

An abstract painting by Arnold van Praag, characterized by thick, expressive brushstrokes and a vibrant, multi-colored palette. The composition is dominated by warm tones of red, orange, and yellow, interspersed with cooler shades of blue and green. The texture is highly tactile, with visible ridges and valleys of paint. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and emotional intensity.

ARNOLD  
VAN  
PRAAG



# ARNOLD VAN PRAAG AT 90

*AN EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS  
AND DRAWINGS*

**The  
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Established 1923

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## ARNOLD VAN PRAAG

*'A kind of touchstone of the highest or most living art is seriousness; not gravity but the being in earnest with your subject - reality.'* Gerard Manley Hopkins

Arnold Van Praag (born 1926) trained at the Slade between 1953 and 1957, and was thus one of that remarkable generation of students which included Craigie Aitchison, Michael Andrews, Paula Rego, Euan Uglow and Victor Willing. His modest disposition and preference for working quietly in his Cambridgeshire studio - indeed his total and refreshing lack of interest in self-promotion - has meant that his work is far less familiar to the gallery-going public than it should be. His first solo exhibition, in 1965, which consisted of somewhat Baconic portraits of Toulouse-Lautrec, sold out before it opened. That early success might have suggested a career in the limelight, but van Praag withdrew, and chose to earn his living teaching art rather than selling it. He was Lecturer in Painting at Hertfordshire College of Art & Design in St Albans 1957-70, then Head of Painting there 1970-75, subsequently accepting the post of Visiting Tutor in painting at Camberwell School of Arts 1975-91. During that time he exhibited regularly, but his painting did not become widely known. Since 1991, he has worked full-time in the studio, and the fruits of that renewed focus may be seen today. Here is an artist ripe for re-discovery and re-assessment, a painter of real probity and skill with something serious to say.

Van Praag has a most pronounced fidelity to what he calls 'the vital and abiding figurative tradition'. He feels an affinity with Nolde, Soutine, late Monet, Matisse, Bonnard and is moved by the painterliness of these painters. Among contemporaries, he particularly admires Josef Herman, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. He paints in series and is drawn to certain themes: tradesmen (butcher, fishmonger) and such masters of past art as Cezanne, Rembrandt, El Greco and Courbet. ('Rouault comes very high on my list', he says.) These artists he re-interprets in modern-day settings, applying his own experience to age-old confrontations. He is not interested in sterile realism, but in a heightened reality of extreme formal situations, operating between suggestion and assertion. He aims for a maximum saturation of colour corralled into the most compacted and exact shapes. His paintings can be uncompromisingly fierce, but also vulnerable. For him, art is made out of sensations rather than ideas. He subscribes to Constable's belief that painting is but another word for feeling.

One of the disadvantages that painting has always suffered when compared to such time-based cultural artefacts as the symphony, which people sit and listen to, or the novel they take time to read, is that pictures are generally given no more than a quick scan or glance before the viewer moves on. Considering how long the painting may have taken to make (months, if not years), this cursory attention is woefully insufficient. Van Praag has responded to this problem by

making paintings which don't give up their secrets all at once. We are forced to read his pictures slowly because he has created a new relationship between pure paint and imagery. At first glance you will not see the various heads and faces that comprise an image - the initial impression will be of paint and colour exhilaratingly applied, with perhaps one dominant figure emerging from the matrix. But then as you look more, other features and figures emerge gradually from the paint. So the image is not all there at a single glance, but develops - like a photograph being printed from a negative in a developing dish - in front of your eyes.

Acknowledging the flow of surfaces around us, the artist's job is to interrupt the seamless interweaving of life by re-combination and re-alignment: marking a shape and its repetition, an unexpected awkwardness or grace in the meeting of lines or planes, stridency or gentleness of colour. Van Praag favours a tough equilibrium of strong colour and embedded forms set in space, contrasted with floating forms on the picture plane. The overall effect tends towards the enclosed and occasionally claustrophobic. Collapsing space and toppling buildings echo the approach of Leon Kossoff in his Christchurch Spitalfields paintings. But another useful comparison would be with the ancient sculptures on the facade of Chartres Cathedral.

'I want things to be real rather than actual', says van Praag. 'Not merely the skin of things, the look, it also has to include some significance, some charge. It has to connect to my interior feelings not just my exterior vision. Things are more real if their character is included with their physique.' Clearly, some subjects are more potent or

relevant than others - he wouldn't be interested in a fruiterer's shop, for instance, but he would in a butcher's. Butchers and fishmongers are to do with life and death - a harsher reality than the pastoral greengrocer. Greengrocers are pacific, nurturing. Above all, he loves the *look* of butchers and fishmongers, which he finds enthralling. To him a greengrocer's doesn't have the same visual impact. Equally the look of a bemedalled soldier is exciting - the visual impulse is here predominant, not any obvious symbolic meaning. Interestingly, his portrayals of soldiers - complete with gold braid and shiny buttons - recall the Glasgow children of Joan Eardley, not an expected comparison.

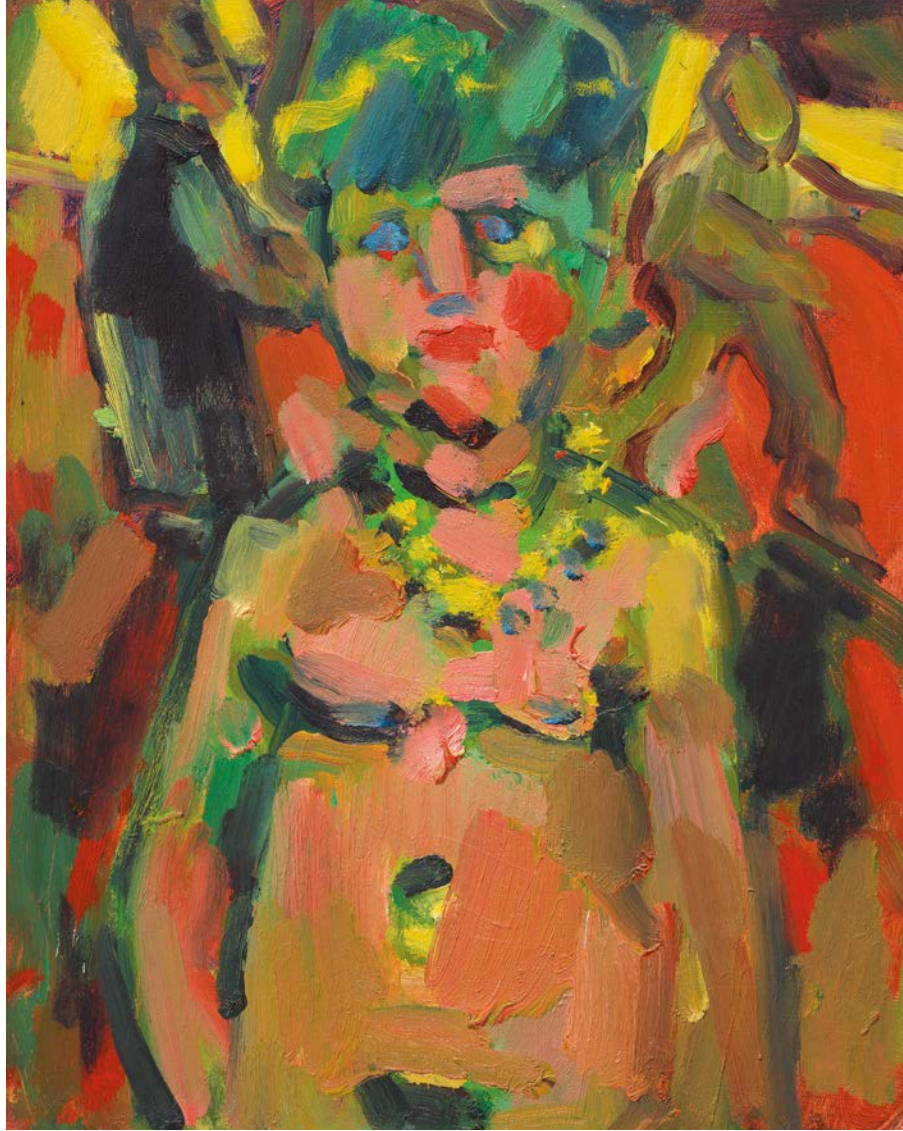
Several favourite subjects derive from his years of teaching at Camberwell. Arriving in London from Fenland, he would take the bus from Liverpool Street Station, past Leadenhall Market (famous for its butchers and poulterers and fishmongers) then over London Bridge. Crossing London Bridge came as a visual and emotional shock; it is perhaps the real (and symbolic) dividing line between country and city. A frontier. Here, too, are echoes of the great Modernist endeavour, and one thinks inevitably of those famous lines of TS Eliot from 'The Burial of the Dead', the first section of his great poem *The Wasteland*:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.

These are the crowds of office workers, the business men, clerks and (when the poem was written) typists, the commuters whose existence is patterned by bells and timetables, who are often dismissed as no



FISHMONGER 2002 oil on board 77 x 92 cm



*left*  
**SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS**  
1998-2001 oil on board 38 x 31 cm

*right*  
**SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS**  
1989-98 oil on canvas 76 x 76 cm



more than half-alive, marking time in a kind of wretched dream. Are these really the living, or are they the ghosts of the dead, the shadows of humanity? How will another age judge such occupations?

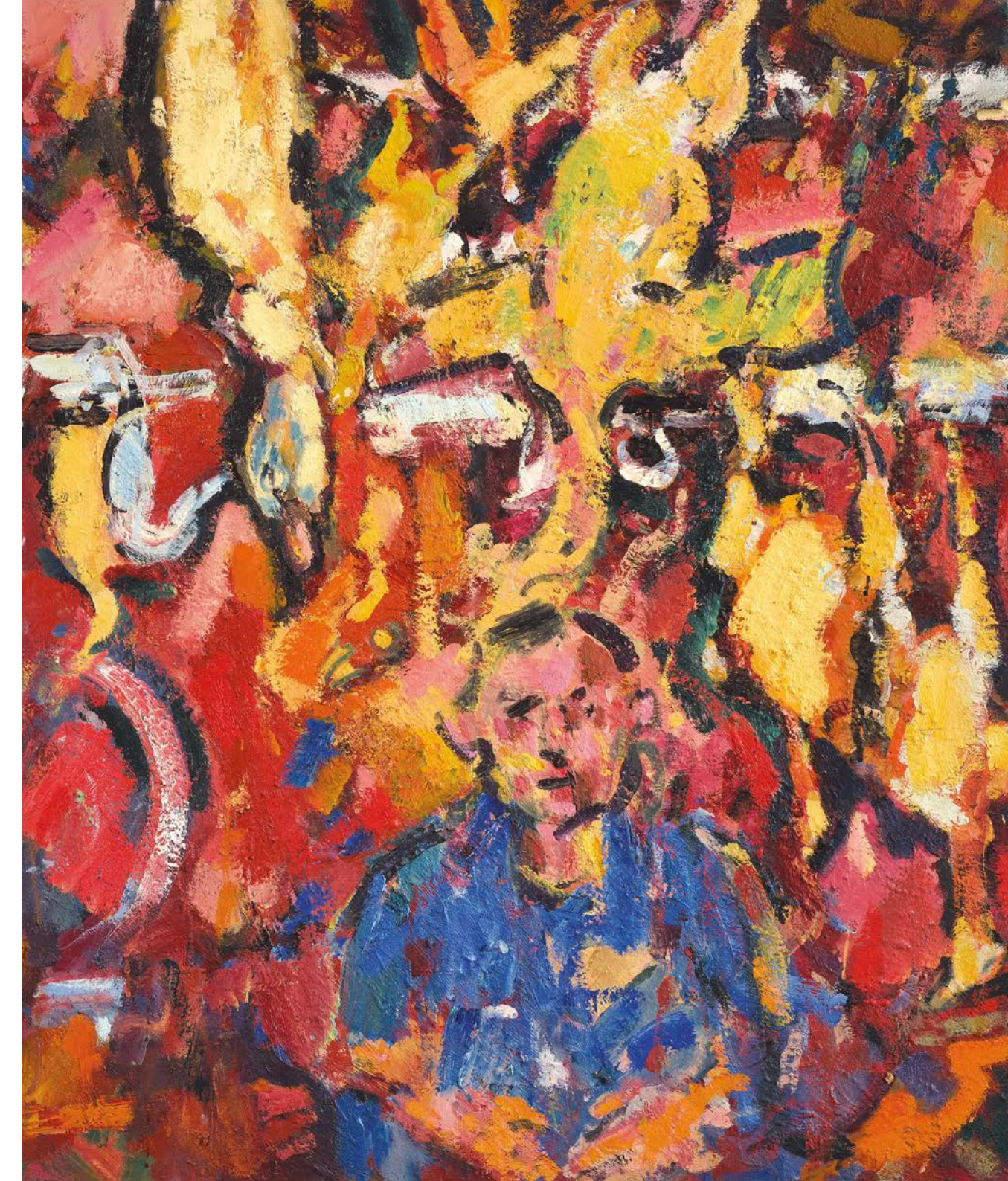
Art can be said to occur when the outer landscape meets the inner world, to create a new harmony, a new reality. Where the world of personal experience (remembered forms, patterns, ideas) acts upon the world of appearances. Van Praag's many paintings of crossing the river have a ritual aspect to them. Another intriguing subject discovered during his weekly Camberwell commute was people falling asleep on the train and entering a private world. That and strap-hanging on the Underground became favourite motifs. His pictures are loaded with meaning, much of which necessarily remains private and obscure, but which may be sensed and apprehended by the attentive viewer.

Van Praag's great achievement has been to imbue an essentially modest subject with an intensity of tragic feeling. He is finely attuned to the ephemeral nature of life and the inescapable finality of death, but in between is a defiant and heart-warming struggle to survive, and this he conjures up. Urban themes predominate, the legacy of the Camden Town group, shaded through Bomberg. No stylistic development as such is discernible in his work, though there have been some changes in subject matter, and others in palette and handling. He himself considers his work has grown more abstract - in terms of the application of the paint. Undoubtedly, experience has focused and clarified his aims, allowing him to reject the anecdotal and sentimental, and to concentrate on the essential. His is a constant search for the greater truth behind appearances. He quotes from van

Gogh's letters: 'My great longing is to make those very faults, those deviations, remodellings, changes of reality that they may become yes, untruth if you like, but more true than the literal truth.'

Although he does use canvas, he prefers to paint on board - 'I like the way it takes the paint'. He works directly onto the support without any preparatory drawing, and collaborates with the paint to discover the flow of the imagery. He does make drawings, admiring very much the particularity that drawing can achieve. He makes two kinds - drawings for themselves (like paintings) and drawings for information. He recognises the importance of drawing from life, but contends that painting is not intended to be a mere record of appearances. Sketchbooks feature studies from life models and ideas for paintings. He often spends long periods working on a picture, returning to rework it. Some paintings just happen in a white heat and 'fall off the brush' as he puts it, others disclose themselves gradually. He often builds a composition around a head. The head and the hands are crucial - as they were for Rembrandt. When I ask him how he knows when a painting is finished, he quotes Klee's answer to the same question: 'When the painting looks back at you.'

Van Praag likes the sensuality of paint. 'I think painting is a sensuous business as well as an emotional business - as well as being paint.' He is a painterly painter and strong lyrical colourist. His palette feels more continental than English, but then van Praag (as his name suggests) is of Dutch extraction. As a colourist he has more in common with the Anglo-Welsh Frank Brangwyn, a very fine artist at his best, who was born in Bruges and maintained strong contacts with Belgium, than with the soft grey-greens of the English school. Colour is used



**BUTCHER: RACK OF BIRDS**  
2002 oil on board 92 x 77 cm



*left*  
**FATHER AND CHILD**  
2008 conté on paper 30 × 38 cm

*right*  
**CROSSING LONDON BRIDGE**  
2007 oil on board 41 × 52 cm



emotively with particular relevance to red: 'I think it's the most emotional colour.' However, yellow is also important. He works in series, varying the viewpoint, the angle of vision, the focus, the fall of light, the intensity of the colours in order best to convey urgency and vigour. He has made his speciality the human drama, or the drama of the human condition - human light and darkness, sincere human feeling. He always wants to know why, rather than how.

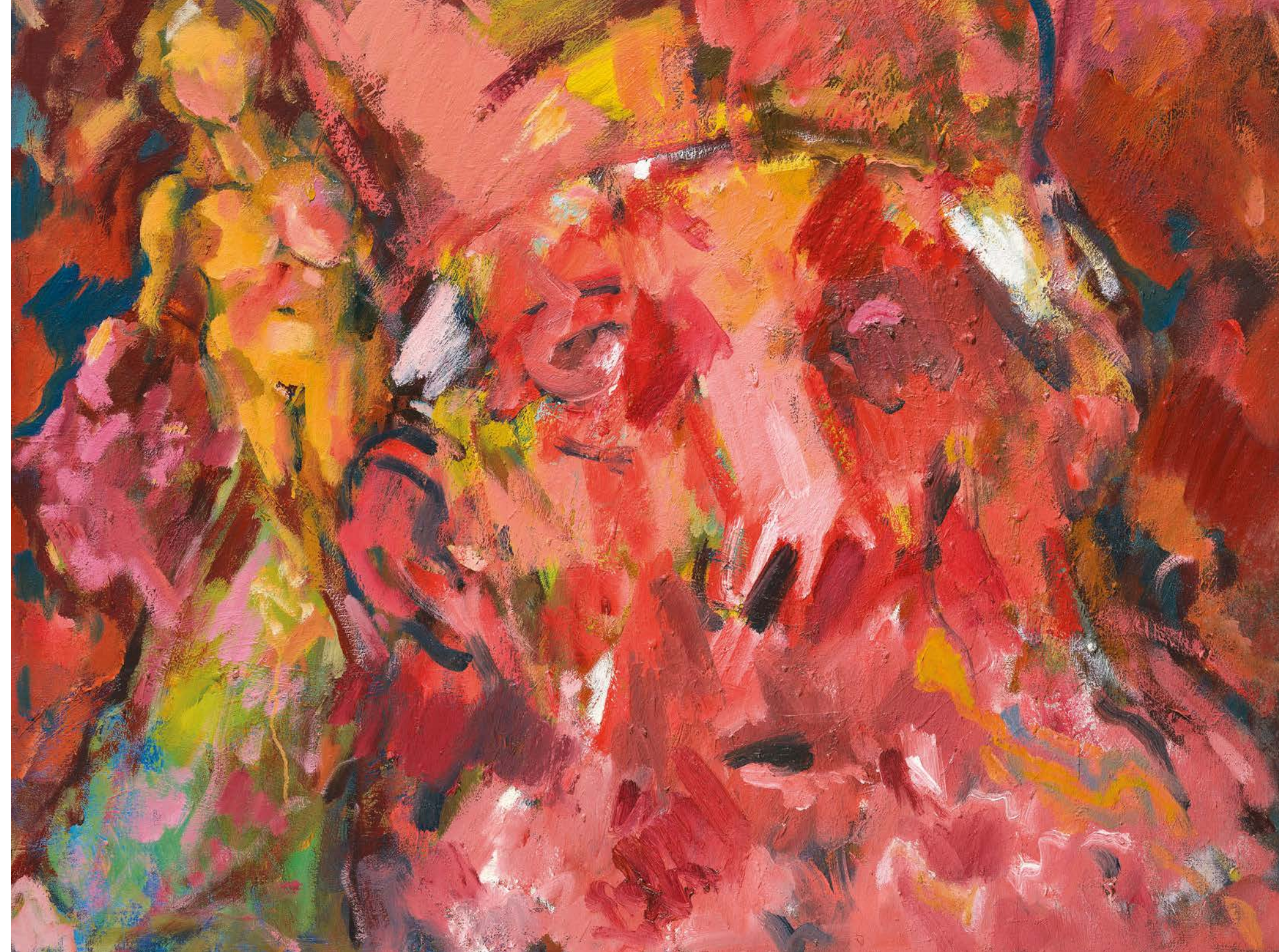
He is drawn to Bible stories because they are very compact, with a powerful moral element that signifies something and is not just entertaining: 'That's what I'd like my paintings to aspire to', he says. When I ask him why he is particularly fascinated by the story of Susanna and the Elders, he replies it is the variety the theme offers that appeals. 'It's about so many things: youth and age, wickedness and probity, water - which I like very much because it's fluid and invites blues. I find it a very thrilling subject.' A fleshy subject, it is essentially about lust and lying, and the triumph of innocence. Van Praag's versions of the story are not painted from models: he doesn't hesitate to invent or work from the imagination. In a similar way, he maintains that he sees things more clearly when they're not there. In other words, when the distraction of their visible presence is no longer apparent and memory can supply the necessary prompt.

Van Praag cultivates a state of receptivity to the picture - intuitive rather than calculated or rational. As he wrote in 2005: 'The facts are played upon by their felt *significance* but also by the necessities of a pictorial realisation - the painting language, the drive of a line, the wrench of a curve, the sensuality of colour. The painting image mutates, no longer literal or particular.' He doesn't plan this and maintains that the images are discovered not made, 'each stage in the

physical act of painting prompting its own suggestions of frustration or opportunity until one recognises the truth of its resolution.' This is the artist's role: putting a shape to the world, imposing limits to what one sees, providing a focus. As Jeremy Lewison pointed out as long ago as 1988 (in *Modern Painters Vol 1 No 2*): 'Van Gogh's desire to paint "something voluptuous and grievously afflicted" is the touchstone of van Praag's aspirations.' It's a view the artist still endorses.

Andrew Lambirth  
June - September 2016

**SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS**  
1989-2000 oil on canvas 75 x 101 cm

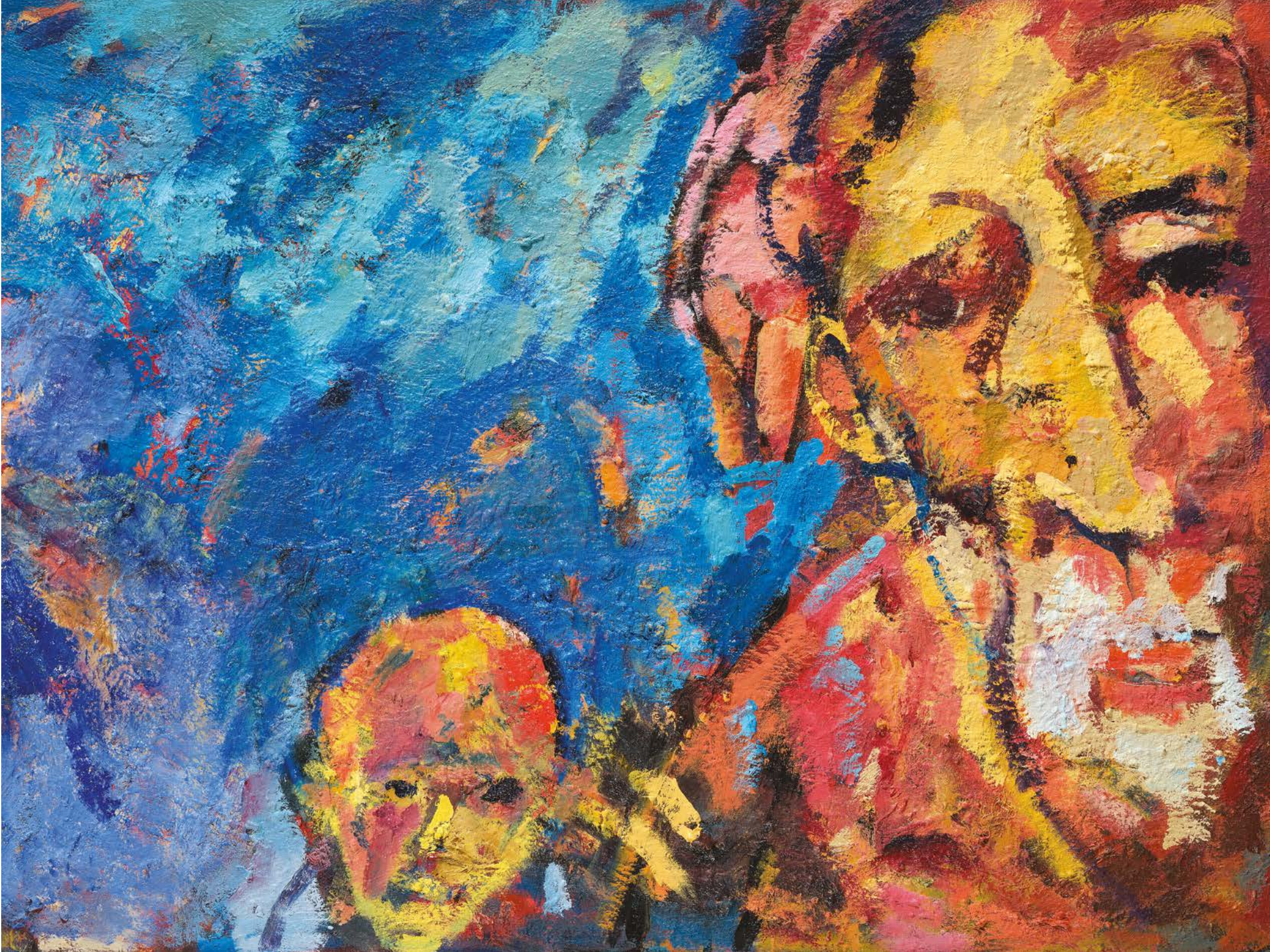






*left*  
**LAUTREC**  
1981 oil on board 41 × 35 cm

*right*  
**SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS**  
1998-2002 oil on canvas 72 × 97 cm





*left*  
**FISHMONGER**  
2008 conté on paper 34 x 25 cm

*right*  
**FISHMONGER**  
2003 oil on board 76 x 91 cm





*above*

**BRINGING IN THE MEAT**

2008 conté on paper 26 × 28 cm

*right*

**BRINGING IN THE MEAT**

2008 oil on canvas 30 × 38 cm





*above*

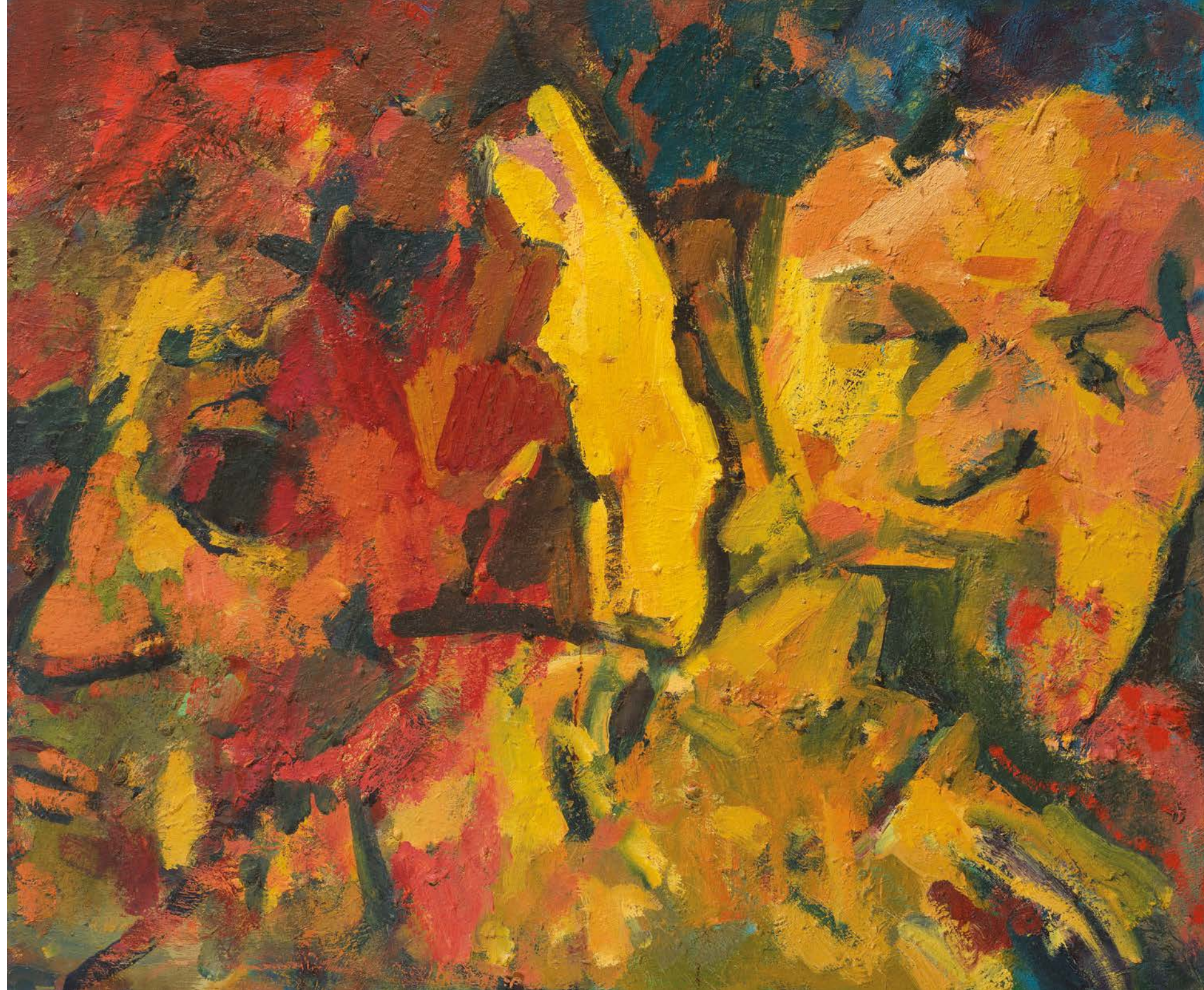
**JUDAS' KISS**

1994 oil on board 24 × 32 cm

*right*

**SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS**

1995-2001 oil on board 77 × 92 cm





*left*  
**CROSSING LONDON BRIDGE**  
2005 oil on board 60 × 71 cm

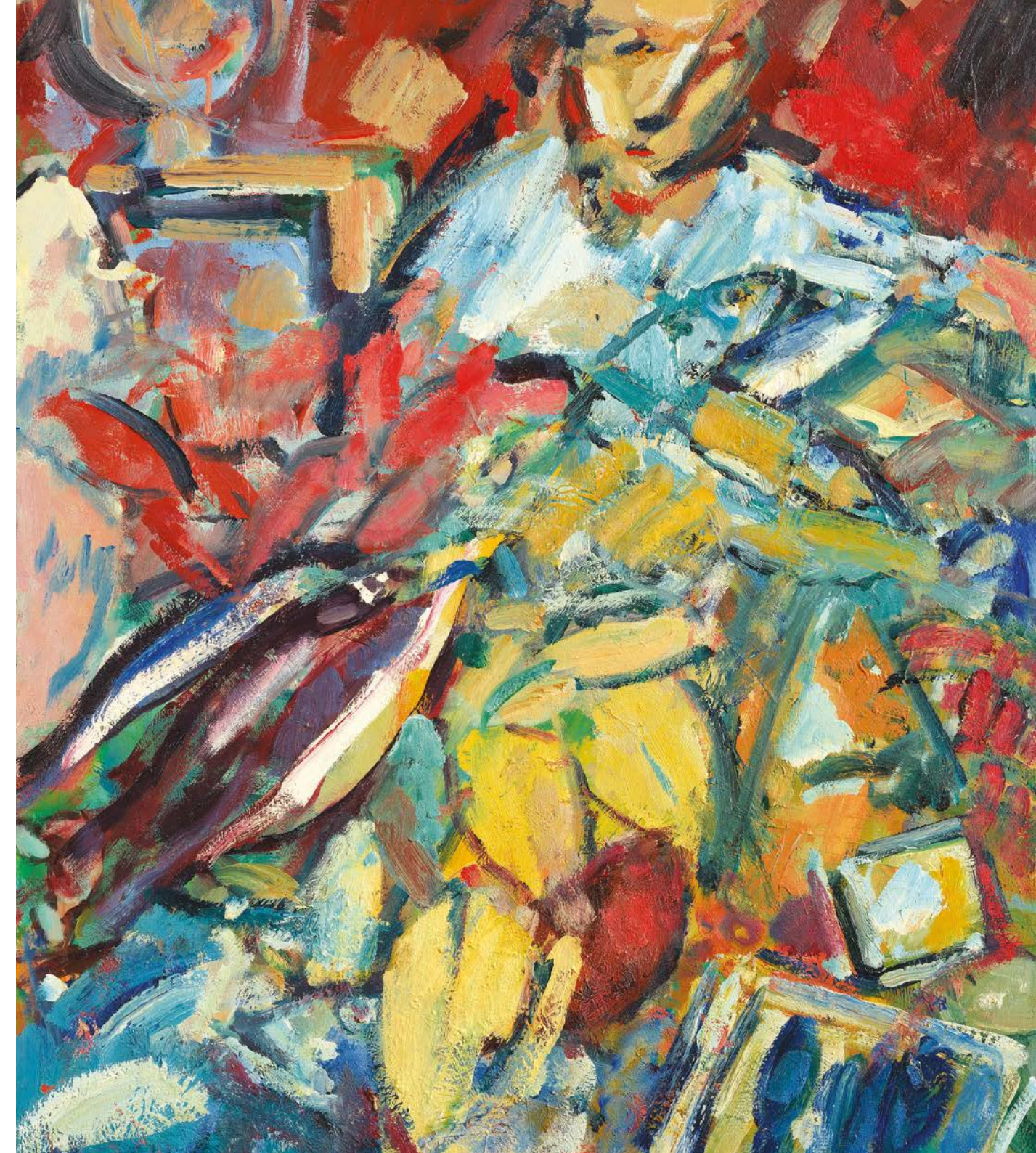
*right*  
**RED MOON**  
2004 oil on board 96 × 76 cm





*left*  
**FISHMONGER AND POULTRY**  
2008 conté on paper 27 × 22 cm

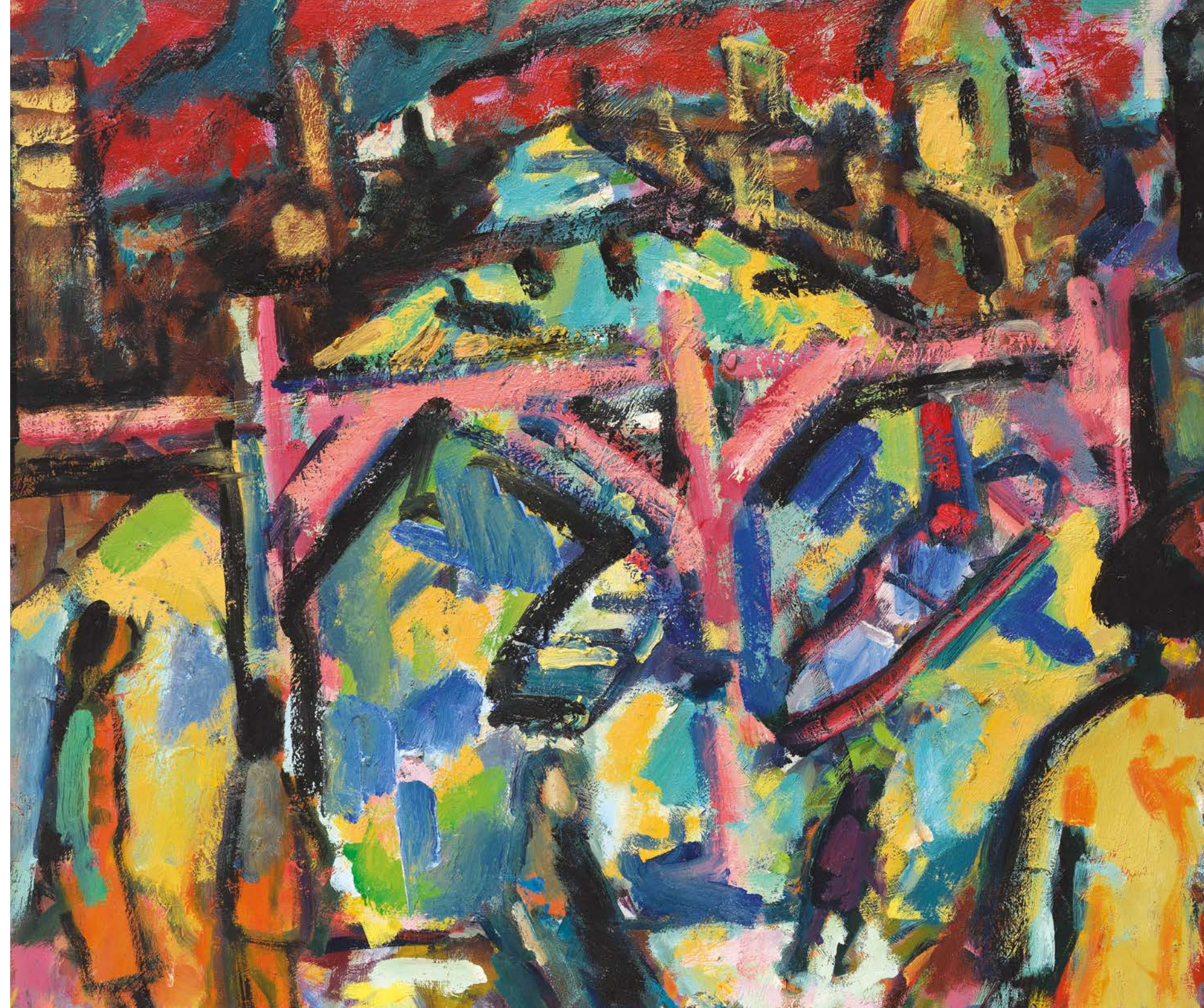
*right*  
**FISHMONGER**  
2005 oil on board 70 × 61 cm

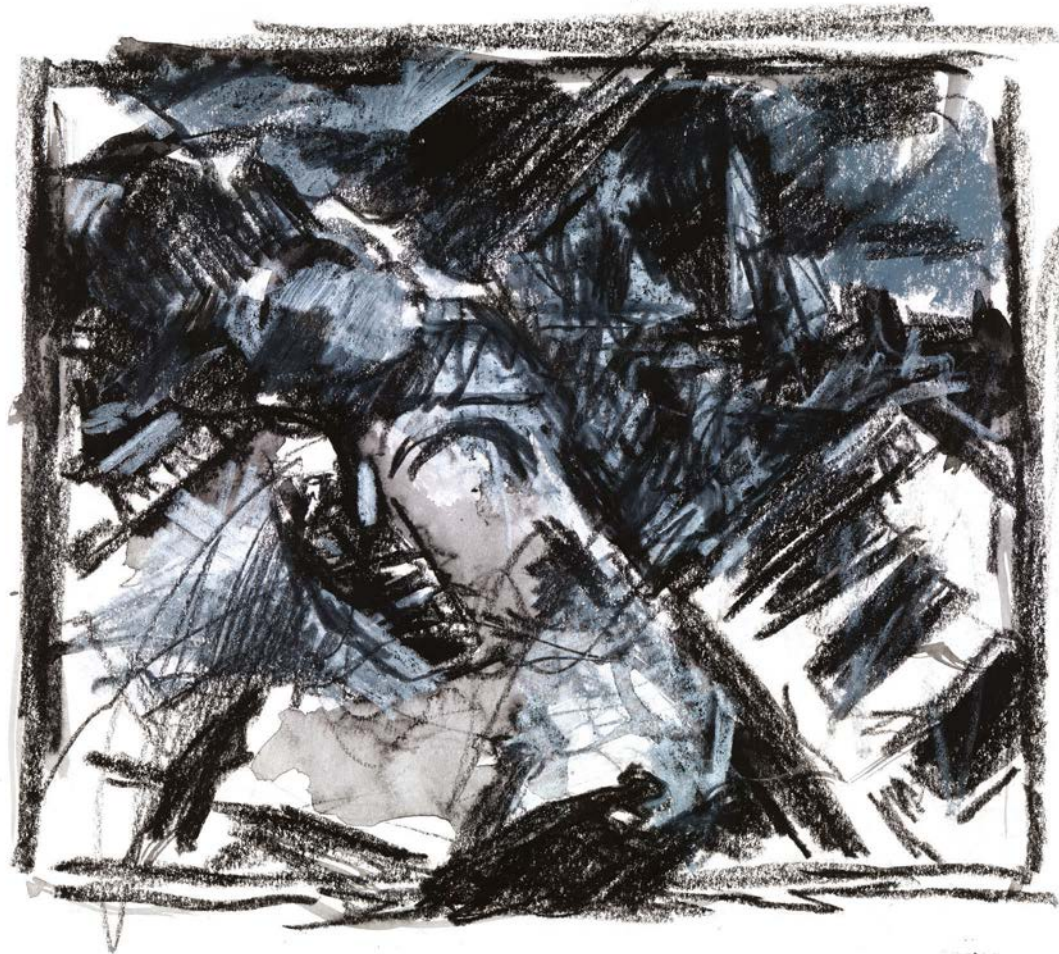




*above*  
**STORM OVER TOLEDO (AFTER EL GRECO)**  
2004 oil on board 30 × 38 cm

*right*  
**BRIDGES**  
2003 oil on board 61 × 71 cm





*above*

**CROSSING LONDON BRIDGE**

2008 conté and wash on paper 21 x 24 cm

*right*

**ONE ON THE BRIDGE**

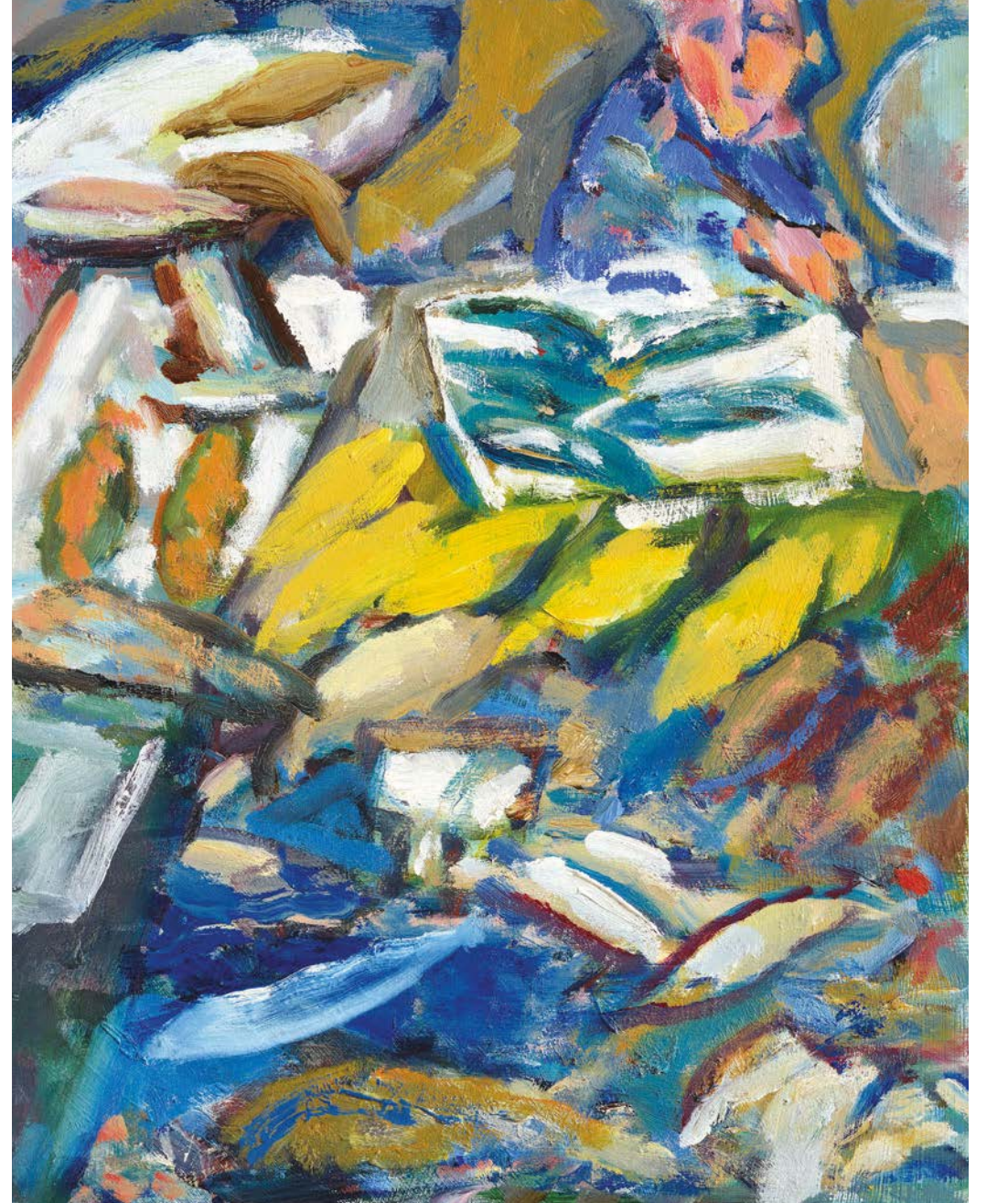
2006 oil on board 61 x 71 cm







*left*  
**CROSSING LONDON BRIDGE**  
2004 oil on canvas 41 × 51 cm



*right*  
**FISHMONGER**  
2011 oil on board 38 × 30 cm



*above*

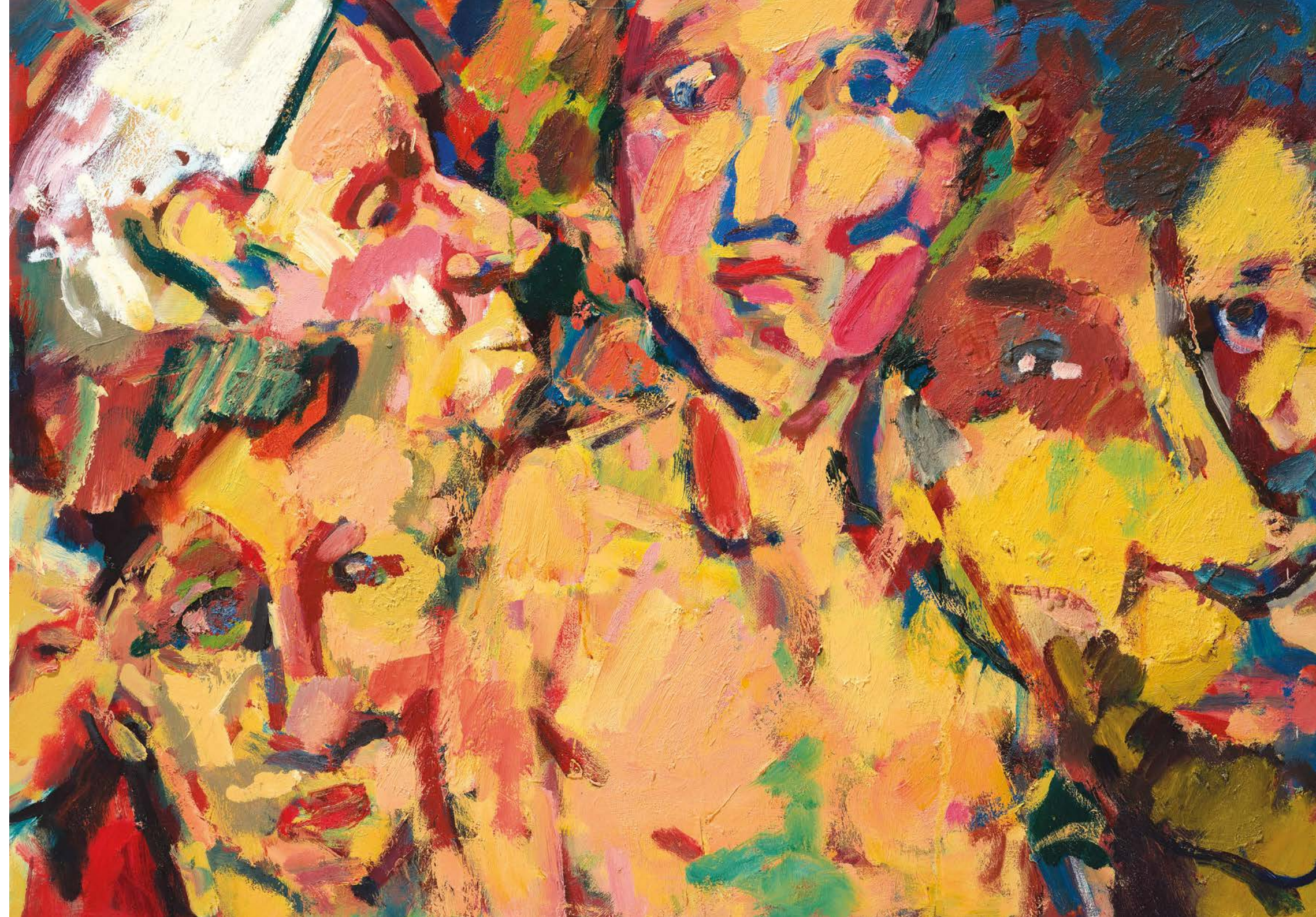
**SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS**

2008 conté on paper 20 × 18 cm

*right*

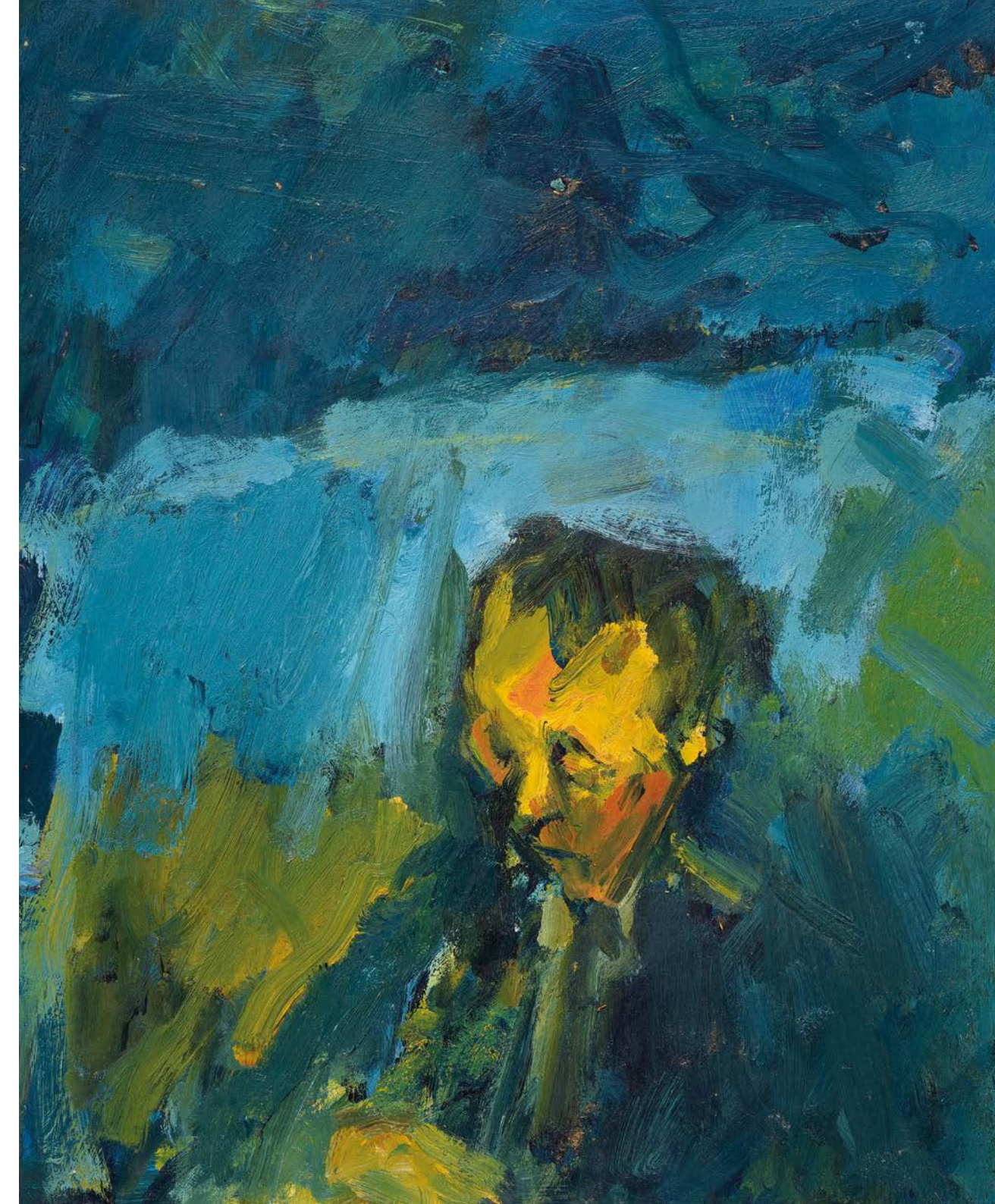
**SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS**

2005-07 oil on board 64 × 89 cm

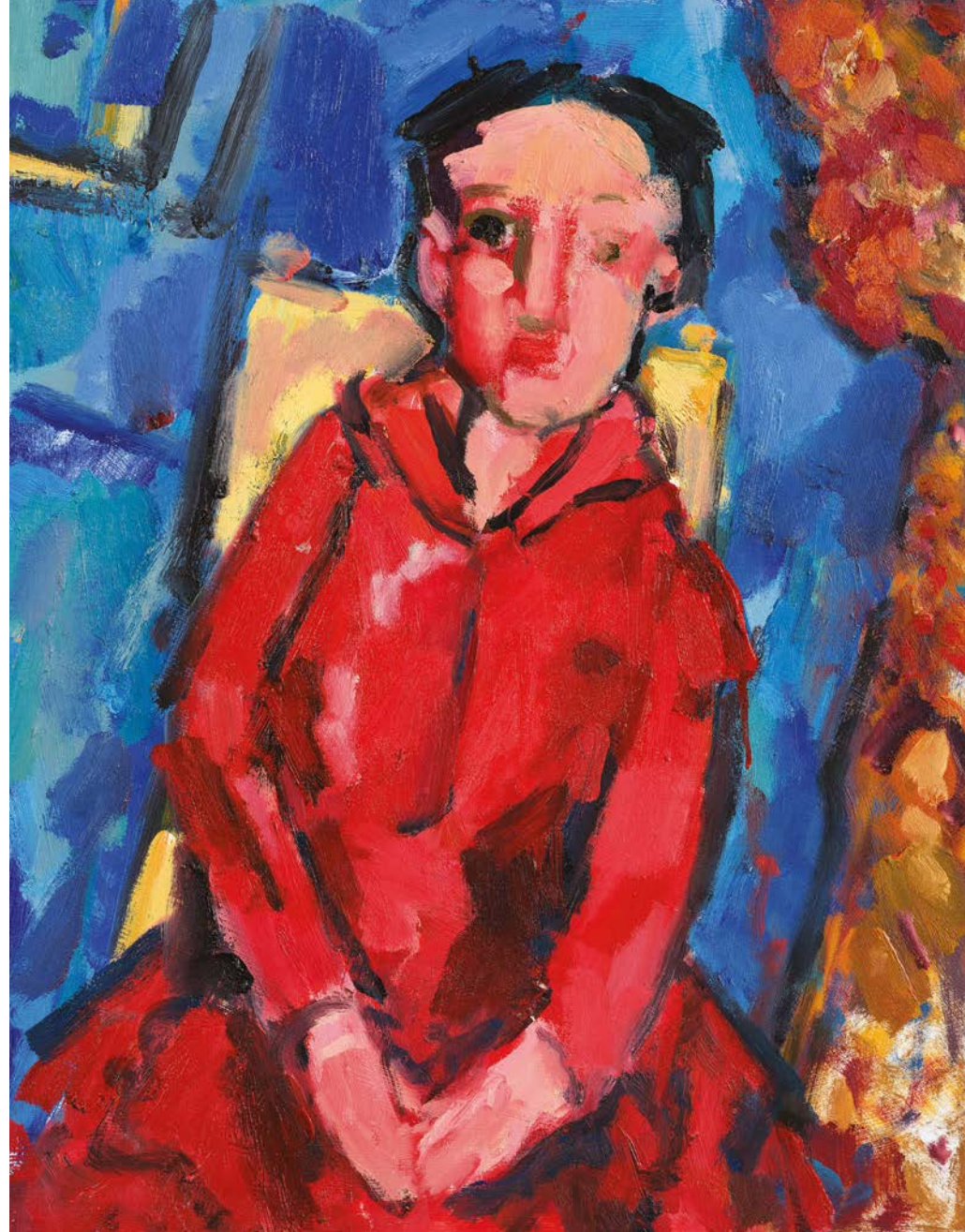




ASLEEP IN THE TRAIN  
2008 oil on board 31 × 38 cm

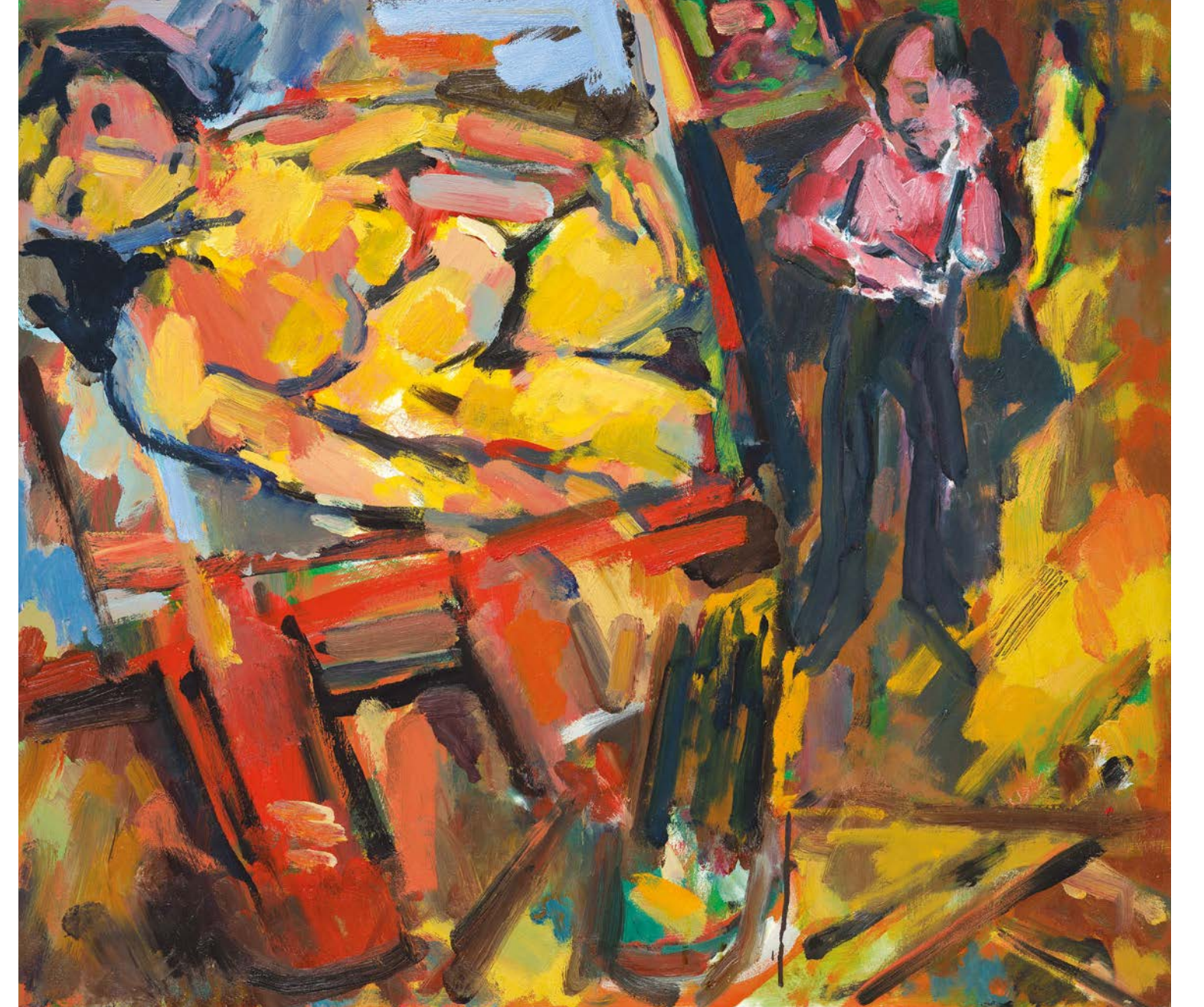


ASLEEP IN THE TRAIN  
1981 oil on board 41 × 33 cm



*left*  
**WOMAN IN A RED DRESS (AFTER CEZANNE)**  
2009 oil on board 51 × 40 cm

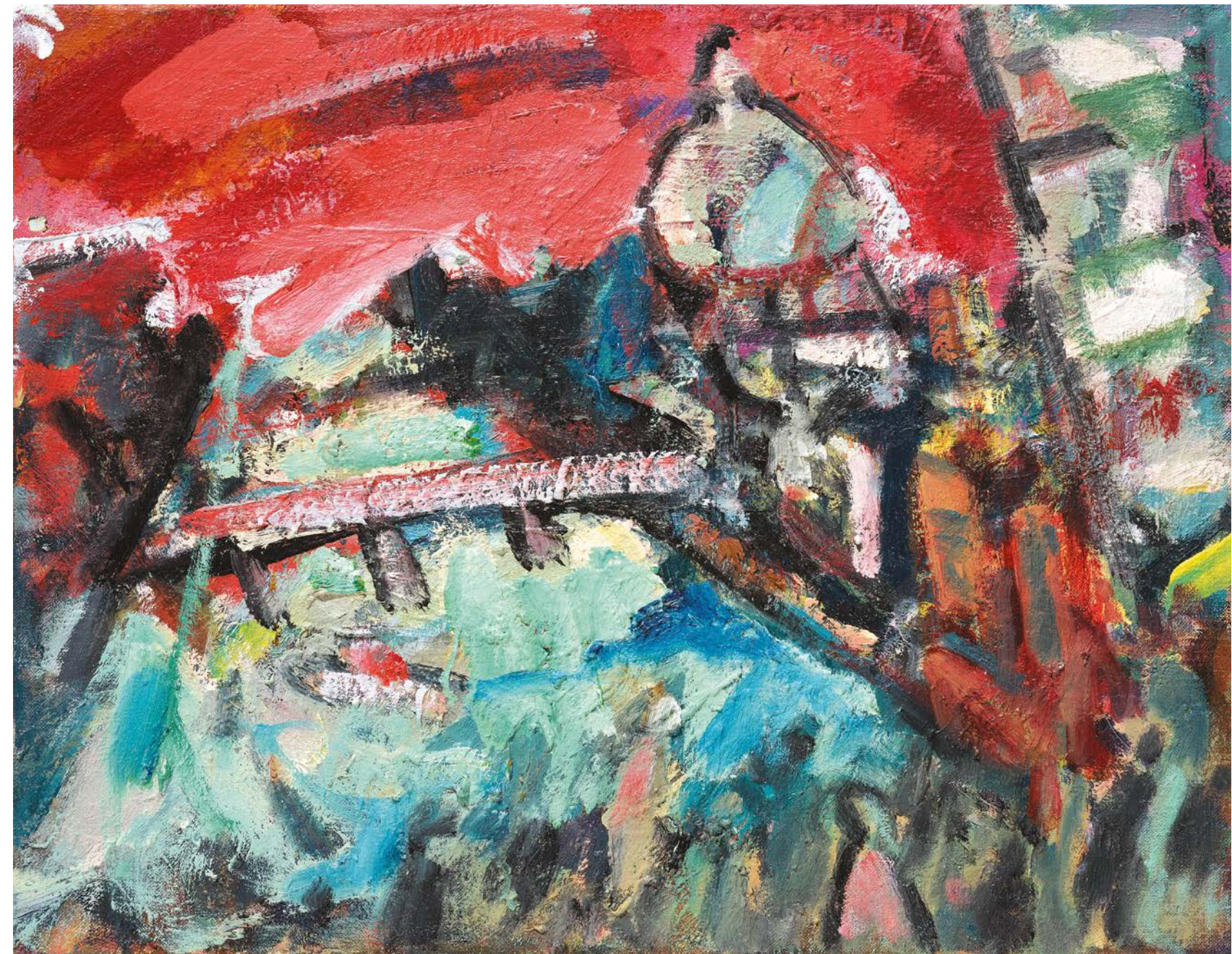
*right*  
**LIFE PAINTING**  
2005 oil on board 61 × 71 cm





*left*  
**FISHMONGER**  
2006 conté on paper 18 x 15 cm

*right*  
**CROSSING LONDON BRIDGE**  
2005 oil on canvas 36 x 46 cm





*above*

**RIVER**

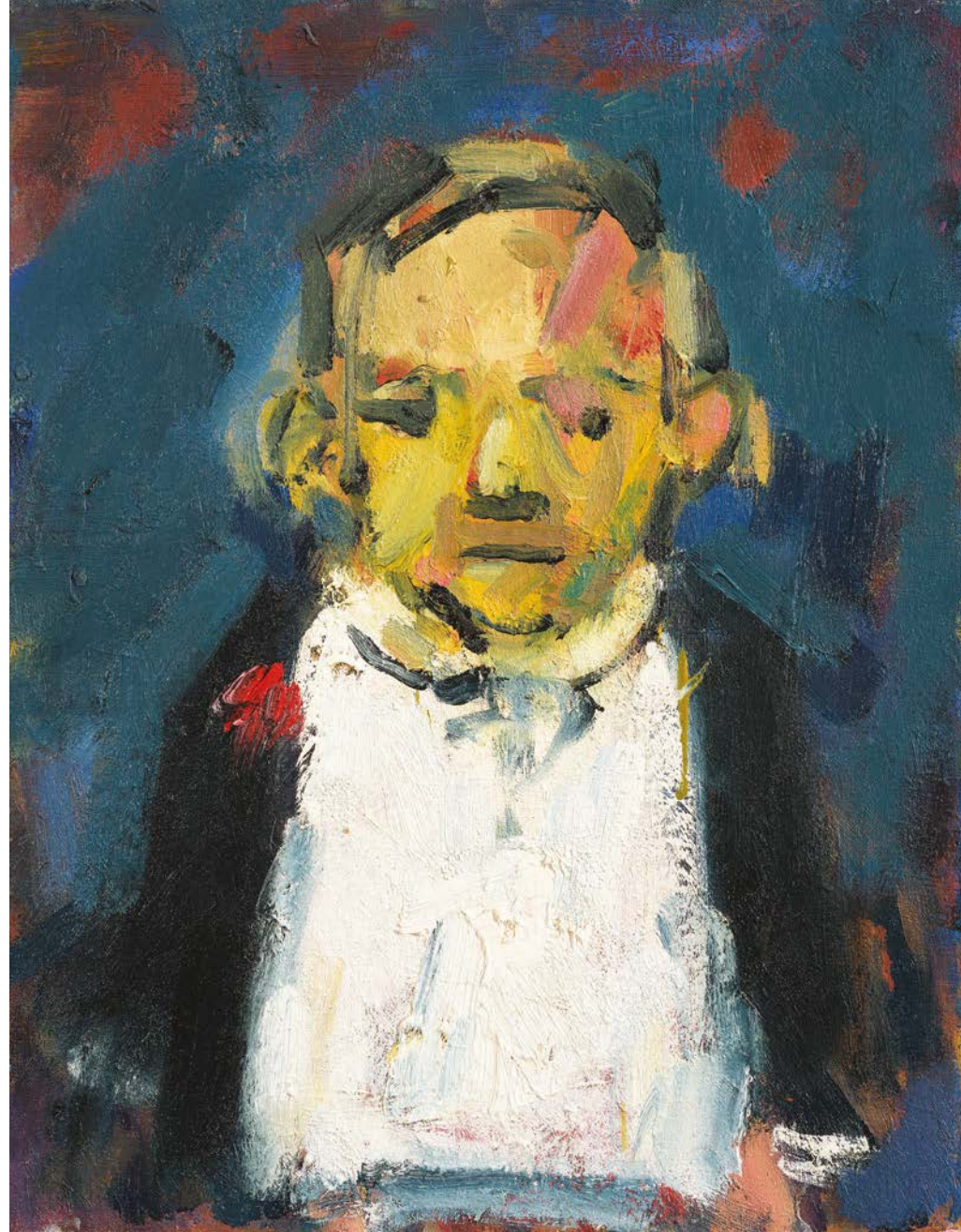
2010 oil on canvas 30 x 36 cm

*right*

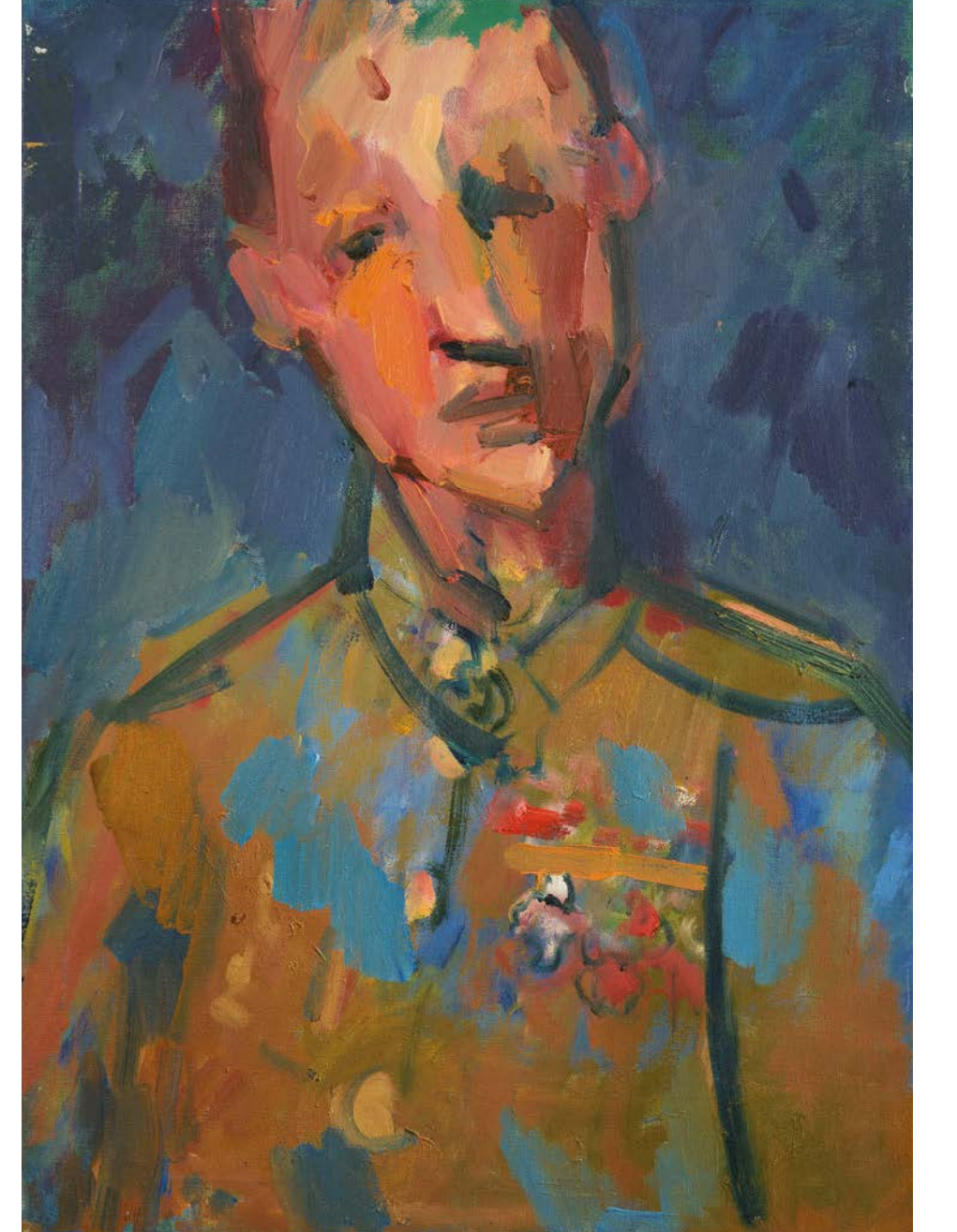
**VIADUCT**

1997-98 oil on board 76 x 71 cm

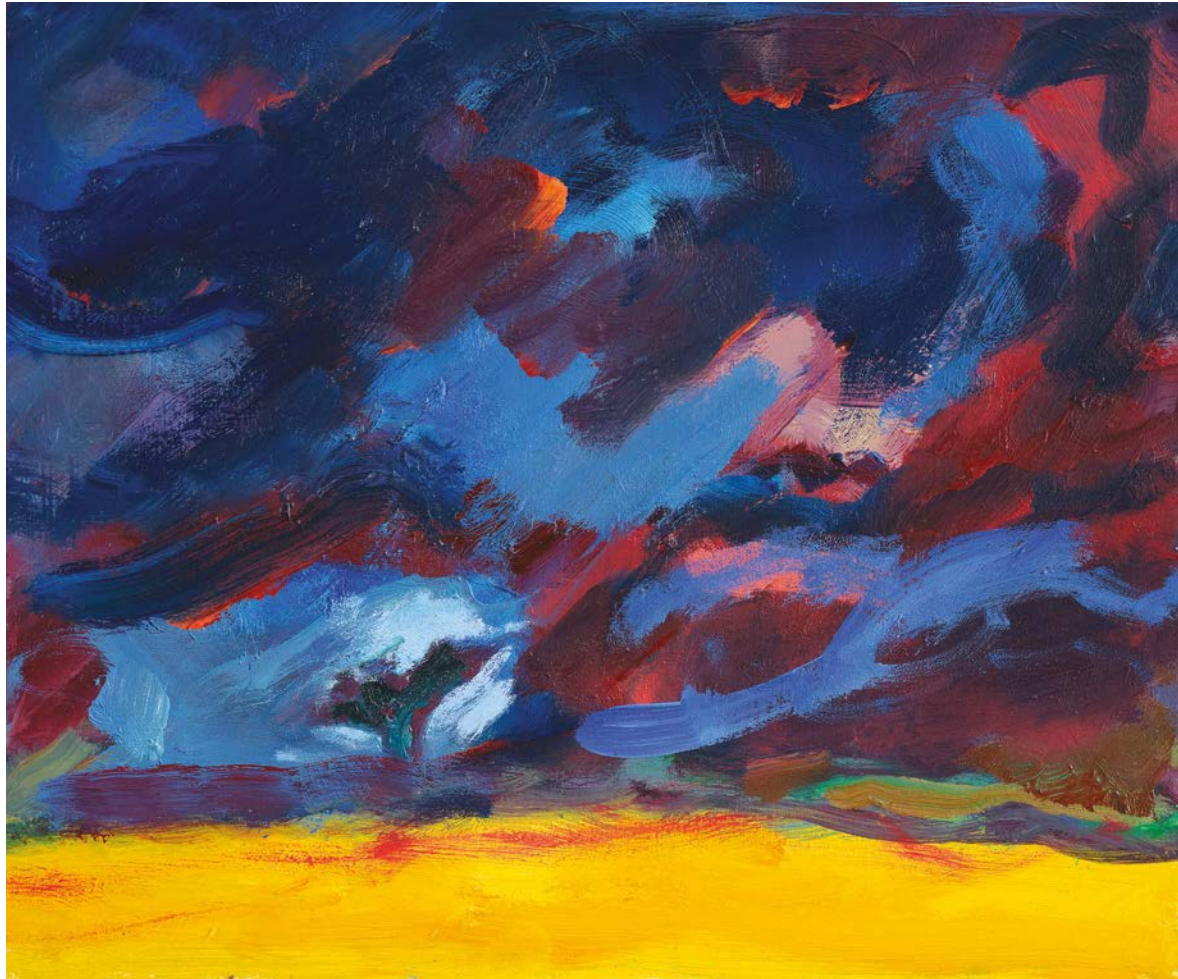




**EVENING DRESS**  
2004 oil on canvas 46 x 36 cm



**SOLDIER**  
1999 oil on canvas 85 x 61 cm

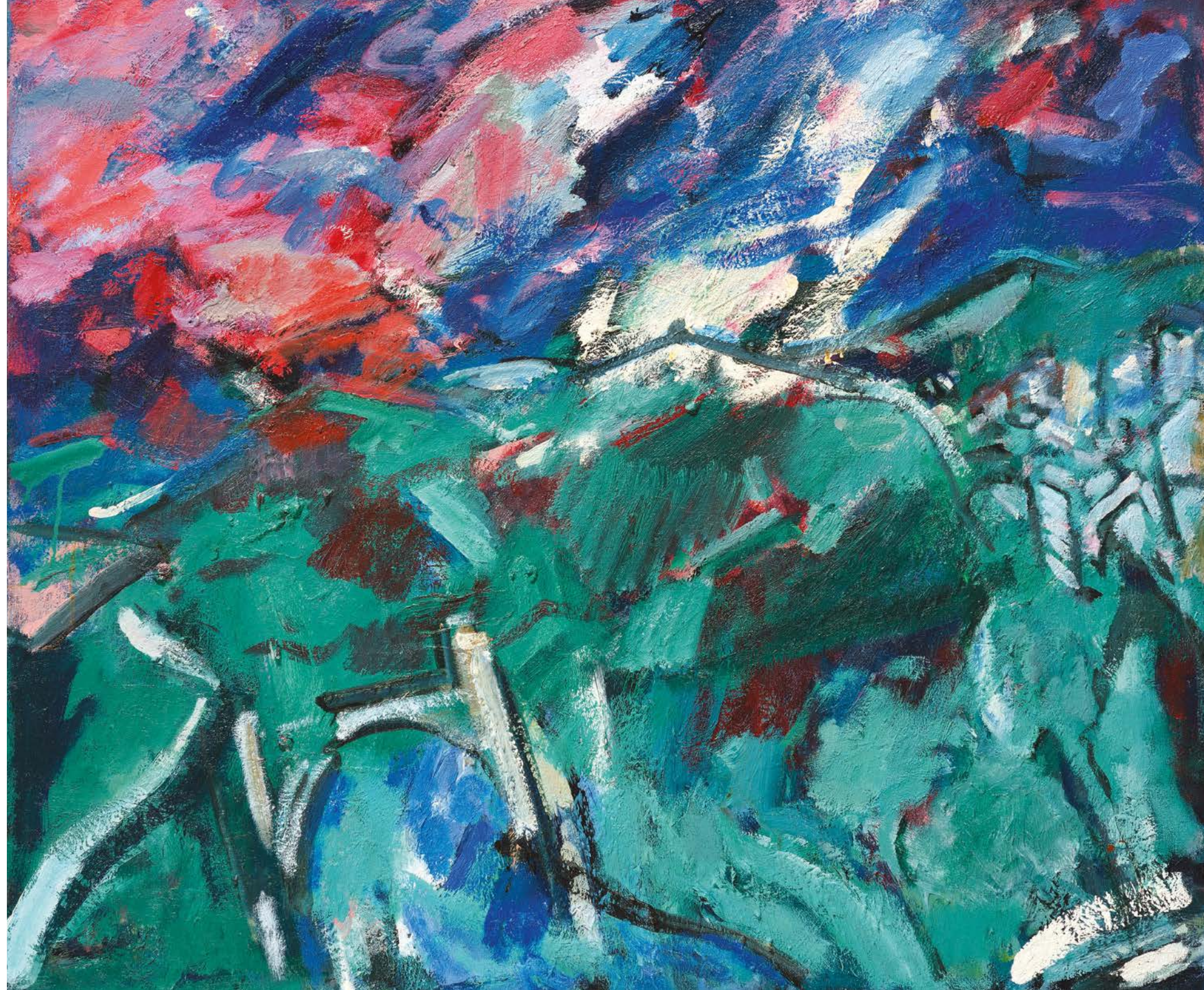


*above*

**STORM OVER THE CORNFIELD**  
2006 oil on board 26 × 31 cm

*right*

**STORM OVER TOLEDO (AFTER EL GRECO)**  
2009 oil on canvas 77 × 92 cm







## ARNOLD VAN PRAAG

1926 Born in England  
1953-57 Studied at Slade School of Art  
1957-70 Lecturer in Painting at Hertfordshire College of Art and Design  
1970-75 Head of Painting at Hertfordshire College of Art and Design  
1975-91 Visiting Tutor in Painting at Camberwell School of Art  
1991-Present Living and working in Cambridge

### SOLO EXHIBITIONS

1963 Insitute of Contemporary Arts, London (*Drawings*)  
1964 Roland, Browse & Deblanco (The Face of Lautrec)  
1965/67 Roland, Browse & Deblanco  
1966 Roland, Browse & Deblanco (with Edward Middleditch)  
1969 Roland, Browse & Deblanco (with Bernard Dunstan, RA)  
1969/71 Galerie D'Eendt, Amsterdam  
1973 Magdalene Street Gallery, Cambridge  
1974 Oxford Gallery, Oxford  
1976 Harlow Playhouse Gallery  
1977 Arts Centre, Folkstone (with John Bratby)  
Campbell and Franks, London (with Edward Middleditch and Zdzislaw Ruzkowski)  
1980 Newcastle Polytechnic Gallery, Newcastle  
Moira Kelly Gallery, London  
1981 Small Works, Newcastle Polytechnic  
1982 Newcastle Polytechnic Art Gallery, Newcastle  
1984 Royal Overseas League, London  
1986 South Hill Park Arts Centre, Bracknell and tour  
1990 Ganz & Co. Ltd., Cambridge  
1991 Cadogan Contemporary Gallery, London  
1994/96/2000 Art Space Gallery/Michael Richardson Contemporary Art, London  
2005 James Hyman Fine Art, London (*From London*)  
2007 James Hyman Fine Art, London (*People*)

### FISH

2004 oil on board 76 x 91 cm

### MIXED EXHIBITIONS

1961 *The Senefelder Group*, Arts Council, London  
1966 *Open Painting Exhibition*, Arts Council, Municipal Art Gallery, Dublin & Belfast City Museum  
1967 *The Face of Man*, Whitechapel Art Gallery  
1971 *Art Spectrum*, Arts Council Touring Exhibition  
1974 *Forty Pictures from the Roland Collection*, Birmingham City Art Gallery/Camden Art Centre, London  
1978 *Notices by Dick Lee*, Camden Art Centre, London  
1980/1 *The Subjective Eye*, Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol and tour  
1982 *East Anglian Artists*, Kettles Yard, Cambridge/Newcastle Polytechnic/Stoke Museum  
1986 *Small Paintings*, Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London  
*Drawing for All*, Gainsborough House, Sudbury and tour (First Prize)  
1988 *Master and Pupil*, Boundary Gallery  
1988/9 *Contemporary Arts Society*, Smith's Gallery, London  
1992/97/2001 *Summer Exhibition*, Redfern Gallery, London  
1995 *Ipswich Open*, Ipswich  
1997 Boundary Gallery, London  
*East Anglian Open*, King's Lynn (First Prize)  
2000 *Blake's Heaven*, Solar Fine Art, London  
2005 *A Private Collector's Choice*, The Drawing Gallery, London

### COLLECTIONS

Arts Council  
Courtauld Institute (Lillian Browse Collection)  
Arthur Anderson Collection  
de Beers (Contemporary Art Society Purchase)  
University of Keele  
Hertfordshire County Council  
Peter Stuyvesant Foundation  
Manchester City Art Gallery  
Ben-Uri Museum

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6 December 2016 to January 2017

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*front cover*

**CROSSING LONDON BRIDGE**

2004 oil on canvas 41 × 51 cm  
(detail; illustrated fully on page 30)

*inside front cover*

**FISHMONGER AND POULTRY**

2008 conté on paper 30 × 38 cm

*right*

**STORM**

oil on board 24 × 30 cm

*back cover*

**CROSSING LONDON BRIDGE**

2005 oil on canvas 36 × 46 cm  
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