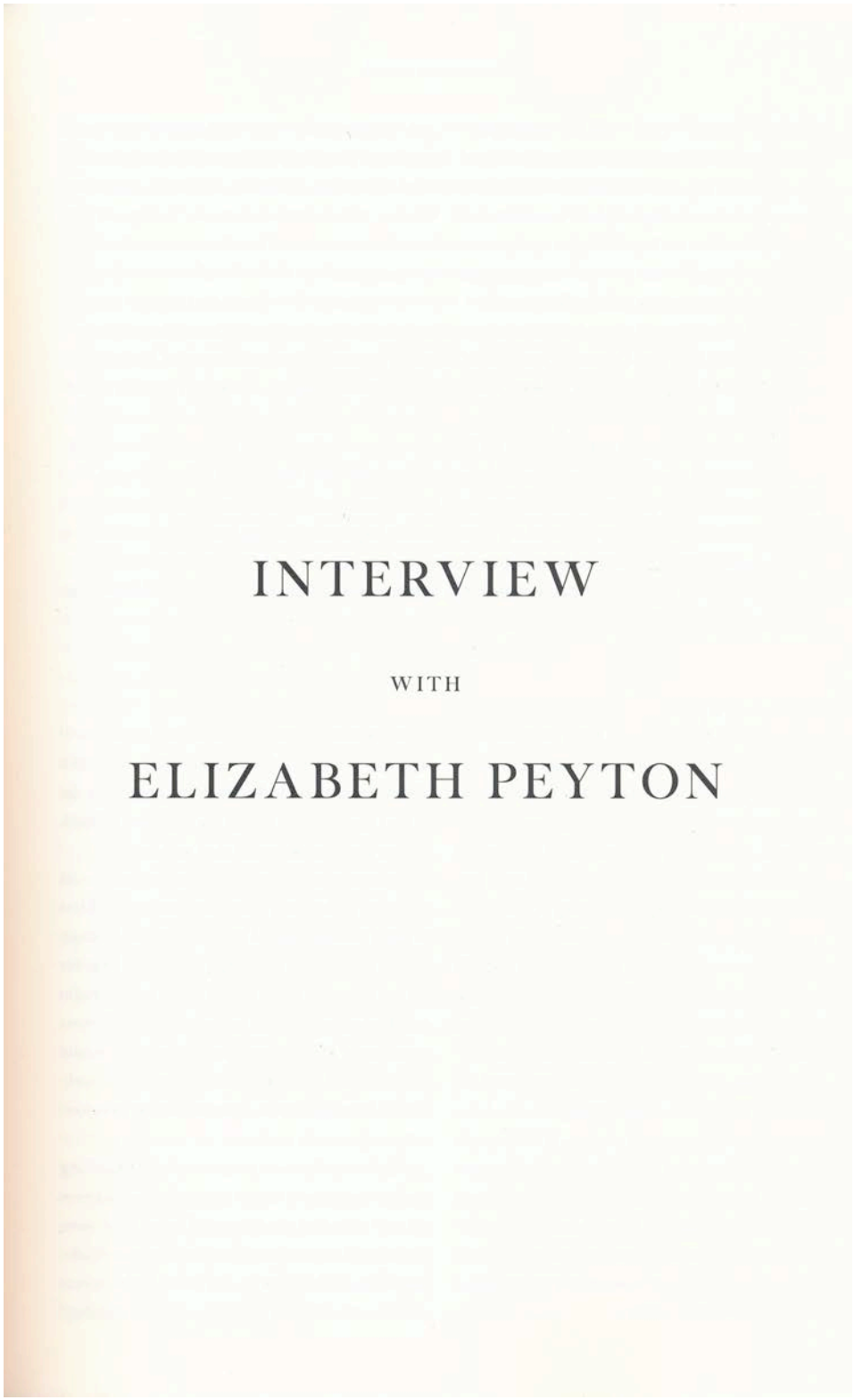
Nicholas Cullinan, “Interview with Elizabeth Peyton,” *The White Review,* April 2016

THE WHITE REVIEW



THIS INTERVIEW with Elizabeth Peyton, one of the most celebrated painters of recent times, was conducted by Nicholas Cullinan, Director of London's National Portrait Gallery. The two met in 2014 when Cullinan was planning his current exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Unfinished: Thoughts Left Visible*, which included works by Peyton. The art historian first sat for the artist (at her invitation) the same year. If further reasons for inviting the two to talk were needed, we would point to the breadth of their shared interests beyond portraiture: as a curator at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and Tate Modern in London, Cullinan worked on exhibitions by such diverse artists as Tacita Dean, Henri Matisse, Kazimir Malevich, Cy Twombly and Amie Siegel; Peyton's recent exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ, London, featured still lifes, landscapes, portraits and homages to canonical painting alongside linocuts.

The pairing also seems appropriate to Peyton's practice, which combines exceptional technical ability with a sensibility predicated on a sincere emotional connection to her subjects. Her recent work has foregrounded the artist's deep engagement with the history of painting, with inspiration from (and allusions to) Manet, Sargent and Moreau, and seen her practice expand to include pastels and a variety of printing techniques. Her portraits, which have included artists, musicians, and literary, historical and cultural figures, among others, negotiate a delicate line between fidelity to life and self-expression.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Your exhibition at Sadie Coles HQ featured not only a range of different genres – portraits, still lifes and landscapes – but also different mediums, from painting to drawing and printmaking. Is this a new direction for your work? Or does it encapsulate what you've been doing before?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — I wouldn't say it's a new direction. It seemed important to include the linocuts because a different thing can happen in them than in a painting, it's a different kind of expression. I've been making prints for a long time, monotypes and etchings and the odd woodcut. I like about prints that you have to make it all happen in one go. I don't work on one piece for a long time, an afternoon usually. I tend to try things out. I would say that, historically, prints have typically been the afterword to a work. But for me it's a foreword. Often I'll make a work *after* something I make in the print studio.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Lucian Freud would make a painting of the sitter first, and then afterwards, as a kind of coda or postscript, he would make prints based on the same subject. But for you it's the other way around?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — One of the prints at Sadie Coles HQ is of [the musician] Elias Bender Rønnenfelt. When I make work about him, it seems like I've been looking at him for six months, but then we go to the print studio and I make something in two hours. Whereas sometimes I'll try and paint him and really struggle. Even though the print might only have taken two hours, it took all that previous time to get to the point.

I also really want to accomplish something each time I am in the print studio. Sometimes when I'm in the print studio I project my own negative thoughts onto everyone who is working there. When I'm on my own, I sometimes think to myself, 'Why am I painting my dog?

Can't I get it together?' But when I'm printing, I'll scramble to make it happen. Whereas in the studio I might have stepped back from it and let it sit.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — So the limitations of printmaking can, in fact, be liberating?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — I even find myself attempting to replicate that anxiety when I'm painting in order to make myself finish something I've been working on for a long time.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — How does that work in terms of your painting and drawing? When does a painting fail? Do you give up, or do you put it to one side and come back to it later? I don't want to focus on failure, but I think it's interesting to think about the limitations of the medium. Printmaking is a concentrated burst of energy; is it the same with painting?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — No, painting is different. It can be many accumulated quick moments, or happen over a long time, but the difference is that the surface is so important to a painting. In printmaking, the surface is flat. With a painting, the weight of the surface has to be right. It's not about failure so much as it's about letting the painting tell you what it needs. Just watching it, watching everything that's happening in it. A painting takes place over time, so it has many influences coming into it.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Painting is essentially a process of addition. If something is unfinished, it's because something is lacking or absent. Sculpture and printmaking are processes of subtraction – that's how you get the image, you scrape away or remove.

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes, though paintings can fail because you've added too much – painting can also be a process of taking away. For a long time – and I still do this occasionally – I made paintings by putting on the paint and taking it off, leaving a little bit. I was trying to get away from literally descriptive things, towards a barer, emptier space.

Now, I'm putting things back in. The still life of flowers ['Carte d'Embarquement (Flowers)'] was the first painting I made for the show. I was listening to a lot of Philip Glass, his piano études. He was once quoted [in Tim Page's 1993 article 'Music in 12 Parts'] as saying that having 'taken everything out with my early works ... it was now time to decide just what I wanted to put back in'. That's just what I wanted. I felt like I was really struggling with that. Wanting to use paint, but having such a hard time getting away from the literalness of it sometimes.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Your paintings have a particular aesthetic, which is this very fluid, watery brushstroke. It's quite unique – no other artist's work looks like this. Can you just talk us through the process?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — When I was younger I painted on found glass. I really loved the fast surface, as paint doesn't absorb into glass. Now I use a wood panel that I put layer after layer of gesso on, sanding in between until it's like glass... which similarly to the glass lets me have the kind of movement I want in my work.

In a sense, making the support is the first part of the painting. Sometimes I'm thinking forward: I see lines building up when I'm using the taping knife, because naturally it's not the most perfect surface. They can guide the composition.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you sketch things out first, or work directly onto the surface of the painting?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — The thing is the thing.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — So sketching and painting are one and the same?
A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes, which relates back to movement. That record of figuring it out is an exciting part of the painting. It's also so challenging, to figure it out from nothing.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Your portraits tend to be of people that you know, as well as some people that you don't know but that you are drawn to in some way. Is there a big difference in painting someone from the life, to use the antiquated phrase, as opposed to painting from a photograph? Because you do both.
A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — I'll often use both for a single portrait. I'll work from life and then work from photos, and then maybe from memory or even other photos. Life tends to get a little literal. I like the magical things that come from my own bad photography, or from photos found on the internet. They might contain something that you would never see in real life.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Something a bit off.
A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes, like a blurring or a heightening of colour, some degeneration. I get really excited about things like that.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — So the paintings are almost palimpsest, a layering of the drawing or painting from life with photography. Is it strange painting yourself, as in 'Dirty Pink Heron' (2016)? Because sitting for a portrait – and I think you were the first artist I ever sat for – can be a very exposing experience.
A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — It's very exposing for me too. By asking someone to sit for me I'm saying that I really want to be with you, spend some time with you, get to know you, look at you. It's a very particular kind of attention. It makes me feel vulnerable, but it's so tender. I often think that people don't really know what other people look like. People generalise even the people they know so well. The shorthand of the person with the tie, and the coloured hair, and stuff. But they don't really see. The person can look so different.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Genre is and always has been important to your work. As far as I know you're not somebody who's painted abstract works; you've always painted portraits or still lifes. You've worked within classical genres, but you have fun with them. There's a dialogue between them, so a portrait could be a still life, or a still life could be a portrait.
A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — I don't really think about genre. I mean, I never thought about portraiture much. The work just has to function as a picture.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Other passions find their way into your work. Music influences your work in multiple ways, most obviously in your choice of musicians as sitters, whether classical, punk, rock and roll, or rap. But is there an element of synaesthesia, because you listen to music when you paint, right?
A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — I don't have synaesthesia exactly. I do have this voice thing, when a portrait I'm doing is getting close to really feeling like the person, I can hear their voice. Like I can hear you talking, it just happens.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — When I sat for you, it a particular world. There's the relationship between the sitter and artist, but also the fact of being in your studio and your house. It's very domestic. It's not a warehouse studio that's separate from where you live. Your dog

is there, you choose the music.

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Whether consciously or not, I am aware that everything I bring into my home could potentially be part of the picture.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — In terms of being drawn to things or images, your recent work includes versions of existing paintings. 'Two Women (after Courbet)' (2015), for example, relates to Courbet's 'Le Sommeil' (1866); and 'Knights Dreaming (K) after EBJ' (2016) to Edward Burne-Jones's 'The Rose Bower' (1890).

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — I recently went to see the series [of which 'The Rose Bower' is a part] by Burne-Jones, which was based on Tennyson's 'The Sleeping Beauty'. My painting is after the first picture in the series ['The Briar Wood']. I'd only seen them on the internet before that.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — How do you find these things? How do you know when they will become part of your work?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — I want to get close to it, I want to know how it works. In this case, too, I'd been thinking a lot about knights, and Tristan from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. This came together with something in my mind, something I really wanted to see. I was thinking about bands and the way young men are together. The way they love each other – that is very much a part of this painting. I've never let that out of my mouth before. But it's something I thought about quite a lot.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — If you ignore the clothing, they could be musicians on tour...

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes. They're tired. They trust each other. They're in the middle of nowhere. But they have each other.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Your work has really oscillated between very contemporary people and images – New York in the 1990s, or certain musicians, people and places who are very much of the now – and things from the past. Yet they're all treated equally. Were you always a painter of historical things?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes, at the beginning more so. Proust was a revelation to me when I was young, his understanding at the end of *À la recherche...*, that it's all present, everything is continual.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — And that's a key thing in your work. If we narrow it down to music, your work encompasses the more edgy, raw, punk end of things, in a very real way, but there's also a yearning for something more innocent.

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes, but one could say Wagner's quite edgy. Not to be defensive about classical music, but it's painful and it's raw.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — So is it just that in people and images and music, you have a singular taste, irrespective of from where or when it comes?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes, but I'm not the first to say that. Baudelaire said that the ideal artist is timeless. Like the Titian painting in the Frick, 'Portrait of a Man in a Red Cap', or Giorgione's 'Portrait of a Young Man' in the Staatliche... I've made copies of both those paintings, actually. These things contain the humanity of the relationship between two people in a room. If you get to the right place in art, it's all alive – or it's alive forever.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — You've painted some of your subjects – Jonathan Horowitz, Nick Relph – over a long period. Is it interesting to

paint the passage of time?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes, it's so interesting. But it's not just the physical changes. Recently I was re-photographing stills from Luchino Visconti's *Ludwig* (1972). I made a lot of pictures from that film [about King Ludwig II, Wagner's patron] when I was 20 or 21. At that age I didn't want to know anything about Wagner at all, but now I want to know everything about Wagner. So I'm appreciating *Ludwig* in a different way.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Is film important to you? Are there directors you look to?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Visconti, clearly. I think I'm attracted to filmmakers like François Truffaut who can make an anecdotal narrative film that somehow filters its time through its subject.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — It distils or channels everything.

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes, like in *The Revenant*. It's so poetic and beautiful, but also powerfully political.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Part of your work is about looking and desire and beauty. The idea of the female gaze and feminist art criticism of the 1970s – was that something you ever actively engaged in?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — It's always been very natural rather than theoretical, though of course I am aware of that history. I think that if I was a man my pictures would be more highly regarded as portraits, and I would be questioned less about my 'obsessiveness'. It is considered normal that a man should paint talented and successful people to whom he is attracted! There's a higher ideal in that. My work is pretty 'feminine' in the sense that it's emotional, it's feeling.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — I don't want to go back to failure, but I love thinking about it. What percentage of the images don't work?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — It used to be much higher, because I would paint a lot more. But the failure rate is still significant.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Your press release for the latest show cites *Tristan und Isolde*, which we've talked about. Is literature an influence upon your work?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes, that was maybe the first thing. When I was younger, I would make pictures based on what I was reading, pictures of things that didn't exist. I still feel that way about the pictures I make. Something that doesn't exist and is missing and so I want to make it.

Q. THE WHITE REVIEW — Do you consider yourself as part of a particular lineage, as an artist?

A. ELIZABETH PEYTON — Yes absolutely. Yesterday I saw the Eugène Delacroix show [at the National Gallery] and I thought... I mean, I don't want to elevate myself to that. But I feel very comfortable with the way he went about painting. I feel in the family of, or I want to be in the family of, Delacroix, van Dyck, Manet, Sargent, Gustave Moreau. I am very grateful that I can do this, but also feel like it's a responsibility. There's the duty to reflect on what's in my time, be it old or new.

NICHOLAS CULLINAN, FEBRUARY 2016

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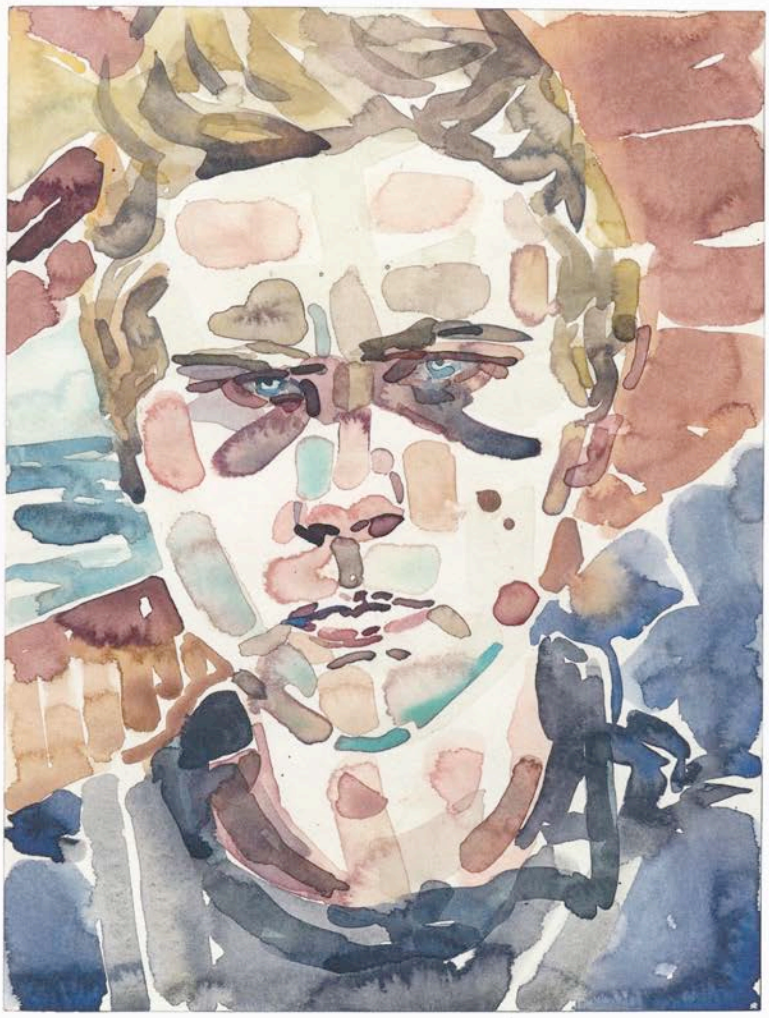

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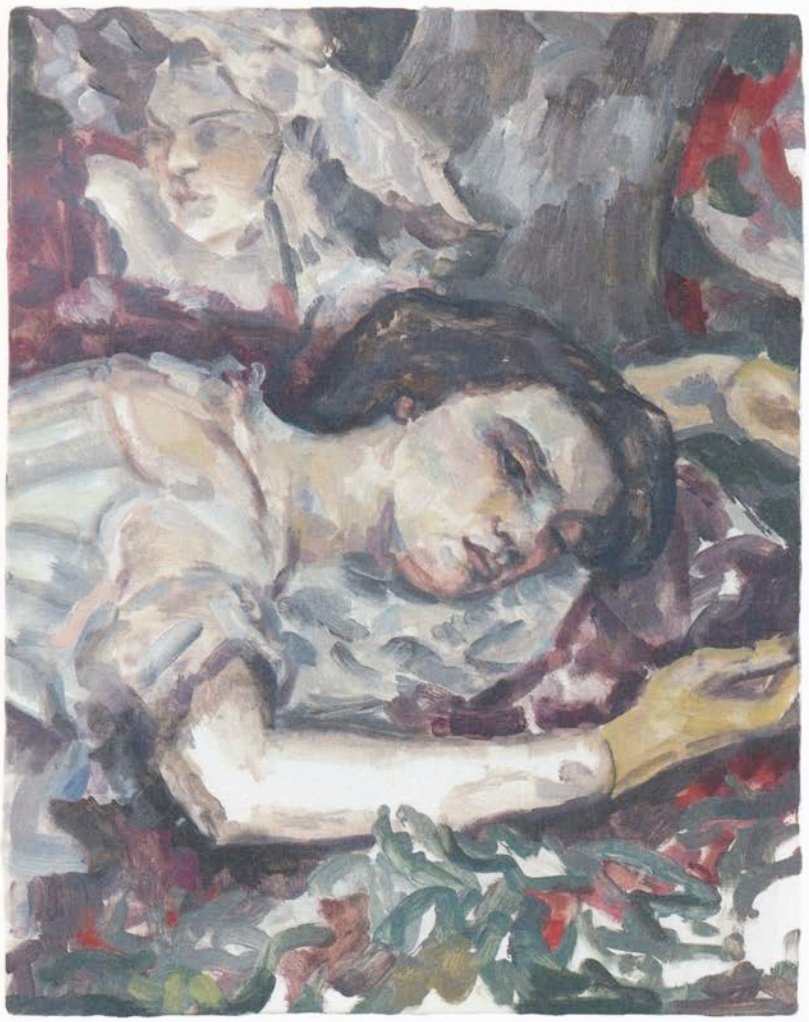

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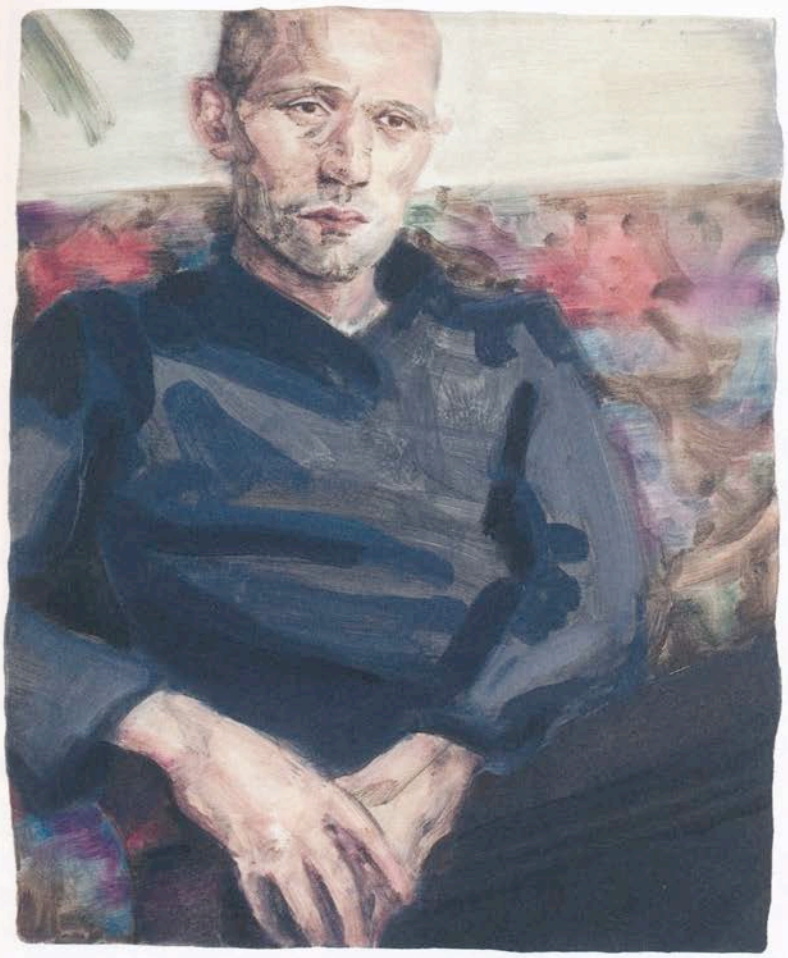

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