

## The Harvest



THE HARVEST

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## ABSTRACT

As a painter who hunts, my art concerns the dialectics of hunting. How can I say, “I love deer” while I am in pursuit to shoot one? Why is it that I am both remorseful and happy when I stand over an elk whose life I cut short? Where is the beauty gleaned from when I recall the dead turkey lying in the dirt? I began hunting when I was twenty years old and it has changed my life. My thesis body of artwork, *The Harvest*, explores these inherent contradictions. I create beautiful pictures of horrific scenes. Visually, I am painting carcasses and animal body parts. Conceptually, I am expressing my emotional recollection of hunting experiences. I rely heavily on the contrast between lights and darks in my art to deliver my primary concept: the conflict between mortality and sustenance. In order for a thing to live, another thing must die. As for my compositions, they are simple. Each painting is of a single animal centrally located, or slightly off-center, in a room or outside in nature. This approach was inspired by artists such and Rembrandt and Antonio Lopez-Garcia. I avoid creating art for a pro-hunting audience. My art is meant to speak to everyone. The contemplative intrigue is in the conflict of realizing that there is beauty in the obviously grotesque. Painting these pictures has in turn shaped how I perceive nature. I am not so much as disconcerted by the many dialectics in nature now, but rather I am delighted to recognize these philosophical phenomena. I accept that death is an essential part of being alive. Ironically, death is what makes life beautiful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**DEDICATION**

To my grandfather, artist and hunter, Wesley Johann Berg.

## EPIGRAPH

*After all, the earliest forms of representational art reflect hunters and prey. While the arts were making us spiritually viable, hunting did the heavy lifting of not only keeping us alive, but inspiring us. To abhor hunting is to hate the place from which you came, which is akin to hating yourself in some distant, abstract way.*

-Steven Rinella

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## DESCRIPTION

I am an American realist painter seeking to harvest the beauty, reality, and sustenance from hunting. My art is naturalistic with sentiments of transcendentalism and romanticism. This approach is a reflection of my utmost respect and reverent affections for the timeless endeavor of hunting. My art is a memory of hunting. My memories are not factually detailed accounts of what happened. Rather, my paintings are a recollection of my emotional responses to my hunting experiences.

My first hunt was a revelation. It was a turning point in my life that has changed how I perceive my food, and how I perceive life as a human and as an animal. I pull inspiration for my thesis paintings from memories and personal photos. All of my artwork is inspired by my time in the field, hunting other animals. Although as a child I did not hunt, I thoughtlessly killed a few small animals with my pellet gun. I perceived my careless ventures as shooting an object that moved. It was target practice. I did not become aware of the life-force of an animal until it had bled to death and became still in my presence.

I remember the day that I killed my first animal before I knew what it was to be a hunter. That day I rejoiced in the fact that I had an air-rifle and was able to roam through the sagebrush and juniper-speckled hills. My twin brother, Daniel, and I had wandered the land looking for anything to shoot at. We shot at birds and squirrels during previous outings but never managed to kill one, let alone hit one. The thrill was in the chase. The thrill was in the chance. At a certain moment, we split up and took our own hunting routes. Looking back now, it was odd for my twin and I to split apart from one another. Alone, I pressed on.

The fog seemed to heighten my alertness. The orchestrated noises of the wild were muffled and choked to a hushed hiss. I could not see far into the distance; it faded into a white

abyss which permitted my eyes to focus on a smaller area around me. Visually, I had less ground to cover. My awareness was keen because I was alone. Suddenly, blue and grey danced from the sea of sage up to a black wire. Silence. Without any nerve or shakiness, I raised my rifle, took aim through the iron sights and fired. No kick, no bang, no flash. Putt! The dancing blue jay fell head-first to the earthen red clay. Excited, I raced over to find my trophy. It took some time before I located the fine, small bird laying face-down in the dirt. Standing by myself over the soft, blue-tufted body, the feeling of remorse pushed its way into my chest.

What was I expecting to gain from the kill? What drove me to such lengths, only to find that my reward was to tear out a piece of my innocence? As a child, I knew my favorite bird was the blue jay. The bird's grace lingered in the inanimate limbs of its flightless body. I remember raising the blue jay up to eye-level by its feet. Looking back at me was a copper eye. I was saddened and my only companion was grief. The experience did not turn me into a hunter. I did not become one for another decade.

I have always been an artist. Now as an adult, the content of my paintings are dead animals that I have stalked and killed. I primarily hunt big-game animals such as deer and elk in Autumn using either a muzzleloader or a rifle. During Spring, I hunt turkey with a shotgun. My reason for hunting with guns is simply that they allow me to shoot an animal with greater accuracy. If I can take a precise shot at an animal, then the quicker that animal will die and the less it will have to suffer. Whereas any other wild big-game animal that dies from natural causes, such as illness, hunger, thirst, or predation, will most likely undergo a long period of extreme stress and pain before dying. Killing my prey quickly is very important to me.

I paint mostly from reference photos that I have taken from my most recent hunts. I capture the moments of the hunt that are most important to me. I tend to break-down hunting into

three major parts. The first part of hunting has everything to do with the pursuit of the animal, up to the point of making a kill. The second part begins when an animal has been killed, and it ends before the animal is cooked, eaten, and mounted. This is the stage of processing a dead animal, which includes: field dressing (gutting), skinning, draining of blood, removal of meat, transportation, dry aging (curing), cleaning, separation of specific cuts of meat (i.e. roast, steak, burger, etc.). The third, and final, part includes preparation, cooking, and eating the harvested animal. My aim is to focus on the second part of hunting: processing. When I take the life of the animal, I truly become responsible for it and my actions. I harvest as much of the meat as I practically can. I leave what I do not need, yet anything left does not go to waste. Other wild animals, such as crows, skunks, and coyotes, will feed on the remains while the very last of the remnants will decompose into the ground as a natural fertilizer for surrounding vegetation.

In the studio, my palette is made of up natural pigments and a variety of reds and pinks. The content of my art dictates the colors I use. I am inspired by artists such as Rembrandt, Thomas Moran, Jan Weenix, and Antonio Lopez-Garcia. They have a technical mastery over their tools that allows them to articulate their ideas clearly. Their art helps inform my technical approach to painting. The scale of my paintings is nearly life size. It is not important to have the paintings be exactly life-size, simply, larger paintings help my viewer to react honestly. Part of the significance of big-game hunting is the magnitude of the animals involved. I strive to paint pictures that resemble my memories of hunting. This means that they are not factually detailed records of a time and place, but rather they are the emotional recollection of events that have spiritually impressed me.

My painting, *European Mount*, shows a decapitated elk head leaning against a log in a bed of grass and flowers (Fig. 1). This painting alludes to the first time I killed an elk. I chose

this title because an actual European mount for an animal's head is just a bleached skull, with the antlers still attached, that is mounted on a wall. To create a European mount, I had to remove the head of the elk from its body. Granted, how the actual scene happened was not in a lush grassy patch of wilderness. In reality, the reference photo that I took of the head was in a dry and arid landscape that was bleached by the desert sun. I was sweaty and tired from the demanding work of hunting and harvesting the meat from the animal. I was happy and grateful. As I recall that



Fig. 1. Aaron C. Berg, *European Mount*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 36" x 36"

experience, I remember the moment just before I pulled the trigger. The elk stepped from behind a tree, stopping as I raised the rifle to my shoulder and took aim. He moved slowly and gracefully and did not startle or try to flee at the sight of me. From a short distance he stood still, turning his head toward my direction. I fired my muzzle loader rifle at his chest: broadside. In

my mind, I had killed “the king” of the forest. I was happy. I was sad. I was thankful. I was remorseful. I was conflicted. In this painting, I want to show the inherently unsettling imagery of a severed elk head, but I also want to reveal the beauty and reverence that I experienced during that day. I seem to remember the emotions I felt during the hunt more clearly than I can recall a thorough record of the day’s passing events.

It may be gruesome and somewhat disturbing to view this painting. The head is dark, and the eye is slightly opened, seeming to stare back at the viewer. It’s startling, however, there is no blood or displayed entrails. The head is centered in the composition, which is surrounded by lush green grass and bright wildflowers. They add a quality of tranquility to the painting that might make the elk head look as if it is sleeping, rather than severed and lifeless. The abundance of living plants that encircles the head refers to the relationship of sustenance and mortality. In order for something to live, another thing must die. One of the greatest dialectic tensions of nature, is the symbiotic relationship between the living and the dying. I rely on the thematic contrast of light and dark in my paintings to illustrate the contradictory interdependencies of life and death. I understand that painting animal carcasses with the intention to express beauty in hunting and killing animals has inherent contradictions. Nevertheless, it is natural and there is beauty to be distilled from the acceptance of nature.

I seek to share the beautiful qualities of hunting without compromising the visceral depiction of an animal that has been killed. For tangible objects, I define beauty as the balance and proportion of formal qualities. As for the intangible, I define beauty as the virtuous, pure, and majestic. Ecologically, beauty can be found in the food chain and how humans contribute to the giving-and-taking cycle to help maintain a balanced habitat. As a human, a predatory species, beauty can be seen in the act of hunting as a pure endeavor to our nature. Indeed, the visual

aspect of processing a dead animal is bloody and gruesome, and I do not want to hide these inherent facts from my viewer—it would be disingenuous. Admittedly, there is a degree of shock-value to my art. Killing, is a shocking thing. It also incites an emotional response in most viewers. Once I have their attention, I can inspire contemplation on the conflicting relationship between sustenance and mortality.

The first buck that I killed was shot with a single bullet. It entered into one lung and exited through the other. He didn't jump or flee as I raised my rifle to my shoulder, took aim, and shot. Standing perfectly still, he watched me go through the motions of his demise. Was he curious? Was he scared? I was scared. This wasn't target practice. This wasn't a water jug or an empty soda can, or a small blue jay. Through my rifle-scope stood the shimmering grey-tan hide of a fully grown mule deer, staring back at me with his large dark eyes. Did he know what was about to happen? Could he even comprehend such, outside of his primal instincts? My arms and legs grew weak. I was trembling. The cross-hair shook behind the shoulder of the buck. My right index finger squeezed and in that instant, came forth a bright burst of light and a rageful ringing in my ears.

My hands rested on the warm body of the lifeless deer. He was lying outstretched in the sun. Suddenly, I realized how peaceful it was outside that day. I admired the deer. A beautiful animal. I killed him with the intention to harvest his body for food. It was also an attempt to reconnect with my heritage in the grand arena of the “human experience” as the “hunter.” It was successful. Every feeling, good and bad, was cherished as a natural phenomenon of what it means to be human; to experience and to feel it physically, emotionally and spiritually, all the while struggling to make sense of it, intellectually. I have never felt so alive, or human prior to



Fig. 2. Aaron C. Berg, *Deer Heart*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 20" x 20"

that moment where I knelt down beside the deer. Slowly, I caressed his shimmering flank. All was quiet and still, save for the brisk autumn breeze.

Humans have been hunting for eons. My Native American and European ancestors were undoubtedly hunters at some point in time. Did they experience the same emotions I did from hunting? Why did I have so much guilt from killing a deer? Why did I have so much joy? Why did I shake with excitement, but suddenly feel like weeping? Did they weep? As my father-in-law, Richie, and I were gutting the deer, he passed me a steaming lung to hold in each hand. I was unexpectedly reminded of my own mortality. I rarely ponder death, but I became aware of my chest expanding and contracting with every breath I drew in and exhaled. By hunting and harvesting what I had killed, I knew that I was not undertaking anything new in the history of

humanity. Why was the experience so shocking, exhilarating, life-giving, and full of revelation? I could not fully understand it, but nonetheless, I wanted to share it.

My painting, *Deer Heart*, depicts the heart of a deer soaking in a bowl of water in a kitchen sink (Fig. 2). This painting represents a tradition that my family and I have. We always eat the heart during the night of the kill. We have not explicitly detailed what this tradition means, but we have taken to it each year. For me, this tradition is done to recognize the life of the deer and we show our gratefulness by consuming the heart. The heart symbolizes the life of the animal. Consuming it first shows that we have taken responsibility for our actions and that animal's life. It is a celebration of the deer's life. It is a meal of thanksgiving. We are thankful for the hunt and the sustenance that comes from it. The heart soaking in the bowl of water is one of the final steps taken before it is cooked. I am reminded of my own beating heart when I stare down at the deer's heart in the bowl of water, just like the steaming lungs I held in my hands. This is the wholesome connection with nature and food that I am attracted to. I am humbled by the fact that I am animal just like the game I hunt. *Deer Heart* is a reflection of my newfound connection to nature through the food I acquire from hunting.

The difference between me killing the blue jay, was that I had thought out my process thoroughly in killing the deer, and I held my intentions in the forefront of my mind through the whole process. As a child, every time I loaded my pellet gun it resulted in a false shot, regardless if I hit my target. The copper pellet was charged with my insecurities of trying to be older than my age, my insecurities of wanting to claim "bragging rights" and of always striving to be the "cool guy" in the crowd. In contrast, my lead bullet was charged with the intention and purpose of prolonging my life. I felt respect for the animal before I pulled the trigger, and forever afterward. In the violence of the act, I revisited my undirected youth. In the beauty of the act, I

was revealed to myself. That beautiful deer, standing alone in all his majesty looked back at me in his silent gaze. Still, he looks at me.

## RESEARCH

There is a long lineage of artists who paint pictures of nature in the hopes of capturing its beauty, but three stand out in my mind as sources of inspiration. Plein air painters Thomas Moran (1837–1926) and Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902) caught the ethereal qualities of the natural world through landscapes of North America. Oil painter Joseph Turner (1775–1851) explored both the beauty and violence of nature by painting stormy seas capturing the awesome drama of the ocean. My admiration and affinity for these artists comes from my emotional response to their work and the fond memories they evoke from my own experiences in the wilderness. Their art returns me to nature. An author and Wildlife Conservationist, Jim Posewitz, eloquently captures this ancestral drive to reunite with the wild by means of hunting in his book, *Beyond Fair Chase*. He states:

One of the primary purposes of hunting is to exercise our need to remain a part of the natural world. We still have the desire to participate in the natural process. Our developed world is becoming separated from nature; it is becoming artificial. Even the outdoors is often delivered through the window of a tour bus or processed through movies, videos, and theme parks that mock reality. Hunting is one of that last ways we have to exercise our passion to belong to the earth, to be part of the natural world, to participate in the ecological drama, and to nurture an ember of wildness within ourselves. (Posewitz 89-90)

My affinity for nature only grows with each hunt I go on. It is hard for me to explain, but I feel more comfortable and at ease when I am in the wilderness. I long to be there more often. For example, when I am camping, I am not trying to keep up with the everchanging rapidity of



Fig. 3. Jan Weenix, *Still Life with a Hare and other Game*, 1697, Oil on canvas, 45.08" x 37.8" Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

civilization. Instead, I am moving in step with the melody of nature. My problems in the outdoors are immediate and often give me instant gratification when I solve them. Not only do I feel more comfortable in the wilderness, but I feel, to a certain degree, that it is where I belong. As the progress of civilization gains speed, the natural wild spaces keep moving at the same constant rhythm as they had for centuries past. There is a quality of timelessness that characterizes nature. These painters did not just paint pictures. They apprehended the experience of the subjects they painted. They harnessed the splendor of the wilderness.

I aspire to apprehend my personal experiences in nature like these artists have. Each of



Fig. 4. Rembrandt, *Slaughtered Ox*, 1655, Oil on panel, 37" x 27.16" Louvre Museum, Paris.

them caught the polarity of nature in their land and seascapes. I found similar dialectics in nature through hunting. Contemporary author and hunter, Steven Rinella, recalls a past hunt in his book, *Meat Eater: Adventures From the Life of an American Hunter*, where he had just field dressed a deer, "The sight of the remains might appear gruesome to some, but to me it seems wholesome, almost appetizing" (224). How do I paint something that is inherently grotesque in a manner that is beautiful? The Dutch baroque artist Jan Weenix (1642-1719) painted pictures of animals that were

hunted (Fig. 3). He paints them with the attitude and perspective of the body as a trophy and the trophy is a memorial to the animal's life. Through these meticulously painted pieces by Weenix, I saw the way in which I could translate the grittiness of my hunting experiences into something more approachable and serene, but still true to its visceral nature.

The Dutch baroque painter Rembrandt (1606–1669) and Spanish modernist Antonio Lopez Garcia (1936 - current) each completed a painting that represents the visual and emotional quality I want my paintings to attain. In Rembrandt's painting, *Slaughtered Ox*, a skinned and

gutted ox carcass is hung upside down and splayed open at a quarter angle to the viewer (Fig. 4). The ox is centered in the composition with bright values. Dark shadows create a vignette surrounding the carcass. There is a small female figure to the right side of the carcass, but she is hard to recognize without closer scrutiny. The color spectrum is dominated by a variety of browns and earthy tones of red and yellow. In Garcia's painting, *Skinned Rabbit*, he depicts a skinned rabbit lying in the fetal position on a plate on top of a table (Fig. 5). The head is to the

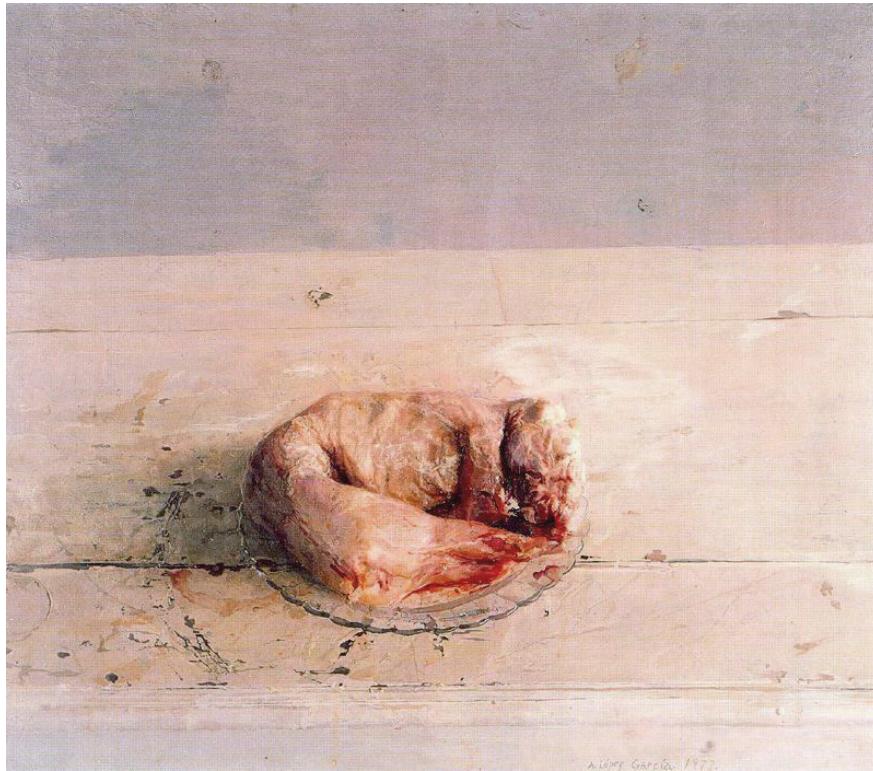


Fig. 5. Antionio Lopez-Garcia, *Skinned Rabbit*, 1972, Oil on wood,  
20.86" x 23.82" Unknown

right and the tail is to the left. The colors are muted down to a very realistic value range. There is a grey wall stretching horizontally across the top section of the painting. Moving downward, there is a white table. Centered and to the lower half of the composition lies the pink form of the skinned rabbit on what appears to be a glass plate, which is also the same white of the table. In both paintings, the raw flesh is depicted in the form of an animal. The flesh is gruesome and

shocking, but I am drawn in by the intriguing textures and colors of the paint. They are paintings of dead animals, but they are also still life paintings of food. I feel sentiments of romanticism when I see how food is depicted through still life by these artists.

Rembrandt and Lopez-Garcia have helped to artistically inform my painting, *Dry Aging*, which depicts the step in processing the meat where I think our minds begin to translate the deer from animal to food (Fig. 6). In my painting, like in Rembrandt's, the hanging carcass still has

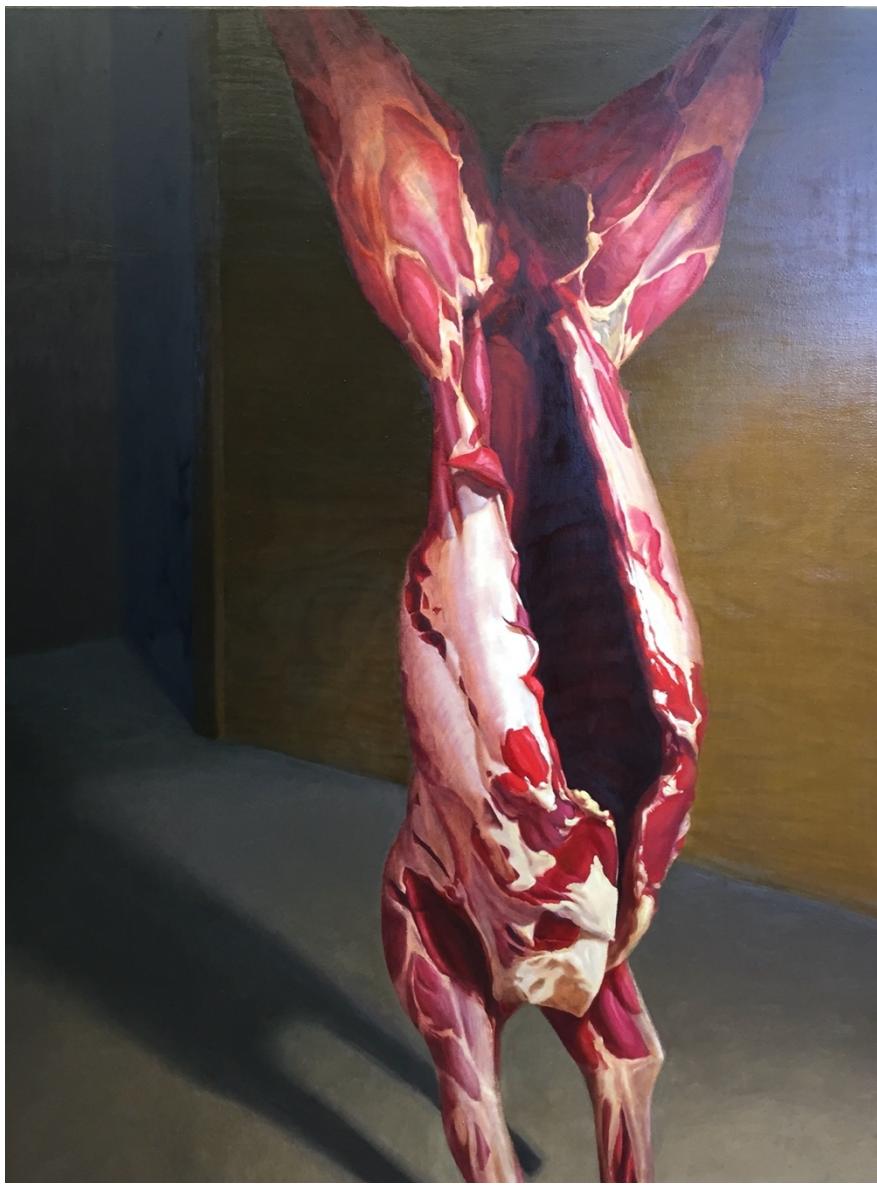


Fig. 6. Aaron C. Berg, *Dry Aging*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 48" x 36"

the shape of an animal but lacks the fur, hooves, and head that make it look fully alive. All that is there is the edible meat. To dry age a piece of meat, it needs to be exposed to the air in a cool and dry environment which wards off unwanted bacteria and rot. The dry aging process helps tenderize the meat before being cut into sections and packaged. That is why the carcass is hung by its legs in this fashion. The spread of the

animal allows for air to contact the majority of the meat's surface, which allows for the surface to dry, or crust over so it is encased in a protective layer against insects. The cavernous opening in the chest represents the death of the animal. That cavity is framed by the brightness of the muscles, fat, and sinew which will give sustenance to life. It reflects the conflict between life and death. The dark doorway in the background represents the possibility of what awaits after death. It is the exit from life into the unknown. This painting is about coming to terms with death while being alive. This painting is about a dead deer that was killed by a hunter and is now dry aging before it is eaten. It is about food.

In an interview with the *Star Tribune*, Rinella stated, "I wouldn't hunt if I didn't enjoy it, and I wouldn't hunt if it weren't for the meat. Both of these things are equally important to me. Remove one and my interest would be gone" (Jones par.8). I agree with him. Although there are many reasons why I hunt. The most important one for me is the meat. A close second is enjoyment. Ultimately, in order for us to eat meat, an animal must die. Not only do I encourage viewers to accept that death sustains life, but hopefully they will embrace this dynamic as a part of the natural cycle of life. There is terrible beauty in mortality. I do not think we should ignore or distract ourselves from it. *Field Dressing* is a painting where I expressed the conflicting relationship of life and death in a way that is reverent and beautiful (Fig. 7).

The deer in this painting has just been field dressed (gutted). This is the first step that takes place after a deer has been killed. The deer is lying outstretched across the entire length of the canvas. It is reminiscent of the body of Christ on the altar. The perspective is on the same level as the deer; not looking down on it as something lesser, or up at it as something greater. This is how I display my reverence for the deer's life. I am not saying that I, or humans, are equal to deer. Rather, that in order to have compassion I must share a perspective with the deer in



Fig. 7. Aaron C. Berg, *Field Dressing*, 2019, Oil on Canvas, 20" x 60"

some way. Whereas, if the perspective were viewing the deer from above it would seem that the viewer is projecting power and dominance over the deer. I want to show that I am grateful and have some degree of understanding. Moreover, the golden arc of the meadow is meant to be a symbol of the arc of life. The early morning glow of the sky adds a calm and serene quality to the painting. It reflects the quietness of the day echoed in the quietness of the deer. Its ribcage breaks the golden arc midway into the darkness of the trees in the background as a reference to the death of the deer in the middle of its life. This picture is meant to be shocking and sad, but it is also meant to be beautiful. Can something as visceral as a gutted deer be beautiful? And at what point does the deer become food and stop being an animal? Are they the same? These are the sort contemplative questions I wrestle with in my art.

Like a sunset that caps sandstone cliffs with a luminous golden light, exalted moments are gone as soon as they arrive. All I can do is be silent and be present. It reminds me of Moran's painting *Grand Canyon in Mist*, I am impressed by the range of colors throughout the entirety of the painting. There are all shades of green, blue, yellow, and red that form the iconic chasm of the Grand Canyon (Fig. 8). There seems to be mist or clouds creeping in the background and off to the left side of the painting. The colors remind me of my experiences in the wilderness with

my twin brother, Daniel. We witnessed many beautiful sunrises and sunsets. When I am viewing Moran's painting, I am revisiting a memory. Essentially, my own paintings are significant recollections gleaned from my memories.



Fig. 8. Thomas Moran, *Grand Canyon in Mist*, 1915, Oil on panel, 13.75" x 20.12" Unknown

Daniel and I have had many conversations about the majesty and virtues of the wild. From our discussions while hunting and backpacking, I concluded that my art should be beautiful like the peaks and valleys we hiked. My art should be realistic like the bear outside my tent at night, and like the fact that carcasses cannot expand and contract their lungs as living animals do. My art should be jovial and forlorn like the wildflowers that carpet the wet black floor of the forest that burned the year before. Reality is more interesting and surprising than anything that my imagination could ever conjure up. Therefore, I wish to honor what reality has been offering us for the past millennia: beauty in the most realistic sense.

## METHODOLOGY

Many great stories and events that happened throughout history involved a great drama or some kind of conflict. What inspires my paintings is the drama that unfolds in hunting. On my first deer hunt, I did not go into the field seeking inspiration of any sort, let alone for my studio practice. My goal was to kill a deer and harvest its meat. I left the forest with the meat of a dead deer, but I also took with me enough food-for-thought to chew on for years to come. That experience has been driving my art ever since. In the woods, I chase wild game. In the studio, I am constantly in pursuit of understanding what it means to be a hunter.



Fig. 9. Aaron C. Berg, *Meleagris Gallopavo*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 24" x 36"

I think about my hunts often. My turkey hunt last spring motivated me to paint *Meleagris Gallopavo* (Fig. 9). The impetus for most of my paintings come from witnessing an intensely captivating act or vision. When I know I am going to encounter an intense moment, I bring my camera so that I may take photos. Camera or not, an image is engrained in my memory. Then I

start by voicing my ideas. I primarily share my thoughts with my wife and my mentor. I begin mentally to work out compositions for a painting. Sometimes I can use a single picture for a reference. This was the case for *Meleagris gallopavo*. I made some minor changes from the photo. They were small enough that I could simply use my imagination to create the rest of the painting. For example, the turkey is lying in the bed of a truck, but in the painting, I have the turkey lying on snow (fig.10). The bed of the truck removes the turkey from nature. The point of



Fig. 10. Aaron C. Berg, *Reference photo for Meleagris Gallopavo*, 2019

this painting is to have the turkey be in nature. Hence, the snow. The snow also alludes to the coldness of death. The vibrant colors of the turkey's feathers in the sunlight were striking when I saw them in person. The warm colors in the painting allude to the warmth of the turkey's body

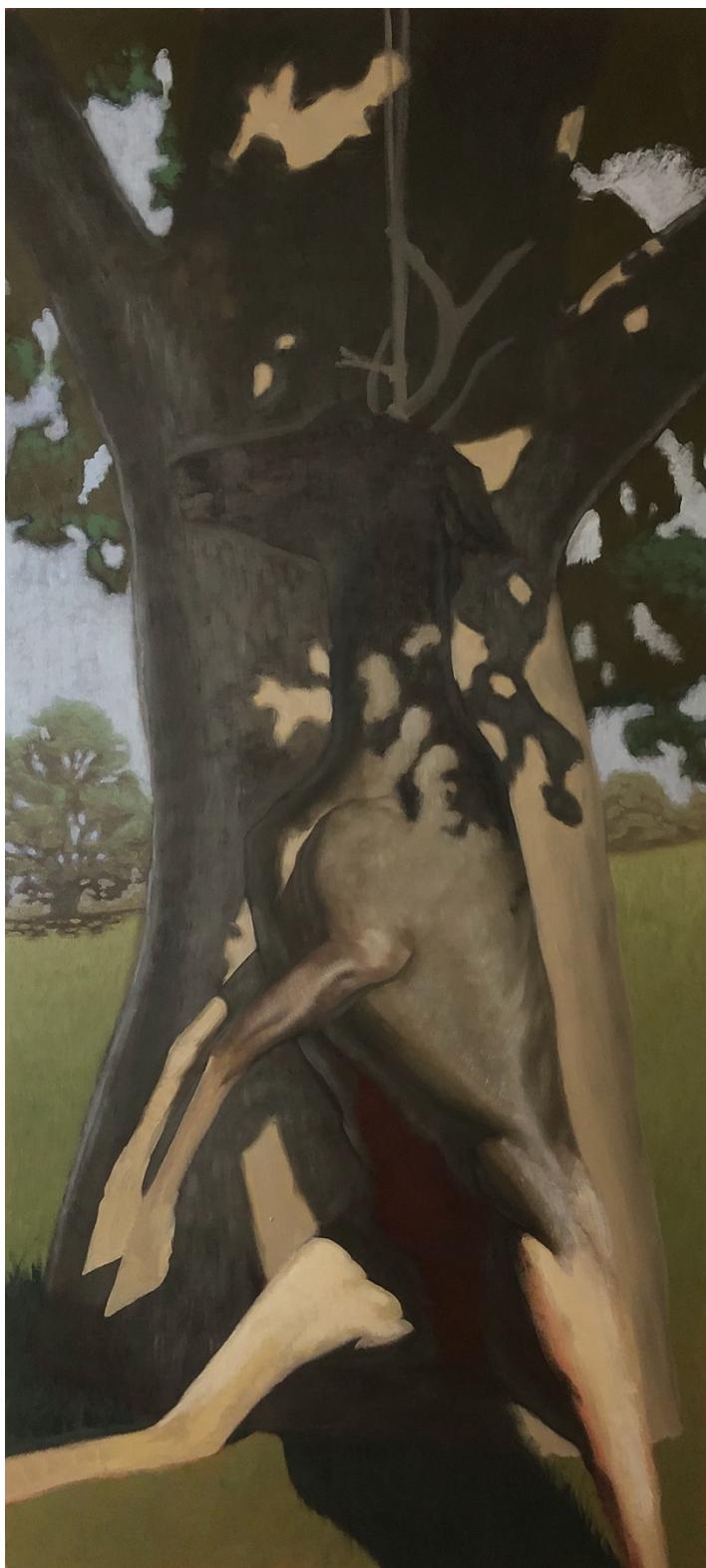


Fig. 11. Aaron C. Berg, *Draining*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 74" x 34"

and its fleeting life. The diagonal cast shadow in the photo strengthened the composition. So, I used it in my painting. Naturally, this sight impressed me. The moment I saw it, I knew was going to make a painting of it.

Unfortunately, not all of my paintings are composed as easily as that. Typically, I do not have a camera with me, or I forget to use it, when I see something magnificent. From there I draw thumbnails of value compositions of what I can recall. I draw these small thumbnail sketches to visually workout the best composition before I commit to a large-scale painting. After I am convinced by one of my sketches, I begin taking more reference photos and use parts of other photos that I already have. Then, I move on to creating some small painting studies. The studies help me with color and composition. From them, I can discern what other changes

need to be made. I start gathering my materials after I have the composition and scale figured out. My painting, *Draining*, was developed in this method (Fig. 11).

*Draining* shows a dead deer that is hanging from a rope by its antlers in a tree. The deer has just been field dressed and is now being drained of excess blood and cooling down before transportation. The medium for this painting, as with all of my other paintings, is oil on canvas. It is just under life-size. It is important that the scale of the animals I paint are close to life-size. If a dead deer or a dead elk are painted the same size as a small rabbit, my emotional message is lost. It is difficult to contemplate the relationship between sustenance and mortality from a painting of toy-sized carcasses. I want my audience to empathize with my hunting experience visually, and emotionally. They get to safely witness the grisly, yet beautiful, traits of hunting through an almost life-size image.

Normally, I start each painting by toning the surface of the canvas. This helps me to regulate my values accurately. I use oil paint mixed with odorless mineral spirits to sketch the underpainting. After the underpainting has dried, I create a chalk grid which aids in the initial outline of my content. I block in the colors on top of the underpainting. The color does not have to be exact during this stage. From there, I move on to painting with accurate colors and rendering forms. It is not uncommon for me to make big changes mid-way into my painting process. My mentor, Peter Zokosky, has convinced me multiple times to change the environments of my paintings mid-way because the change would better serve the concepts that I wish to share through my art. For example, the environment of my painting *European Mount* had changed from an elk head leaning against a house in a dirt lot to an elk head leaning against a fallen log in a verdant patch of wilderness (Fig. 12). In that particular case the grass served as a better conduit for my thesis concepts. Moreover, at this stage I remove all of my photography

references and intuitively try to figure out how to make the picture more compelling on its own. This final stage mostly involves glazing with thin transparent layers of color. This darkens values and saturates colors. Every one of my paintings could be worked on endlessly. I can make changes, but the painting does not become any greater, rather it just becomes a different painting than it was before. This means it is finished.

Nevertheless, my paintings must be visually compelling. I believe that my art needs to stand alone from the idea and the artist behind it. The physical painting has to be beautiful. If the concept is lost in translation, then at least the composition, craftsmanship, and skill should be

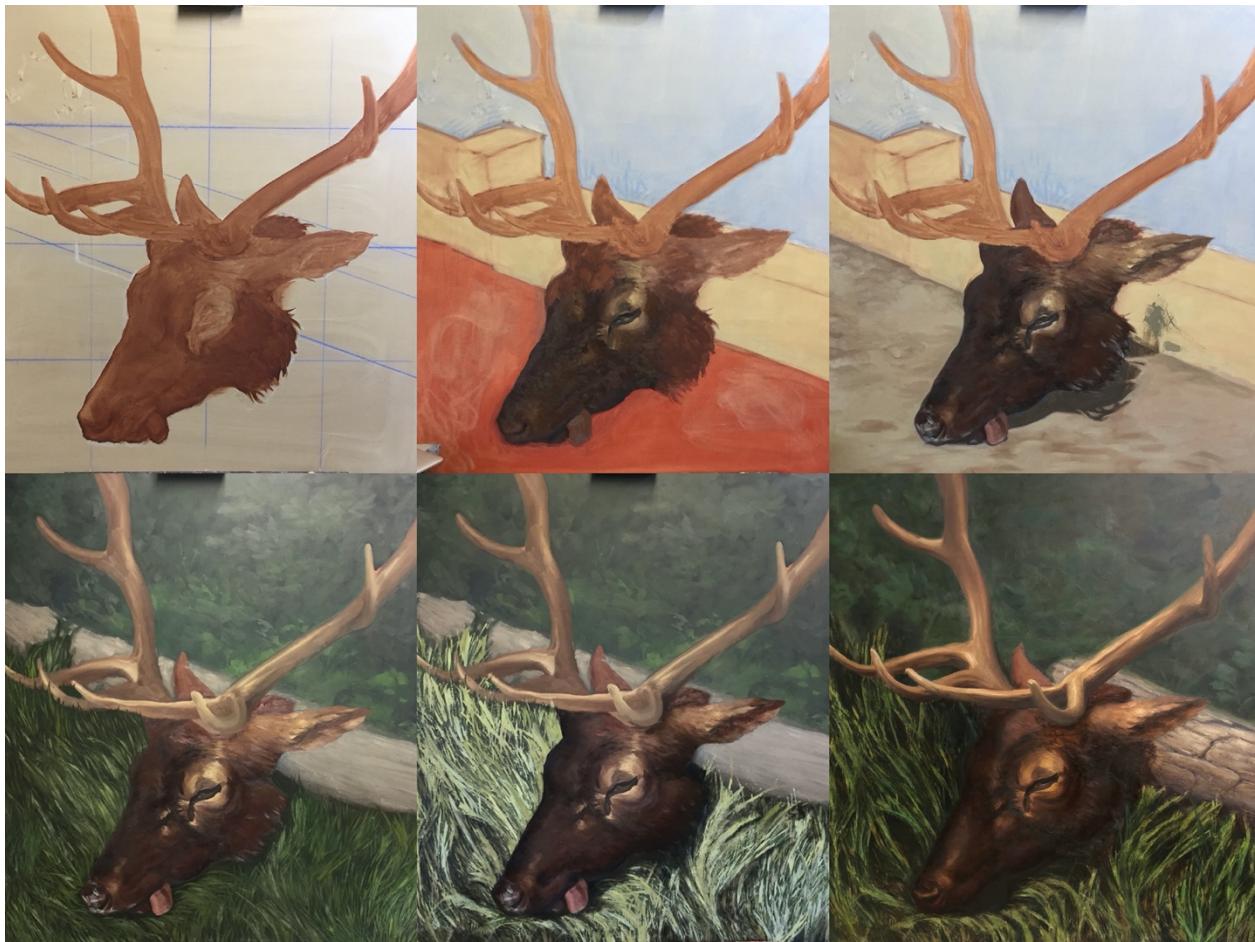


Fig. 12. Aaron C. Berg, *Progress for European Mount*, 2019

excellent. I am communicating through the visual language of objects and places through paint.

It is not my job to make sure that my audience comprehends my art, even if I would like for them to. I am wholly aware that some viewers will misunderstand my paintings. At least I hope my audience will see something beautiful that they did not know they were missing, until now.

## **CONCLUSION**

I am constantly seeking beauty and attempting to understand the balance that validates it. My paintings are a way for me to share my emotional responses to hunting. My painting allows me to showcase my insights in a way that is not confrontational. Furthermore, hunting has caused me to interact with the natural world more intimately than ever before. It pushes me to be aware of my environment and my place in it. I hope that my art can bridge the gap that separates humanity and nature by showing my connection with the food I harvest from hunting.

I spend much more time making art about hunting, than I spend out in the field actually hunting. I often reflect on my past hunts. They have changed how I define myself as an individual and as an artist. My thesis paintings are about these changes. I have noticed that my artwork has influenced my perspective on hunting, which I admire even more now. I long for the raw experiences that inspire my artwork. It seems that the only thing better than the art itself, is to be at the water-well that I draw inspiration from. To be there and fully aware that it is where I belong.

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## APPENDIX



Plate 1. Aaron C. Berg, *Deer Heart*, 2018, Oil on canvas, 20" x 20"

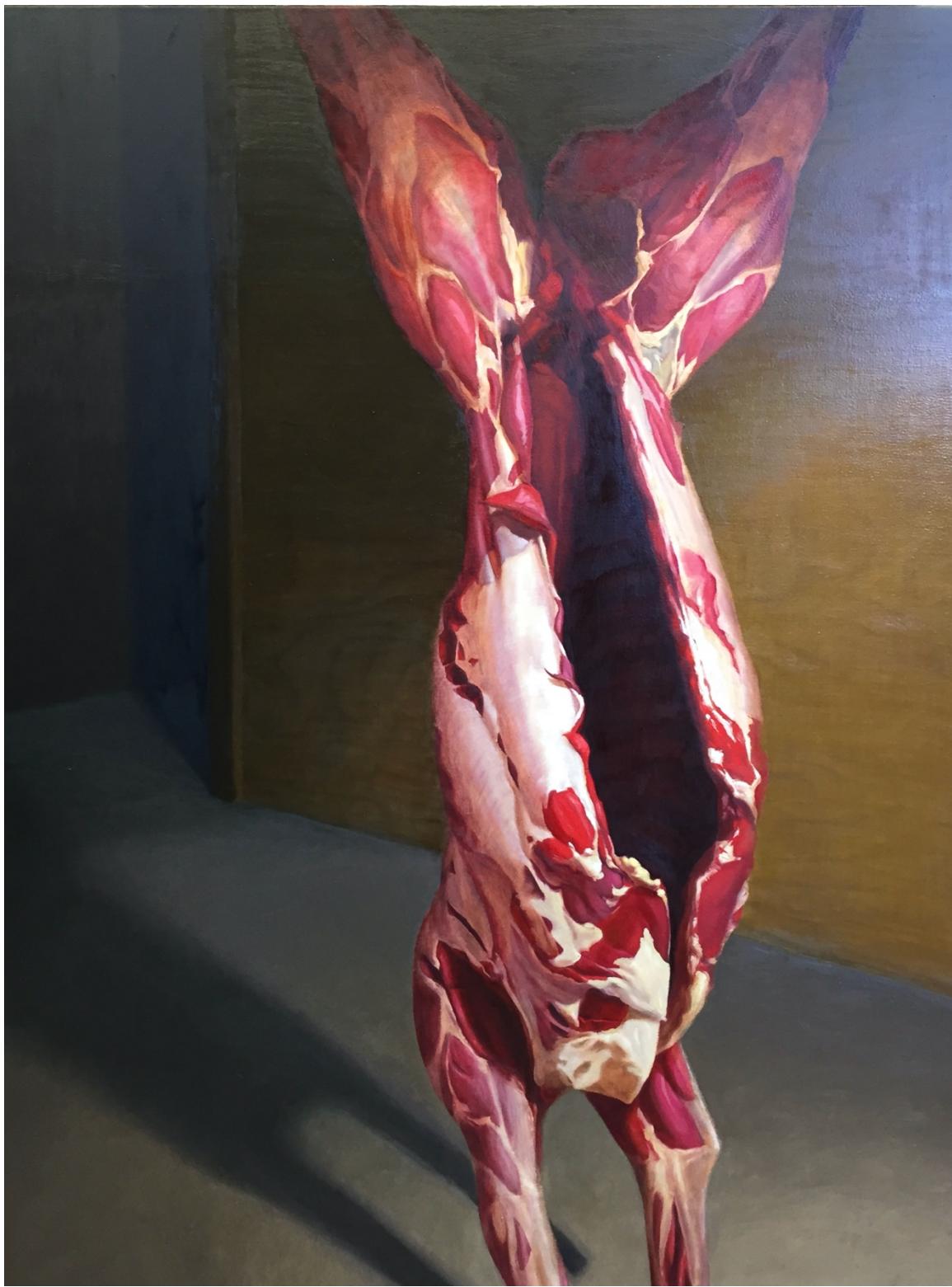


Plate 2. Aaron C. Berg, *Dry Aging*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 48" x 36"



Plate 3. Aaron C. Berg, *Field Dressing*, 2019, Oil on canvas, 20" x 60"



Plate 4. Aaron C. Berg, *European Mount*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 36" x 36"



Plate 5. Aaron C. Berg, *Meleagris Gallopavo*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 24" x 36"

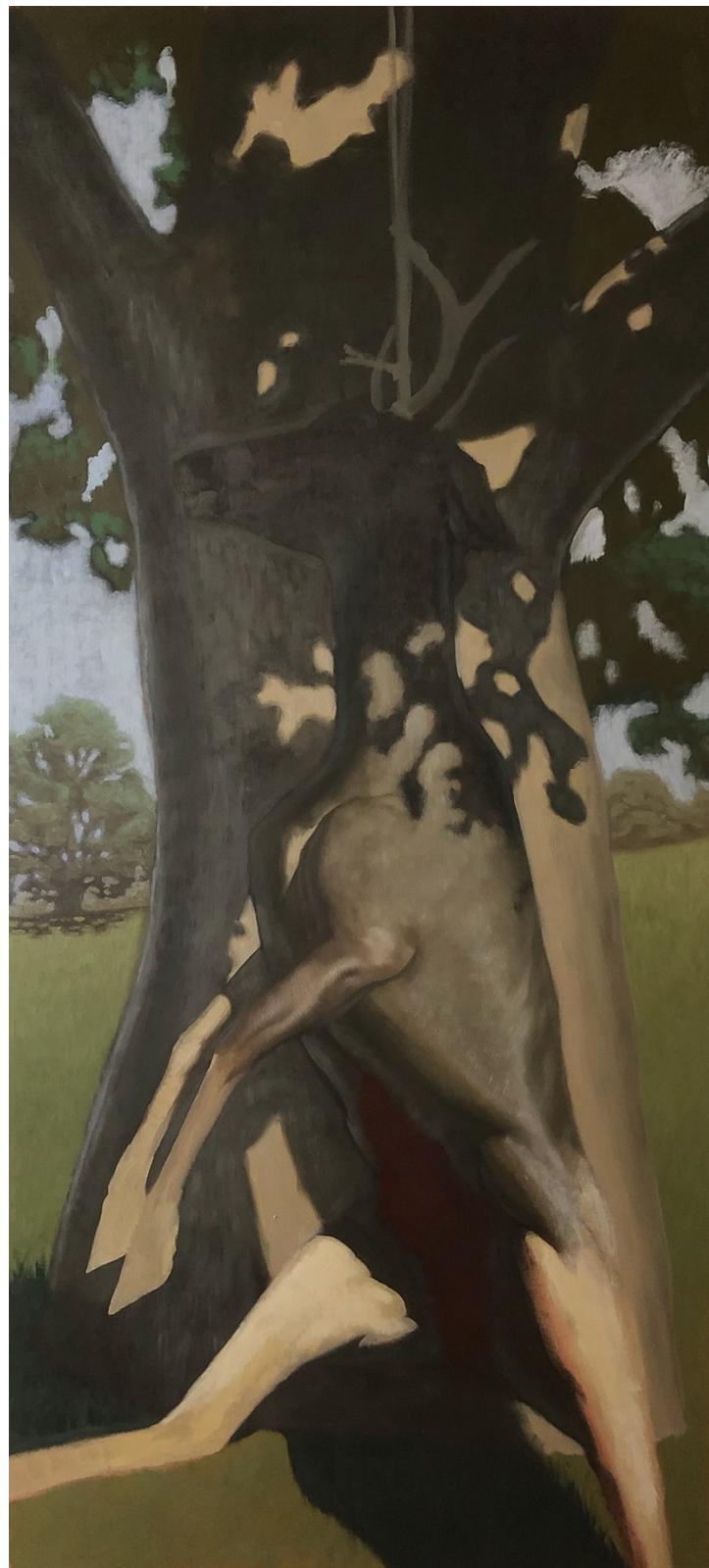


Plate 6. Aaron C. Berg, *Draining*, 2020, Oil on canvas, 74" x 34"