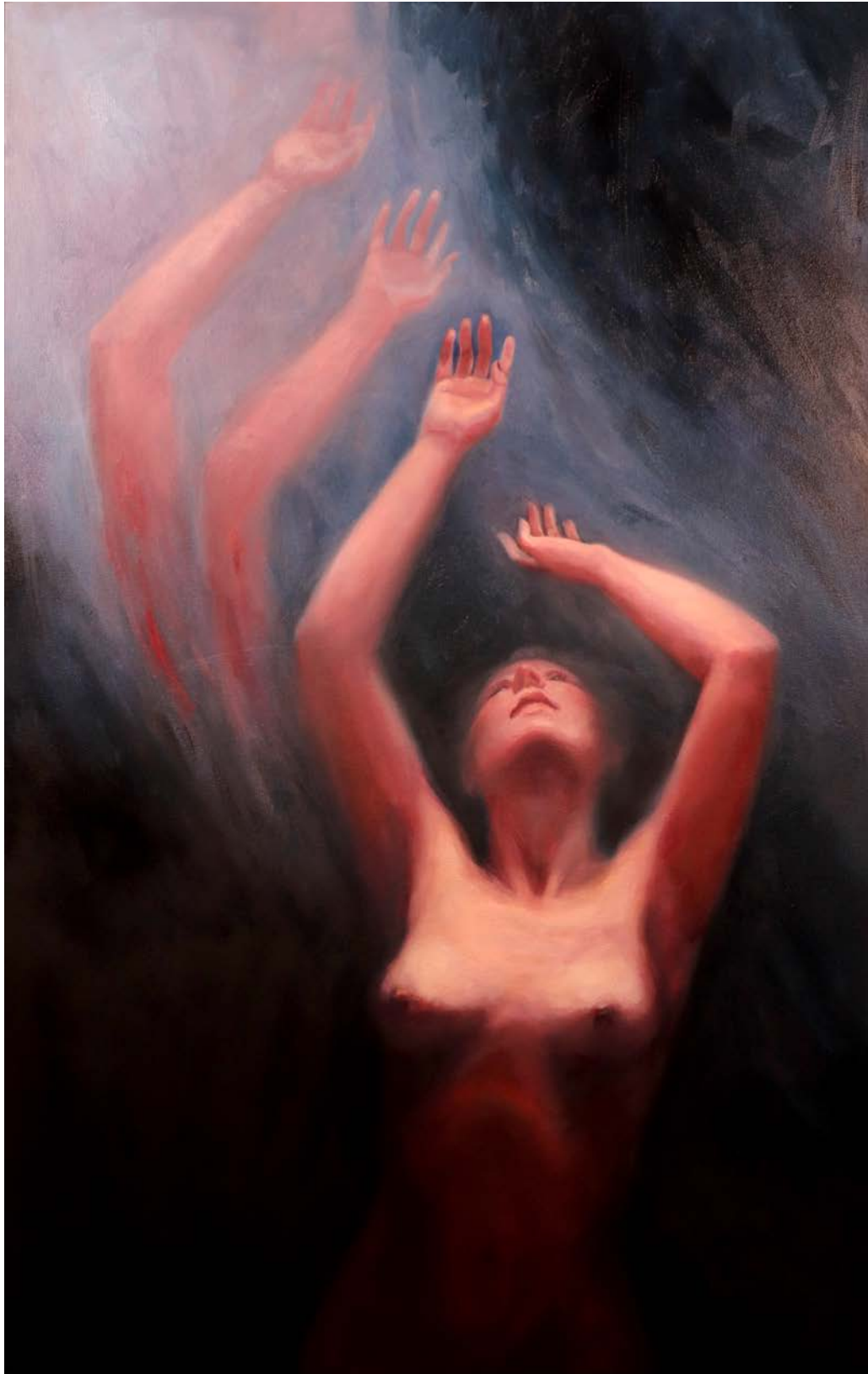


DREAMS, MEMORIES, LIGHT, & RESPONSE



DREAMS, MEMORIES, LIGHT, & RESPONSE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Laguna College of Art & Design

by

KELLY JANE SMITH-FATTEN

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of
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Signature Page**

Thesis Title: Dreams, Memories, Light, & Response

MFA Candidate: _____
Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten

Thesis Advisor: _____
Susan M. King, PhD

MFA Program Chair: _____
Peter Zokosky

**Vice President of
Academic Affairs:** _____
Vice President of Academic Affairs

LCAD President: _____
Steven J. Brittan

Date Approved: _____

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ABSTRACT

My experiences, memories, dreams, and ideas are externalized and made lyrical through my oil paintings on canvas. I respond to motifs and subjects from art history, and this body of work is especially informed by the Baroque period and artists including Artemisia Gentileschi. I want to offer possibilities for rethinking and responding to representations of women. I look to *vanitas* themes as well to develop a personal symbology and express my experience during the Covid pandemic. Additionally, I use dark visual humor to explore complex human situations where tragedy meets absurdity. I search for expressions of the figures and provocative colors that will betray the narrative suggested in the picture. Although my paintings cover a range of genres—portraits of women, *vanitas* still life, and contemporary scenes of daily life—I seek to connect my paintings through tension and mystery to confront the viewer. My subjects are often personal, but I seek to widen the lens for interpretation and create space in my paintings for viewers to construct their own narratives.

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husband, whose steadfast belief in us keeps me anchored always. I couldn't have done it
without you.

DEDICATION

To my husband.

EPIGRAPH

Draw Antonio, draw Antonio, draw, and don't waste time.

-Michelangelo

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DREAMS, MEMORIES, LIGHT, & RESPONSE.....	1
DESCRIPTION	1
RESEARCH	10
METHODOLOGY	16
CONCLUSION	21
WORKS CITED	23
APPENDIX	25

TABLE OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1	<i>Everything's Going to be Alright</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2021–2022	1
FIGURE 2	<i>Ritual</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2021–2022	3
FIGURE 3	<i>Still Life with Cream Pot and Lemon</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2022	4
FIGURE 4	<i>Still Life with Skull and Orchid</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2022	5
FIGURE 5	<i>Still Life with Skull and Lemon</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2022	5
FIGURE 6	<i>Sleep Trials One</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2021	6
FIGURE 7	<i>Sleep Trials Two</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2021	6
FIGURE 8	<i>Reaching</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2023	7
FIGURE 9	<i>After Artemisia</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2021–2022	8
FIGURE 10	<i>Specter</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2023	9
FIGURE 11	<i>Study of a Skull and Book</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2018	10
FIGURE 12	<i>Saint Jerome</i> , Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, 1605–1606	10
FIGURE 13	<i>Lucretia</i> , Artemisia Gentileschi, about 1627	11
FIGURE 14	<i>Allegory of Inclination</i> , Artemisia Gentileschi, 1615-1616	13
FIGURE 15	<i>Repetition Cannot Make It Less</i> , Jesse Mockrin, 2019	14
FIGURE 16	<i>Mother's Milk</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2019	15
FIGURE 17	<i>Bacchante with an Ape</i> , Hendrick ter Brugghen, 1627	15
FIGURE 18	Value Studies for <i>Specter</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2022	17
FIGURE 19	<i>Reaching (process photo)</i> , Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, 2022	19

TABLE OF PLATES

PLATE 1	<i>Everything's Going to be Alright, 2021–2022</i>	25
PLATE 2	<i>Still Life with Three Cupcakes, 2021</i>	26
PLATE 3	<i>Tempting, 2021</i>	27
PLATE 4	<i>Ritual, 2021–2022</i>	28
PLATE 5	<i>Good Ol' Sugar, 2020</i>	29
PLATE 6	<i>Mother's Milk, 2019</i>	30
PLATE 7	<i>Sisters, 2018</i>	31
PLATE 8	<i>Ashleigh, 2022</i>	32
PLATE 9	<i>Still Life with Fall Flowers, 2021</i>	33
PLATE 10	<i>Still Life with Paintbrushes, 2021</i>	34
PLATE 11	<i>Still Life with Skull and Lemon, 2022</i>	35
PLATE 12	<i>Still Life with Skull and Orchid, 2022</i>	36
PLATE 13	<i>Still Life with Pomegranate, 2019</i>	37
PLATE 14	<i>Still Life with Cream Pot and Lemon, 2022</i>	38
PLATE 15	<i>Lemons, 2022</i>	38
PLATE 16	<i>Still Life with Oils, 2022</i>	39
PLATE 17	<i>Still Life with Vessels, 2022</i>	40
PLATE 18	<i>Still Life with Apricots, 2022</i>	41
PLATE 19	<i>Purple Heart in a Jar, 2021</i>	42
PLATE 20	<i>Pony Shot, 2018</i>	43
PLATE 21	<i>Sleep Trials One, 2021</i>	44

PLATE 22	<i>Sleep Trials Two, 2021</i>	45
PLATE 23	<i>After Artemisia, 2021–2022</i>	46
PLATE 24	<i>Reaching, 2023</i>	47
PLATE 25	<i>Specter, 2023</i>	48
PLATE 26	<i>Fairytale, 2023</i>	49

DREAMS, MEMORIES, LIGHT, & RESPONSE

DESCRIPTION

Sparks jump off a freshly lit wick. They burst and light a darkened room, then settle into a flickering glow. My mind is set aflame with ideas when my lived experiences give oxygen to the heat of my memories and emotions. How the feelings, thoughts, and moments collide to produce an idea for a painting is mysterious even to me, but they spontaneously ignite when my mind is in a loosened state. An idea will come to light when I'm transported to another time or space while reading, dreaming, or wandering a gallery of paintings. I may be standing in front of a masterpiece by Artemisia Gentileschi, reading about artists' studio practices from centuries past, or drifting uncomfortably through sleeplessness, unable to



Fig. 1. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Everything's Going to be Alright*, 2021–2022, oil on canvas, 20.5" x 32".

dream or wake up. My mind is visually activated, my emotions are charged, and I am elevated to an imaginary space with endless possibilities for new paintings to create.

In this body of work, my experiences through the Covid pandemic are expanded to address the hidden histories of commonplace commodities, spaces of privilege, overindulgence, and the things we do to cope. Historical visual representations of violence against women become a lens through which I use my own portrait to challenge our contemporary interpretations and reception of misogynist acts. Traditional themes associated with *vanitas* still-life paintings feed into my versions of *memento mori*. In my paintings, reminders of mortality are not limited to historical symbology.

In my narrative and figurative paintings, themes of overindulgence and internal strife suggest the fragile and tenuous nature that is part of being human. For example, in *Everything's Going to be Alright* (Fig. 1), my husband and I are seated at a table littered with sweets and booze. We are so captivated by a glowing cell phone that we disregard the overturned cupcake and glass. In the background, a silhouette of Disneyland's Sleeping Beauty's Castle hangs haphazardly on the wall, reminding us of the artifice and decadence we crave amid a confusing and chaotic existence. Here, the pink hues and static moment belie the disorder within the scene.

I want to broaden the stories, thoughts, and emotions that can be intuited from the figures set inside imaginary scenes. Through my paintings, I explore aspects of the world that inspire, intrigue, or confound me. I try to take lessons from the pantheon of painters, but I also question them. I am looking for beauty in my painting that is unique to my paint handling and color choices. My paintings are figurative and personal, but I am not interested in repeating traditional standards for beauty and perfection. When I paint the figure, I seek a

balance between idealism and my subjects' unique quirks. My husband and I often appear as protagonists. However, I am not seeking to capture something essentialized about myself or my husband through portraiture.

In *Ritual* (Fig. 2), cookies, coffee, cream, and sugar are scattered across the foreground. Pastel colors and childlike rainbows on the cups subvert the more serious tone of the painting. As in

Everything's Going to be Alright, this painting is about mindless consumption and overabundance. The images address the mundane routines of everyday life that we carry out without thought or ceremony.



Fig. 2. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Ritual*, 2021–2022, oil on canvas, 24" x 31".

In both paintings, the strange figures in disquieting environments are meant to inspire curiosity and express humor through irony.

These two paintings helped me process my experience during the Covid shutdown in 2020 and 2021. The scenes are exaggerated representations of any real situations that took place within my home. Still, the unnatural gestures, excess, and overindulgence lay bare the strangeness that underpinned even the dullest routines during this exceptional time. These paintings may offer a familiarity at first. You recognize a coffee pot or table setting you have



Fig. 3. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Cream Pot and Lemon*, oil on panel, 2022, 6" x 6".

seen before. The scenes are innocuous until you notice a blank stare or a furrowed brow. You sense the pressure of the constricted atmosphere. This tension acknowledges the privilege of indulging in food, drink, and media during the Covid shutdown.

I struggled through isolation and fear during this time, but I was conscious of how seemingly unfair it was for me to be able to

make art and enjoy my creature comforts while so many others suffered immeasurably.

These paintings were borne out of an awareness of how fragile our social fabric can be and how its brittleness can be felt in odd ways, even in the perceived safety of home. We must consume to survive, but sugar, coffee, alcohol, and media are addictive and provide temporary highs and hollow nourishment. They offer no safety from threats of any kind. For the short-lived comforts and tenuous human nature they depict, *Everything's Going to be Alright* and *Ritual* are *vanitas* paintings for a 21st-century pandemic.

Partway through the MFA program, I took a step back from multi-figure paintings. I returned to the type of still-life paintings I had copied from Caravaggio at the very start of the program. I began painting from objects set up in my studio. Incidentally, the shift in my work from figures to still lifes coincided with the return to in-person instruction at LCAD, on-site work, and caretaking for my mother. Life became complicated in different ways as society began reopening after the Covid shutdown. To cope, I simplified my paintings for a time.

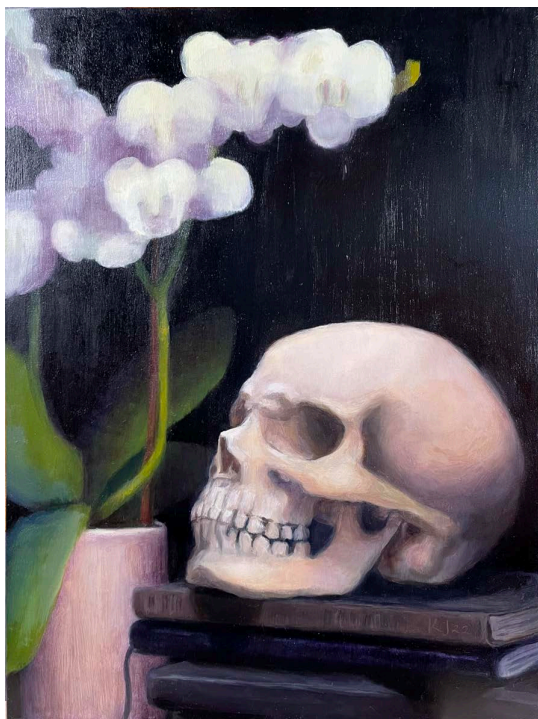


Fig. 4. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Skull and Orchid*, 2022, oil on panel, 9" x 12".

I began expressing emotion and implying a narrative through simplified forms and paint handling. The story might be as simple as the reflection of a lemon on a shiny surface, such as in *Still Life with Cream Pot and Lemon* (Fig. 3)—or how depicted light can create an internal glow, which I was aiming for in *Still Life with Skull and Orchid* (Fig. 4). Symbols can also help tell a story. I turned to traditional *vanitas* symbols in my still-life paintings to remind the viewer of mortality and the impermanence of living things.

Still Life with Skull and Lemon (Fig. 5)

incorporates three traditional symbols of mortality: a skull, a cut flower, and a piece of fruit.

These *vanitas* paintings also relate to the temporary comforts depicted in my larger figurative works.

In my still lifes, I blend out my brushstrokes and pull the paint downward, controlling how light reflects off the surface and enhancing the illusionism in the painting. By smoothing the surface, I minimize the evidence of my labor to add mystique to the



Fig. 5. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Skull and Lemon*, 2022, oil on panel, 9" x 12", Nava Family Collection, Los Angeles.

completed work. I attempt to capture everyday objects not as they are but as transformed or elevated from their familiar appearance. My still-life paintings have served as studies to build my technique and have become finished works in themselves. The lessons I learned led me to want to experiment with simplifying my figurative paintings. I tried to convey a broader story using fewer elements in one painting.

Throughout the pandemic, nightmares and anxiety plagued me.

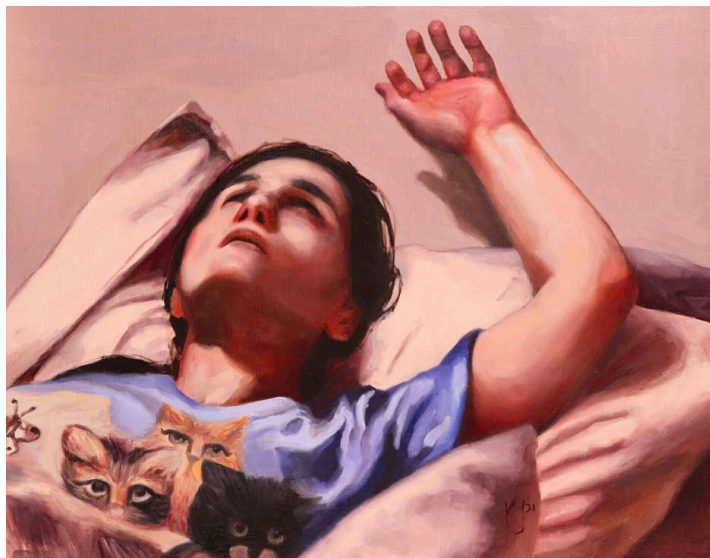


Fig. 6. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Sleep Trials One*, 2021, oil on panel, 11'' x 14''.



Fig. 7 Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Sleep Trials Two*, 2021, oil on panel, 11'' x 14''.

I wanted to make a painting about this while exploring what it would mean to imply the narrative rather than explicitly illustrate it. My *Sleep Trials* paintings *One* (Fig. 6) and *Two* (Fig. 7) feature singular, expressive figures within an ambiguous environment. In these paintings, I experiment with communicating complexity through gesture and emotion. The images relate to my experience of being haunted at night while trying to sleep. My ghosts are not literal, but they haunt me nonetheless—memories of

abuse and self-destructive behavior, family members lost, and actions I feel I should have taken before their passing. In these paintings, my abuser is the unseen force of my psyche, but I wish to leave it up to the viewer to determine the meaning of the gestures. I depicted myself wearing a shirt speckled with kittens and butterflies to provide levity through irony.

To me, there is an absurdity in battling one's inner world of thoughts and emotions. Why should we fight against ourselves? Yet it is human nature to do so. This is an all-too-common nighttime scene for those who suffer from anxiety and trauma. Meanwhile, the kittens poke fun at my desperation in the pictures.

In *Reaching* (Fig. 8) and *After Artemisia* (Fig. 9), I react to historical paintings that depict women in compromising and sexualized positions. For example, Baroque archetypes include female saints and martyrs reaching upward to plead with Zeus for mercy or to express their devotion to God despite

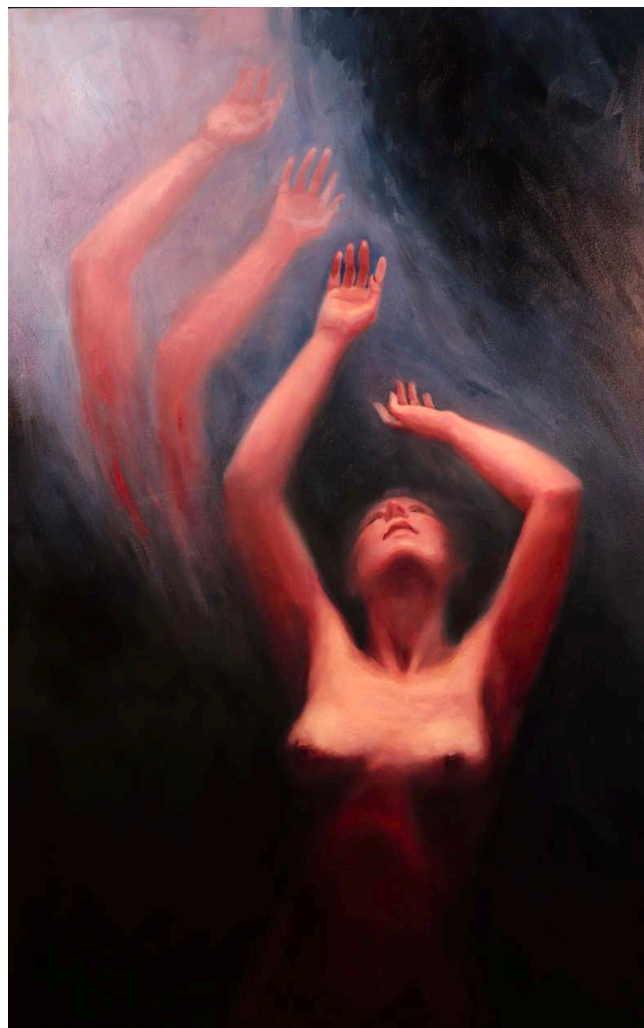


Fig. 8. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Reaching*, 2023, oil on canvas, 24" x 36".

the horrors they will experience in their earthly flesh. Others open their arms in an improbable gesture of welcome to the masculine and godly force that will defile them. My goal is to offer possibilities for rethinking these historical representations of violence against

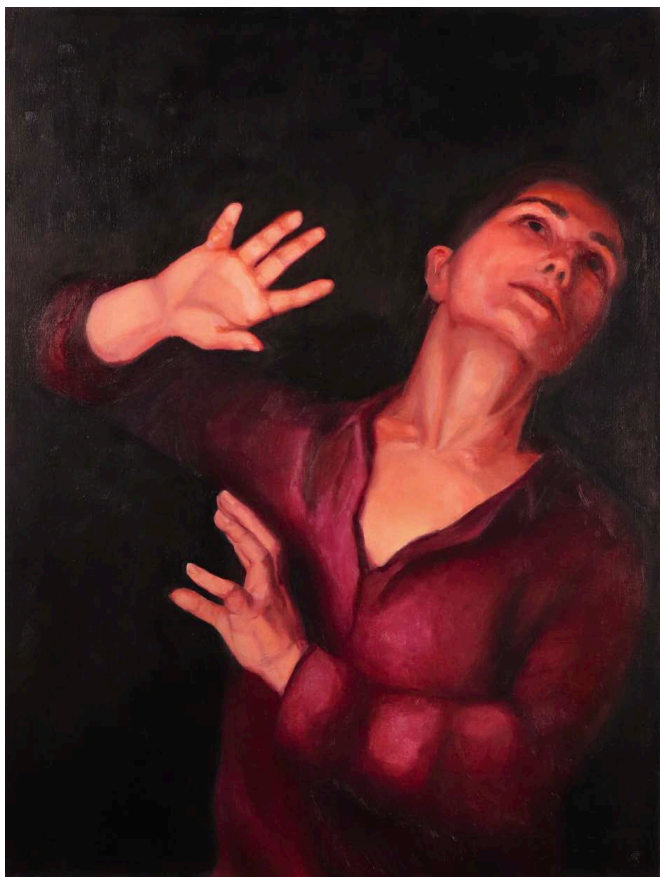


Fig. 9. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *After Artemisia*, 2021–2022, oil on mounted canvas paper, 24” x 18”.

women. The gravity of the subject matter compels me to convey raw emotion within the figure. The woman in *Reaching* is nude, but her gesture and its ghostly echo, with hands and arms reaching upward, dominate the painting. Her personal identity is lost not only because her face is obscured but because her strife is amplified through the repeated forms of her outreached arms. She becomes her strife.

Specter (Fig. 10) represents a

return to my multi-figure paintings and continues the themes of sleeplessness and torment. My eyes are closed, and I am lying in bed. Unlike *Sleep Trials One* and *Two*, I give form to the angst that plagues me in *Specter*. Figures in billowing fabrics float above me. They answer a question that came to me one sleepless night, “What if my anxiety took on physical form outside of me?” They are symbols of my internal torment made external and given human shape. Like so many angels and putti from Baroque paintings, it is up to the viewer to determine if they are actual beings within the space of the painting or if they inhabit the dreamscape of my reclining figure. Furthermore, my composition alludes to Renaissance reclining Venuses, Baroque Danaë, and interpretations of the subconscious from the 19th century, such as in Henry Fuseli’s *The Nightmare*, now in the Detroit Institute

of the Arts. In *Specter*, I am again reacting to historical paintings, this time to sexualized representations of women. So often, the reclining woman is painted to suggest she is waiting for sex or otherwise on display for a male audience to imagine what could come next. In *Specter*, I am waiting for sleep. By placing myself in the painting and sharing my personal experience with sleeplessness, albeit lyrical, I offer the possibility of reframing past historical representations of women.

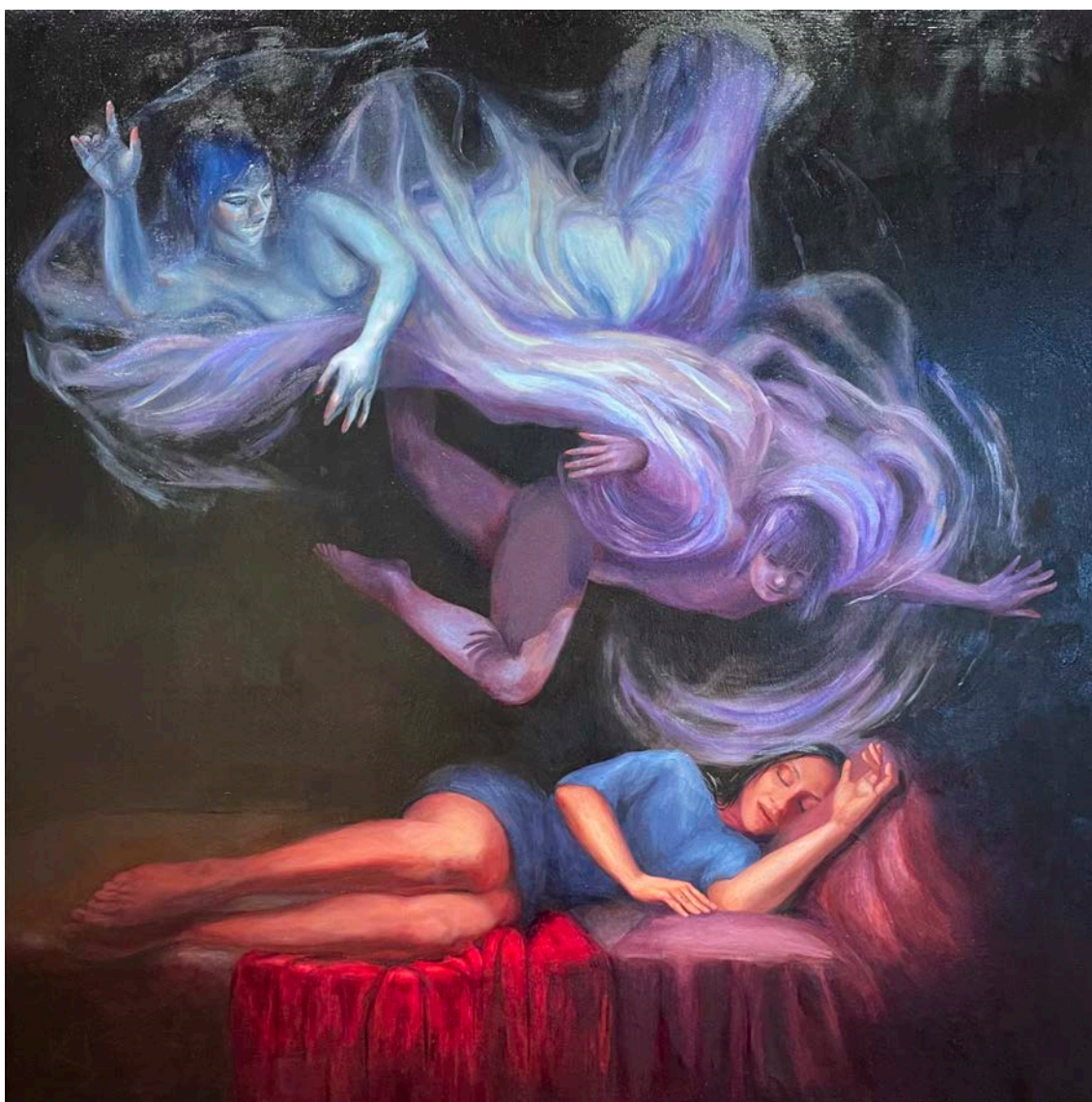


Fig. 10. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Specter*, 2023, oil on canvas, 36" x 36".

RESEARCH

Seventeenth-century Dutch and Italian paintings inspire me, and I see many of them in my employment at the J. Paul Getty Museum. I relish the dramatic lighting and paint

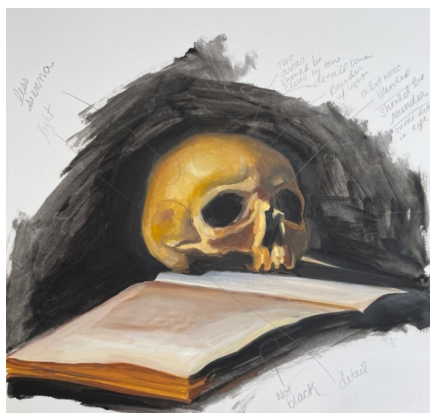


Fig. 11. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Study of a Skull and Book*, 2018, oil on paper, 18" x 24".

handling in the paintings of Rembrandt and the artists in his circle, along with the Caravaggisti of Italy and the still-life painters of the North. Archetypes, histories, and mythologies from the Baroque period capture my imagination and stoke my passions. Several contemporary artists who have influenced me have also derived subject matter and techniques from the same era.

In 2017, I completed a course led by my Getty colleagues to survey Baroque art in the Getty collection and its historical context. While there are no paintings by Caravaggio in the collection, he was a starting point for our studies because of his legacy in the Italian Baroque and beyond. The mythology of Caravaggio's life, coupled with the drama of his work, seduces me.

Following the conclusion of the course on Baroque art, three famous Caravaggio paintings arrived at the Getty on loan from the Galleria Borghese. It was the first time they had traveled out of Rome together, and we were told it would likely be



Fig. 12. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, (1571–1610), *Saint Jerome*, 1605–1606, oil on canvas, 44" x 62", Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo-Galleria Borghese.

the last time. This small exhibition, *Caravaggio: Masterpieces from the Galleria Borghese*, profoundly impacted me. The exhibition was still on display when I began my first semester at LCAD in the spring of 2018. My *Study of a Skull and Book* (Fig. 11) quotes a portion of Caravaggio's *Saint Jerome* (Fig. 12), which I first viewed many years ago in Rome and reconnected with in Los Angeles during this show. Subsequent paintings of mine were informed not only by Caravaggio but by the work of other Baroque artists as well.

In 2021, the Getty Museum acquired a painting by another influential Baroque artist, Artemisia Gentileschi. I identify with Artemisia's personal history as a victim of sexual violence and am outraged by the archetype she defines in her painting *Lucretia* (Fig. 13). The subject is a rape victim who, in 509 BCE, stabbed herself in the heart in front of her father, husband, and others (Aldrete). To her male witnesses, Lucretia declares, "Although I acquit myself of guilt, I do not absolve myself from punishment. Never let any unchaste woman live by citing me as an example" (Aldrete, 06:35). The male-dominated society of Lucretia's time offered no other

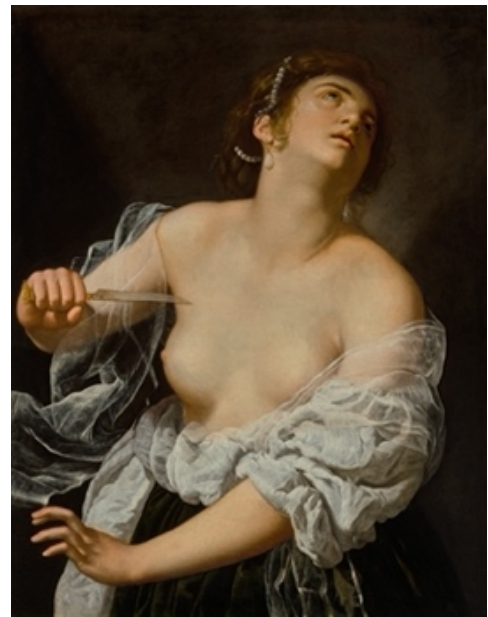


Fig. 13. Artemisia Gentileschi (1593– after 1654), *Lucretia*, about 1627, oil on canvas, 36 9/16" × 28 5/8", The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

option to preserve her honor. She carried the weight of responsibility, even though she was the victim of a terrible crime. Lucretia's story endured for centuries, and she set an example for women who are shamed and punished for the hateful acts done to them (Getty). The dynamic is repeated today, exemplified by the 2022 United States Supreme Court decision

overturning the landmark court case *Roe vs. Wade*, eroding women's rights to an abortion, even in extreme circumstances, including rape (Walker).

Lucretia's suicide is said to have incited the revolt against the Etruscan king, whose downfall would eventually lead to the establishment of the Roman Republic. The story is a relic of a male-dominated Western society in which women are abused and sacrificed for the creation and glory of a new world. Why should Lucretia's suicide endure as the punctum to a story about the rise of the Roman Republic and, by extension, Western society today? Why should the violence she did to herself serve for centuries as an exemplar for women up until this day?

In *After Artemisia* (Fig. 9), I replaced Gentileschi's figure of Lucretia with my own. I retain the gesture and gaze from the 1627 painting but do not wield a weapon against myself. Viewers can see that I am shielding myself or pleading with a higher force for help. In either scenario, unlike Lucretia's situation, my survival is an option within the scene. By leaving out the weapon, I hope to offer alternative endings to the story to refocus the conversation from Lucretia's death to the idea of choice and survival despite rape and assault. I want to offer possibilities for reinterpreting historical representations of violence against women. I believe viewers do not have to react to them in the same ways as in the past. Instead of accepting representations that seem to reinforce everything wrong with the present, we can imagine new possibilities for the future.

Another aspect of Artemisia's work that I connect with is her use of self-portraiture. Savvy as she was, Artemisia used her visage to actively shape what the world of painters and potential patrons perceived of her. She marketed her image and work, successfully elevating her status within important circles in various cities. In *Allegory of Inclination* (Fig. 14),

Artemisia painted her face onto an allegorical figure whose body is draped in shiny greenish-gold satin and semi-transparent silk. However, the body was likely modeled after her sister-



Fig. 14. Artemisia Gentileschi (Italian, 1593–after 1654), *Allegory of Inclination*, 1615–1616, oil on canvas, 59 7/8” x 24”, Casa Buonarroti, Florence.

in-law, Maddalena Stiattesi, “or [Artemisia’s] disgruntled maidservant Maria Stecchi” (Barker 49). The figure would have been familiar to her circle of painters and patrons. She must have chosen the figure with some idea of how she would be perceived within the allegory and used that perception to her advantage.

Although I often paint myself in my narratives, I refrain from associating with well-known contemporary archetypes to elevate my brand or connect me with any specific style, class, or fad. Instead, I turn to my portrait and that of my husband because my ideas originate from a personal place. I want us to become characters in the paintings—lyrical representations of our true

selves. Artemisia provides precedence for using one’s own image in nuanced ways. In finding connections to artists like Artemisia and Caravaggio, I feel anchored to a lineage of painters that came before

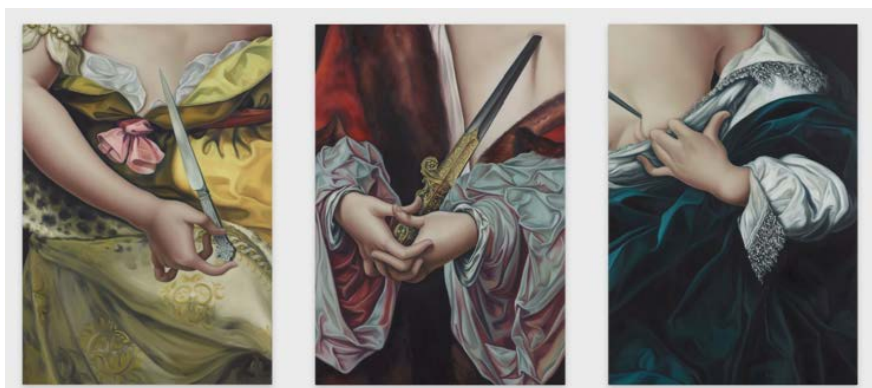
me. I can receive the wisdom of elders, so to speak, to guide me on my journey as a painter in the twenty-first century.

My interest in Baroque themes led me to discover a contemporary painter, Jesse Mockrin. Born in Silver Spring, MD, she currently lives and works in Los Angeles, CA. Her figures reference characters from mythology and tropes from history. She often paints elaborately folded drapery, elegant sleeves, and adornment from the centuries that interest her. Her deep black backgrounds often occupy a large portion of the picture plane. However,

the lighted areas of bodies, fabric, and still life are self-contained. She is not reproducing the chiaroscuro effects from the seventeenth century. Instead, she has developed a graphic and elegantly sleek technique to depict light and shadow. She works on a variety of surfaces, large and small.

My paintings take inspiration from similar, if not the same, sources as Mockrin's. An example is her triptych *Repetition Cannot Make It Less* (Fig. 15), which directly references the story of Lucretia.

Mockrin's execution of the three exquisitely detailed paintings inspired by this story is vastly different from



my take. In her work,
 Fig. 15. Jesse Mockrin, *Repetition Cannot Make It Less*, 2019, oil on cotton, 26" x 54", <https://jessemockrin.com/>.

the women are faceless and seem to be of the past, given their draping sleeves adorned with lace and ribbon. My self-portrait as Lucretia in *After Artemisia* suggests a personal and current connection to violence. Mockrin homes in on the gesture and weapon of Lucretia's suicide, fetishizing the scene with delicate fingers handling the knife. Instead, I become Lucretia and recoil bodily in my painting. My elbows are bent and lifted away from my body. My hands are open, and my fingers are splayed, resisting the notorious ending of the story. My paint handling in *After Artemisia* is brushy and accented with areas of impasto. In this painting and *Reaching* (Fig. 8), my brushwork performs the contorted emotions of the figure represented.



Fig. 16. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Mother's Milk*, 2019, oil on canvas, 28" x 22".

unnatural, pasty white skin. Still, I am drawn in by the figure and her companion. Ter Bruggen created a comic yet unsettling painting to warn against the follies of drunkenness and excess.

Mother's Milk is another painting in which I intend for my self-portrait to speak to issues beyond me. I cock my head and smile stupidly out at viewers, mimicking the pose of the bacchante. One of my hands rests on a carton of milk, the other on a bottle of bourbon as though I am offering a choice of beverage to the person standing in front of the artwork. Paintings that combine grotesque imagery set inside seemingly innocuous environments can

In *Mother's Milk* (Fig. 16) and *Ritual* (Fig. 2), I hope to instill curiosity about the meaning of the strange figures in foreboding settings. The inspiration for these two paintings included Baroque-genre paintings peppered with crude and sly humor. *Bacchante with an Ape* by Hendrick ter Bruggen (Fig. 17), also in the Getty collection, influenced the composition and expression of the figure in *Mother's Milk*. I find myself repelled by the bacchante's gawky expression and her clumsy breasts spilling out over her corset, accentuating her



Fig. 17. Hendrick ter Bruggen (Dutch, 1588– 1629), *Bacchante with an Ape*, 1627, oil on canvas, 40 1/2" x 35 1/8", The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

often signal a more severe and cautionary message than is initially perceived. In my pictures, I want viewers to look for clues about the folly of the scene. *Mother's Milk* is about the choice between nurturing and self-destructive behavior. I grew up in an abusive household and still struggle today with the aftermath of that environment. *Mother's Milk* confronts that struggle using potent symbols of drunkenness and purity.

My painting *Ritual* features sugar and coffee, which are widely popular and socially accepted despite being extremely addictive. These commodities have complicated and dark histories, intersecting with centuries of colonialism and global trade bolstered by slave labor. Today, we enjoy sugary foods and gourmet coffee by the pot without thinking about where they came from and how they became an integral part of our everyday lives. In the United States, they are an everyday decadence with neglected histories.

My paintings bring together my experiences, which are often personally meaningful, with broader ideas I have about culture and the past. Artists from Caravaggio and Artemisia to Mockrin have offered me inspiration for composing my paintings in ways that I find interesting and creatively gratifying. My research has offered me insight into specific genres and narratives in historical paintings. I have also discovered inspiration in early artists' manuals and treatises, especially by quattrocento artist and writer Cennino Cennini. Maxims, poetic quips, and fabled anecdotes about famous artists also light my creative mind aflame with inspiration.

METHODOLOGY

...this is an occupation known as painting, which calls for imagination, and skill of hand, in order to discover things not seen, hiding themselves under the shadow of

natural objects, and to fix them with the hand, presenting to plain sight what does not actually exist. And it justly deserves to be enthroned next to theory, and to be crowned with poetry.

-Cennino Cennini, circa 1400

Like the sparks jumping from a lighted candle, the flare that ignites an idea for a painting does not always remain in the finished picture. From the first steps of drawing and refining an idea, to sourcing and photographing reference material, the image will shift and grow into something beyond what I initially conceived. I cultivate this discovery process along the way. Some ideas may incubate for a year or more before they come to fruition in a painting. Sometimes it is a matter of repeatedly trying out an idea before hitting on the colors, composition, and subject matter to express my intentions. I remain an explorer, even

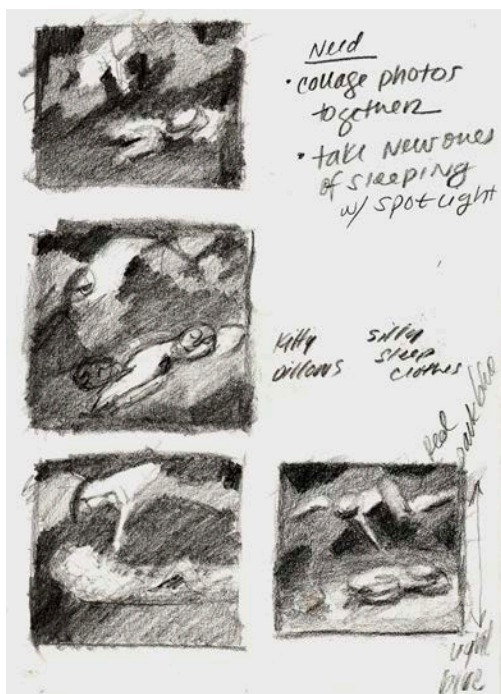


Fig. 18. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Value Studies for Specter*, 2022, graphite on paper, 8.5" x 11".

after I have begun painting because I can learn so much from the process. Responding to the changes I make and listening to the painting as I guide it slowly toward completion can lead to more creative discoveries and ideas. This is part of what makes the process exciting and addicting. It keeps my candles burning through hours, days, and months of preparation and painting.

I sketch over and over to refine the composition and components of my vision before I ever start painting. *Specter* (see Fig. 10) began with

loose sketches to work out the gestures of the figures and overall composition. I wanted to

convey the experience of being haunted by memories. The limbs and fabric of the figures needed to flow into each other, and all the components had to come together to give the scene a dramatic emotional charge. Since I imagined this painting to derive its mood and drama through lighting, I created additional value studies to determine the light and dark areas of the design (Fig. 18). The bed became a sort of stage or sacrificial altar for the sleeping figure, lit from above by the floating specters.

Although my ideas are products of my imagination and the inspiration I find in paintings, books, and dreams, I use tangible objects and life models to stage the scenes I intend to paint. Because *Specter* is a lyrical depiction of my personal challenges with sleep and memories, I decided to use myself as the model for the sleeping woman. I selected my clothing to match what I wore for *Sleep Trials One* and *Two* (figs. 6 and 7), adding fabrics to the bed and arranging the lighting to complete my value studies. For the drapery and lighting, I looked at paintings by Titian, Caravaggio, and Artemisia to inform my decisions. Books were strewn about my studio and opened to pages of their paintings printed in full color while I set up my photo shoot. I used a digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) camera to shoot the photos myself, setting a delay on the shutter so that I would click the button and dash into position. It took many tries to get a set of digital images useful for my design. After evaluating the challenges with staging the flying figures, I contacted a professional model who creates source material for artists to purchase. She had produced digital images perfect for the figures I imagined in my painting, and I bought a set.

With my favorite digital files gathered, I began arranging and editing them in Photoshop. At this point, *Specter's* design changed from one flying figure to two. Working in digital layers, I saw an opportunity to fill the negative space in my design in an exciting way.

I saw that two flying figures would heighten the feeling of menace and mystery in the painting. I allowed my idea to change and evolve into a stronger, more compelling composition.

The visual impact of *Specter* (Fig. 10) relies on the shifts from light to dark and warm to cool. I needed a roadmap to help me get this shift in value and temperature correct. For this reason, I painted the surface with an underlayer of burnt umber for the warmer areas and bone black for the cooler regions. For this layer, I added minimal Oleo Gel medium to the paint. Contrary to popular contemporary practices, I did not use mineral spirits during



Fig. 19. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Reaching* (process photo), 2022, oil on canvas, 24" x 36".

application. By omitting mineral spirits at this stage, I can better ensure that subsequent layers will appear juicy and thick and avoid the problem of colors that “sink in” and produce a cloudy effect on the surface. Once the underlayer was complete and dry, I built up the surface with impasto and painterly effects in full color.

Not every painting will speak to me in the same way that *Specter* did when it asked for one flying figure to become two. Part of the creative process is to listen to the needs of the painting along the way, and each one

has something to say. Even though I create robust reference material to guide my progress, I allow for changes on the fly while painting.

For example, *Reaching* (Fig. 8) was conceived to have many figures layered, one on top of another (see Fig. 19). Some were turned forward, some backward. All were reaching upward because I wanted to multiply the motion of reaching and grasping to intensify the chaos and emotion of the gesture. Rhythm and repetition would generate the anguish and longing I want viewers to perceive and empathize with when they encounter the painting.

After painting the entire scene as originally conceived, I decided to sand down the areas of impasto and repaint everything. As it was, I felt the meaning of the painting came through the abstraction of the figure, which undermined my aims as a figurative painter. The repetition overwhelmed my message, and a change was needed. I simplified the composition by painting over most of the figures and limbs, retaining one body and two detached arms (See Fig. 8). I allowed the overpainted hands to show through to offer a secondary read. I believe this choice deepens the dreamy quality of the painting and subdues the intensity of the repeated hands. The meaning now relies on a balance of the forms flowing from the bottom of the canvas to the top left. The gesture and expression of the singular figure have now become the essential form in the painting. The two additional limbs may be interpreted as echoes of the woman's motion or as ghostly symbols of her desperation. She is granted psychological weight in the painting rather than being subsumed by the multiplicity of forms in the previous iteration.

I know when a painting is complete when I have addressed every area of the canvas or panel with my intentions. Sometimes, new opportunities to push the painting further reveal themselves toward the very end, and I will go beyond what I expected. I had this experience

when *Specter* was nearing completion. In conversation with my mentor Natalia Fabia, it became clear that the overall composition would be strengthened by omitting or adjusting the vase of flowers that had been part of the foreground since the original transfer of source material to canvas. We reviewed several possibilities to emphasize the s-curve of the flying figures and sleeping woman. To help me visualize the changes before committing to them, I snapped a photo and digitally painted over the area using an app on my iPad. This process allowed me to come to the decision to paint out the vase of flowers entirely. The result was a more balanced composition and a mysterious environment for the figures to inhabit.

CONCLUSION

My time at LCAD has been long and non-traditional because I attended part-time over five years, including an eighteen-month leave of absence, which I needed to take to recover from an illness and adjust to a new job. I worked full-time for the entire duration of my graduate education. Many experiences and opportunities were not accessible to me due to my work schedule and because I live 64 miles away. Nevertheless, I have come away from the program having achieved the personal and professional goals I sought when I first entered. I have improved my craft and established a painting practice that will continue to be sustainable and productive for years to come.

With what I have learned, I now take ideas from start to finish with confidence. I can choose the creative and technical challenges that excite me and that I want to tackle in a painting. When I first started the program, I did not have adequate space to work. Now, I have a dedicated home studio with the amenities necessary to continue painting whenever and at whatever scale I choose. My full-time work outside the studio has shifted to allow me

more time and flexibility while providing the financial security I need to continue painting. Even my marriage has evolved to allow for the creative pursuits my husband and I enjoy separately and together. I have found a welcoming and exciting community of artists outside of school with whom I can continue to be involved for camaraderie and experience.

Personal challenges and growth aside, I attended school during a time of great social and political upheaval. My daily life and emotional landscape were affected by the Covid pandemic, economic recession, nationwide civil unrest for racial injustices and police brutality, an attempted coup on the nation's capital, and the erosion of the rights of women and transgender people. I learned that painting does not stop during the dark seasons of life. Instead, my practice records these moments in time, however tangentially, while fortifying my soul against suffering.

Because of these lessons and how my life changed during my MFA career, I have a new understanding of the saying, "Painting is a way of life." The phrase has always felt opaque and hackneyed to me. However, now I feel a special connectedness to the concept. I make daily and long-view choices to ensure that my life bends towards painting. The flame ignited during my time at LCAD lights my future.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Everything's Going to be Alright*, 2021–2022, oil on canvas, 20.5" x 32".

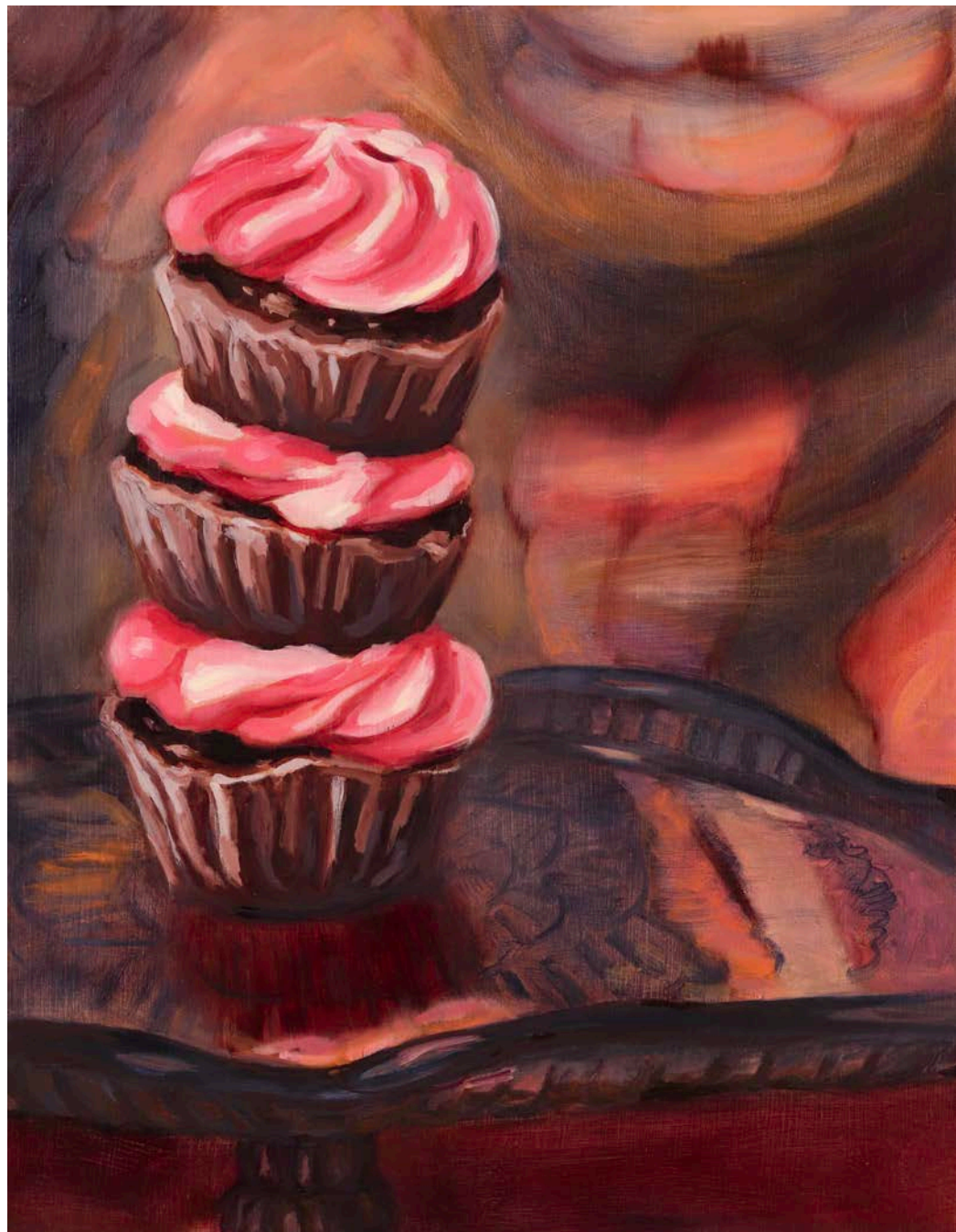


Plate 2. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Three Cupcakes*, 2021, oil on panel, 14" x 11".



Plate 3. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Tempting*, 2021, oil on panel, 6" x 6", Private collection, Los Angeles.



Plate 4. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Ritual*, 2021–2022, oil on canvas, 24" x 31".



Plate 5. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Good Ol' Sugar*, 2020, graphite, acrylic, vellum, paper, 18" x 24".



Plate 6. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Mother's Milk*, 2019, oil on canvas, 28" x 22".



Plate 7. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Sisters*, 2018, oil on panel, 12" x 12".

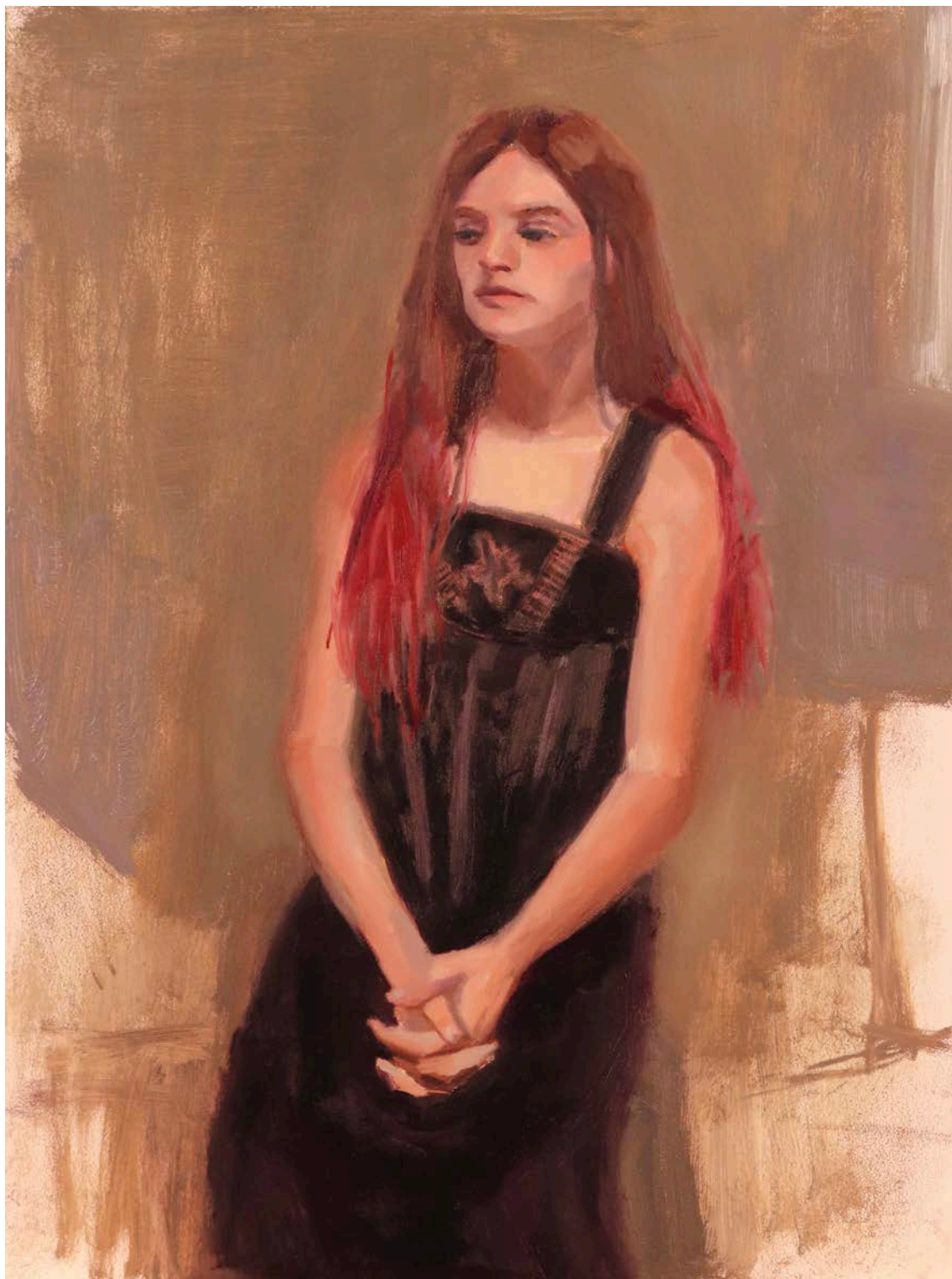


Plate 8. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Ashleigh*, 2022, oil on panel, 12" x 9".

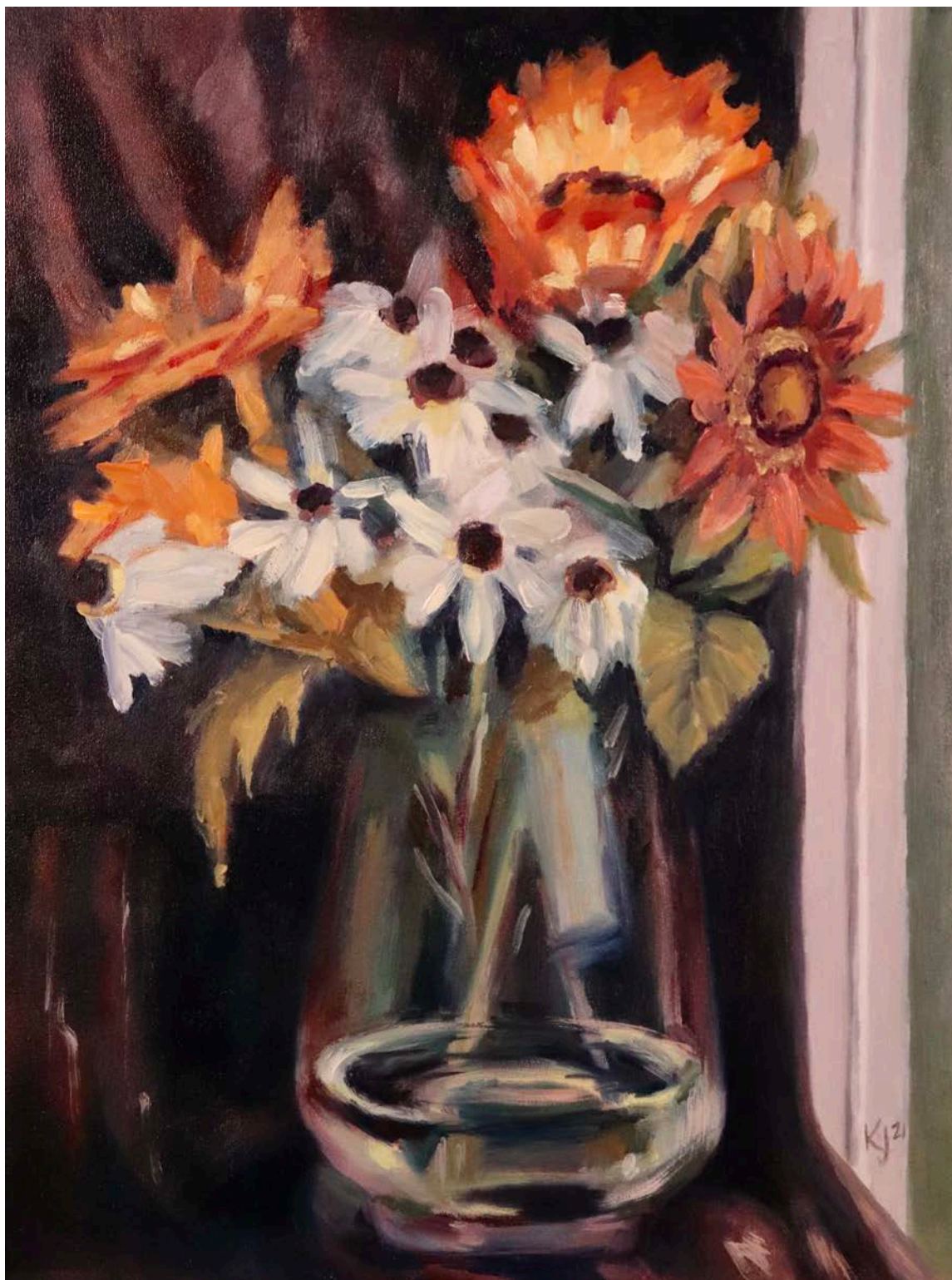


Plate 9. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Fall Flowers*, 2021, oil on panel, 12" x 16".

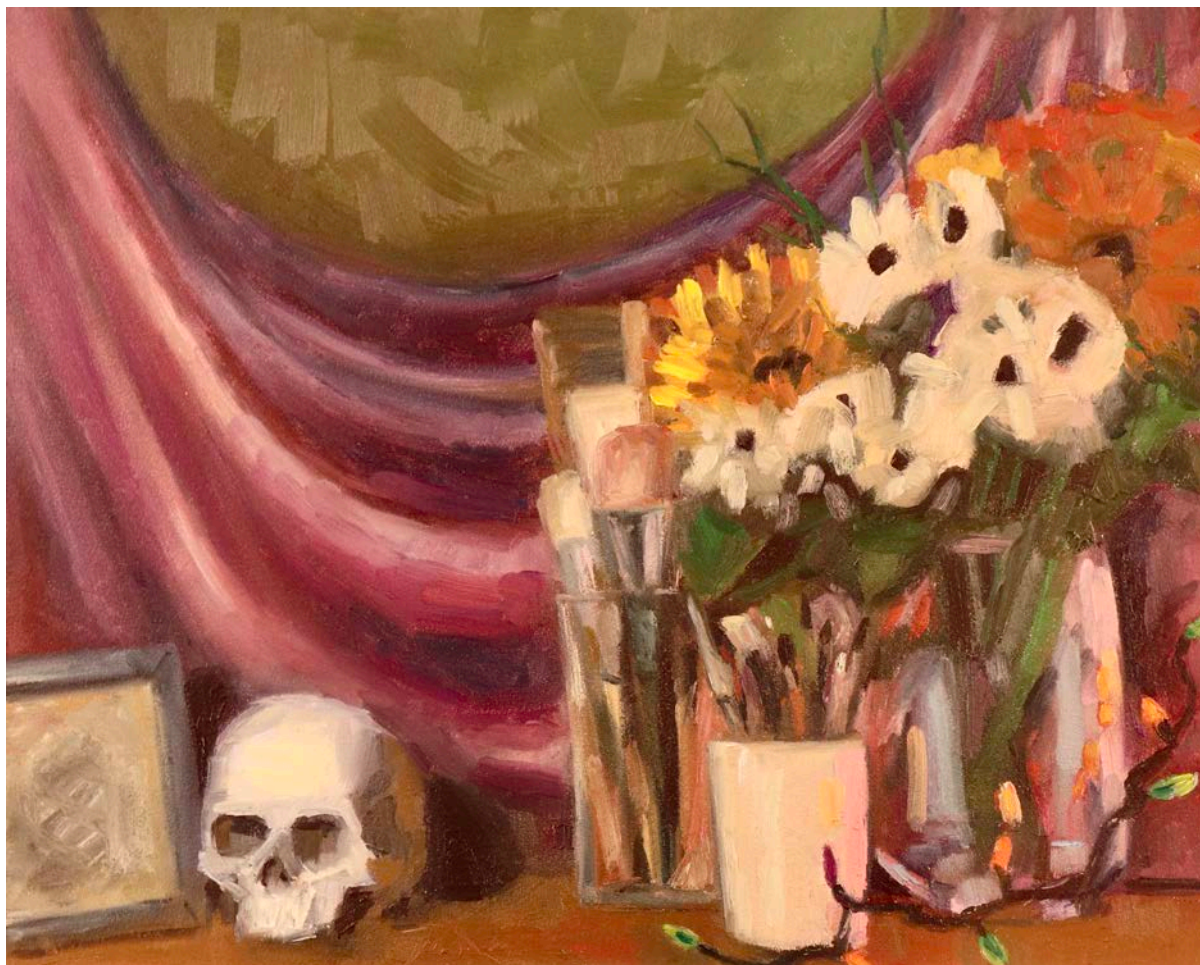


Plate 10. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Paintbrushes*, 2021, oil on panel, 10" x 8".



Plate 11. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Skull and Lemon*, 2022, oil on panel, 9" x 12", Nava Family Collection, Los Angeles.



Plate 12. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Skull and Orchid*, 2022, oil on panel, 9" x 12".

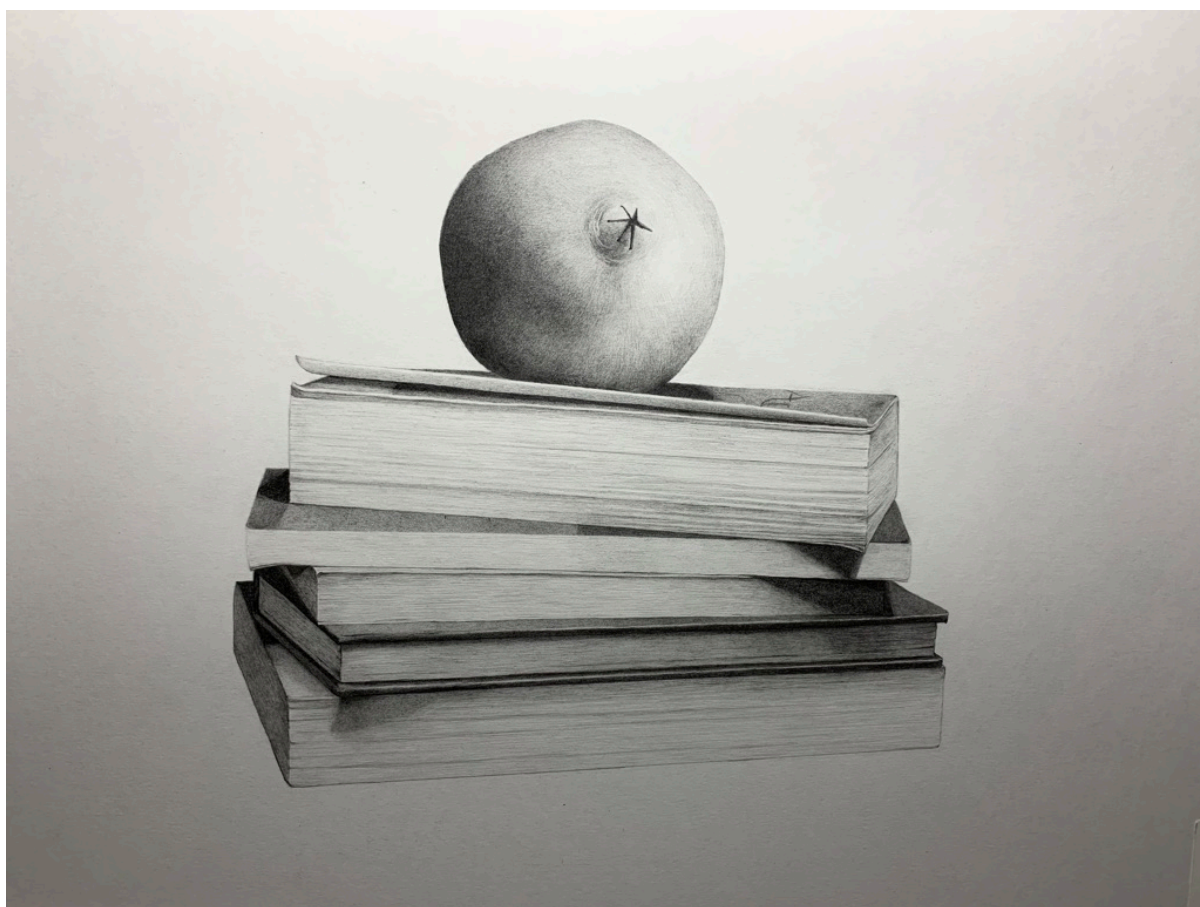


Plate 13. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Pomegranate*, 2019, graphite on paper, 14" x 17".



Plate 14. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Cream Pot and Lemon*, oil on panel, 2022, 6" x 6".



Plate 15. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Lemons*, 2022, oil on mounted linen, 6" x 8".



Plate 16. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Oils*, 2022, oil on panel, 9" x 12".

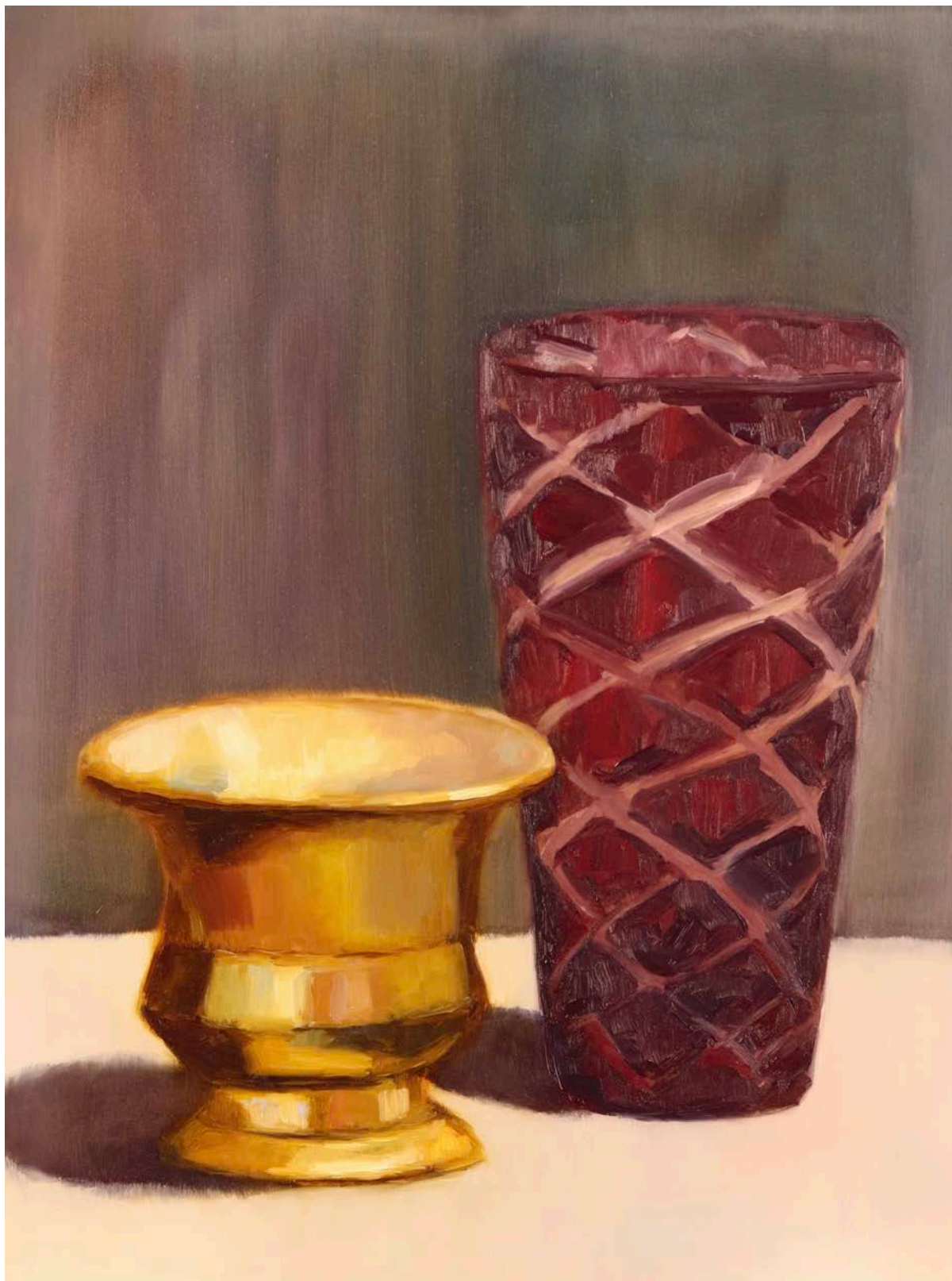


Plate 17. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Vessels*, 2022, oil on panel, 9" x 12".



Plate 18. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Still Life with Apricots*, 2022, oil on panel, 9" x 12".



Plate 19. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Purple Heart in a Jar*, 2021, oil on panel, 8" x 10".



Plate 20. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Pony Shot*, 2018, oil on panel, 9" x 12".

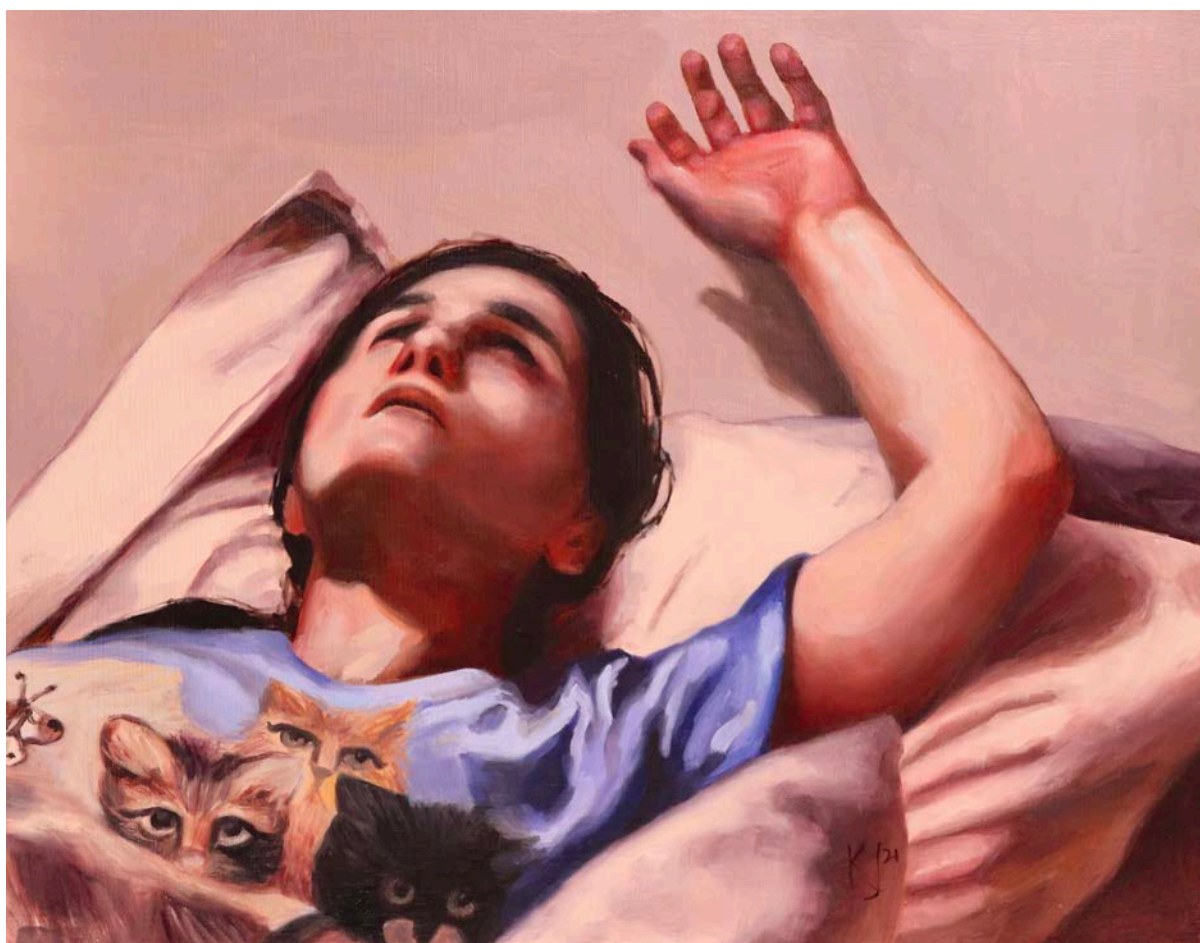


Plate 21. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Sleep Trials One*, 2021, oil on panel, 11" x 14".



Plate 22. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Sleep Trials Two*, 2021, oil on panel, 11" x 14".

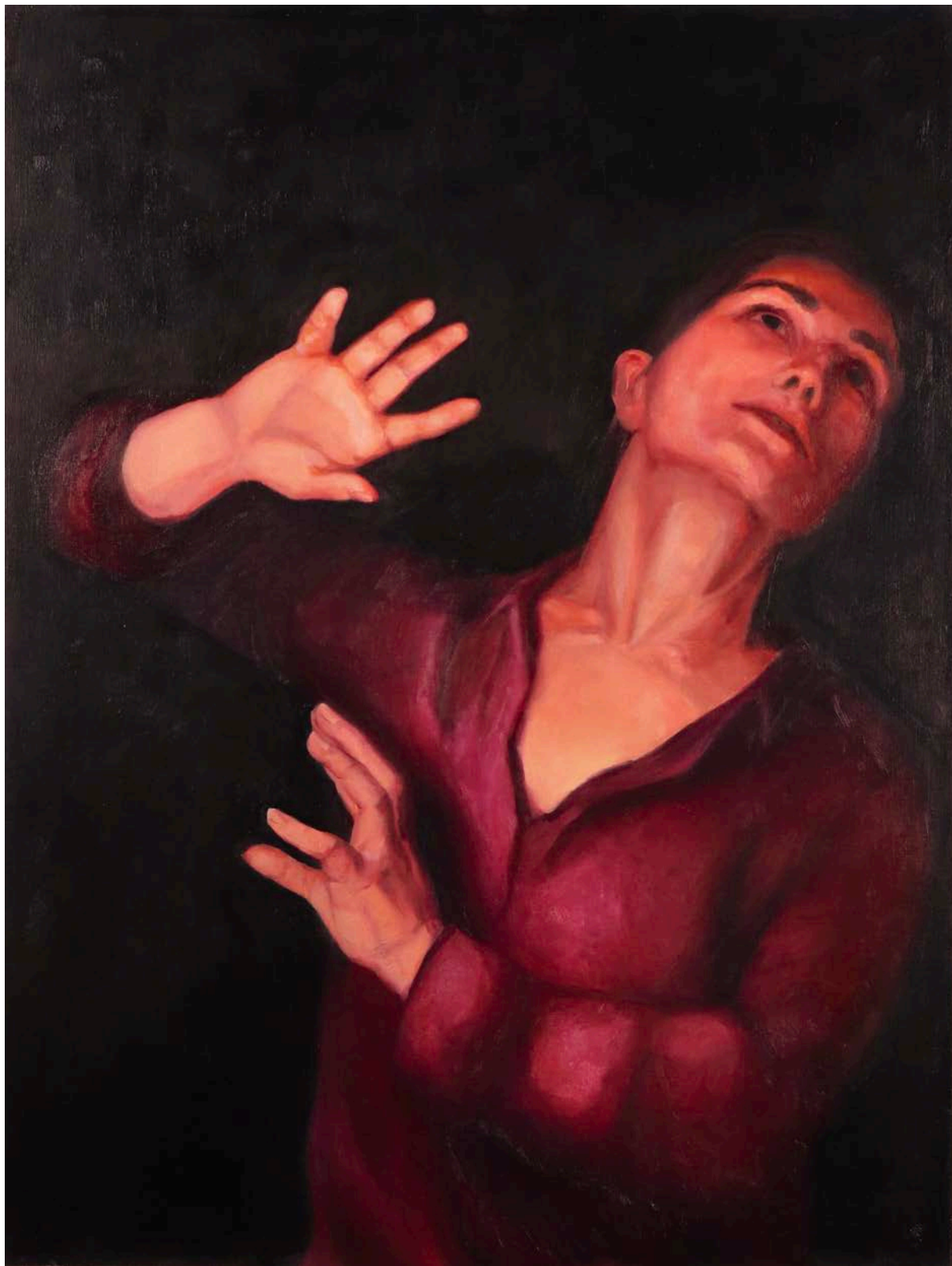


Plate 23. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *After Artemisia*, 2021–2022, oil on mounted canvas paper, 24" x 18".

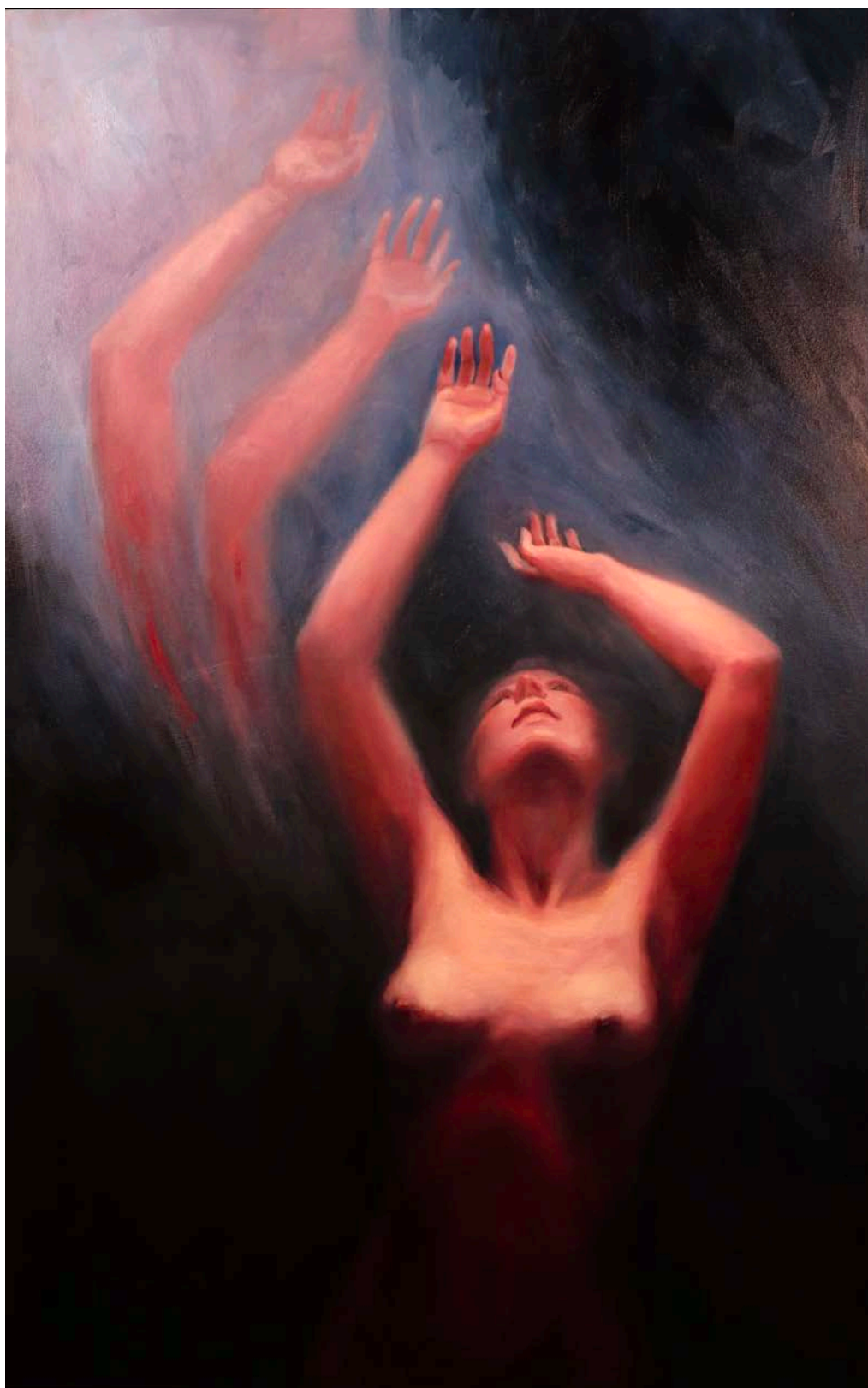


Plate 24. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Reaching*, 2023, oil on canvas, 24" x 36".



Plate 25. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Specter*, 2023, oil on canvas, 36" x 36".



Plate 26. Kelly Jane Smith-Fatten, *Fairytale*, 2023, oil on mounted canvas, 16" x 20".