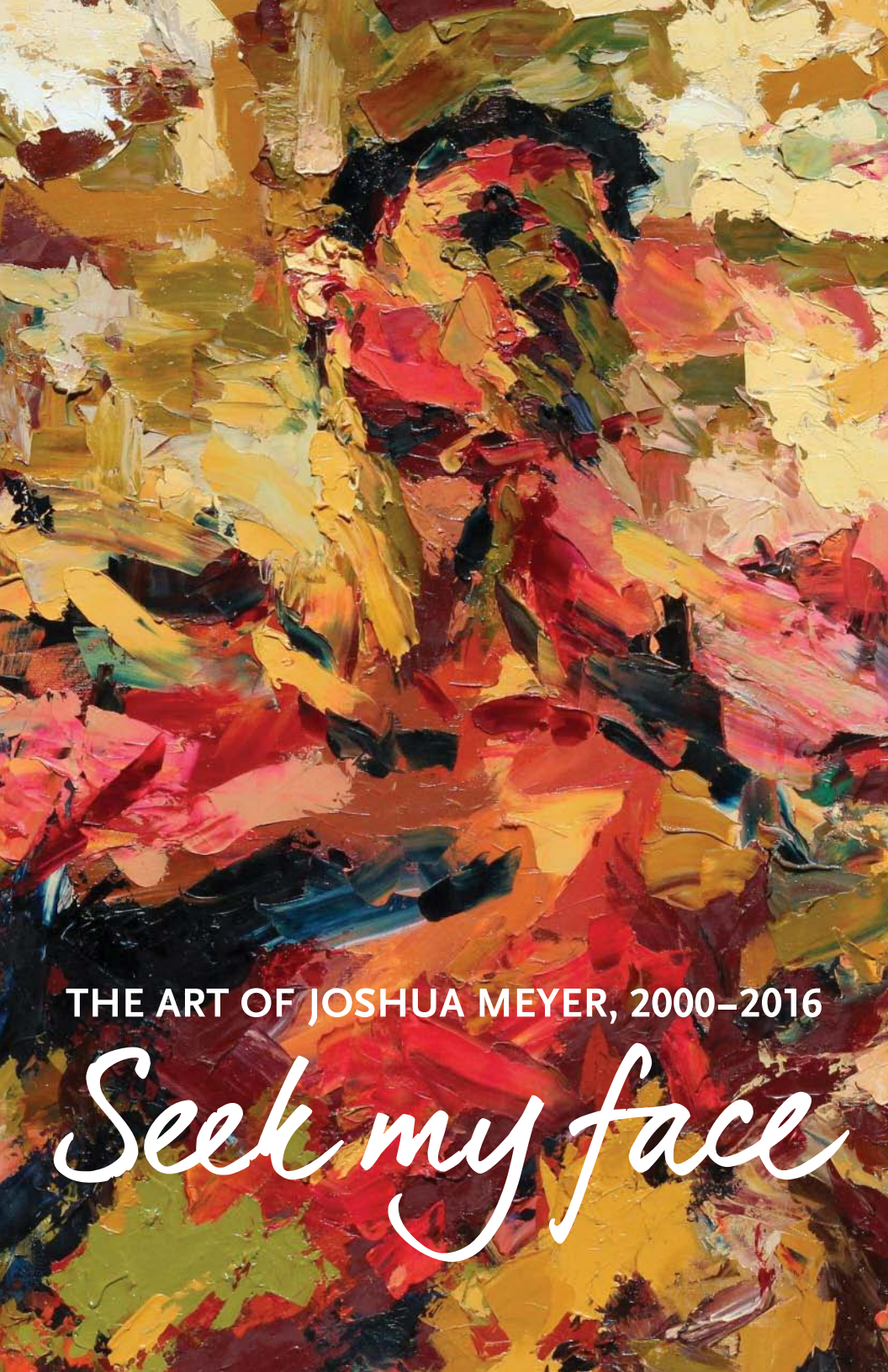

THE ART OF JOSHUA MEYER, 2000–2016
Seek my face

DORTORT CENTER FOR CREATIVITY IN THE ARTS AT UCLA • FALL 2016

THE ART OF JOSHUA MEYER, 2000–2016

Seek my face

When Perla Karney, Artistic Director of the Dortort Center for Creativity in the Arts at UCLA Hillel showed me the paintings of Boston-based artist Joshua Meyer, I was very intrigued. Our conversation for this catalogue unearthed many layers—some overlapping, some divergent—of how we each approach our art. We both see ourselves in the light of history, both art and human. We also share a very Jewish attitude about the past. Judaism has taught us to keep re-incorporating and re-elaborating the wisdom of the centuries. That is what makes it such a rich and inexhaustible source.

My first strong impression was of Joshua Meyer as a painter. Paint is his medium in a much more profound way than most twenty-first century painters. Seeing his works in person gave me a very good sense of the extremely visceral, painterly qualities of Meyer's art, and prompted me to begin our discussion with historical foundations and influences.

Ruth Weisberg: One of the things that I'm very aware of, having lived in Italy for several different periods of my life, is the distinction that is often made between high and late Renaissance artists in Florence and Venice. The Florentines were known for their use of an exquisite line and contour—Botticelli immediately leaps to mind. And then the Venetians—think of Titian or Tintoretto—were thought of as the colorists where the paint itself was more important than the contours. So you are very clearly aligned with Titian and Tintoretto. You are a Venetian in your approach to painting.

Joshua Meyer: Getting lost in Venice is wonderful because you have to navigate by way of nooks and crannies. I love it because there is a surprise around every corner—not so different from painting. So I am honored to be called a Venetian!

Untitled, 2001 | Oil on panel | 8 x 8 inches

Titian and Tintoretto are great company, but I would add another Italian painter to the mix and move us forward in time. I went to Bologna to see Morandi's house and studio. Titian and Morandi both know to lift their brushes and think between each act. These are both artists who live in that pause. They are artists who think about in-betweens. Morandi always surprises me because he will not paint an uncomplicated, Botticelli-like line. His jars and bottles are still and won't wiggle or shift over time, and yet he doesn't really believe that there is a line. It's not that he can't paint a straight line—he refuses. Instead he paints up to it from one side and pushes back from the other side, and we see how two ideas interlock and interweave.

RW: So much resides in his paint application. In fact, Morandi's paintings themselves are so quiet—superficially that is the impression—but when you really look at them there is this tremendous energy having to do with how the surfaces come together. I studied with a printmaker at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Perugia, Padre Diego Donati, who was a student of Morandi's, so I had a kind of direct line...

JM: I wonder if it is okay to use "direct line" and Morandi in the same sentence? Like Morandi, I'm not so sure that I have the truth, but I need to keep looking for it. As an artist, I am always searching for that perfect line, and by that I mean that I am trying to describe what I see with accuracy and confidence. But my art isn't about trying to fool anyone into believing that I have the answers. I am more interested in bringing the viewer along with me on my quest.

RW: I understand—I read a previous interview where you really described that sense of tension and reward in the search, rather than the resolution. And I was impressed with how deeply you delved into that topic of the search. And the other artist that evokes is Alberto Giacometti, who typically painted in a way that was ninety-nine percent search and one percent resolution.

JM: Though interestingly, when he is painting, he works with line.

RW: Yes, he does work with line, but I'm talking more about the method, the way of thinking, than stylistically. Have you read—there is a really wonderful book called "A Giacometti Portrait," by James Lord?

JM: It's one of my favorite books—I've bought so many copies of it to give away as gifts!

Untitled, 2001 | Oil on panel | 8 x 8 inches

RW: Your description of your own involvement in the painting process really reminded me very much of the descriptions Lord makes of Giacometti's process.

JM: Giacometti's work brilliantly describes his sense of the elusive. He honestly finds that the information in front of him is changing or simply out of reach and he is trying to find language for that. He uses lines to tell a story for more or less the same reason that I build my paintings in layers. When you look at the overlapping marks in my paintings, you see the days and the months pass. The layers are recounting the way the painting was made. This is how the painting reveals itself over time. If you stand in front of my art, I hope you can feel what it is like to be there in my shoes, painting and revising.

I have this quote from Kafka on my studio wall: "We Jews are not painters. We cannot depict things statically. We see them always in transition, in movement, as change. We are story-tellers." Of course I read it as a challenge, but while Kafka may be on to something, he fundamentally misunderstands what painting can do—he underestimates painting's ability to describe time passing.

Giacometti's paintings are always in transition. He and I also paint our own rotating cast of friends and family over long spans of time. The familiarity of our models is important.

RW: Yes, you, like I and Giacometti, have used family members and close friends. I don't use strangers, although I sometimes use archival material, but I never use strangers per se. I just have less to say.

JM: I paint from life because it forces me to be responsive. There is an urgency when someone is in the studio with me, and if it is a person who is enmeshed in my life, that deepens the engagement with the painting. Over time, these paintings accrue so much information about not just the model or me, but about everything in-between us.

RW: I think that is because there is a conjunction between the richness of the relationship and the richness of the process. You are not, after all, going straight to an image, you are engaged for a long period of time in the material process. The painting of the painting is really at the core of your art. In addition to the subject itself, I was really struck with how much energy, attention, and passion are devoted to the process of discovery. I would say battle, except that might sound too confrontational.

Untitled, 2002 | Oil on panel | 8 x 8 inches

Courting Incoherence, 2003 | Oil on panel | 8 x 8 inches

JM: On some days it ought to be described that way, but on other days it is quieter. The interplay between the two gives the paintings their rhythm.

RW: One of the things that is interesting for me as the observer of these paintings is how much I can detect the process in looking at the paintings, which are, after all, evidence of this engagement with the paint as well as the form. So I think the paintings in the end speak to this very eloquently. That's why they are successful. Otherwise you might as well fold your tent, because you could struggle with the paint and it could be a mess! And I'm sure occasionally it is. But it is not the usual subject of the paintings that either interests you or the viewer. It is about the struggle to achieve the image rather than the image itself.

JM: Art should be hard to pin down, and I am at my best when the pictures are unstable—where there is still room for the viewer to insert themselves between the marks and muck about for themselves. I want a picture that makes you a little uncomfortable and unsettled. Unresolved in a way that demands that you, the viewer, play an active role. I like a little dissonance.

I want someone who approaches the painting to feel what it feels like to make a painting, and to feel that struggle to understand and to see the world. To some extent this takes us back to Botticelli and Titian—it would be disingenuous if I left you with a harmoniously contoured image because it took me so much more to get there. The paintings allow you to see when I pause and think.

RW: Yes, I think you succeed very much in that regard. So we've talked a little bit about parallel examples, sources, and artists that you resonate with. I wanted to also ask you some things that were more biographical. Your resume starts with Bezalel and then proceeds to Yale. I've lectured at Bezalel.

JM: Bezalel was an opportunity to immerse myself, however briefly, in Israeli art. To see art being made in a different context and culture. I had already spent time in Israel, but this was a way to approach it as an artist. I worked with a wonderful painter named Alex Kremer, also Shlomi Haggai and Sigalit Landau. I spent some time in Tel Aviv, as well. It was a really exciting time in the mid-nineties, and a pivot point in many ways in Israeli art.

RW: Have you been back since? Have you continued to visit Israel?

JM: I have, and for a while I showed at Guy Yanai's gallery in Tel Aviv.

RW: And what art scene would you say you do relate to? What is your context? Is it Boston, is it East Coast, is it other figurative artists? How would you define your milieu?

JM: I think it is a little bit of all of those, and to that extent, throwing Israel or Tel Aviv into the mix might be fair. My work is so specific and local, but my paintings are also in dialogue with everything I see and hear, especially in this interconnected, internet-centric world. Soutine is often with me in the studio, as are my friends and peers. It's an eclectic mixture of the people that show at my galleries, the people that I admire, living and dead, a lot of Boston artists, there are a lot of San Francisco artists that are very important to me.

RW: I can see San Francisco figurative painters—Nathan Oliveira—I can see a rapport, a relationship.

JM: Oliveira is very important to me. Elmer Bischoff, in particular, is a huge influence. Also Diebenkorn and Park. That group, over several generations, thought about pictures and color in such fresh ways and with such pictorial intelligence. They were dissecting space and picking apart the universe and then putting it back together in fresh ways that still inform how I think on a daily basis in the studio. And their color, of course, is so forceful. They taught me how color can push you around within a painting.

RW: The other aspect of that is that, for instance in Los Angeles, when people were *not* doing the figure, or when they were doing it in New York in a very detached sort of manner—I'm thinking of Philip Pearlstein in particular, or Alex Katz for that matter; in San Francisco there was a more heated, passionate engagement with the figure, which I appreciated enormously also. It influenced me very much. It gave me permission, as it were.

JM: I can see it in your work, and it is something I've thought about a lot. Some of the really important artists for me are the British figurative painters: Auerbach and Kossoff and Freud.

RW: Kitaj?

JM: Of course Kitaj. I corresponded with him a bit at the end of his life.

RW: When he moved to Los Angeles, I would go and visit him.

Scattered Syllables, 2007 | Oil on canvas | 30 x 30 inches

JM: Kitaj is still an enormous presence and inspiration—he gave a lot of permissions and asked a lot of complicated questions. But I have always had the sense, looking at both the London painters and the Bay Area painters, that they were able to make those amazing and unique paintings because they were sort of hiding out. Even though London and San Francisco are huge cities, because they were not in New York, those artists could get away with making only what was important to them, as opposed to doing what you needed to do if you were an artist living at that time and that place.

RW: Because there was a party line.

JM: Right, so that has informed why my studio is in Cambridge. Even though we all need to be in dialogue with other artists, I think that hiding away in my studio helps to keep me honest. I want to be making the paintings that come intrinsically out of the way I see the world, rather than because there is a movement or a trendy scene. I think I've always done my best work when there wasn't anyone looking over my shoulders, so that I can take more chances and let things evolve over time.

RW: Do you feel that New York is still so bound to these different movements or do you feel that there is more freedom now for everyone?

JM: I don't think there is the same kind of religious, dogmatic, doctrinal necessity to be a certain kind of artist anymore, but there is still a sense of being part of a moment and a scene that I don't think has disappeared in New York. There is certainly more freedom now. It is almost a free-for-all because movements come and go so quickly, just like pop music comes and goes very quickly.

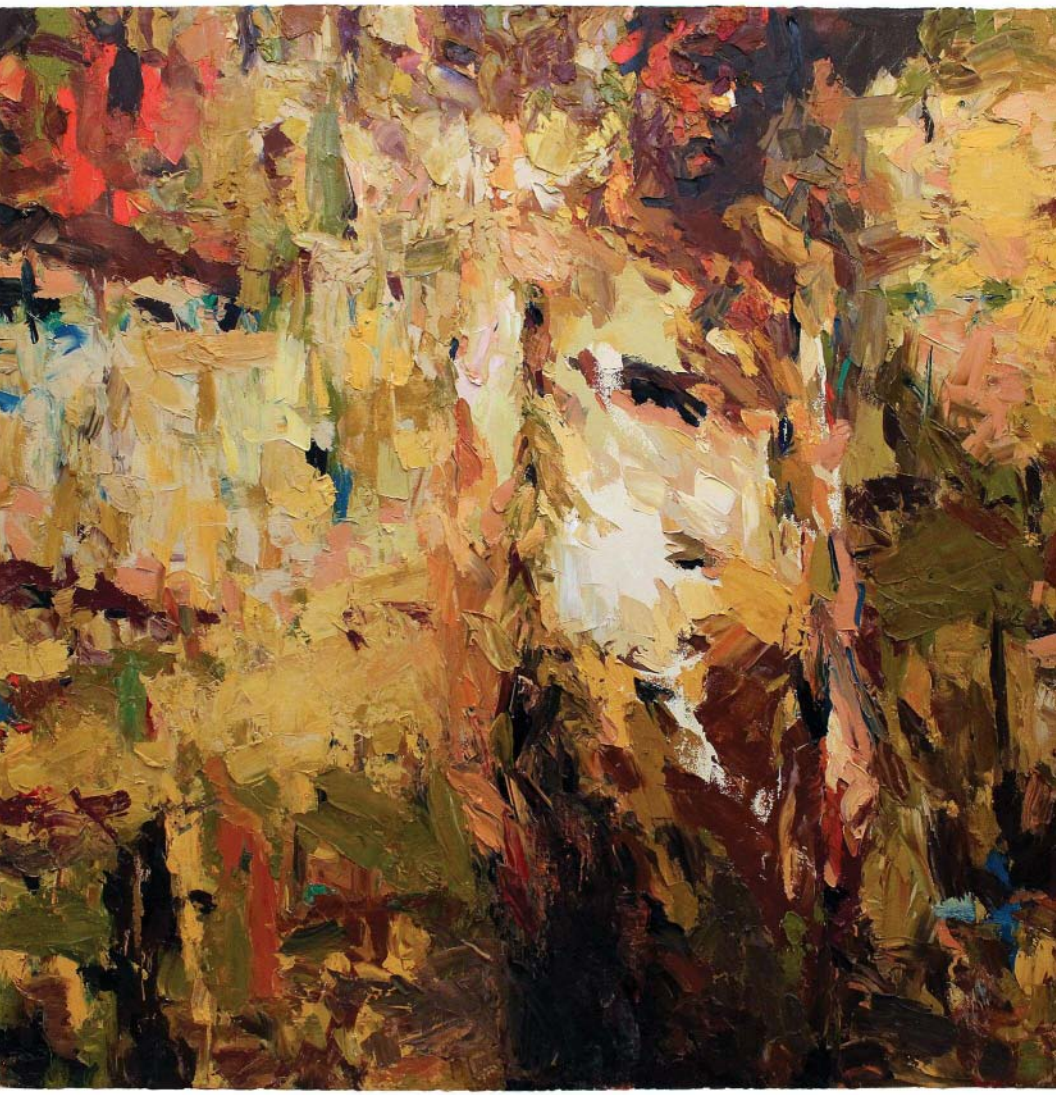
RW: [laughing] Nice comparison.

JM: There are a lot of amazing contemporary artists who are making important work for the right reasons. Because it is personal and resonant.

RW: As opposed to fashion.

JM: Exactly, because it describes their relationship to the world.

RW: I also want to ask you, partly from my own sense of my sources, has Judaism been a source for you? Either the history of the Jewish people or observance—have any of those aspects of Judaism been important to you as an artist?



Untitled, 2007 | Oil on canvas | 36 x 36 inches

JM: Art is omnivorous and more or less devours everything in my life, and Judaism is really foundational to the way I live my life and think about the world. Judaism is rigorously legalistic, but the code is actually a book of arguments. It is discussions and struggles and not a straight path at all. So Judaism teaches us that nothing is black and white. Everything is process and reevaluation. That is the way I approach the world, and it is the way I make art. I struggle and I seek. So it lays some philosophical groundwork for my art, and my art also lays some groundwork for my Judaism.

RW: Excellent. I find that profound. The sense of struggle and disputation being at the heart of both your work as an artist and your identity as a Jew. I like that a lot, especially with your art in this context of The Dortort Center here at UCLA.

JM: This show is named "Seek My Face," which is a line straight out of *Tehillim*. It is from Psalm 27, which is read over and over again in the fall, at just the time that the show is opening.

RW: Oh, how wonderful.

JM: The psalm starts with the words "God is my light". Especially for an artist, light changes everything. Light is what allows us to see. So already, I understand that this is a poem about how to see things and how to understand the world. And to say "God is my light" describes God as our means for visualizing or deciphering the world! With that as a starting point, nothing will ever look the same again.

Eventually the psalm gets to that wonderful line, "Seek my face," which even outside of the context of the psalm is so central to what I do every day as an artist. I am painting people and trying desperately to find the language to describe those faces and to situate them within that world. I love to discover how people emerge and reveal themselves. We are constantly seeking—looking for the pure notes amidst the noise.

RW: The emphasis on "seek" is like the emphasis on process. It's not "find," it is "seek." It's not finish, it is process—the struggle, the engagement with the painting.

Six, 2008 | Oil on canvas | 24 x 24 inches

JM: We're looking for those elusive openings so that we can burrow in and find meaning. So that we can enter and engage.

RW: I'd also like to talk a little about the variety of solutions within your own body of work. In other words, some have much more emphasis on resemblance, some are more abstract. All are about paint, but some are more about paint. Some are more about form where there is a bigger contrast between the detail of the face and the broader strokes of the setting.

JM: The differences come from the ebb and flow and the rhythm of my painting. I had a painting of a friend in my last Boston show—when I first brought it to the gallery, no one else could make out the figure. To me it was perfectly clear and literal. To go back to your original framework, I thought it was a Botticelli. I was surprised at how hard it was for people to decode that particular image. Eventually they were able to find an opening into it, but I'm not sure, to this day, that I can put my finger on why it was so disorienting. I am so close to the work that I often don't know when the paintings are more opaque or more obvious.

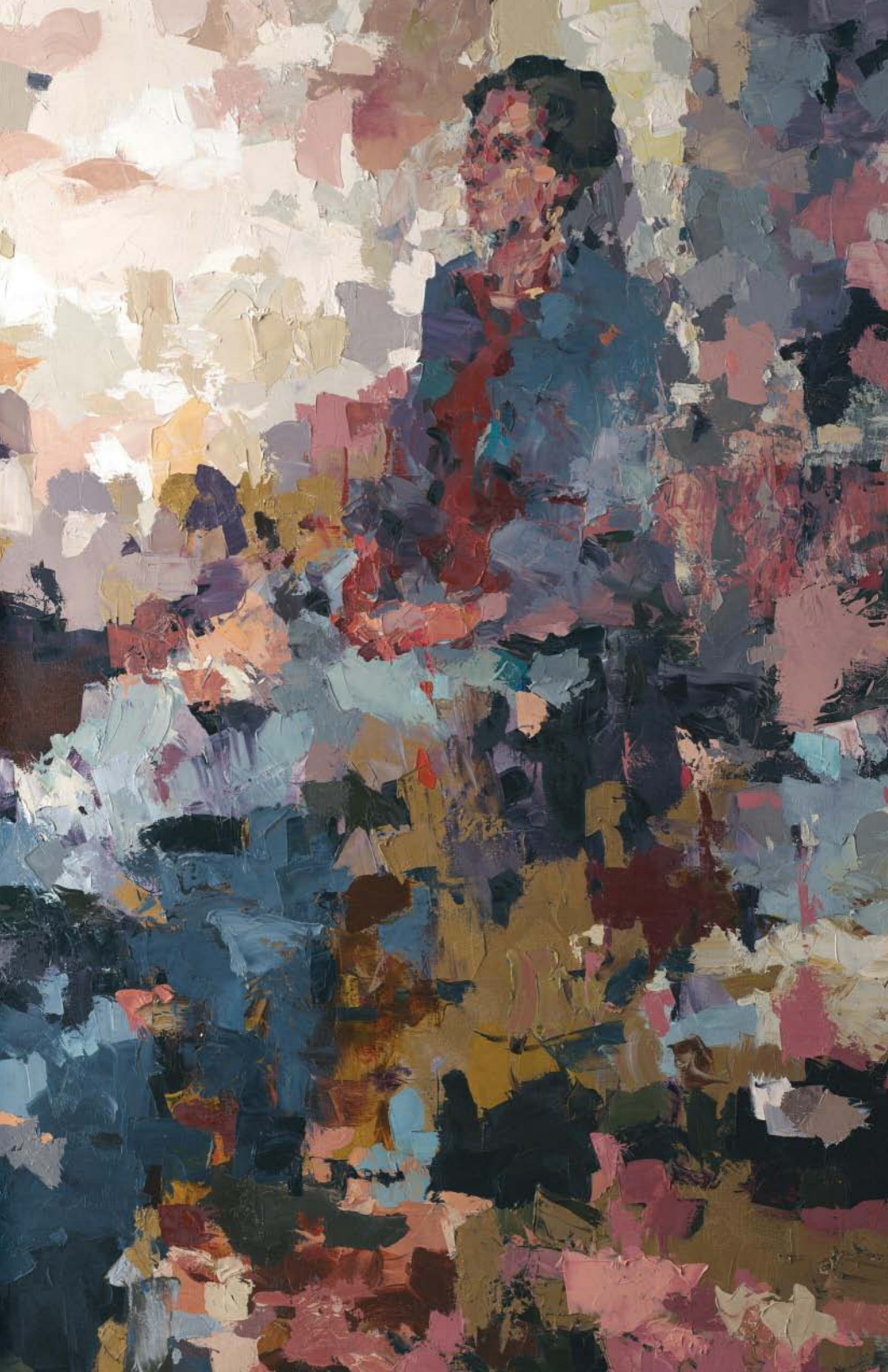
In the midst of making a painting, though, anything is fair game. Any experiment is worth trying. There are so many different solutions hidden in each painting. If I start out quietly, the next day I'm likely to come back swashbuckling. I cover up bright colors with muted tones and then I'll cover those the next day, too. All of these solutions and possibilities swirl and churn—prologues to what is possible. I don't sketch or preconceive a painting. The main thing that distinguishes one painting from another is not the intention, but where I leave off.

RW: You are reacting to the situation.

JM: I jump in and I don't know where it is going to stop. Then I paint until it is just resolved enough and just unresolved enough. What I've covered up might be more important than what I've shown you. Every painting has the potential to be any of those paintings. So I don't stop until it appeals to me in a way that feels surprising. Something that expands the way I see the world.

When I'm putting together a body of work for a show, I am always surprised to step back and to see what I've been up to. Patterns of ideas emerge that I can only see when I'm looking at the larger arc. In this case we are looking at sixteen years of work, and I usually don't know what I'm up to when I'm in the midst of it. I'm not always aware when I'm painting.

Berlinning, 2010 | Oil on canvas | 48 x 30 inches



RW: It allows you to take stock in a way that you can't while you are in the midst of it.

And is the model in front of you for the entire time or are you also painting on the painting without the model in front of you?

JM: I start most paintings with the misbegotten notion that I am a realist, painting with a person and a canvas in front of me. But even though I am compelled by the facts, I distrust them. The models come more or less once a week. I paint as we talk or debate, other times we listen to music. We can use the time to relax or to unpack our lives. But I often continue to paint after the model has left for the day. I tend to take more chances and experiment with new ideas during the in-between time. But then they return to the studio the following week, so I have to revisit all of my decisions. So I go back and forth, revising and then revising again.

RW: What would be normal, average—not that anything is normal or average in painting paintings—but how long does it take you to complete a painting?

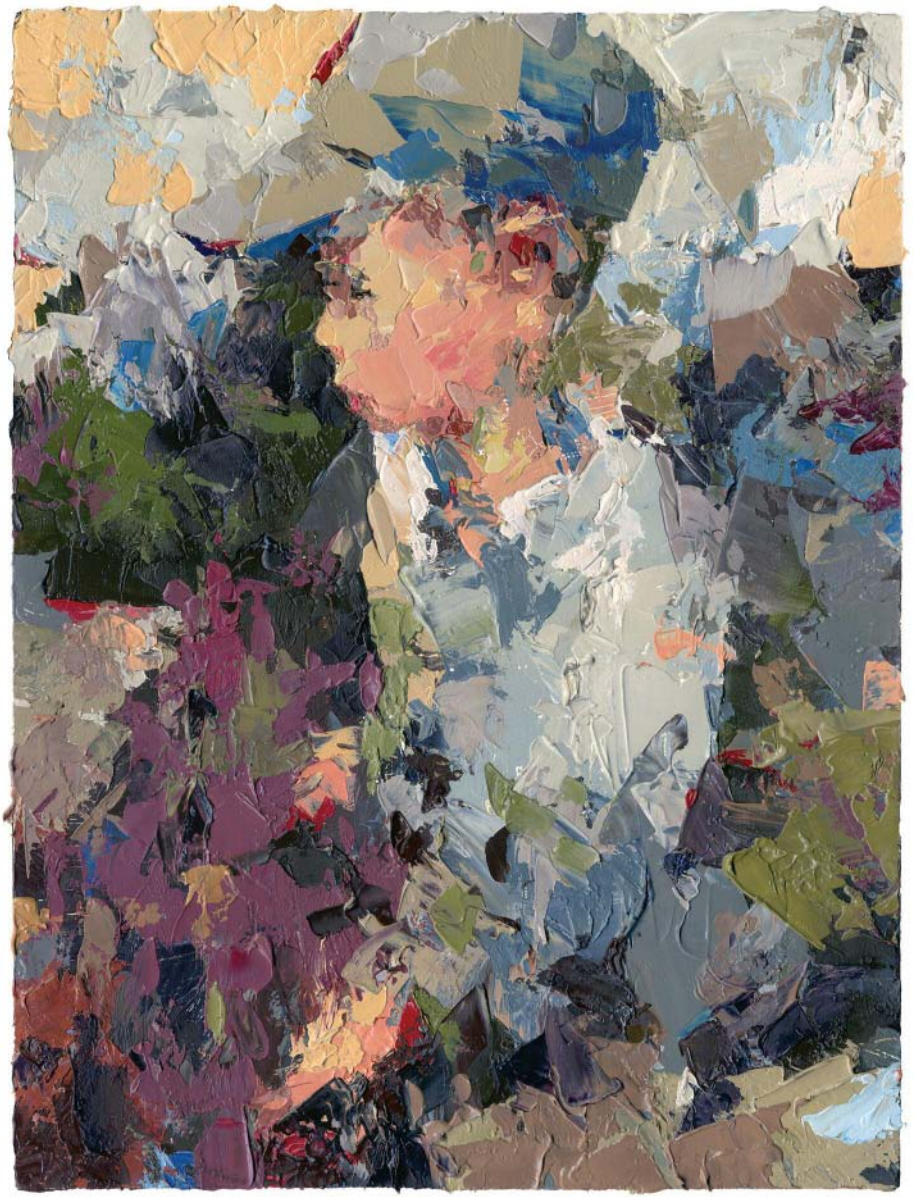
JM: Each painting takes anywhere between a few months and a couple of years. The paintings and their layers are the accrual of these visits. But I'm never working on just one painting at a time. The studio is always full of works in progress. There is a sense of dialogue between the paintings in the studio. A painting of one model talks to another and they help inform each other and resolve each other. And, of course, some pieces that I think are done turn out not to be done, so they help to *unresolve* each other as well.

RW: I can imagine that, the dialogue between the paintings.

JM: It is the most wonderful thing when they start to talk amongst themselves. When their information flows from one to another and they open each other up. It is magical when they reveal themselves.

RW: When I look at the early paintings, as compared with the middle and later paintings, they seem to me to be a little less resolved. Or in any case, less focused on the face, perhaps, is another way of saying it. And I wondered, there is tremendous continuity in your work, but I also see some changes and developments. How would you characterize them, if you agree with me?

JM: When I went back to construct this show, I learned a lot about myself. I can see where I have stayed on a steady path and where I've become a different



Covered, 2012 | Oil on panel | 12 x 9 inches

painter. I made the first group of paintings, the small early work from the early two-thousands, with a powerful sense of mission and a direction. I needed the paintings to be visceral and immediate. I refused to use a paint brush, I was only going to use a knife, and I was going to paint only from live models. There was so much to unlearn. I was urgently trying to discover a new vocabulary.

But the ideas and the paintings evolved. The slow reveal. Eventually that aggressive stance felt like it was beside the point—I simply needed to be doing a certain kind of painting. It was more about questioning. Every day I would look at what I was doing and ask "What am I making and why? And is it what I ought to be doing?" Now I let them take the time that they need. My scale may fluctuate, my tools come and go, and my mark-making speeds up and slows down, but when I think back to "Seek My Face"—it works as the title for the show because it is one of the constant threads.

I have changed as a person over the years and that has changed the way that I see the world and the way that I draw the world. Now I am much more open to letting what happens in the studio happen in the studio. I try to know enough to get out of my own way.

RW: Well you are more confident. This is the difference between starting out and being more of a veteran.

JM: I might even say it the other way. I might say I'm much less confident. Then, I knew exactly what I was doing and now I have no idea what I'm doing. But I also know that I have no choice. Then, I was trying to define who I was as an artist—now I know I have no choice but to be who I am as an artist.

RW: Excellent. I assume everything is in oils?

JM: Everything is in oils. I experiment with other media from time to time, but most everything is in oils. Oil for me has both the wonderful access to tradition, because I'm standing on the shoulders of giants, but it also has a pliability and

Changing Light, 2013 | Oil on panel | 20 x 18 inches

the capacity to keep moving over the course of months and years. And that is so critical to what I do.

RW: I also notice that everything from the early period is untitled, and I view titles as the opportunity to write very short poems.

JM: I love that idea—I wonder if poets ever get to make very tiny paintings! Early on, the purist in me felt a bit of a tie to modernism. I wanted the painting to stand up for itself without getting caught up in words because they were an "other".

RW: I understand perfectly.

JM: Eventually I realized that there were aspects of who I am that were important, yet neglected in my art. The most obvious thing that was missing was humor. I can't go very long without a sarcastic comment or two, even in the studio. I use humor to cushion my relationships and to test the water. I use it to question and to bring perspective. But those weapons were missing from my arsenal as a painter. My art doesn't have to be funny, but yet its absence was notable.

RW: Too austere?

JM: Yes, so I wanted the ability to undercut myself sometimes, or to talk about the relationship I am having with the model through either poetry or song lyrics or through humor. And when I realized that was missing, I started to name them. But I also realized I didn't have to be describing the paintings with titles—I could actually use the text as a point of friction or to push off in an unexpected direction.

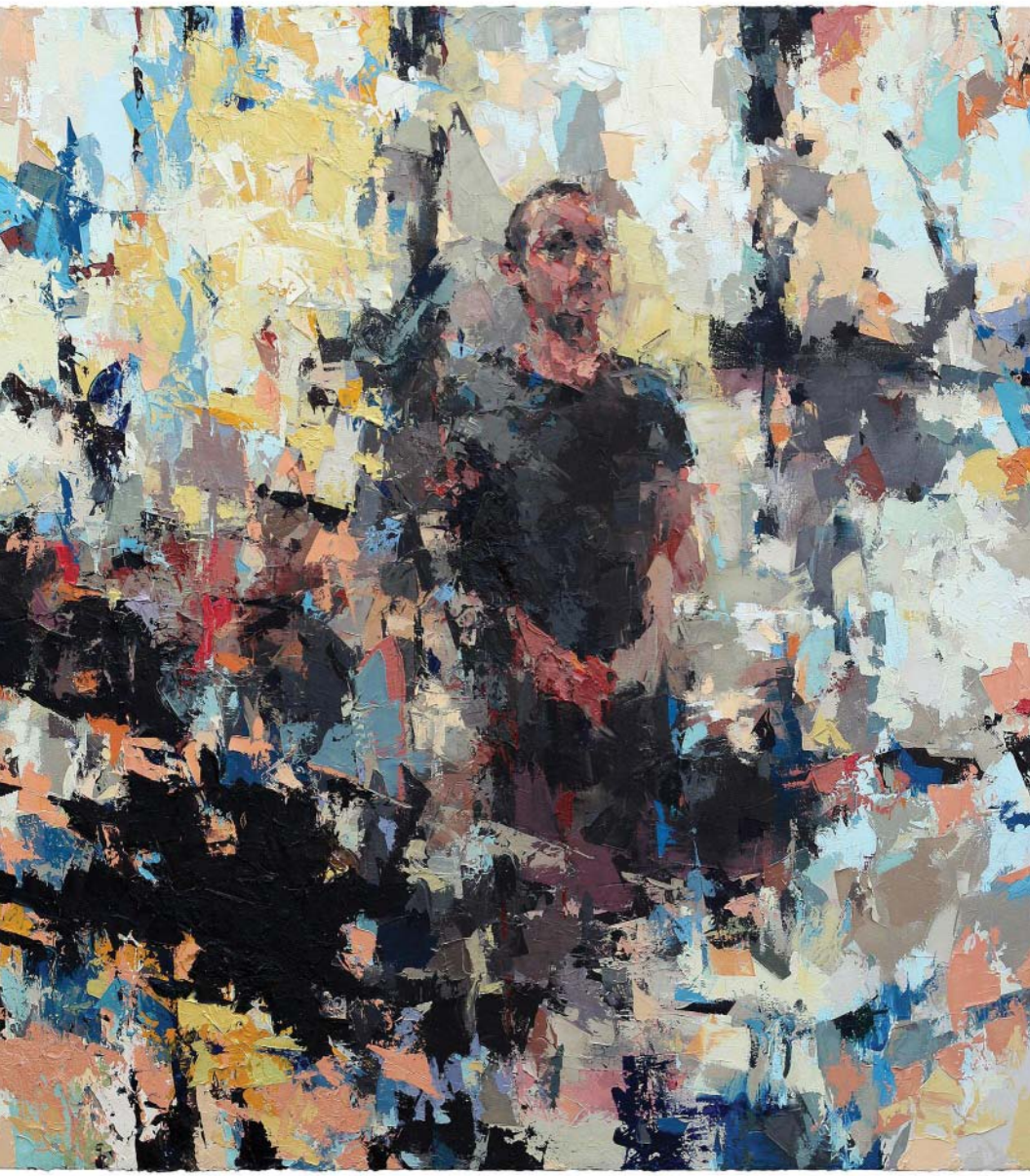
The text also acts as an access point for a lot of people. So if you aren't quite sure how to approach a painting, reading a few words and juxtaposing them with the image creates a new puzzle to solve. You start to ask questions about how the image and the text are related. Is there a congruence or a dissonance? And that point of friction where the two rub against each other is a great way in, even if it will never ultimately resolve itself.

RW: Do you want to speak a little bit about your use of color? And whether it has in any way changed? I see a shift in the work to having more variety of small and large marks. I see more emphasis on that in the later work. The color also

Insofar, 2015 | Oil on canvas | 24 x 20 inches

The Gap Between Light and Thunder, 2016

Oil on canvas | 36 x 80 inches (diptych)



Parentheses, 2015 | Oil on canvas | 40 x 36 inches

seems a little more varied in tonality—darks and lights—to my eye. Not in every case, but just as a trend.

JM: I find color to be so personal and subjective. Color to me is about relationships. It's not about pinpointing something so much as it is about showing how two things work together. How one thing pushes off of another. And maybe this sends us back to...

RW: Morandi!

JM: Yes, exactly! And of course Bischoff and Diebenkorn, too.

I love the interplay between the color and drawing. They can enhance each other, but often I prefer to let them undercut and subvert each other. When the drawing or the resemblance is clear, then the colors have more freedom to wreak havoc. The colors should leave the painting a little unstable. They should be difficult to contain so that the painting comes to life.

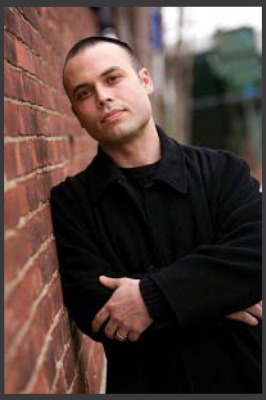
Beyond that, when I have a half dozen paintings or more going on simultaneously in my studio, they start to borrow each other's palettes. When I am working on two paintings side by side, the palettes start to seep into each other. And you end up with this weird conglomeration of different ideas fighting with each other.

RW: Which is a very rich context.

JM: I think that is part of the joy for me of making paintings over long expanses of time. They can contain—just as a person can—so many overlapping ideas and stories. We are rich with contradictions, but you don't feel you know a person until you see these aspects and impulses begin to weave together. The juxtapositions are so fertile. The layers and colors move and build and add up to a painting that refuses to sit still.

Ruth Weisberg is an artist and professor. She is the former Dean of Fine Arts at the University of Southern California. Her work is included in the permanent collections of over sixty museums, and Weisberg is well known for her paintings reflecting upon the cycle of life, the continuity of generations. Ruth Weisberg is represented by Jack Rutberg Fine Arts in Los Angeles.

"Looking at a Meyer painting means changing your mind about what you see. Only gradually do I discern the figures in his work. They emerge slowly, rewarding a second and third glance. Coming into their own, they transform the color all around them. As living people do, Meyer's subjects will reveal themselves, and they will disappear. Look at them up close and they scatter, self-effacing. Back away and they gather force and gravity. Back away a little more. Give Meyer's figures space, and they'll possess the room." —Allegra Goodman



Artist Joshua Meyer is known for his thickly layered paintings of people, and for a searching, open-ended process. The Cambridge, Massachusetts, artist is the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant as well as the Sustainable Arts Foundation Award, and a Painting Fellowship from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. He studied art at Yale University and The Bezalel Academy. The artist's work has been shown in galleries and museums across the United States, Europe and Asia, including a solo exhibition, *Tohu vaVohu* at Hebrew College in Boston, and *Becoming* at the Yale Slifka Center and NYU Bronfman Center. Meyer is represented by Rice Polak Gallery in Provincetown, Matter & Light Gallery in Boston and Dolby Chadwick Gallery in San Francisco.

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DORTORT CENTER FOR CREATIVITY IN THE ARTS AT UCLA

Since its inception, the mission of the Dortort Center for Creativity in the Arts has been to make art and culture an integral part of the Hillel experience at UCLA. Our three main gallery spaces encompass 2,300 square feet and present nine art exhibits every academic year. Since 2004, the Dortort Center has mounted over eighty exhibits featuring artists from around the world.

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