

NIOVI
KAFANTARI

The Necessary Other

OPERA GALLERY

NIOVI KAFANTARI

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LONDON

OPERA GALLERY



FOREWORD

'The Necessary Other' marks Niovi Kafantari's first solo exhibition in London, bringing together a new body of work that explores one of the most enduring questions of human experience: how identity is shaped through encounter. Taking its title from Adriana Cavarero's philosophy of relational identity, the exhibition proposes that the self is never formed in isolation but comes into being through the presence, memory and gaze of another. Rather than illustrating this proposition, Kafantari uses painting as a means of testing it, allowing each canvas to become a site where intimacy, vulnerability and ambiguity remain unresolved.

At the heart of her practice is a sustained investigation into the body—not as a vehicle for narrative or portraiture, but as a physical and emotional structure shaped by pressure, proximity and dependence. Figures lean, embrace, support or resist one another; gestures remain suspended between tenderness and possession, care and conflict. Drawing upon archaeology, cinema, theatre, literature, and art history, Kafantari absorbs these sources, transforming them until their original narratives dissolve.

This approach is evident throughout the exhibition. In *Just Met*, the dramatic energy of Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* survives not as recognisable iconography but as the unstable sensation of a first encounter, where identities have yet to settle. A *Pastoral Fragment* similarly draws upon an encounter with Michaelina Wautier's *The Triumph of Bacchus*, distilling the historical painting into an exploration of desire, power and vulnerability. In *Last Tango*, two figures hold in an embrace that refuses certainty, suggesting attraction and withdrawal simultaneously, while *Married, a Second Time* reflects on the body as a repository of memory, allowing gesture and colour to carry emotional experience beyond autobiography.

The apparent spontaneity of Kafantari's brushwork conceals a deeply considered construction. Trained as a sculptor, she builds her paintings through mass, treating paint as a material capable of conveying physical presence as much as visual description. Figures emerge only partially from the surface, forms dissolve into loose passages of colour, and the image is often left deliberately open. This unfinished quality preserves the painting's capacity to remain alive, resisting definitive interpretation in favour of possibility. 'The Necessary Other' reminds us that meaning is not discovered in certainty but in relation, where every encounter has the potential to generate another way of seeing.

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ARTIST *STATEMENT*

“The title of this exhibition came to me while reading Adriana Cavarero's reflections on relational identity. I was particularly struck by her return to Gertrude Stein, who narrated her own life through the voice of Alice B. Toklas. The idea stayed with me—not as a theory to illustrate, but as a question that continued to resonate as I painted. How much of who we are depends on another person? Can we ever understand ourselves without someone else's presence, memory or gaze?

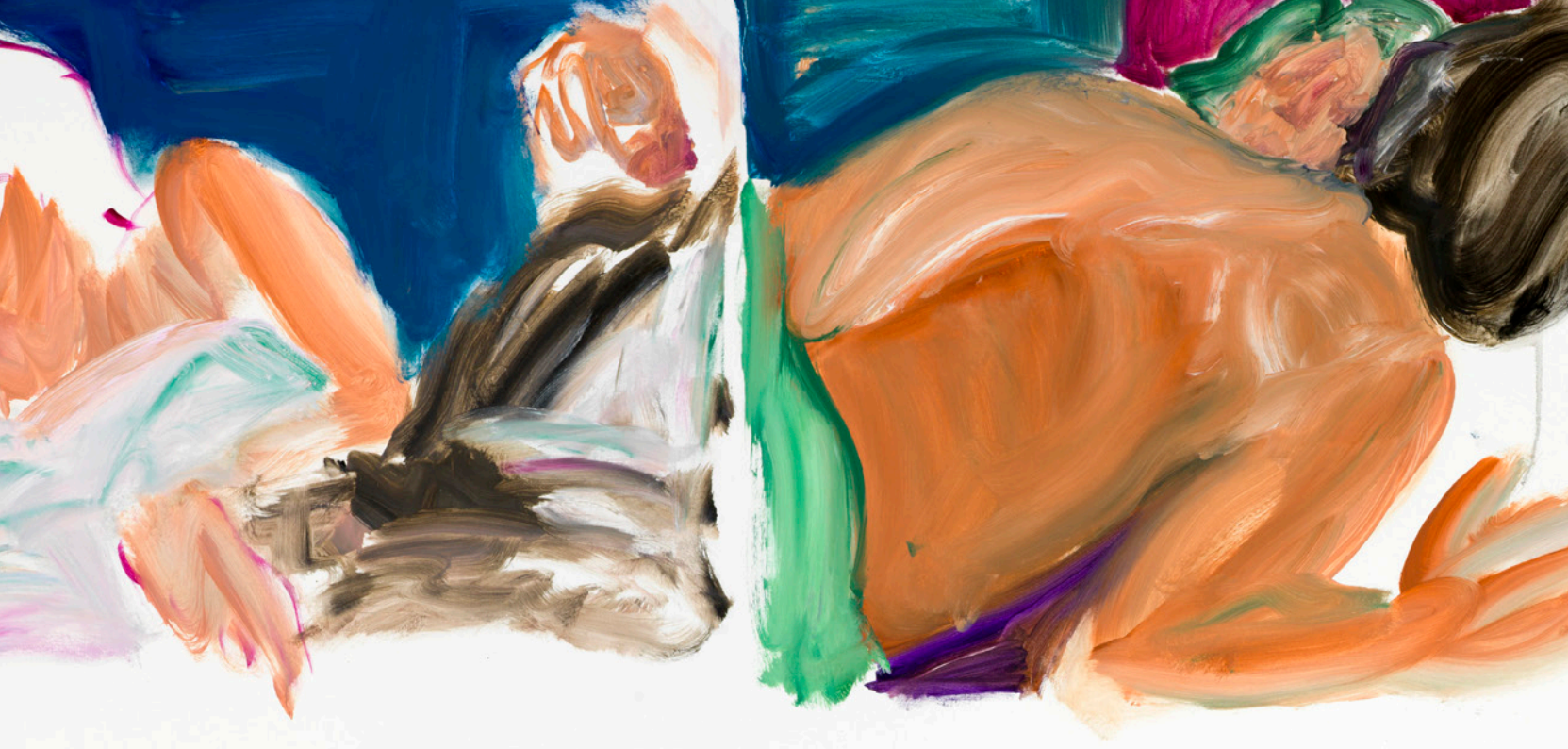
Painting has become the place where I think through these questions. I return to images of people who meet, embrace, desire, care for, betray or imagine one another. I am less interested in telling their stories than in the unstable space that exists between them. It is there that painting begins.

My work draws from many encounters: archaeology, cinema, Renaissance paintings, museum collections, conversations, fragments of memory and lived experiences. These references are never quotations or subjects to illustrate. They become visual memories that are absorbed into the language of painting, where they lose their original narratives and enter new relationships with one another. Again and again, I find myself returning to intimacy—not as a fixed emotional state, but as a condition shaped by desire, vulnerability and power. The figures in my paintings remain incomplete, psychologically open, and often resistant to certainty. Their relationships cannot be fully explained because intimacy itself cannot be reduced to a single meaning.

Painting allows different histories to coexist. Ancient sculpture, Titian, Michaelina Wautier, Fassbinder, a story told by a friend, or an imagined neighbour may all inhabit the same pictorial space. What interests me is not the distance between these references, but the emotional continuity they reveal. Images survive because they continue to shape the way we look at one another.

‘The Necessary Other’ is not an attempt to answer the questions that inspired it. It is an invitation to remain with them. Each painting is another encounter with the possibility that we come to know ourselves only through others, and that every act of looking is also an act of being looked back at.”

NIOVI KAFANTARI



ARTWORKS



Last Tango

2026

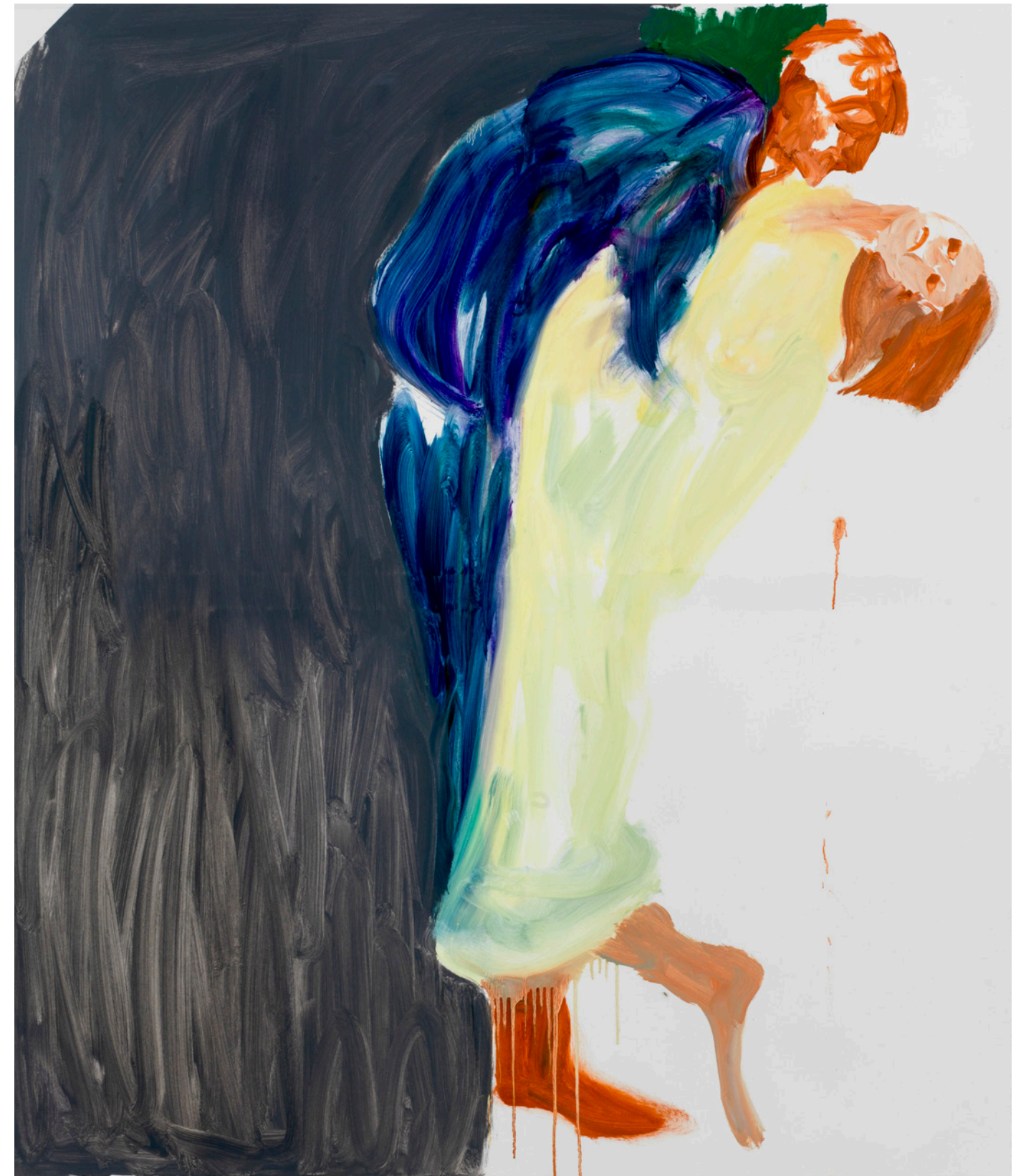
Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
140 x 120 cm | 55.1 x 47.2 in

This painting began from one of my marker drawings, but it quickly moved away from its original source and began to define its own logic. I often return to drawings not to reproduce them, but to discover what painting can reveal that drawing cannot. The two figures occupy a compressed space where there is almost no distance between them. They appear locked in an embrace, yet the gesture remains unresolved. It can be read as tenderness, dependence, desire, protection, or resistance. I am interested in this ambiguity, where intimacy never settles into a single meaning.

GESTURE

An embrace. A burden.
Protection.
Possession.
The painting refuses to decide.

The space surrounding the figures is not descriptive. It is a psychological space that allows emotional proximity to exist without certainty. The painting does not narrate a relationship; it suspends it in a moment where attraction and withdrawal coexist. For me, painting is a way of approaching the other without fully possessing them. It is in this unstable territory—between desire and avoidance—that these figures continue to exist.



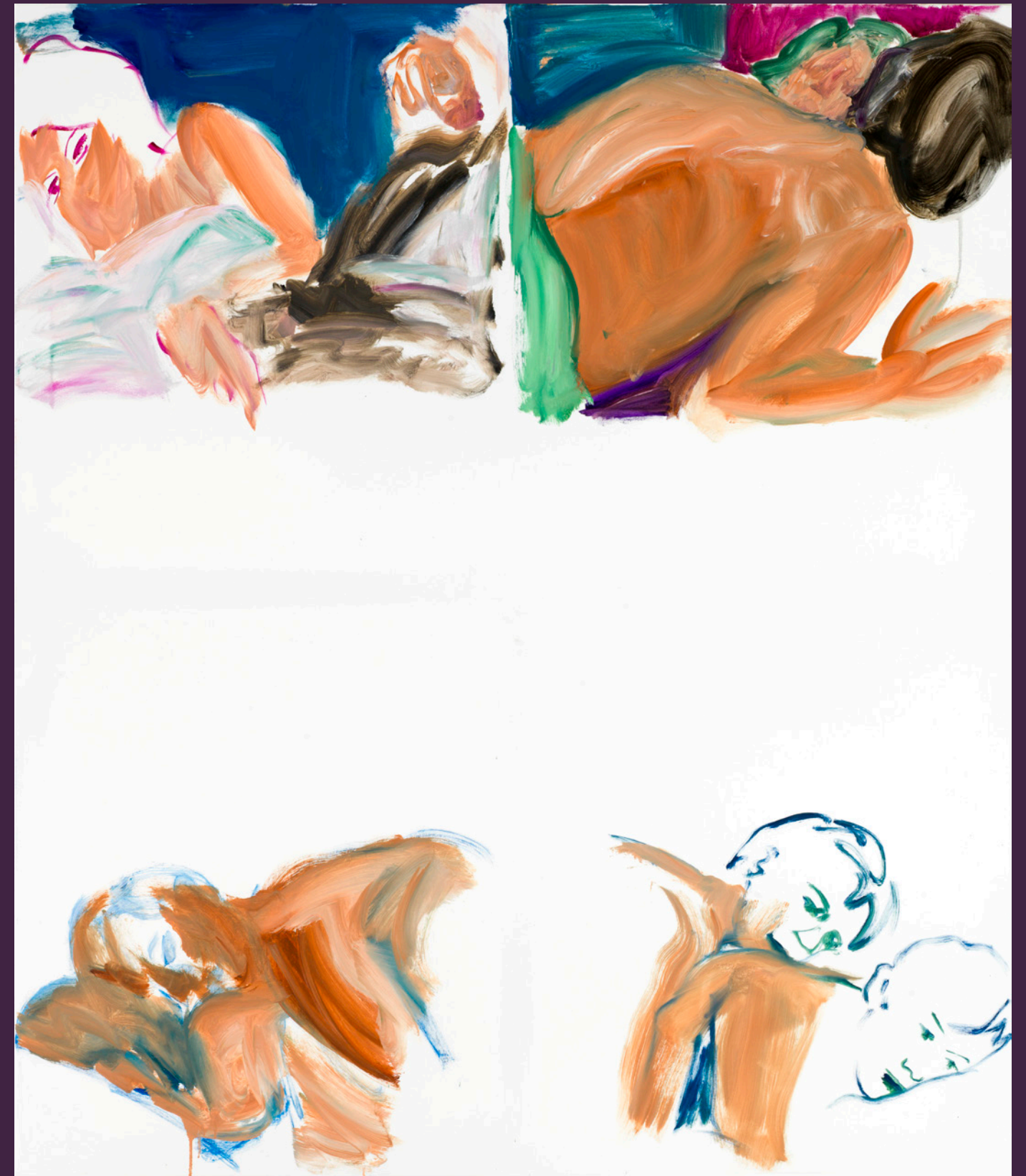
Neighbor Imagined

2026

Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
140 x 120 cm | 55.1 x 47.2 in

This painting began with a story rather than an image. My best friend described the sexual meeting of two people they barely knew. I realised that the story immediately produced another image in my mind—one that belonged neither to them nor to me. It was imagined, yet emotionally real. I became interested in how intimacy circulates through imagination. We often desire people we have never touched, invent relationships that never existed, and project ourselves into the lives of strangers. The imagined other can become as present as the person standing next to us.

The figures remain fragmented because imagination is fragmented. They are not portraits but possibilities. Some belong to memory, others to fiction. They meet on the same surface without needing to become a single narrative. While painting, I thought about cinema as much as painting. Pasolini's characters often exist between reality and myth, between the ordinary and the symbolic. That openness permitted to invent my own fictional bodies. For me, painting is a place where imagination becomes another form of intimacy.



Married, a Second Time

2026

Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
120 x 140 cm | 47.2 x 55.1 in

I don't begin with a complete image. I begin with the possibility that painting knows something before I do. The figure appears slowly, not because I am searching for resemblance, but because I am searching for a state. I paint until the body begins to resist certainty. At some point it is no longer a portrait, nor simply a woman. It becomes a place where colour, memory, and gesture meet.

I am interested in the moment when flesh stops belonging only to anatomy and becomes paint again. A shoulder can become a landscape. A hand can disappear into a brushstroke. The face can remain unfinished because identity is never completely visible. I trust what remains unresolved more than what becomes fixed.

The title, *Married, a Second Time*, refers to a personal history, but I never wanted to illustrate biography. I am interested in how experience settles into the body without becoming a story.

A second marriage cannot be painted directly. It exists in weight, hesitation, tenderness, and the feeling that every beginning carries what came before it.

While I paint, I often feel that other paintings are present. Not as images I want to imitate, but as memories that have settled into my mind. They return through colour, rhythm and the movement of the brush rather than through quotation. I don't think of painting as borrowing from history. I think of history as something that continues painting through us.

For me, painting is not about completing an image. It is about staying with uncertainty long enough for something truthful to emerge. I never look for certainty in a painting. I look for the moment when colour, memory, and the body begin to speak the same language.





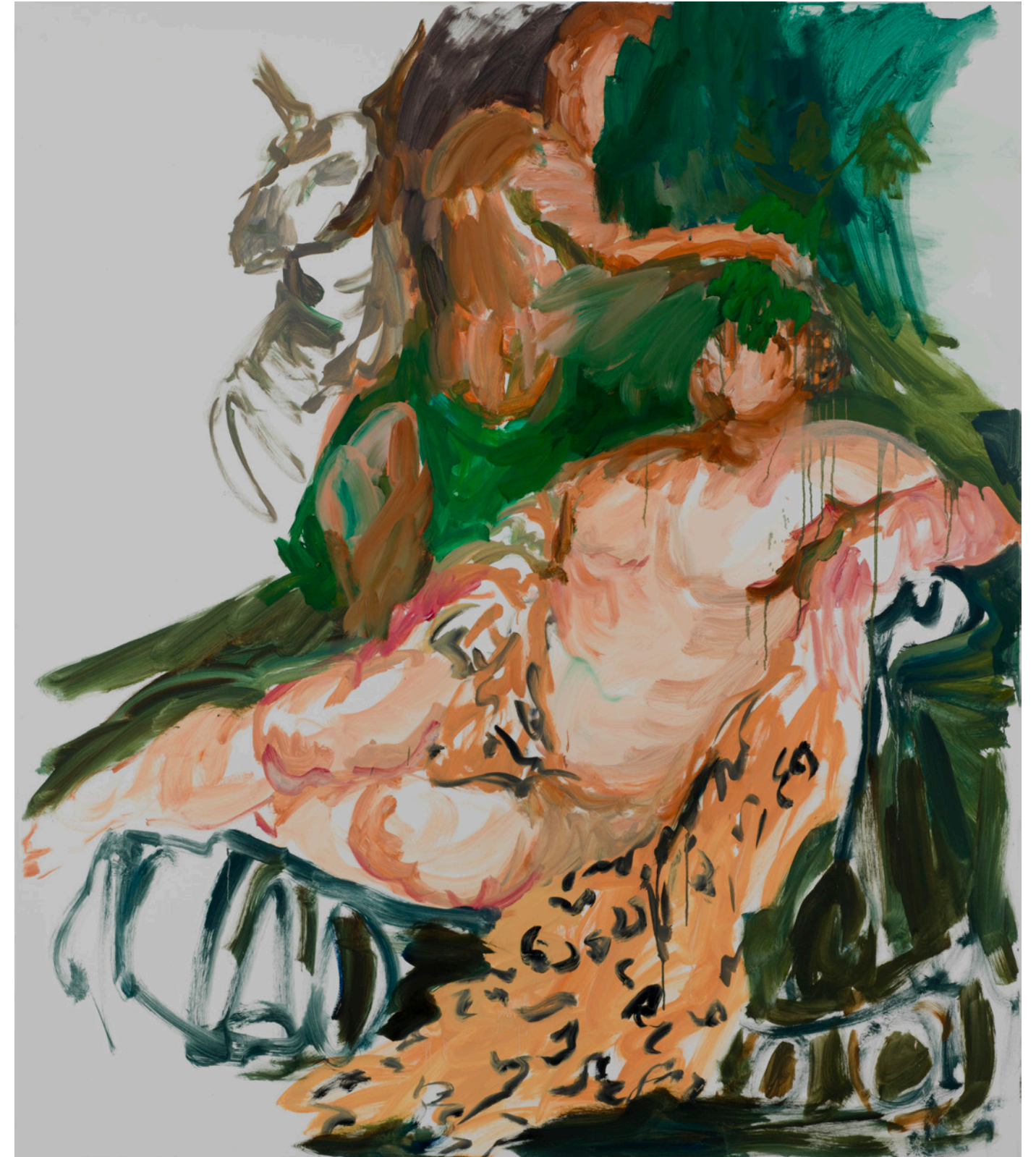
A Pastoral Fragment

2026

Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
140 x 120 cm | 55.1 x 47.2 in

This painting began after encountering Michaelina Wautier's *The Triumph of Bacchus* at the Royal Academy exhibition in London last March. I was drawn less to its mythological subject than to the physical presence of Bacchus and the unstable relationships unfolding around him. Certain paintings remain active long after leaving the museum. They return not as images to be reproduced, but as sensations that continue to shape the way I paint. I was interested in the body as a place where pleasure and power become inseparable. The reclining figure suggests vulnerability, yet the surrounding gestures never allow the relationship to settle into a single reading. Desire, care, and dominance remain in constant negotiation.

The title, *A Pastoral Fragment*, acknowledges that what survives from the historical painting is only a fragment. I am not interested in reconstructing its narrative or mythology. I allow the painting to dissolve until only its emotional structure remains. For me, museums are not archives of completed images but places where paintings continue to generate new ones. The encounter with Wautier's work became another conversation within my own practice, where memory, observation, and invention meet on the same surface.



Just Met

2025

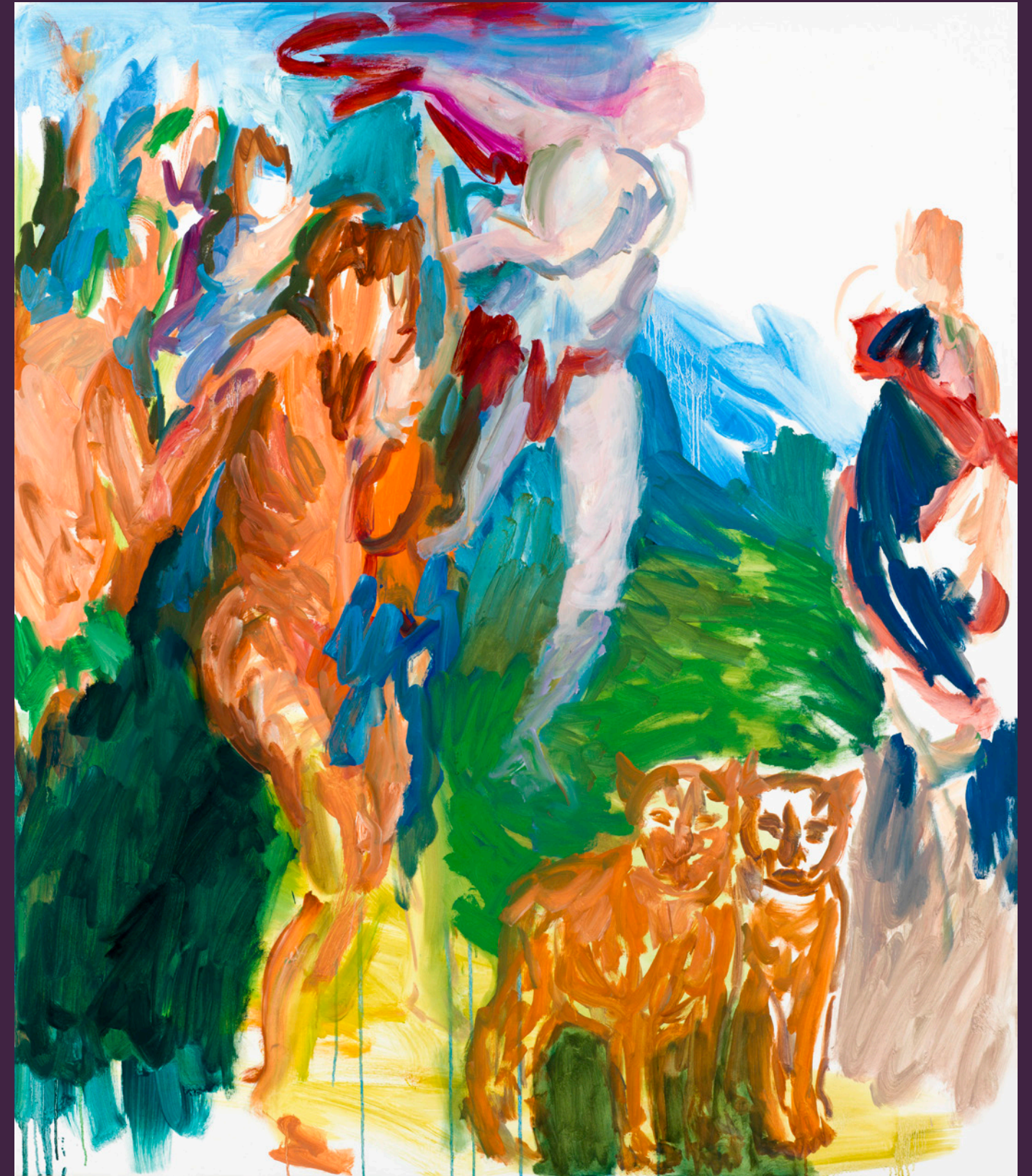
Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
140 x 120 cm | 55.1 x 47.2 in

Just Met begins with Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, yet its subject is not the Renaissance painting itself but the persistence of its energies. The dramatic leap of Bacchus, the separation of Ariadne, the procession of animals, and the chromatic brilliance of Venetian painting survive only as traces within a field of unstable colour and gesture. Myth has been stripped of narrative certainty and

returned to the condition of sensation. The title redirects attention from the ancient story to the fragile instant of encounter, where identities have not yet settled and relationships remain provisional. The painting proposes that images do not endure through faithful reproduction but through continual transformation, carried forward by memory, material, and the act of painting itself.

MYTH WITHOUT MYTHOLOGY

The Titian tells the myth about the first meeting of Dionysus and abandoned Ariadne. Now, there is no mythology. No identifiable narrative. No certainty. Instead, bodies remain unstable. Identity has not yet solidified. Paint behaves exactly like people do during first encounters: hesitant overlapping unfinished constantly revising itself.





What Was Promised

2026

Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
160 x 180 cm | 63 x 70.9 in

What Was Promised begins with one of my long-standing cinematic obsessions: Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. Throughout the film, Nicolas Poussin's *Midas and Bacchus* occupies the wall of Petra's bedroom, becoming more than decoration. The painting silently intensifies the film's asymmetrical relations of desire, dependence and power. What interested me was this sequence of translation: a seventeenth-century painting enters a film, the film transforms its meaning through bodies and power, and the film still then becomes material for another painting. I was not interested in reconstructing either Poussin or Fassbinder. I wanted to retain the pressure produced between them. Bacchus carries an instability that is important to me: human and animal, masculine and feminine, restraint and ecstasy refuse to settle into clean oppositions. I wanted the painting to hold that same instability through bodies that accumulate, touch, dominate, yield, and dissolve into one another. I work through what I understand as one-field painting. The image is not constructed through successive layers of revision; it must emerge within one continuous pictorial field. This is

where I feel close to painters such as Maria Lassnig, Edvard Munch, and Henri Matisse: the painting retains the immediacy of drawing because the decisions remain exposed rather than being buried beneath later corrections. For me, this is fundamental. I draw rather than build the image through accumulation. The painting was executed in approximately five to eight hours, but that speed should not be confused with spontaneity. The preparation can take months. What happens in those few hours is the result of a much longer accumulation of looking, drawing, failing, remembering, and rehearsing. I think of the final execution almost as choreography: once it begins, every movement must remain physically alert and consequential. Even the wrong decisions become necessary because they alter what the next gesture must do. I aim for the painting to arrive as one continuous field of energy rather than as a sequence of corrected decisions. Its apparent excess is therefore held by a strict internal structure. What matters to me is not control in the sense of perfection, but the moment when accumulated preparation allows the painting to become faster than conscious explanation.





The Guest who Wouldn't Leave

2026

Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
180 x 100 cm | 70.9 x 39.4 in

The Guest Who Wouldn't Leave arrived at the end of the exhibition's development. By then, the structure of the show was already clear, but I felt that something was missing: a vertical composition capable of interrupting the existing rhythm while at the same time giving the exhibition a different gravitational centre.

I wanted to make a vertical painting and tested several compositions, but none of them felt right. That failure made me realise something more fundamental: because this is my first solo show, the exhibition itself was asking me to return to, and in a sense confess, the visual obsessions that have shaped my work from the beginning. I had already done this through several of the other paintings, and Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* belongs to that same deeply rooted visual world.

I began to fragment the painting until I found a structure that could operate independently from its original narrative. What remained for me was an almost architectural division into three horizontal fields within the vertical format: the reclining male body above, the female body crossing the middle in a contradictory direction, and below, the darker figure in relation to the horse. The historical painting became less a source to reproduce than a structure to destabilise.

Linda Nochlin's reading of *The Death of Sardanapalus* is important to me because

she understood the painting not simply as an Orientalist fantasy, but as a collapse of distance between the Western subject and the constructed "Other" of Orientalism. In this reading, the supposedly distant, exotic other is no longer safely external, but becomes entangled with Western desire, violence, and projection.

That connection is crucial for me in relation to 'The Necessary Other.' I am interested in moments when the other can no longer remain comfortably outside the self. I do not return to Delacroix to reconstruct Orientalism or to illustrate its history. I return because culturally saturated images continue to survive inside collective memory, and because their meanings change when they are forced back into another historical moment.

Bodies separate from their original roles. Hierarchies become unstable. What once appeared distant, exotic or historical begins to operate again as a contemporary question of desire, domination, projection, and otherness.

The verticality became essential to the painting. Despite the instability of the bodies, the composition descends with considerable weight. The work interrupts the horizontal format of the exhibition, but it also anchors it. It became, almost unexpectedly, the painting that allowed the rest of the show to settle around it.



How Nice that we Don't Understand Each Other

2026

Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
140 x 120 cm | 70.9 x 39.4 in

This is perhaps the most intimate painting in the show. It requires a very close, almost intrusive kind of looking: two people in bed, caught in a moment that refuses to identify itself clearly. Are they before sex, after it, in the middle of it, or has something interrupted the encounter? That ambiguity is essential. I belong to a generation that learned a great deal about sexual intimacy through screens. Cinema, erotic imagery, and pornography taught us how desire was supposed to look before many of us had any real experience of it. Pleasure arrived already framed, edited, performed, and projected. What interests me is the gap between that visual education and the reality of two bodies meeting. The mind and the body do not always arrive at the same place at the same time. A body can be completely involved while the mind has already escaped elsewhere. What we

imagine we want can also contain the fantasies, expectations, and projections of the other. I wanted that split to exist materially inside the painting. The knees and lower bodies carry dense, physical paint. They press into the mattress and into one another, trying to stabilise themselves inside an unstable position. The faces, by contrast, are almost ghostly. They barely settle into form. There is something very intimate for me in that contradiction: maximum physical proximity without any guarantee of psychological proximity. Pleasure, detachment, tenderness, embarrassment, fantasy, or an entirely unrelated thought can coexist within the same second. The title does not describe a failure of intimacy. It accepts its limits. Perhaps not completely understanding the other is part of what allows the other to remain other.

DETAIL

The eyelid is barely more than a single stroke, yet it holds the face alive. There is no modelling, no correction, almost no description—only the exact pressure and direction of the mark. For me, this is where drawing becomes most demanding: when one gesture must carry anatomy, sensation and psychological distance at once. The eye closes, but the figure does not disappear. It becomes more present through what has been withheld.



Commitment to Non-Commitment

2026

Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
140 x 120 cm | 70.9 x 39.4 in

This painting began in reverse: the title came before the image. *Commitment to Non-Commitment* emerged from a contradiction I encounter repeatedly now: the simultaneous desire for intimacy and the cultivation of behaviours designed to prevent it. People can feel profoundly lonely, imagine themselves within lasting romantic structures, and yet organise their lives around avoidance, provisional encounters and the preservation of escape. Part of my daily practice in London involves returning to the National Gallery and to draw directly from historical paintings. I think of this in relation to artists such as Leon Kossoff and Paula Rego, for whom the museum was not a mausoleum but a working studio: a place where another artist's composition could be physically re-entered through drawing. While drawing from Poussin, I began to recognise something unexpectedly contemporary inside the apparent ecstasy of the composition. Bodies circulate without arriving anywhere. They approach, touch, recoil, overlap, and redirect themselves.

There is frenzy, but also distance; proximity without necessarily producing attachment. What interested me was not the mythology, but the relational structure hidden within it. This distinction is fundamental to my use of mythological and historical sources. I have no interest in re-illustrating myths or translating them into contemporary costumes. I use these paintings because their extraordinary compositions already contain highly sophisticated relationships between masses, bodies and forces. I extract those relationships and allow them to enter another psychological and social condition. In *Commitment to Non-Commitment*, I handle oil paint almost as directly as I use a marker. Bodies are not carefully separated into protagonists; they continually threaten to become one another. Attraction, avoidance, touch, and withdrawal occupy the same pictorial field. The painting does not resolve the contradiction of wanting the other while preserving the possibility of leaving. It stays inside it.





The Feast has Begun without us

2026

Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
140 x 120 cm | 70.9 x 39.4 in

This work is a rare case in which I had almost completely forgotten the original image that initiated it. I no longer care about that source. What survived in the studio was the painting itself, and it had enough internal force to impose its presence in the exhibition. I return repeatedly to the diagonal because it introduces movement, instability, and tension into the pictorial field. I often think back to theatrical workshops with Theodoros Terzopoulos, where spatial movement along diagonals could radically alter the pressure of the stage. That logic stayed with me. Here, the whole painting seems to move diagonally through bodies, colour, and mass. Orange, red, yellow, green, and deep burgundy do not simply describe figures; they create opposing vectors of pressure. The bodies

accumulate and collide, but the composition never settles into a single centre. It feels as though something is happening everywhere and nowhere at once. There is celebration in the image, but also a sense of having arrived late, that the feast may already have started before you arrived, or that what you came looking for may not be there at all. Desire becomes pursuit, but pursuit does not necessarily lead to possession. For me, this is another form of the other: not one fixed person, but a plurality of forces crossing the limited geometry of our lives. Other people disturb the stability of our position; they redirect us, interrupt us, open new space, and sometimes remain impossible to reach.



My Father Introduced me to Don Juan

2026

Oil on cotton
Signed and dated on the reverse
100 x 80 cm | 39.4 x 31.5 in

The construction of the image borrows loosely from Bergman's treatment of Don Juan, but the source serves only as a starting point. What interested me was not the narrative itself, but the remains of it once the story has been stripped away. For me, Don Juan is not defined by beauty. He is defined by persistence: the conviction that he can seduce, enter, and leave. He is both gesture and emptiness. Don Juan appears here as an inherited archetype: charismatic, excessive, theatrical, desirable, and morally unstable. What interests me is not the myth itself, but the way such a figure can become part of a private visual education. The seductive male figure is never simply individual; he carries accumulated projections of power, freedom, conquest, and vulnerability. In the painting, the central figure is held between two others rather than isolated as a heroic protagonist. The bodies press into one another, and the composition compresses the figures into an almost claustrophobic social

space. Green, violet, ochre, and flesh tones create a field in which attraction and unease coexist. The gestures can be read as intimacy, guidance, possession, admiration, or control. This is perhaps one of the most personal works in this exhibition, not because it narrates a specific story, but because it touches on a relational pattern I recognise deeply—the way presence and absence can become entangled, and the way another person can occupy psychological space even at a distance. I do not want to dramatise this or turn the painting into a narrative of trauma. The work itself refuses that kind of explanation. It is built through gaps, incomplete bodies, pressure and interruption. The figures do not fully resolve. They lean into one another, but the relationships remain unstable. What matters is less who each person is than what passes between them: attraction, distance, inheritance, power, and vacancy. Don Juan, for me, is not a character. He is a pattern of relation.





BETWEEN FIGURATION AND DISSOLUTION

One of the clichés I most want to avoid in describing painting is the exhausted phrase “between figuration and abstraction”. It is so often used that it explains almost nothing. My territory is more specific, and more uncomfortable: between figuration and dissolution.

The paintings do not become abstract, but neither do they surrender themselves to illustration. I approach bodily form first as pressure: a mass licking, pressing, touching, yielding to, or avoiding another mass. Recognition comes later. The viewer must reconstruct what is being seen.

A body can become brushstroke and then body again. Figures appear, collide, merge, and disappear. Human and animal forms occupy the same unstable pictorial space. Loose handling is not gestural decoration, and areas that appear unfinished are not failures of resolution; they perform compositional work, determining what becomes visible and what remains unstable.

Across the paintings, the same pictorial logic can be recognised without the images becoming repetitive. What persists is not a fixed repertoire of figures, but a way of allowing form to approach recognition, lose it, and then re-form.

NIOVI KAFANTARI



BIOGRAPHY

Niovi Kafantari is a Greek artist living and working between London, UK, and Athens, Greece. She completed an MFA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London (2024), and holds a BA in Fine Arts, majoring in Sculpture, from the Athens School of Fine Arts, where she graduated with honours.

Working across painting, drawing, and sculpture, Kafantari's practice investigates the relationship between sex and power, treating eroticism not as consequence-free pleasure, but as a force through which power, dependency, and vulnerability are revealed. Her work approaches the body as a site of pressure and transformation, and the image as an aftermath rather than a resolved narrative. Myth functions as a structural framework within her practice, allowing ancient archetypes to be reactivated as contemporary psychological and relational conditions.

Her painting practice is grounded in a hybrid language that merges drawing and painting into a single gestural process, primarily working with oil on cotton. Drawing extensively from European art history and cinema, her work is informed by a scopophilic engagement with the image, in which looking becomes an ethical and psychological act. A strong sense of theatricality and dramaturgy runs throughout her work, shaped in part by her participation in 'The Return of Dionysus,' a workshop based on the method of Theodoros Terzopoulos (2025).

Kafantari's work has been exhibited internationally, including at the Benaki Museum in Athens, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center and Lincoln Center in New York, Mall Galleries in London, and as well as in Venice, London, Athens, and Hydra. Her work is held in private collections in Europe.

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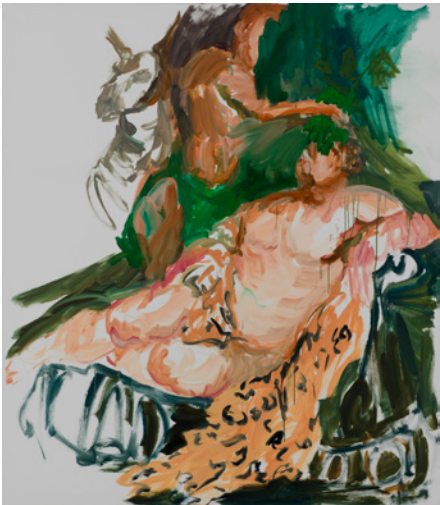
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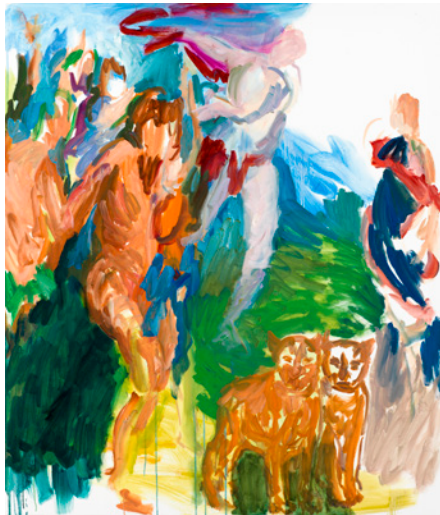
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COVER

Niovi Kafantari, *Married, a Second Time*, 2026

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