

Dov Talpaz

THE SOUND OF
LONGING

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Dov Talpaz
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SARAHCROWN

373 Broadway #215
New York, NY 10013
info@sarahcrown.com



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www.dovtalpaz.com

The Sound of Longing

Foreword by **Sarah Corona**

A few years ago, in 2016 precisely, I wrote “If every color of a painting was a tone, and every work of art a musical composition, what would the song sound like?” referencing a series of works by Dov Talpaz featuring the trumpet as a recurrent subject. I was highlighting the relationship between images and sound in Talpaz’s art, revealing also how the absence of narrative elements could tell an entire story. Now, seven years later, Talpaz keeps investigating the realm between emotions, sound, and images, in an even deeper way.

For the first solo show with the gallery, Dov Talpaz proposes a brand new series of works that revolve around the feeling of longing. Longing intended as a testament to our capacity to feel deeply and to imagine beyond the present.

In these new works, longing is never expressed literally. Rather, through an extraordinary combination of facial expressions, color combinations, vast empty areas, and scenes of people engaging in communal activities—often inspired by acclaimed movies and literature. Music instruments still play a role, however, instead of being the protagonists, they have become more of a supportive element to the main characters. Juxtaposed to plain landscape paintings, void of human traces but filled with emotional memories, this new series emanates a subtle melody, washing over you like a gentle wave.

While the composition of the paintings is simple and often flat, reminiscent of American pop art, the works are far away from the superficial but soothing happy place pop-art tries to sell us. They highlight a bittersweet gloom, something between nostalgia and parting away from something. For an American contemporary painter, Talpaz stands out. Painting with quite a traditional technique, but with tense color juxtapositions and distortions that are unique to any expressionist master, Talpaz repositions painting in the contemporary context.

As you embark on this visual journey, allow yourself to be carried away by the art, let your senses resonate with the emotions conveyed, and find solace, inspiration, and a profound connection to the shared human longing for something just beyond our grasp. “The Sound of Longing” is not just an exhibition of artworks; it is an exploration of the human spirit, an invitation to reflect upon the desires that shape our existence, and a testament to the enduring power of art to articulate the unspoken.

Sarah Corona is an Art Historian, Dealer, and Curator specialized in Post-War and Contemporary Art. She is the founder of SARAHCROWN located in Tribeca, New York. She holds an MA in Fine Arts and a Doctoral Degree in Art History from the University of Bologna (Italy) and Université Paris 8, Paris, (France). Holding a wide range of positions in the art world, she has curated, published, and advanced the arts internationally and at many different levels.

Stories Retold: The Paintings of Dov Talpaz

By Jennifer Samet

I write this essay about Dov Talpaz, an Israeli-American artist, during the period of the Jewish High Holidays: the Ten Days of Teshuvah (Repentance). It feels appropriate; I see his paintings as entwined with a search for personal betterment, a humanist quest. Over the past several years, Talpaz has focused on simplifying his compositions, using colored paper and latex collage as a tool in this process. It is not reductive; he is searching for essentials: deep meanings in complex stories, human connection, and love. He sees decision-making in the painting process as a parallel to decision-making in life.

In the opening sequence of Kenji Mizoguchi's 1952 historical drama film, *The Life of Oharu*, the main character, Oharu, who experiences a tragic fall from societal ranking and grace, hallucinates the faces of her former lovers in rows of Buddhist idols in a temple. We watch as the arhat statues metamorphose from real people's faces and then back to the stylized features of the statues. It is a visualization of the problem that will haunt Oharu: her constant exile from physical and earthly love—for her parents, her first true love, her son, and her husband. And, despite behavior which is usually noble and non-materialistic, she is always viewed by society as a sinner and a whore.

Talpaz has drawn inspiration from this film—along with other films by Mizoguchi and his contemporary, the filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu—to create paintings, including his two 2021 paintings *Ugetsu* and *Oharu*. In these works, Talpaz focuses on pathos, melancholy, and interpersonal drama: their downturned brows, the tilt of their heads, the proximity or separation between the figures as they crouch or sit on tatami mats in simplified interiors. Although Talpaz defines these spaces with saturated color planes, the brushwork, modeling, and curving forms become signs for the emotional depth, pain, and complexities of the stories.

Talpaz says simply, "I paint stories." He connects it to the pleasant memory of his father reading bedtime stories and freely adding his own imaginative twists. Talpaz adds, "In my work, I try to do the same—to retell stories through painting and capture their essence."¹ The balance between abstraction and representation in his retelling is significant. It connects to the title of this exhibition and catalog: *The Sound of Longing*.

The Life of Oharu is a story about exile: one tragic exile after another. Talpaz connects to the theme of exile as an immigrant who has struggled to find a true sense of belonging and home in both the United States and Israel. As he writes:

In my paintings, the main character often experiences a sense of aloneness or in a state of contemplation. Growing up in Israel but being born in Texas, I never felt that one place was a true "home" for me. I constantly traveled back and forth between these two countries and had to navigate being a bit of a foreigner in each.

The teacher who likely influenced Talpaz the most was the painter Rosemarie Beck, a "second-generation" Abstract Expressionist who developed a remarkable body of figurative painting. Her subjects were literary and mythological narratives. In 2013, I wrote the following about Beck:

Orpheus, Antigone, Phaedra, and The Tempest are all stories of forbidden loves and exile. And Beck subjected herself to a form of exile, becoming a figurative painter in the 1960s. In all painting, the space between flatness and tactility is a space between longing and having. It is a space of desire. Beck's hatched stroke, the way her paintings are woven, the way she pieces forms together with marks, increases this space of desire. In contrast, it is an act of possession to fluidly find one's way around form. Beck made paintings about human desire and jealousy, and she deliberately left her forms open, with those woven, hatched

¹ Talpaz's notes and statements quoted in this essay are all from an email to the author, July 25, 2023.

marks. *By not closing lines, she keeps herself, and us, in a state of partial exile, a tantalizing state of longing, not possessing.*²

Talpaz does not use a hatched mark like his teacher Beck, but he is certainly interested in this state of longing. In his depictions of Mizoguchi's films, the sense of longing comes from the enclosed rooms with glimpses of the world beyond. In addition, by emphasizing the abstraction of the painting, and by synthesizing the feeling of the films, rather than illustrating a specific scene, he leaves them open for our own interpretation.

In Talpaz's painting *The Blessing of the Wrong Son* (2023), he depicts the biblical story of Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Esau. Jacob and Esau fought for their father's approval and blessing. Rebecca, their mother, conspired with Jacob to trick Isaac—by relying on his poor eyesight—into blessing Jacob, rather than his first-born, Esau. The story doesn't have one clear "moral," rather it lends itself to complex interpretation: Is it about familial deception? Who is the victim? Or is it about



Rosemarie Beck (1923-2003)
Paradise, embroidered fabric, 24x18 inches, circa late 1980's

the process of enlightenment and spiritual redemption as opposed to material greed? Talpaz does not take sides in his depiction. There is no wicked son or sinner, no trickery: each character is sympathetic and melancholic. Talpaz states:

I perceive biblical stories as poems that reveal aspects of the self. Therefore, all the characters, including God, represent different parts of oneself. They reflect the reader's or viewer's emotional spectrum and explore the mysteries of the human soul. The figures in my painting may appear anatomically peculiar, but still belong to the painting's own palpable world.

I see Talpaz's depiction of the story as focused especially on Isaac and Rebecca's relationship with their children: their

²Jennifer Samet, "Space of Desire: The Paintings of Rosemarie Beck." In *Rosemarie Beck: Le Maquillage/ Magdalen*, Exh. cat. Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, New York, 2013.

hands and arms connected to those of Jacob and Esau. It is a deeply problematic and difficult moment, but Talpaz recognizes the love that Isaac and Rebecca feel for their children, and the deep flaws that all parents have, navigating and balancing societal pressures while also trying to protect their children, even if this causes conflict or distance between the married couple. (This, incidentally, is also a major theme in *The Life of Oharu*).

In Talpaz's *The Blessing of the Wrong Son*, familial warmth is reflected by his choice of orange, gold, and umber tones to mark the interior where the family is seated, while dark grays and blacks expose the night landscape beyond the arched entryway. One streak of blue and a crescent moon signifies light at the upper left, and Talpaz chose to bring this into the interior of the space. These simplifications and abstractions of interior connect to the paintings of Henri Matisse from the 1910s, in which views beyond the window are suggested by simplified geometric angles of light—the spaces of desire and longing.

Although it is a leitmotif throughout many of Matisse's paintings, I think of *The Piano Lesson* (1916), in particular, where a triangle of green signifies landscape beyond, and it echoes the form of the metronome and a triangular plane / shadow on the student's face as he plays. Many of Talpaz's paintings utilize such reduced and simplified compositional structures to define spaces and relationships between inside and outside.

In fact, another subject running through Talpaz's work is that of musicians. Talpaz once found inspiration in the early Paul Cézanne painting *Young Girl at the Piano (Overture to Tannhäuser)*, (1869–70) in which wallpaper patterns on the back wall reflect the music being played. Talpaz's recent musician paintings reflect his own upbringing—with his mother being a pianist and music teacher. More specifically, he depicts traveling American bluesmen, often using the portraits in Les Blank documentaries as source material. The traveling musician is a stand-in for the eternal immigrant. In Talpaz's musician paintings, he turns his gaze to focus almost exclusively on the musician and their instrument, whether it be a guitar, a saxophone, a flute, or an accordion. The landscapes or grounds are loosely scumbled in, as if to highlight the purity of the connection to music, regardless of place. In Mizoguchi's film, Oharu's brief interaction with an itinerant singer is a pivotal moment. She has money—and empathy—to offer the singer; she has just returned home to her family after months spent working in a brothel. As an audience, we feel hope. Yet this scene also foreshadows her own future: the destitution and sadness which will continue to deepen.

Talpaz also addresses the theme of the eternal immigrant in his paintings of horse riders—a recurrent motif in his work over the last 20 years. He began depicting riders after reading the stories of Russian-Jewish writer Isaac Babel who was born in the Jewish ghetto of Odessa in 1894 and lived through pogroms as a child. Babel's collection, *Red Cavalry*, reflect his lived experience assigned to the cavalry in the Polish-Soviet War of 1920, where he was forced to conceal his Jewish identity. Talpaz also has spent time visiting and re-visiting Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider* (c. 1655), a painting which is still shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. It is not known whether the work represents a specific subject or a story. As art historian Julius Held wrote in his 1944 essay, "Rembrandt's 'Polish' Rider:"

*Enough unanswered questions will remain to stir our curiosity, enough strangeness to provide material for our imagination; above all the shining youth who himself seems to be in search of something distant, unmindful of things close and familiar, still withholds from us, like another Lohengrin, the secret of his name.*³

The lack of known or intended specificity in terms of portraiture in *The Polish Rider* does not detract from meaning; instead the rider becomes even more relatable. It is his humanity and soul quality which shines through the painting. This is what Talpaz most admires in Rembrandt's work. In the late 1620s, connoisseur Constantijn Huygens wrote of

³ Julius S. Held, Rembrandt's "Polish" Rider, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Dec., 1944), pp. 246-265.

Rembrandt's ability to capture the "movements of the soul."⁴ In the late 19th Century, German scholar Wilhelm von Bode discussed how Rembrandt's chiaroscuro effects allowed him to suppress surface details so that he could render "souls rather than existences."⁵ I see, in Rembrandt's portraits, a quest to depict the inner light—and life—of his subjects. Centuries later, we still feel this as we look at, and into, his paintings.

Talpaz has focused on suppressing surface details to interrogate the essential humanism of his stories. In this, he also connects to the work of Bob Thompson (1937–66), who in his brief but extremely prolific career, revisited the history of European painting and mythological stories using a new visual language of intense chroma and silhouetted, simplified forms and figures. Thompson also made jazz musicians a subject of his painting. It is only in recent scholarship that Thompson's direct references to the civil rights issues of his time, and the violence enacted upon Blacks, have been recognized. I believe that the inherent "abstraction" and the liberties Thompson took with his palette have been misunderstood as apolitical.

Similar is the challenge that Talpaz's work offers: its balance between the personal and the universal. His work is informed by not only the biblical, mythological, and filmic stories, but also by familial and political ones: the stories of his grandparents and his relatives from Poland and Lithuania, who he only knew through the memories and stories told by his parents. His grandparents made it to Israel before the war, but their relatives were all killed in the Holocaust. As Talpaz has noted:

I never had the chance to meet my grandparents. They were originally from Lithuania and Poland and passed away before I was born. However, I've always had a strange sense of connection to their land and cultures. I would dream as if I were my grandfather (whom I am named after) and hear stories about him. In describing the term "Postmemory" Columbia Professor Marianne Hirsch explains: "It describes the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before, to experiences they 'remember' only by the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up...Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation." Painting a place, a certain memory of a landscape is a way to connect to the past or to one's roots.

Thompson engaged in a similar pursuit; see, for instance, his early and significant painting *The Funeral of Jan Müller* (1958), depicting an artist he never met, and whose funeral he did not attend. Like Thompson, Talpaz uses simple shapes to represent deep, mysterious stories. Talpaz has said that constructing his collages can provide a "break" from the emotional depth of oil painting. But of course, even as they do provide a path to eliminate unnecessary surface details, there is no break from emotional depth. The pathos, melancholy, and the love and difficulty of familial connection, is within the stories and these paintings. The choices Talpaz makes as he reduces, simplifies, and organizes color and form, become an analogy to complex life decisions and a way for us to connect with our own inner worlds.

Jennifer Samet is a New York City-based art historian, curator, and writer who specializes in contemporary and post-war painting. She is the Director of Eric Firestone Gallery and a member of the faculty at the New York Studio School. She completed her B.A. at Barnard College and her Ph.D. at The Graduate Center, CUNY.

⁴ See Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., "Rembrandt as Universal Artist" (2020). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 3rd ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Lara Yeager-Crasselt. New York, 2020–. <https://theleidencollection.com/essays/rembrandt-as-universal-artist/> (accessed September 26, 2023). For a translation of Constantijn Huygens's text on Jan Lievens and Rembrandt, see Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., ed., *Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered* (Exh. cat. Washington, National Gallery of Art; Milwaukee Art Museum; Amsterdam, Museum Het Rembrandthuis) (New Haven, 2008), 286–87.

⁵ Wilhelm von Bode and Cornelis Hofstede de Groot, *The Complete Work of Rembrandt*, trans. Florence Simonds (Paris, 1897–1906), 8: 19.





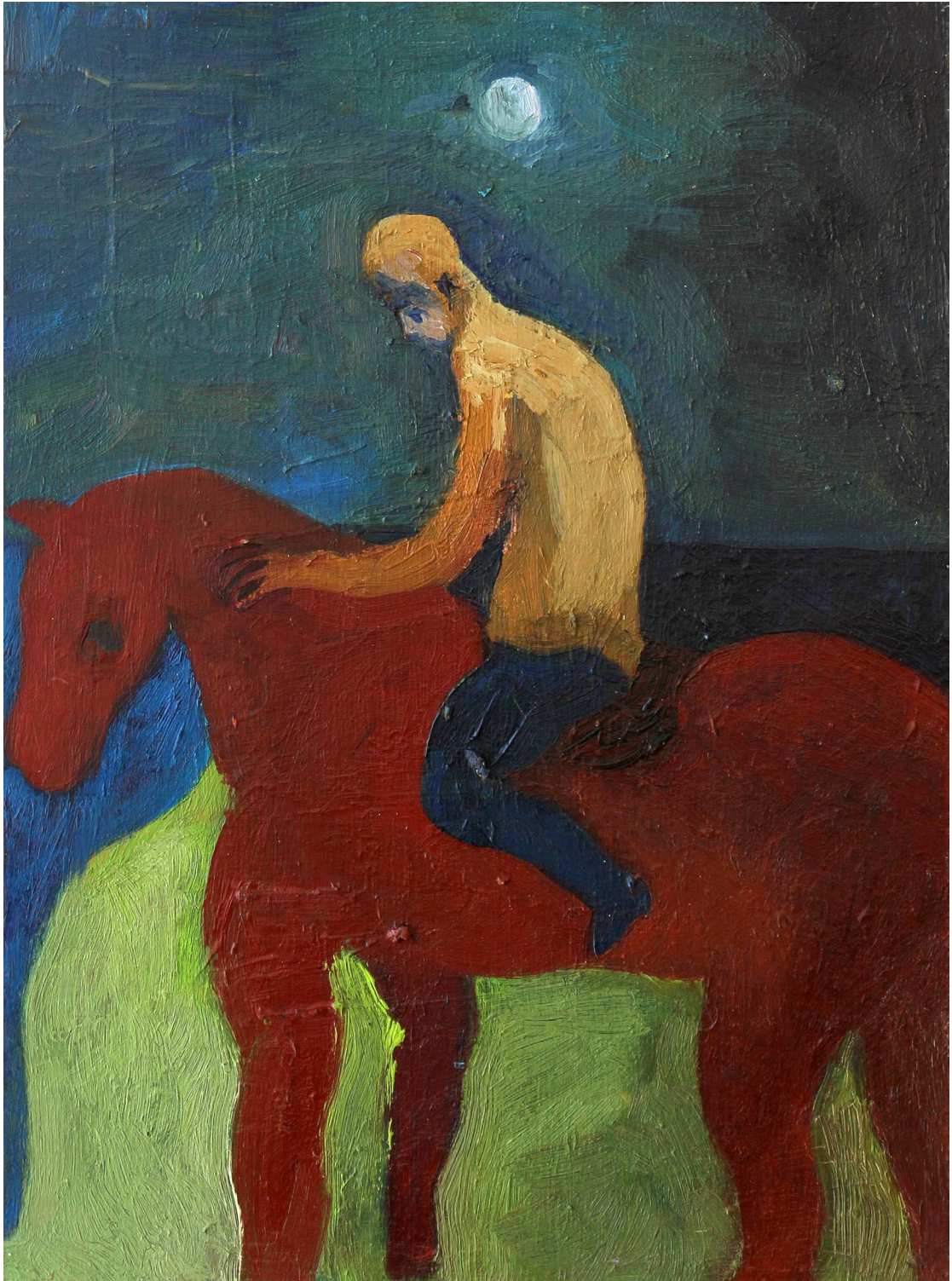


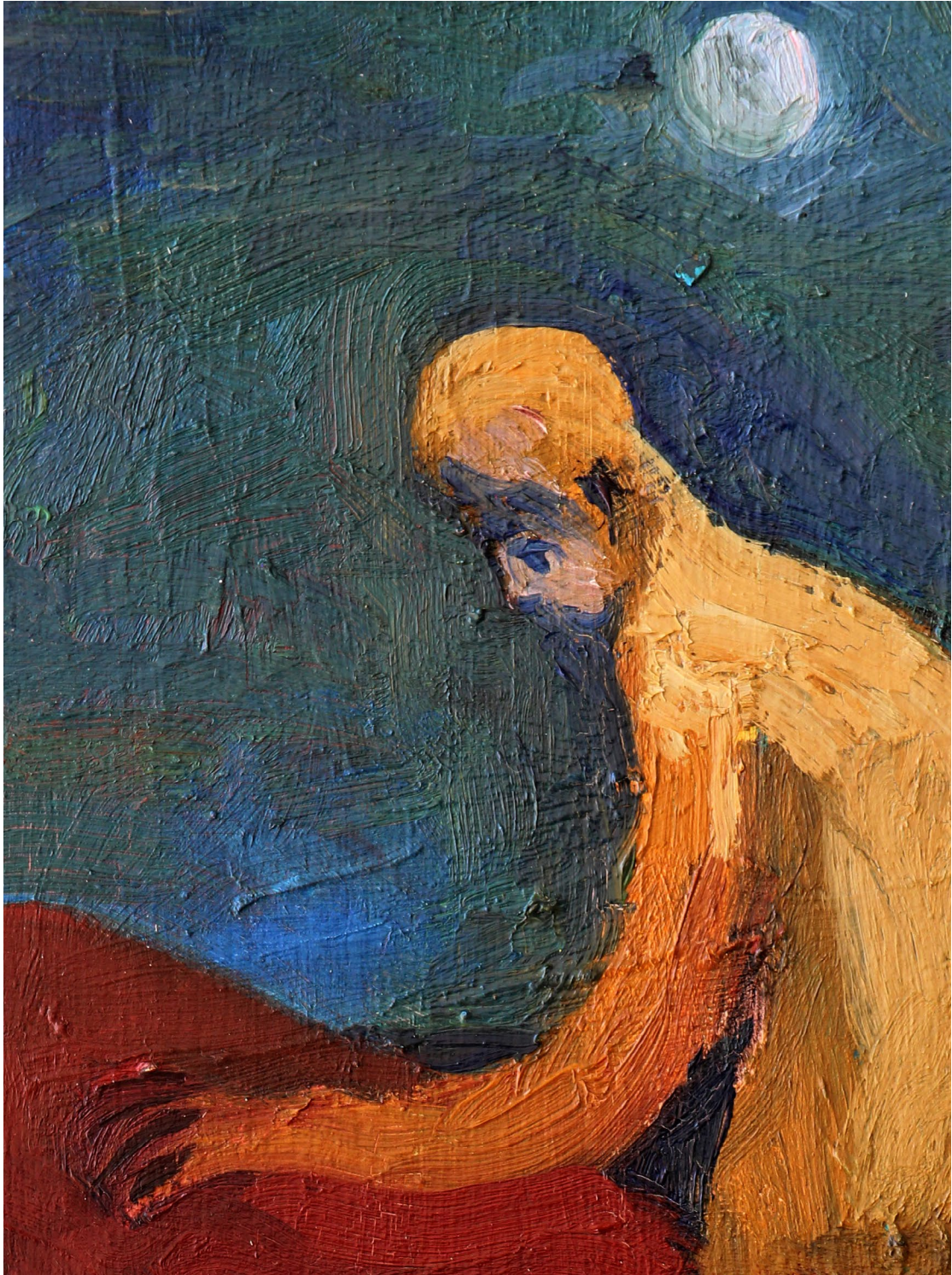










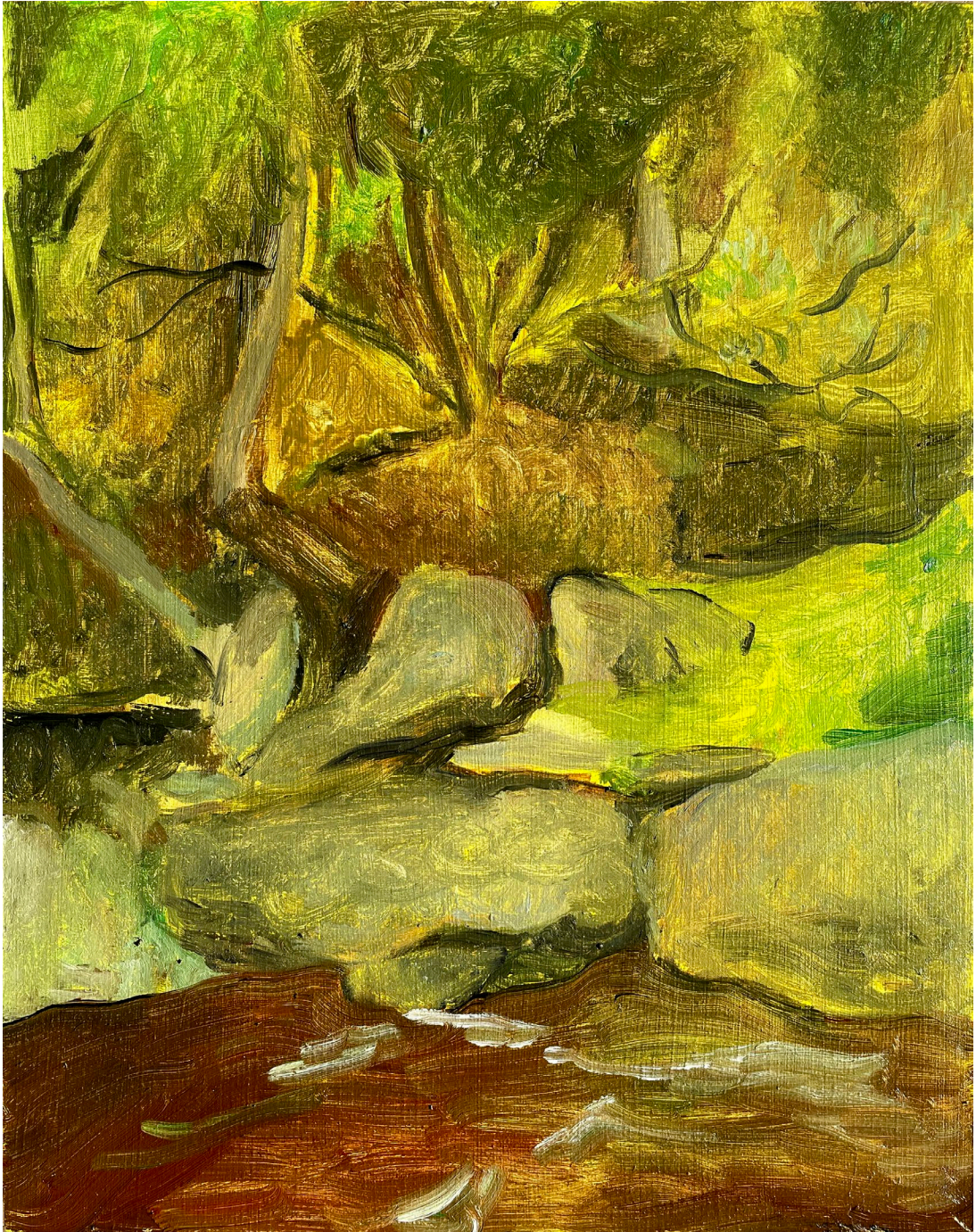


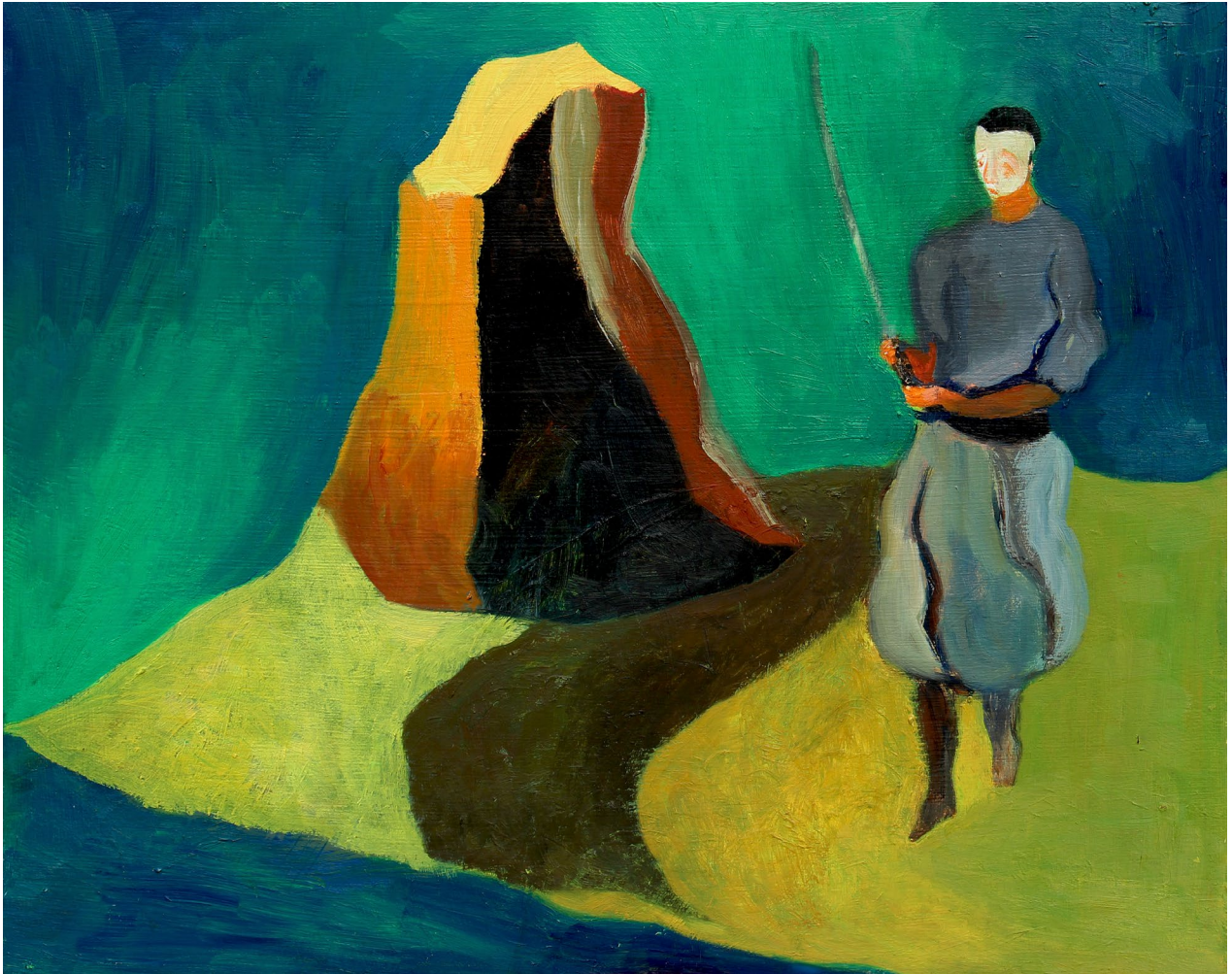


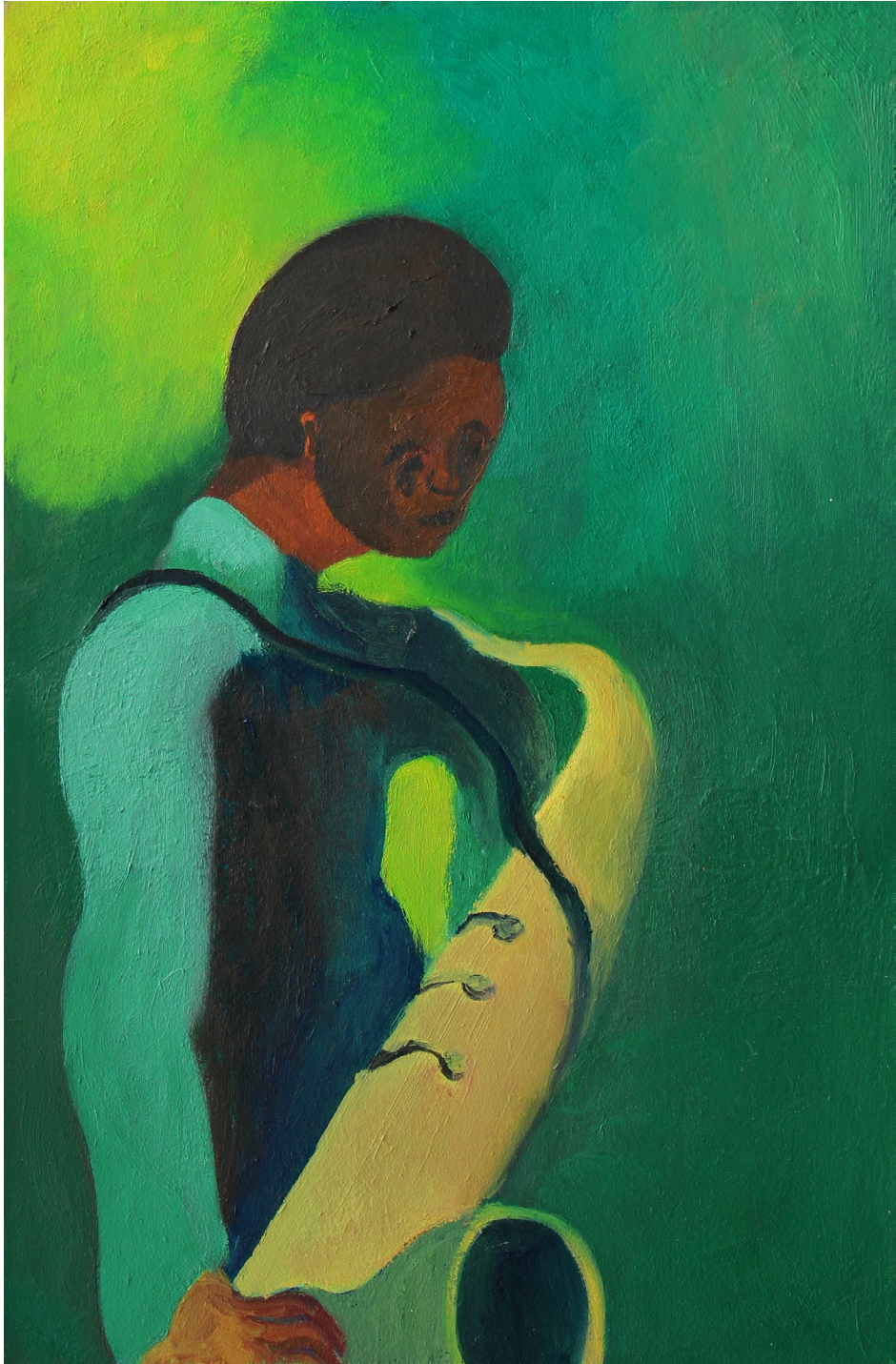




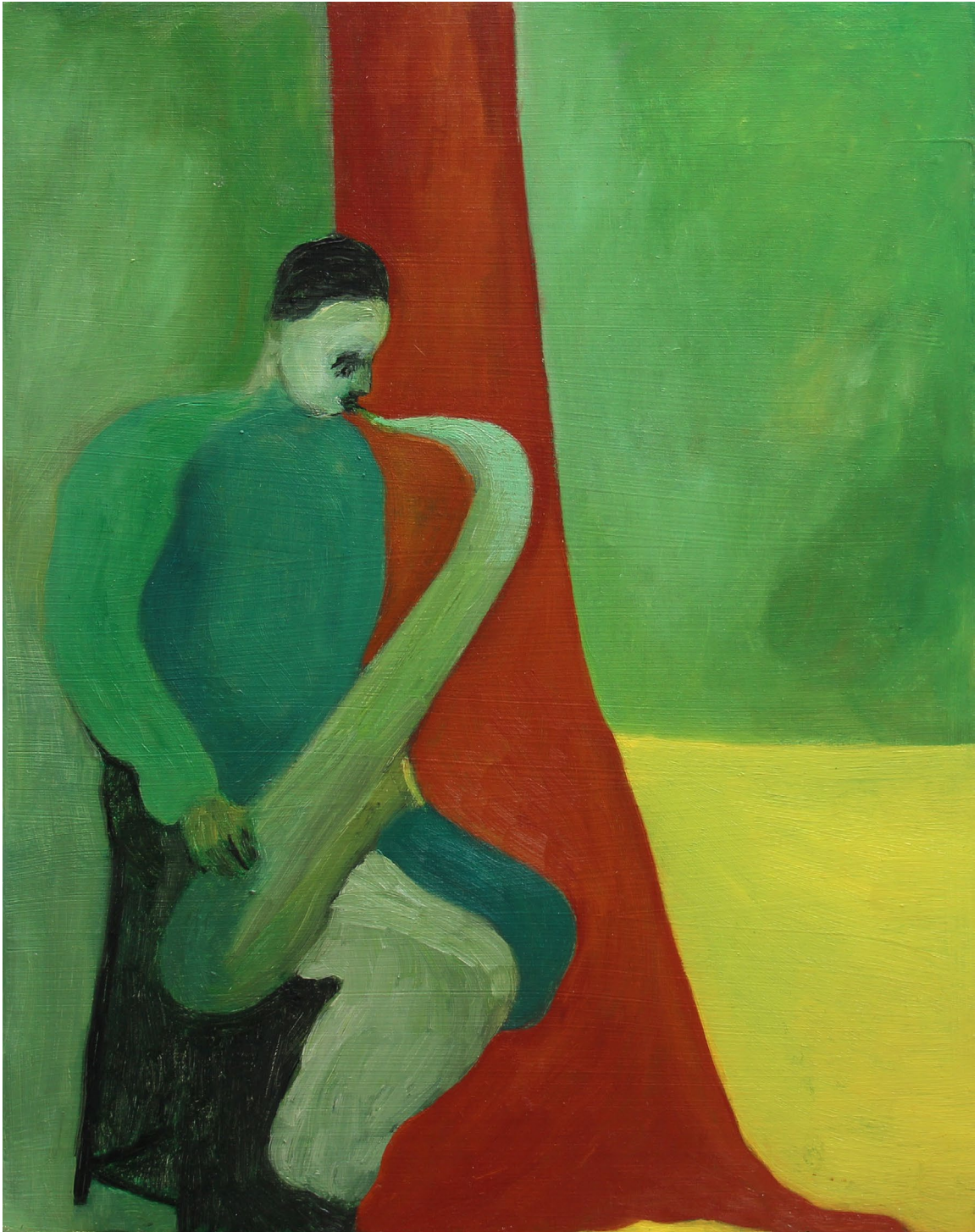


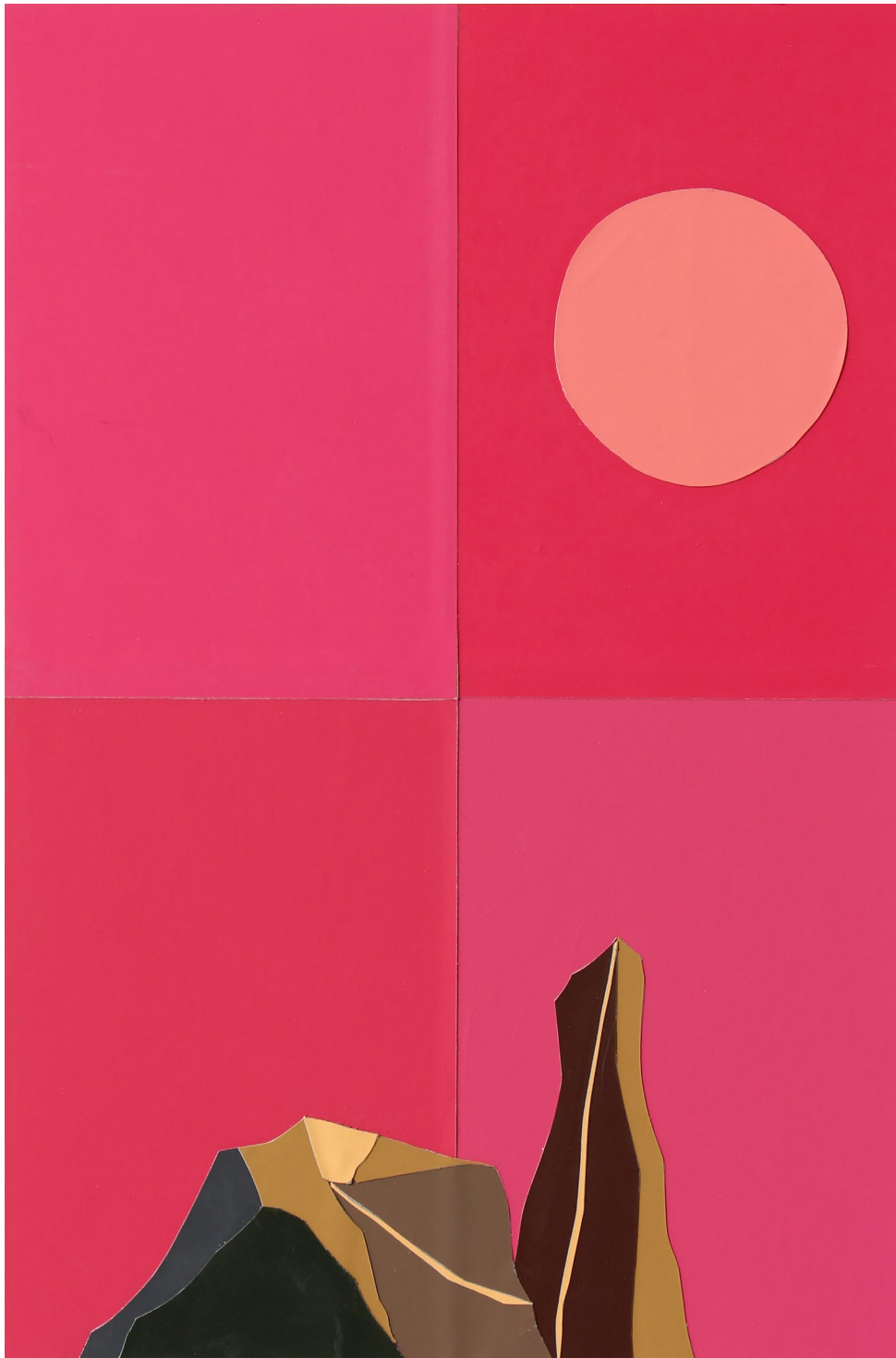












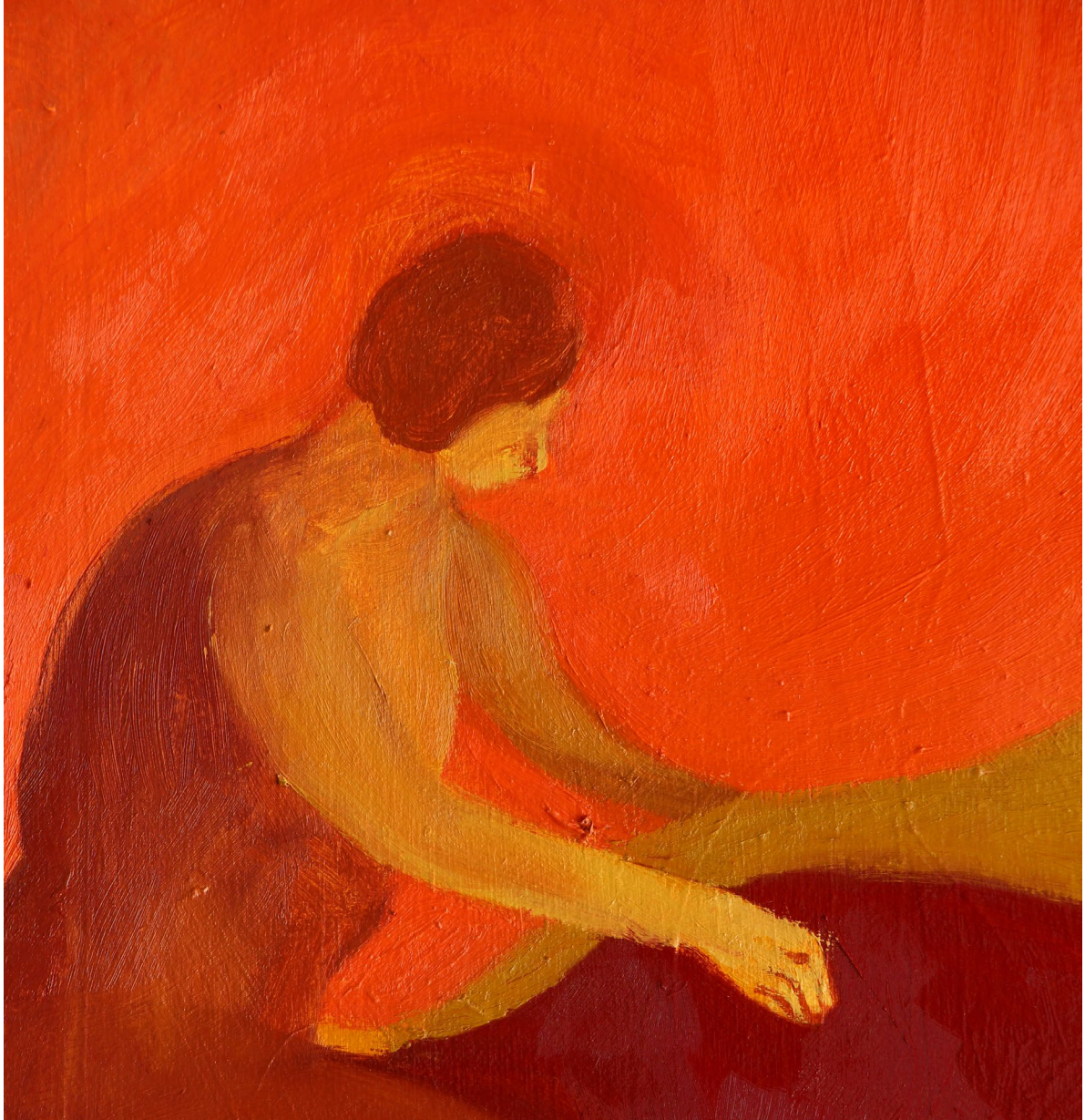


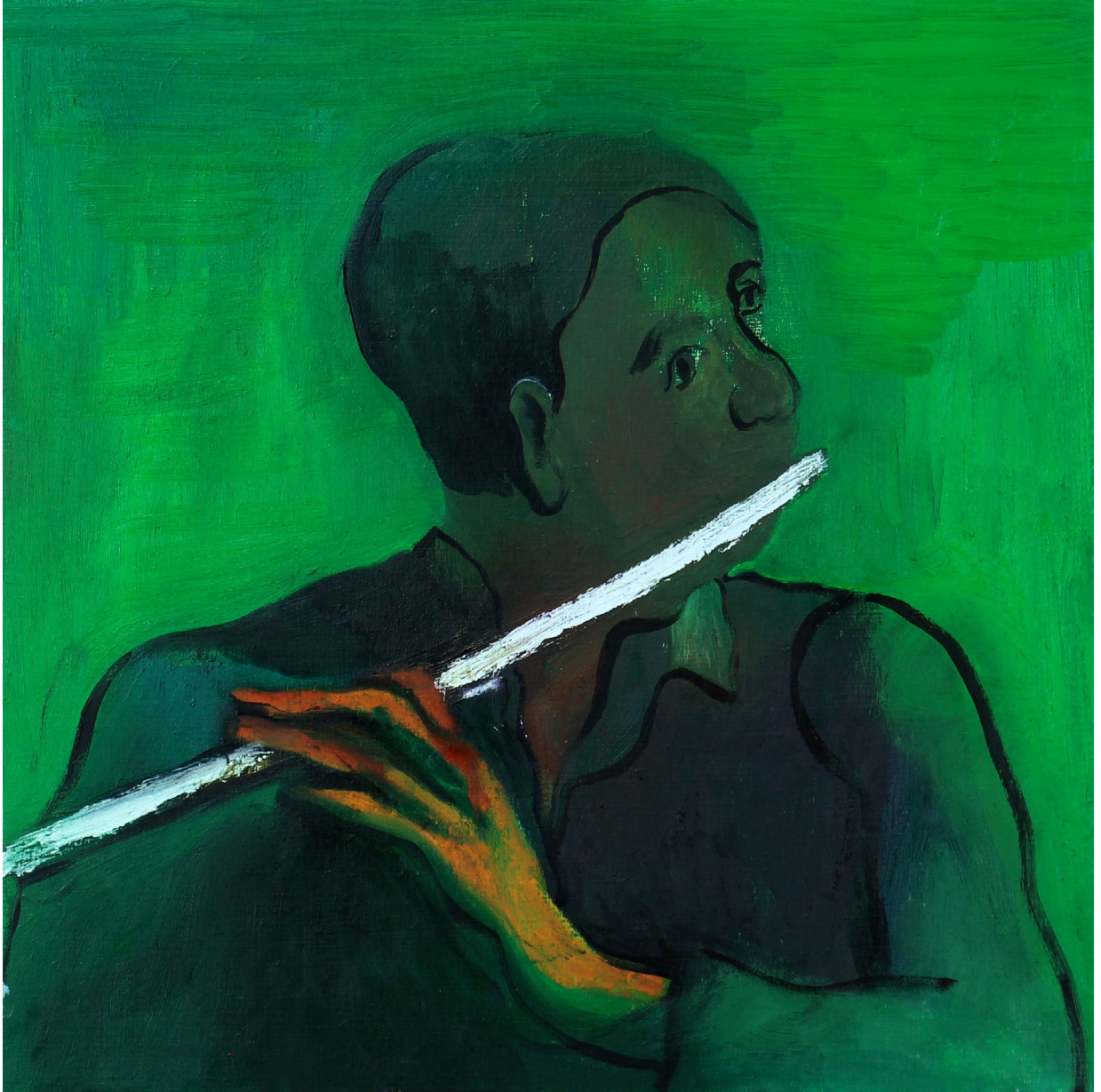


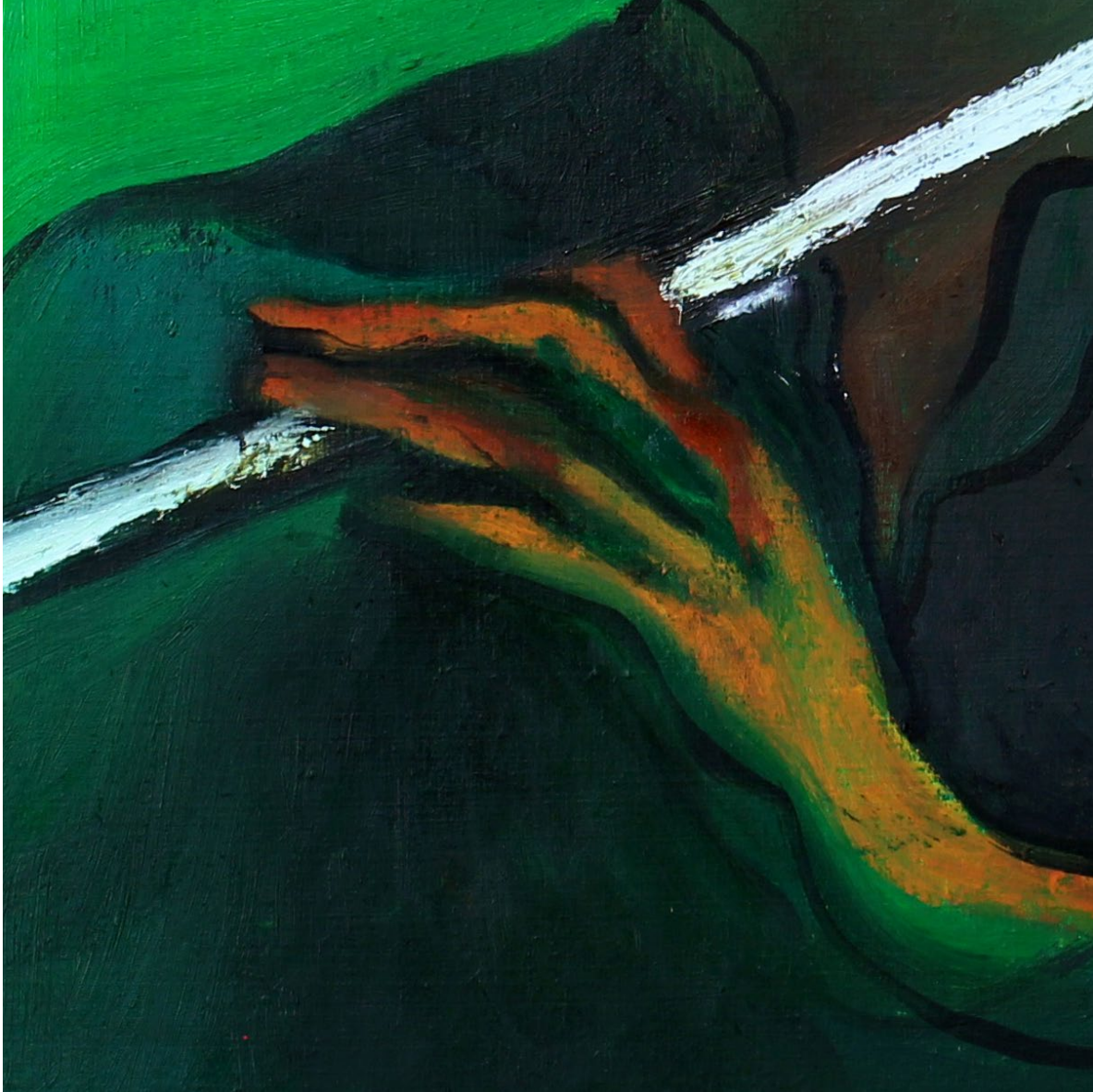






















List of Works

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|----|---|----|---|
| 1 | The Blessing of the Wrong Son , 2023 Oil on wood, 24x18 inches | 17 | River Music , Detail |
| 2 | Between Inhaling and Exhaling , 2017-23 Oil on wood, 12x24 inches | 18 | River Music , 2019-22 Oil on wood, 18x14 inches |
| 3 | Between Inhaling and Exhaling , Detail | 19 | Passing of the Day , 2021 Paper collage, 17.5x11.5 inches |
| 4 | Two , 2023 Oil on wood, 11x14 inches | 20 | Conquering Fear , 2020 Oil on canvas, 20x24 inches |
| 5 | Mountain , 2018-19 Latex on wood, 36x36 inches | 21 | Oharu , 2021 Oil on wood, 12x18 inches |
| 6 | Grace , 2021 Oil on wood, 11x14 inches | 22 | Desert Sun , 2021 Paper Collage, 17x12 inches |
| 7 | Growth , 2021 Paper collage, 26.5x17.5 inches | 23 | Oharu Study , 2021 Pen on paper, 5x8 inches |
| 8 | Under the Moon , 2014-22 Oil on canvas, 12x9 inches | 24 | Holding the Mountain , 2018-23 Oil on wood, 36X24 inches |
| 9 | Under the Moon , Detail | 25 | Holding the Mountain , Detail |
| 10 | Attentive , 2018-23 Oil on wood, 20x24 inches | 26 | The Flute Player , 2021 Oil on wood, 16x16 inches |
| 11 | Ugetsu , 2021 Oil on canvas, 18x24 inches | 27 | The Flute Player , Detail |
| 12 | Ugetsu Study , 2021 Mixed media on paper, 5x8 inches | 28 | The Zydeco Blues Player , 2021 Oil on wood, 16x20 inches |
| 13 | Close and Far , 2022 Oil on wood, 14x11 inches | 29 | Clarinet Player , 2021 Ink on paper, 8.25x5.5 inches |
| 14 | Creek , 2022 Oil on wood, 14x11 inches | 30 | Golden Lightness , 2023 Oil on wood, 14x11 inches |
| 15 | Warrior Mountain , 2021 Oil on Wood, 16x20 inches | 31 | Flowing , 2023 Oil on wood, 14x11 inches |
| 16 | Saxophone Meditation , 2020-21 Oil on wood, 20x14 inches | 32 | Holding It Together , 2021 Oil on Canvas, 30x40 inches |

