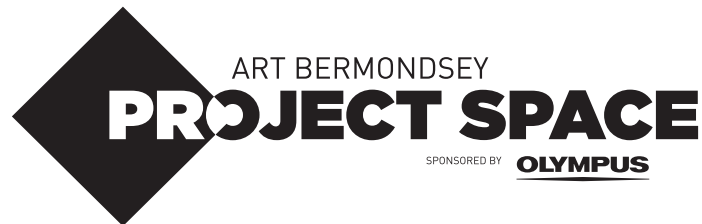


Stephen Newton

Abstract Realism

18 May - 26 June 2016



LOOKING INWARDS

The Art of Stephen Newton

MIKE VON JOEL

Stephen Newton's years of contemplation and engagement with painting and drawing (his art is supported by a highly reasoned theoretical position, so articulate that it has provoked numerous academic papers, lectures and publications) has resulted in a distillation of that fusion between the physical and intellectual in the creative process – the essence being a reduction to primitive, almost primeval, images of immense power. In the same way a simplistic icon on a computer screen is actually the access portal to a complex hidden programme, so Newton has refined his images to a set of recognisable (within his personal vocabulary) icons, totems even, which act as gateways to more complex philosophical positions. In much of his work the sense of human isolation, ignorance, inadequacy and fragility is offered in the 'present' of an image, whilst the suggestion of an undefined 'redemption' lurks off stage (through a door or window; over the horizon; beyond a wall, in a mirror's reflection). In Newton's painting, this reduction to a language of the icon is supported by a symbolic use of paint. A heavy gestural and highly charged – physical, in fact – technique that results in any pictorial motif, say a

building, disintegrating into an abstraction when viewed up close.

Newton has never been weighed down by the formal tradition that precedes his work as a figurative painter. The skills the Old Masters; the exploratory studies of Da Vinci and his followers; the topographical and narrative pictures of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the intellectual and conceptual epoch-making innovations of the twentieth century; these are most likely less relevant to Newton than the arcane manifestation of automatic writing, of Art Brut with stream of conscious metaphor; and the exultant, dynamic spontaneity of the Futurists (for example). Although it must be made clear that in his painting Newton '...disclaims the communicative efficacy of pure psychic automatism and works with acute critical self consciousness.'⁽²⁾ Additionally, Newton is not a participant in the complex polarisation between tradition and the avant-garde, a concept brought to debate in the early 1980's by Bonito Oliva's premise of the Trans-Avant-Garde. Nor does Newton's position specifically embrace a Post Modern doctrine that allows : '...the dialectical

principle, the reconciliation of extremes ... [and which] ... in its free relation with the past, the Post-modern work acknowledges the evocative impact of history rather than an absolute respect for historic tradition.'(3) Rather it is Newton's quite independent philosophical mien, from which his paintings, drawings and prints emanate, that makes him an artist of preternatural interest and originality.

By considering the ancient motifs and visual texts of – say – cave painting, one can begin to approach and understand Newton's work. It is interesting to note when considering wall painting and pre-historic drawings that, contrary to common understanding, individual pictures were repeatedly 'added to'. Pictorial elements were superimposed – one on top of another – with impunity, often over tremendous periods of time. The Giant Horse Cave at Cape York Peninsular, Australia (20th millennium BC) would be a good example of this. Here, as in many other works from pre-history, there is a total absence of the tenet of a 'unique' work of art, or a 'finished' work of art – barely conceivable today. Pre-historic peoples did not quest for vanitas, for beauty, but rather aimed to document the complex social and spiritual code within which they existed. For Newton, the paramount consideration is the authenticity of an image by which it reconciles its meaning with a deeper, almost subliminal, spirituality – it is with this that the artist attempts to imbue each individual painting, to generate a relevance and a universal resonance.

Newton has, through a twenty year examination of psychoanalysis and psychometry of Art,(4) evolved a sophisticated series of visual 'situations' related to primitive manic states; isolation; disassociation; loss; fear; loneliness; supplication; etc., with which

to introduce an engagement with subconscious spirituality. These 'situations' have taken on totemic (or iconic) status and are at once familiar to those with experience of Newton's oeuvre. The Empty Room; the Empty Chair; the Doorway; the Mirror; the Flight of Stairs; and the ever present possibility of transference between one pictorial space – one area of consciousness – and another, via a half open door or window or even, Alice-like, via a reflection. These two spaces, these two realities, are often divided by a line which could represent a horizon, might possibly represent the traditional yin/yang dichotomy of good/evil; conscious/subconscious; light/dark. A perpetual Manichaeian conflict.

What is apparently always suggested however, is the inherent possibility of a redemption – undefined, but certainly reminiscent of that spiritual essence contained within traditional icon painting, or Byzantine and Coptic art, with its hidden protocols. Excess elements in a picture are eliminated in favour of the central motif, reduced to the bare essential – the local point – by which the meaning of the work can be deciphered, Newton's works are not decorative, nor are they narrative; they function more as a stimulant to contemplation and self examination. In this way they may be regarded as 'religious' or 'iconic' in so far as they 'reconstitute the icon – the traditional artistic means of embodying spirituality'.(5)

The painted image disturbs. It disturbs because it is suggesting an idea which resonates somewhere in the psyche of the spectator, appealing directly to ancient, inherited, memories that can seemingly be triggered by the correct application of certain visual stimuli and suggestion. If a 'door' has any connotations then Newton's interpretation

undermines them. If one considers the spiritual metaphor of 'the door' – passage to another reality? doors of perception? – then the subversion of this is another matter altogether.

As with all Newton's works, the title of an individual piece is fundamental to the understanding of it, a consistent formalised metonymy. They are a first clue to the understanding of the other world which Newton attempts to reveal and which, on closer inspection, appears to contain sinister elements common to us all.

NOTES

1.
The Spiritual Unconscious (Paintings & Drawings 1975-1996) essays by Mel Gooding: Keith Patrick: David Maclagan. Ziggurat Books 1996.
2.
Mel Gooding: Reveries, Intimations, Ironies: The Recent Painting of Stephen Newton (essay) *ibid*
3.
Erich Steingraber: What is Art Today? (essay)
Dorling Kindersley
4.
Stephen Newton awarded PhD (Psychoanalysis & Creativity) University of Sheffield.
5.
Donald Kuspit: The Post-Modern Icon: Stephen Newton's Post-Abstract Paintings (essay)

Stephen Newton's **POST-ABSTRACT PAINTINGS**

DONALD KUSPIT

Suppose, as I think, 20th century abstract art has by and large lost its creative depth and become an academic mannerism: an illustration of the idea of spiritual pictorial space rather than its ecstatic substance. Then the question art faces – at least for art eager to serve and ‘substantiate’ the spiritual unconscious – is how to sustain spirituality without its abstract mode of articulation. More simply, how can spirituality be made to seem credible when the abstract art, that has been its modern vehicle, has become shop worn and outworn – that is, old? For out of avant-garde necessity – the avant-garde compulsion to rebel against whatever has become a tradition, however untraditional it once was – the critical spectator, along with the critical artist, must repudiate an art once it has acquired bourgeois credentials.

Assimilated by society, abstract art – supposedly the peak modern art has been struggling to climb from the start – suddenly loses its authenticity and difficulty, and becomes, as Max Horkheimer has suggested, no more than entertaining wallpaper. (1) They have become simply another language of art, in which the artist makes many interesting,

even intriguing statements – none of which, unfortunately, evoke the spiritual or afford a spiritual experience. Or, to put this another way, abstract art no longer implies spiritual communion with unconscious creativity: depth perception of the creativity that permits people to transcend ordinary superficial perception, and thus experience the mystery of creativity as such.

I think Stephen Newton's paintings offer an important, convincing answer to this question: they are postmodern post-abstract-icons, that is, painterly images that reconstitute the icon – the traditional artistic means of embodying spirituality – in new figurative terms. Traditionally, a sacred person is someone who has been saved by the grace – creativity – of God, in whom he has placed his faith. In our godless world, a sacred person is someone who has been saved by his own creativity – by having faith in his own spiritual unconscious. In other words, the sacred person is an ‘artist’ in principle.

Newton's pictures give us a view of an inhospitable, indeed, inhuman space, which diminishes what

ever is in it. His pictorial space it is essentially deserted – the epitome of an emotional desert. Human reciprocity is impossible in it –altogether extinguished, as though it had never existed. Indeed, the radical emptiness of the space embodies the impossibility of being intimate in it. Newton's space has an air of remoteness about it, conveying feelings of separation and isolation – radical loneliness. Indeed, there is an impersonal air to the bleak space, however much this is contradicted by the aggressively personal way it is painted – a tension, dialectically unresolved. Clearly, the modern idea that art regresses to a child's vision of reality in order to serve the troubled ego of the adult has reached an ironic climax in Newton's imagery.

What does the psychodynamics of Newton's paintings have to do with their being icons? I am suggesting that they are personal icons, and that these are the only kind of icons that can be legitimately made in this age of doubt, indeed, of abysmal self-doubt. The self is re-consecrated in them, recovering its sense of itself as sacred by working through its wretched past – the past in which its growth was stunted rather than encouraged. Thus his self-analytic pictures show the process by which an emotionally wounded person heals himself with the help of his spiritual unconscious – his unconscious creativity. This is the hidden triumph, strength, and richness of his paintings – it is hidden in their ecstatically creative gesturalism, their relentless expressionistic dynamics – which on the surface present such a spare, even barren environment.

Newton's icons are in emotional affect an account, even a kind of allegory, of his difficult ascent from

inauthentic homebound uncreative existence to authentic creative selfhood – to creative and personal autonomy. The spiritual unconscious is narcissism at its most creative but also most desperate, creative narcissism restores a self that has been destroyed by the world. Creativity dramatises this destruction, and in so doing discovers a dramatic new self. Creativity is the basic skill of survival in a world indifferent to the survival of the self.

As Viktor Frankl (another psychoanalyst) suggests, we have become intoxicated by creativity, but we no longer understand its redemptive existential significance – its spiritual character.(2) We think that it can be consciously willed, forgetting that creativity is an unconscious response to the sense of the meaninglessness of life – an unconscious attempt to overcome the feeling of the futility of it all –the intense feeling of nothingness embodied in the void of Newton's pictorial space. It is the same void we find in a good deal of 20th century abstract painting, for example, in the work of Malevich, Motherwell, Newman, Rothko, and Still. Motherwell, it should be noted, declared that 'abstract art is a form of mysticism'.(3)

Anton Ehrenzweig, Newton's acknowledged mentor, describes creativity in terms derived from the Kleinian model of psychic development as well as, more broadly, Hegelian dialectic. There is an "initial ('schizoid') stage of projecting fragmented parts of the self into the work, unacknowledged split-off elements will then easily appear accidental, fragmented, unwanted and persecutory. The second ('manic') phase initiates unconscious scanning that inaugurates art's substructure, but may not necessarily heal the fragmentation of the surface

gestalt. In the 3rd final phase a new gestalt is created, which embodies the autonomy of both, but also their connection and even reciprocity. Thus what Klein calls the depressive position is reached. The interpretive issue is to show how these stages are embodied in Newton's icons.

I am suggesting that Newton's most important achievement is to picture the creative process itself, and, equally important, to convey its profound human import. 'If we visualize the creative instinct as a river,' the critic Alfred Neumeyer writes, 'with its source in the ego of the artist, and as its mouth or estuary the final product -the work of art – then we realise that before the twentieth century the flow of the river remained hidden [...] contemporary art, on the other hand, charts the river from source to sea.'(4) Few contemporary artists have traced the course of the creative river with as much precision – as much scientific awareness – as Newton.

NOTES

1.
Max Horkheimer. Critique of Instrumental Reason (Continuum, 1974)
2.
Victor Frankl. The Doctor and the Soul (Bantam Matrix, 1969)
3.
Stephanie Terenzio ed. The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell (OUP, 1992)
4.
Alfred Neumeyer. The Search for Meaning in Modern Art (Prentice Hall, 1964)



Farmhouse 2012

oil on canvas

8 x 15in



Empty Street 2016

oil on canvas

13 x 17in



Street With A Hoarding 2012

oil on canvas
24 x 26in



Birthday Party 2015

oil on canvas
26 x 24in





Late Excavation 2016

oil on canvas

55 x 50in



Winter With A Derelict House 2014

oil on canvas

50 x 42in



Room With A View Of A Chapel 2010

oil on canvas

30 x 26in



Late Afternoon 2010

oil on canvas

15 x 15in



The Sea 2015

oil on canvas

55 x 50in



To The Sea 2013

oil on canvas

48 x 42in



Park In Winter 2015

oil on canvas

50 x 42in



Untitled 2013

oil on canvas
10 x 10in



Asylum 2015

oil on canvas
25 x 30in



Room With A Chair And Open Door 2010

oil on canvas

32 x 38in



Hospital Bed 2012

oil on canvas

12 x 12in



Hospital Ward 2013

oil on canvas
15 x 15in



Room With A Yellow Vase 2014

oil on canvas

8 x 8in



Front Room 2016

oil on canvas

14 x 18in



Mirror Reflecting A Room 2014

oil on canvas

42 x 35in



Empty Room With A Mirror 2014

oil on canvas
40 x 34in



Room With A View Of Cliffs 2013

oil on canvas
60 x 55in



Room With A Mountain View 2014

oil on canvas
30 x 34in



Cell 2014
oil on canvas
8 x 8in



Bedroom With Flowered Curtains 2011

oil on canvas
40 x 34in



A Married Couple 2013

oil on canvas
8 x 8in





Room With A Seaview 2010

oil on canvas

32 x 38in



Room At Dusk 2011

oil on canvas

30 x 34in



Altar Table 2013

oil on canvas
15 x 15in



Terrace 2012

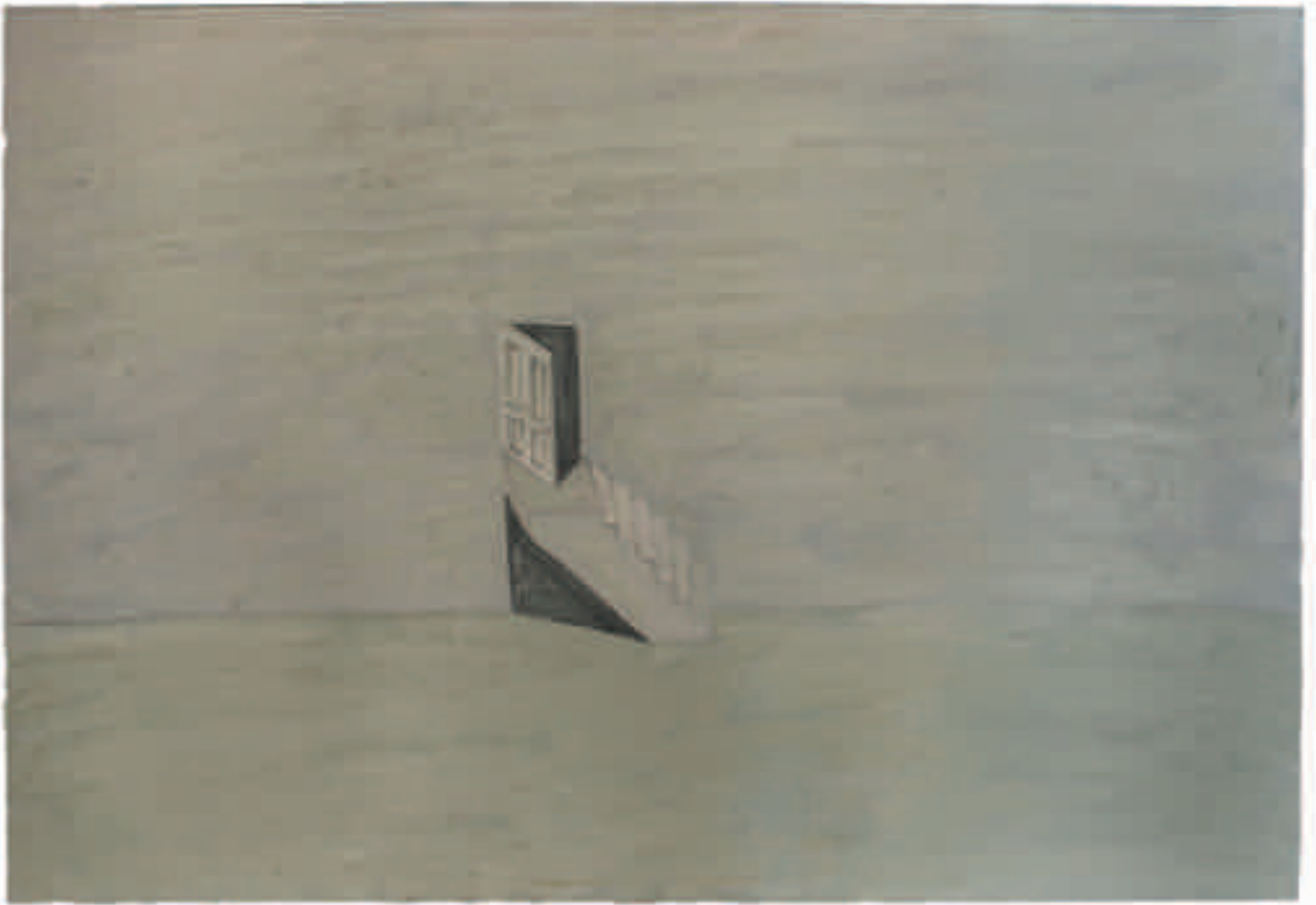
oil on canvas
26 x 24in



Confessional 2016

oil on canvas

52 x 48in



Stairway To A Door 2001

oil on canvas

76 x 110in



Bowl Of Fruit On A Table 2013

oil on canvas

40 x 34in



Mirror Reflecting A Green Chair 2014

oil on canvas

18 x 20in



Window On To A Street 2011

oil on canvas
30 x 34in



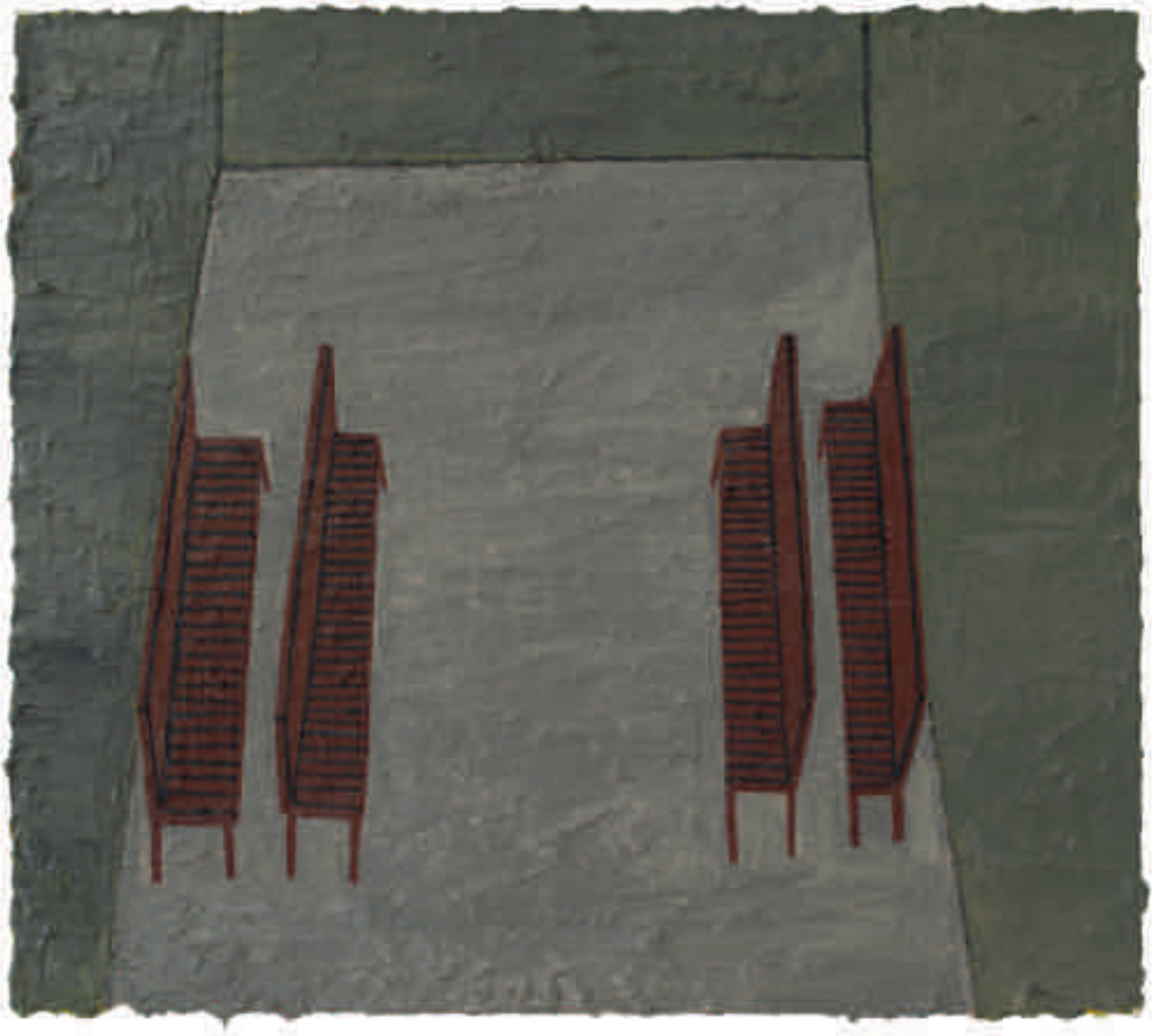
Man Reading A Newspaper 2012

oil on canvas
15 x 15in



Two Chairs And A White Table 2002

oil on canvas
38 x 40in



Grey Chamber 2016

oil on canvas

30 x 34in



Vigil 2015
oil on canvas
24 x 26in



Dark Night Outside 2015

oil on canvas

19 x 16in



Table Beneath A Window 2010

oil on canvas
10 x 10in



Room With A Portrait 2010

oil on canvas

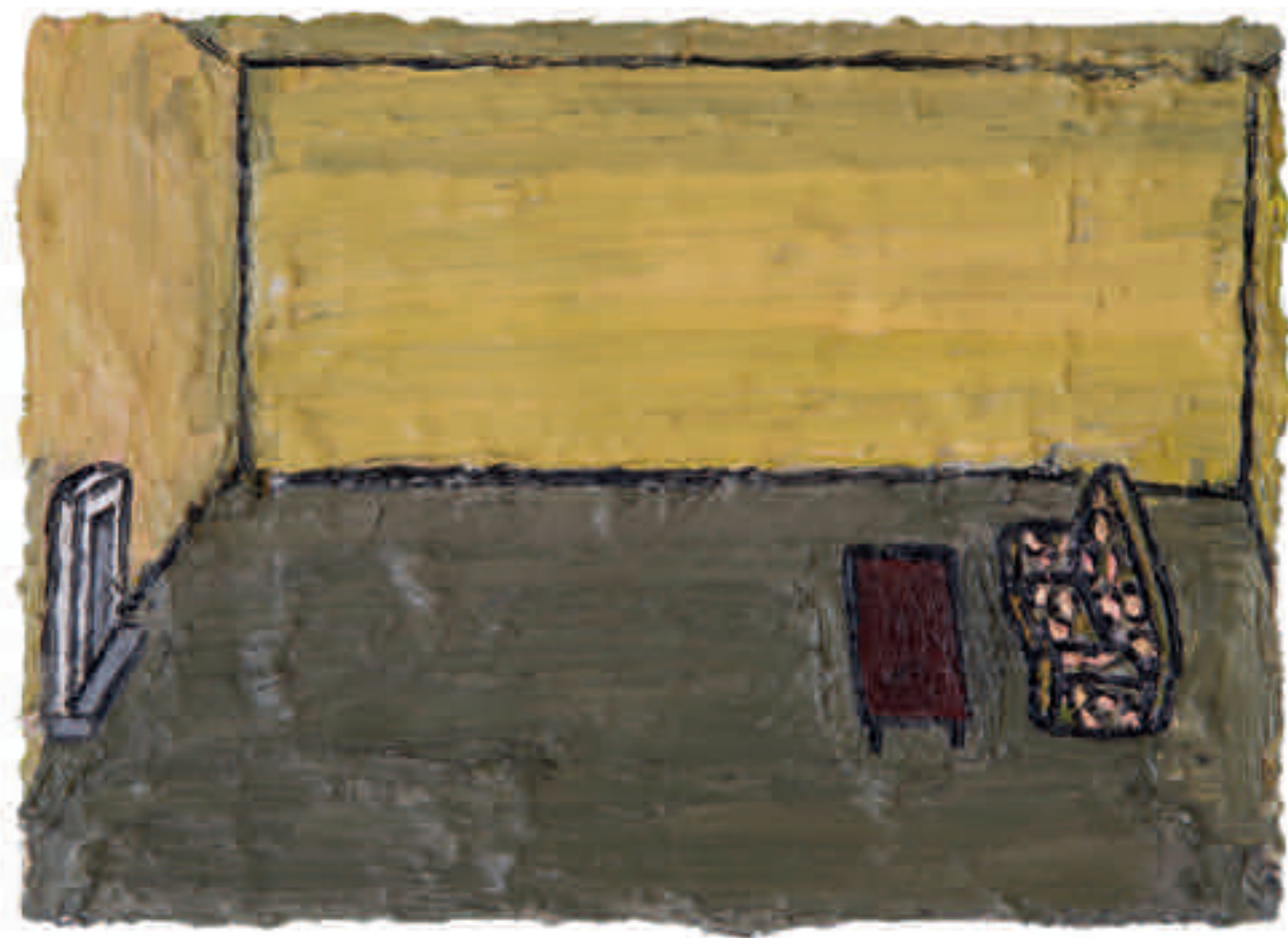
25 x 28in



Table With A Tablecloth 2016

oil on canvas

10 x 14in



Room With Yellow Walls 2016

oil on canvas

10 x 14in



Window And A Pulpit 1997

oil on canvas

40 x 60in



Table Reflected In A Mirror 2015

oil on canvas

13 x 20in



Self-Portrait By A Mirror 2011

oil on canvas
60 x 54in





Open Window 2016

oil on canvas
13 x 20in



Sofa And A Table 1998

oil on canvas
37 x 51in



Discarded Chair 2002

oil on canvas
60 x 60in



Room With Two Chairs And A Small Table 2002

oil on canvas

38 x 40in



Doorway With A Blue Sky 2001

oil on canvas

76 x 110in



Bathroom With A Yellow Chair 2004

oil on canvas
60 x 54in



Chair By A Window 2009

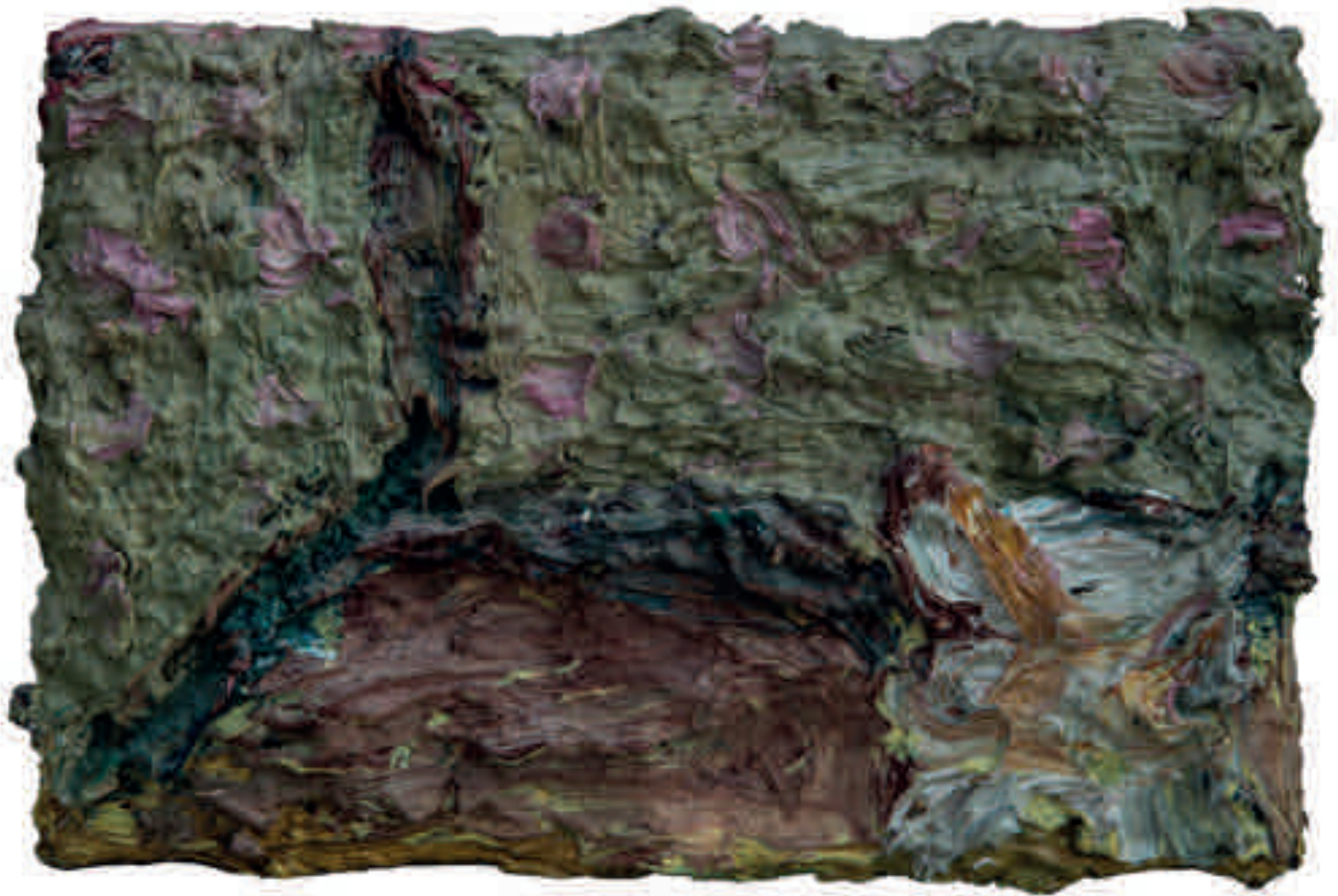
oil on canvas

30 x 25in



Recessed Door 2015

oil on canvas
12 x 12in



Room With An Armchair And Spotted Wallpaper 1986

oil on canvas

8 x 12in



Orange Sofa 1996

oil on canvas

19 x 20in



Table With A Clock And A Photograph 2010

oil on canvas

28 x 32in



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