

Mike Kelley

Painting

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Timeless

Painting

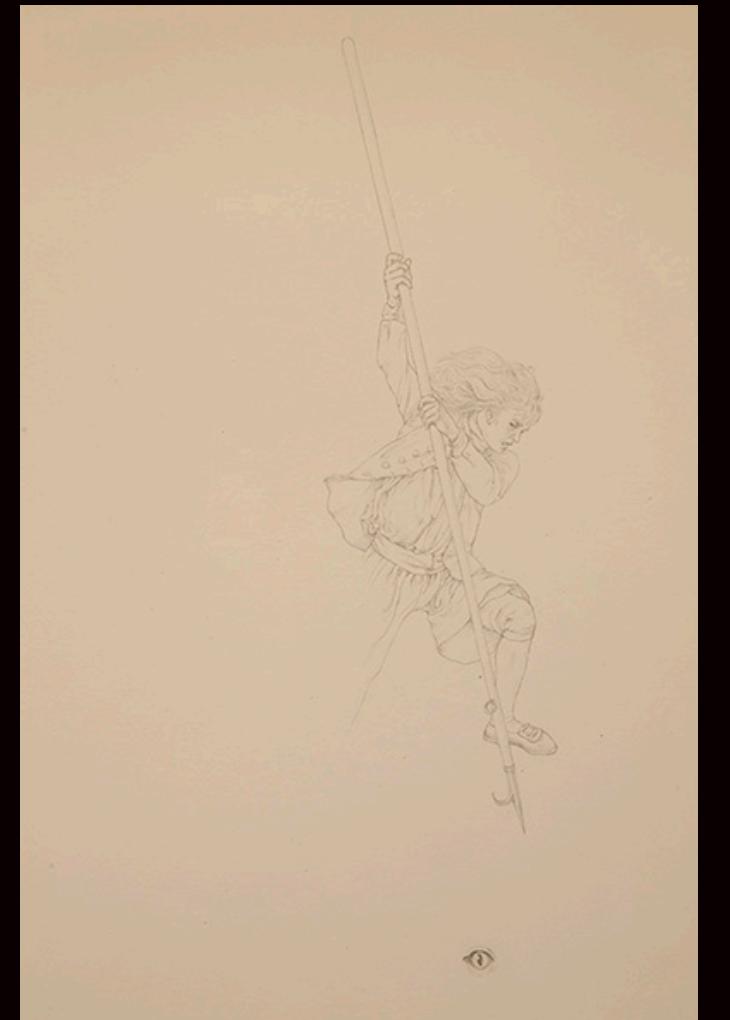
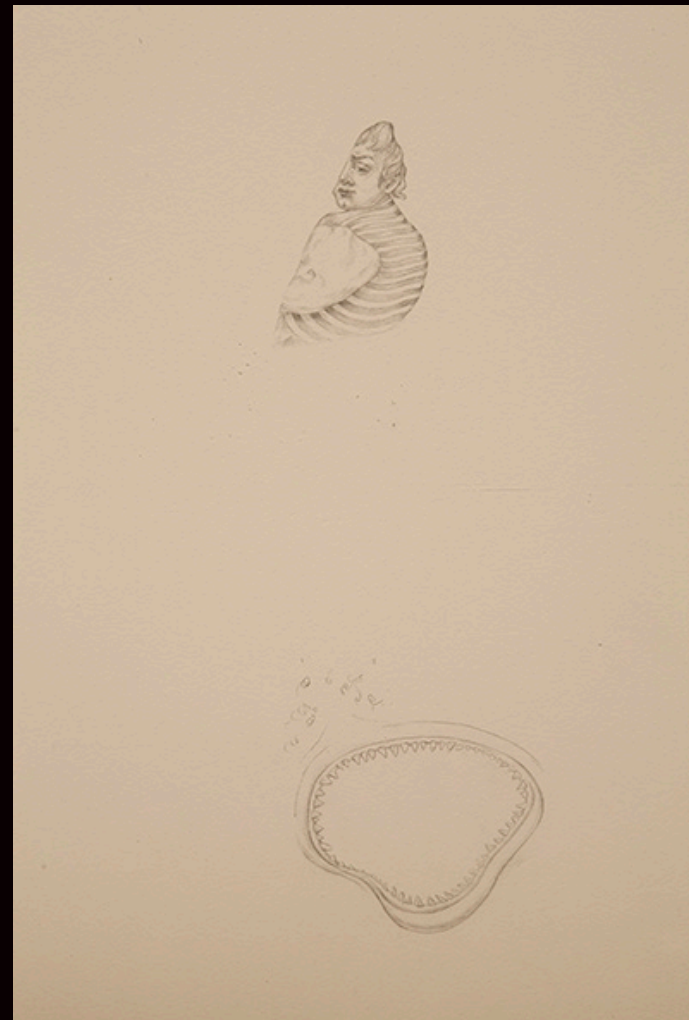
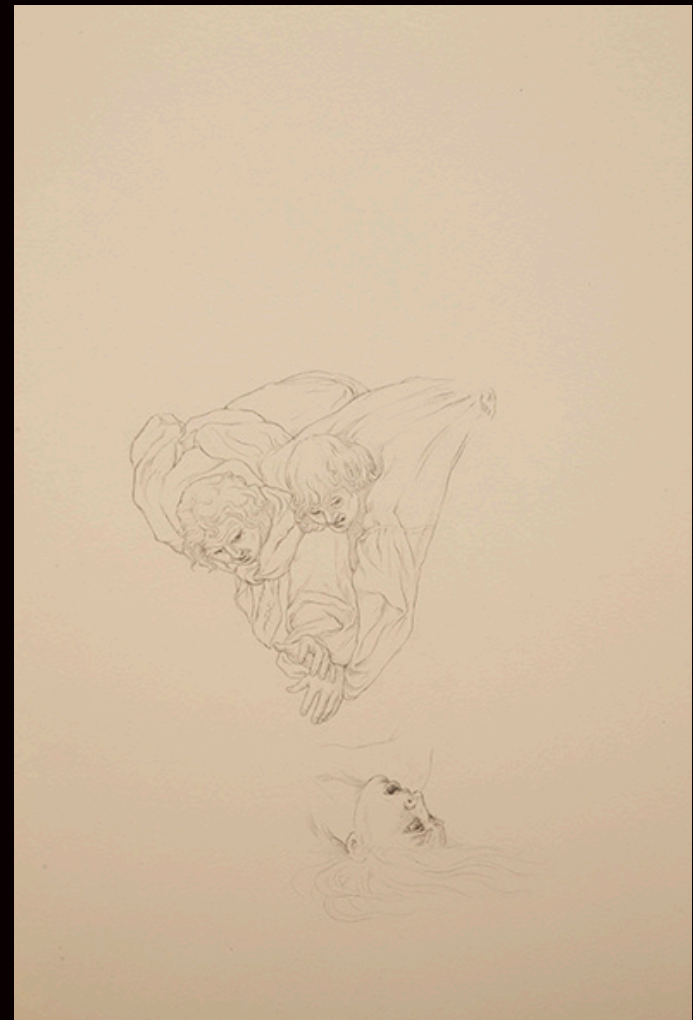
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HAUSER & WIRTH



MIKE
KELLEY

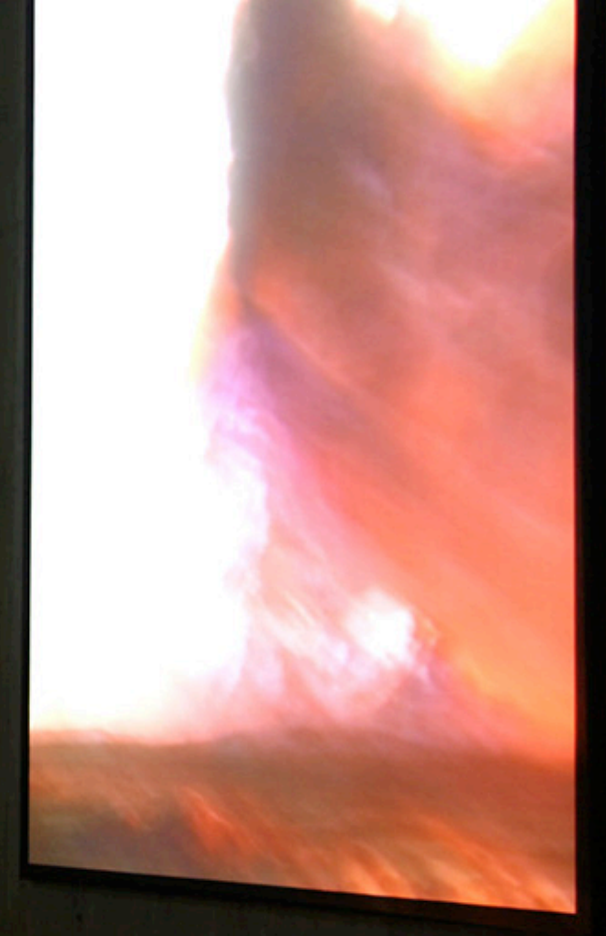
Profondeurs
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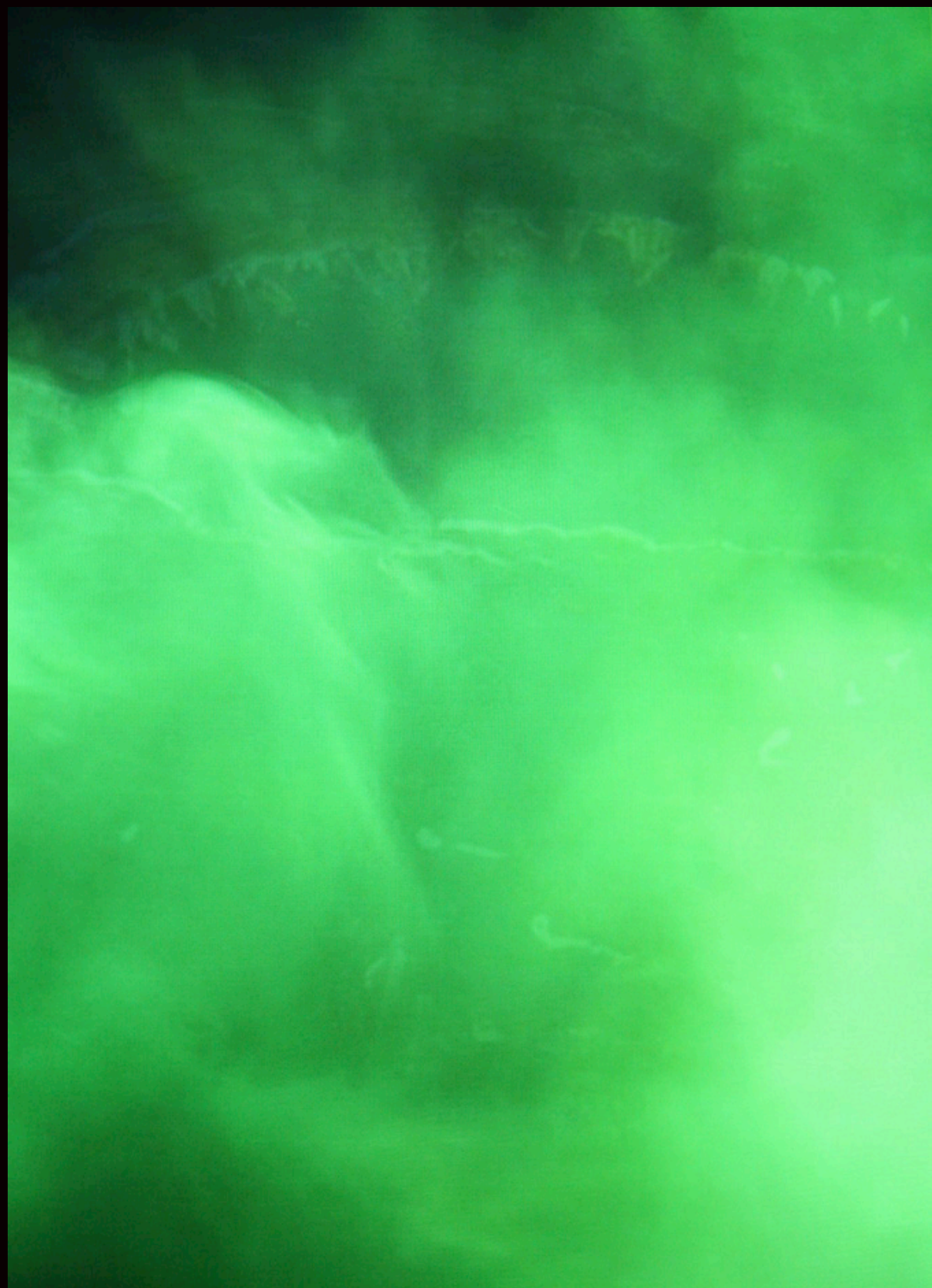
14 juin
au 18 septembre 2006

Avec le soutien
de la Broad Art Foundation
et de la galerie Gagosian

Broad Art Foundation GAGOSIAN

Entrée de l'exposition →





Profondeurs Vertes, 2006
Mixed media installation with video projections, sound, Dimensions variable

Jenelle Porter

Timeless Painting, an Introduction

One of the forty entries Mike Kelley authored for his *Educational Complex Onwards (Project-related Flow Chart)*¹ reads:

Timeless Paintings (1993–present)

The *Timeless Paintings* are the official visual art production of *Educational Complex*. They are patterned after my own paintings on paper, made while I was an undergraduate student in the art school at the University of Michigan. These paintings were mannerist take-offs on Hans Hofmann's compositional theory of "push and pull." The first paintings in this series were actual works from my student days that I painted into in order to re-familiarize myself with my technique of this period. These were followed by a group of new paintings on paper done in a similar manner. The designation *Timeless Paintings* is intended to define these as "classical" works, the compositional approach of which is to be read as outside of the influence of historical aesthetic development.

The artist's bureaucratic but deadpan choice of words includes the reader in a droll subversion: making contemporary art is such a totally *un*-official activity that calling something the official art production of anything rolls mockingly off the tongue. Kelley's flowchart, dated 2008, is an expansive and inclusive diagramming of decades of artwork—and a map that offers the brightest guide to making an exhibition of Kelley's paintings. Because if you're isolating one medium in an oeuvre characterized by its very convolutions and obfuscations, it seems prudent to follow the artist's logic. If Kelley called it a painting, let's call it a painting. Still, those familiar with Kelley's oeuvre might not immediately consider uttering "Mike Kelley" and "painter" in the same sentence. Or it might be more like sentence five in any serviceable description of Kelley's expansive oeuvre—one that also includes sculpture, performance, sound, installation, video, music, expository writing, found object assemblage, collage, drawing, and more. Nonetheless, when tasked with organizing a Mike Kelley painting exhibition, one meets the artist on his own terms. And so . . .

The Thirteen Seasons (Heavy on the Winter) (1994)

A series of *Timeless Paintings* painted on oval wooden panels. The iconography of the paintings is derived from common seasonal imagery, taken from mass media sources. A series of collages of such material, used as studies for these paintings, also exists.

The exhibition begins in the mid 1990s, when Kelley made a distinct return to painting. In color. The *Timeless Paintings* series comprises ten works (acrylic on paper, framed) that extrapolate Kelley's college-era drawings, deploying Hofmann's "push and pull" compositional theory of the interdependence of color, form, and space. One work features eight right handprints, each a different color on an orange background, clustered in a circle with one centrally positioned. It's very cave painting, even as it calls up the memory of the first kind of image made by our bodies, when nurses literally take hand- and footprints right out of the womb. Other works in the series feature disembodied heads, a floorplan labeled St. Mary's superimposed over paired profiles of children's bodies, a costumed horse, mascot- and tattoo-like cartoons, and even an ancient maternity fetish figure.²

The Thirteen Seasons (Heavy on the Winter) emerged from Kelley's backward glance at his "originating trauma: my student trauma."³ (He embraced what he considered an unexpected critical interpretation of his stuffed animal sculptures as illustrative of childhood abuse and repressed trauma, which led him to consider his own alleged "trauma," or at least a convoluted, fantasy narrative of trauma.) With college-era drawings in hand and the instruction of their "perversions of Hoffmannesque compositional principles," Kelley re-learned how to paint in the manner in which he'd been educated—and that he'd long since rejected. Of these seventy-four works in mixed media on paper (many of which appear to be painted on wallpaper, merging not only histories of mixed media collage but those of domestic craft and design, pattern painting, and a feminist art) made during his undergraduate years at the University of Michigan (1972–76), Kelley reworked twenty-seven, which he exhibited the same year he debuted *The Thirteen Seasons*. By painting over or re-painting his own twenty-year-old gestures, Kelley not only reconnected, conceptually and corporally, to his past (and past trauma), but he generated a means by which to inject painting into his oeuvre.

Yet *The Thirteen Seasons* is really anything but straight-up painting. The mass-culture-derived imagery is unadulterated Kelley, but he painted on panel not canvas, and he defied painting's rectangle (and its intrinsic window to another world) by adopting the oval, a shape with no end—metaphorically eternal, timeless—and a symbol of "eternally recurring abuse."⁴ Kelley describes these and other works as "prototypical postmodern paintings, reflecting the influence of Robert Rauschenberg



The Thirteen Seasons (Heavy on the Winter) #12: Death, 1994
Acrylic on wood panel, 62 1/2 x 40 in. (158.75 x 101.60 cm)



The Thirteen Seasons (Heavy on the Winter) #13: Art, 1994
Acrylic on wood panel, 62 1/2 x 40 in. (158.75 x 101.60 cm)



Caption TK

The uncanny is apprehended as a physical sensation, like the one I have always associated with an "art" experience—especially when we interact with an object or a film. This sensation is tied to the act of remembering. I can still recall, as everyone can, certain strong, uncanny, aesthetic experiences I had as a child. Such past feelings (which recur even now in my recollection of them) seem to have been provoked by disturbing, unrecalable memories. They were provoked by a confrontation between "me" and an "it" that was highly charged, so much so that "me" and "it" become confused. The uncanny is a somewhat muted sense of horror: horror tinged with confusion. It produces "goose bumps" and is "spine tingling." It also seems related to déjà vu, the feeling of having experienced something before, the particulars of that previous experience being unrecalable, except as an atmosphere that was "creepy" or "weird." But if it was such a loaded situation, so important, why can the experience not be remembered? These feelings seem related to so-called out-of-body experiences, where you become so bodily aware that you have the sense of watching yourself from outside yourself. All of these feelings are provoked by an object, a dead object that has a life of its own, a life that is somehow dependent on you, and is intimately connected in some secret manner to your life.

—Mike Kelley

In trying to reconstruct my first encounter with Mike Kelley's work, my reactions are easier to retrieve than a sense of time and place.

As someone who, much to my own embarrassment, played with toys in my pictures, I was most comfortable denying the "girl" part, the "play" part, and the "childhood" part, instead emphasizing the formal exploration of memory as well as the domestic culture of suburban 1950s and 1960s post-war America. Mike's early works with stuffed animals were jarring, visceral, and immature. They conjured for me a synesthetic experience of the sort of carpeted, wood-paneled rec rooms—soaked with the odor of smelly feet, socks, and sneakers—where I'd played spin the bottle as a kid: gross but familiar. My toys had come mostly from an old toy store that was going out of business in Liberty, New York, in 1971. Although they were leftovers from the 1950s and 1960s, they were still in their original plastic wrappings. Mike's toys were filthy (I'm sure he liked them that way), scavenged at yard sales and thrift shops and probably full of baby vomit and snot.

By the mid-1970s, I had put my dirty thrift store days behind me as I began to make simple, austere artworks based on my first encounters with process, minimal, and post-minimal work in the New York galleries. I'd pretty much wholly rejected the work of the feminist generation before me, which I considered time-stuck in women's crafts and feminine secretions. I felt the same about "messy" painting and sculpture, which sometimes felt too male and violent.

While I attempted to deny the taboos that hovered around adults engaged in child's play (though when Cindy Sherman and I showed each other our photographs in 1978, we did acknowledge that we were essentially playing dress-up and dollhouse), the "play" aspect of Mike's work was always front-and-center. I found this somewhat repulsive, but also endearing. If, in his work, he played the debased adolescent, then my work would have to be the younger, more proper tween girl he enjoyed teasing.

My one tender point of entry into Mike's world was the afghan blanket. We'd had a huge one in my childhood home, crocheted by my Great Aunt Elsie and made up of dozens of crazy-colored squares that (along with lipstick tubes and nail polish jars) lay at the core of my color theory foundations. When I saw how Mike used the blankets, I felt like he and I shared a secret language—that we both knew how to use objects like paint, and that we could both outperform many of the best of the painters without actually painting. At the time, I had no idea he both drew and painted, and I have to admit to being disappointed when I found out he made other kinds of things.

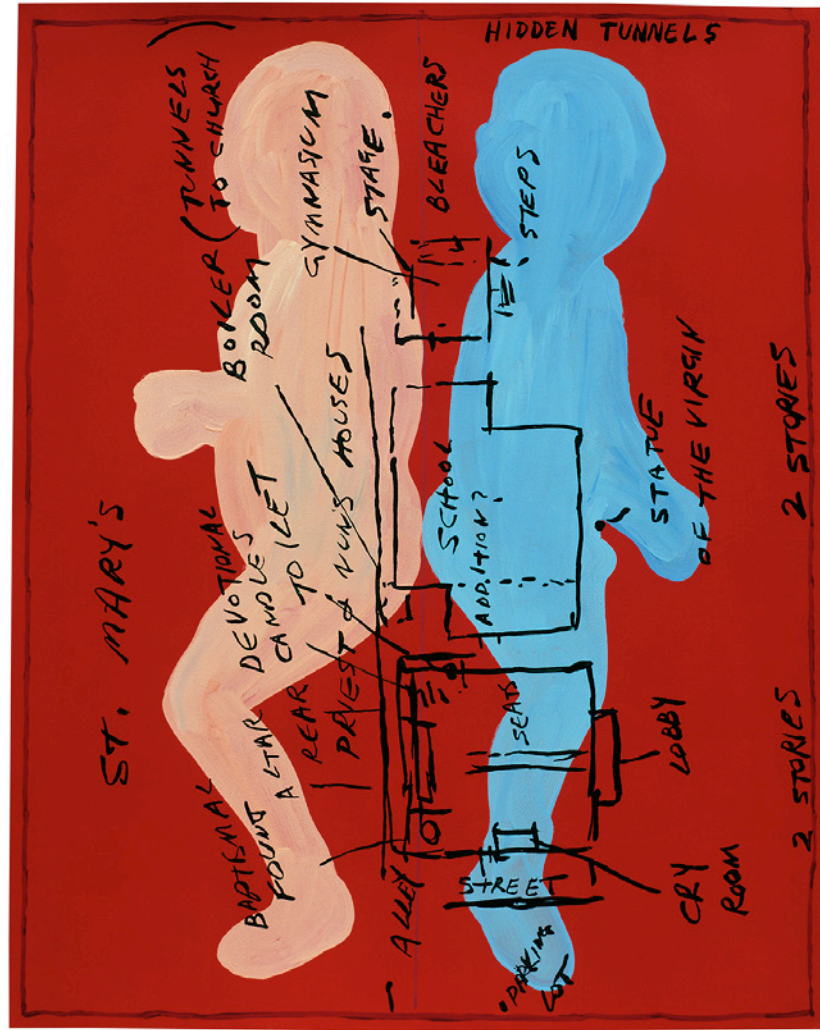
When Mike joined Metro Pictures, my gallery at the time, in 1982, he treated me like a new friend, an equal, and a kindred spirit—not at all typical of my male gallery cohort at the time. He knew a lot about my work, asked a ton of questions, and eventually included me in his 2004 exhibition, *The Uncanny*, which traveled from Tate Liverpool to mumok in Vienna. In terms of *his* work, I needed to get past the grime and the melted wax (conjuring boys playing with fire) and the poop references (conjuring boys in general). In fact, he was as embedded in his idea of a boy's life as I was in a girl's.

It was his cover for the 1992 Sonic Youth album, *Dirty*, that firmly sealed the deal for me. The image was essentially a mug shot lineup of soiled, frayed stuffed animals interrupted by a

picture of Mike's own face. The artwork, called *Ahh...Youth!* (1991), had a special resonance for me.

When I was around ten years old, I carried my favorite ceramic nebbish figure into my father's dental office, which could be accessed through a door in our suburban kitchen. My father had just installed a new, tricked-out stationary Polaroid camera that could photograph people's bites and smiles to indicate whether they needed orthodontia. I asked him to shoot a close-up of my nebbish's face, which he agreed to do in the interest of supporting my artistic aspirations. I'd kept the picture with me from that time forward, and secretly considered it my first "grown-up" artwork. If Mike had added my nebbish to *Ahh...Youth!*, it almost could've worked.

The idea that Mike would place his own image—at equal scale and of equal importance—in a universe otherwise populated entirely by toys—just tore me apart. His tenderness, hiding in plain sight amidst the grit, grime, poop, pee, high school humor, clown suits, and awkward adolescent sex references, is the aspect of him (and his work) that remains ineffable in my memory as the essential Mike.



Timeless Painting #1, 1995
 Acrylic on paper mounted on matboard, image: 28 1/2 x 23 in. (72.39 x 58.42 cm)



Timeless Painting #2, 1995
 Acrylic on paper mounted on matboard, image: 28 1/2 x 23 in. (72.39 x 58.42 cm)



Cornholier Than Thou, 1995
Acrylic on wood panel, 64 × 47 in. (162.56 × 119.38 cm)



Liberal Paganism, 1995
Acrylic on wood panel, 65 × 47 in. (165.10 × 119.38 cm)



Free Gesture Frozen, Yet Refusing to Submit to Personification (Green Fingerpainting), 1998
Acrylic on wood, 102 3/8 x 60 1/4 x 5 3/8 in. (260.03 x 153.04 x 13.65 cm)



Free Gesture Frozen, Yet Refusing to Submit to Personification (Orange Fingerpainting), 1998
Acrylic on wood, 66 1/8 x 101 5/8 x 6 1/4 in. (167.96 x 258.13 x 15.88 cm)



Free Gesture Frozen, Yet Refusing to Submit to Personification (Red Fingerpainting), 1998
Acrylic on wood, 91 3/8 x 47 1/4 x 6 3/4 in. (232.09 x 120.02 x 17.15 cm)



Free Gesture Frozen, Yet Refusing to Submit to Personification (Violet Fingerpainting), 1998
Acrylic on wood, 86 5/8 x 47 1/4 x 6 1/4 in. (220.03 x 120.02 x 15.88 cm)





Missing Time Color Exercise (Reversed) #5 (Resonating Stone Walls), 2002
 Acrylic on wood panels, magazines, wood, and Plexiglas, 47 × 80 ¾ in. (119.38 × 205.11 cm)



Missing Time Color Exercise (Reversed) #6 (Order Adjustment/Resonating Hot Pinks), 2002
 Acrylic on wood panels, magazines, wood, and Plexiglas, 44 ¾ × 111 in. (113.67 × 281.94 cm)



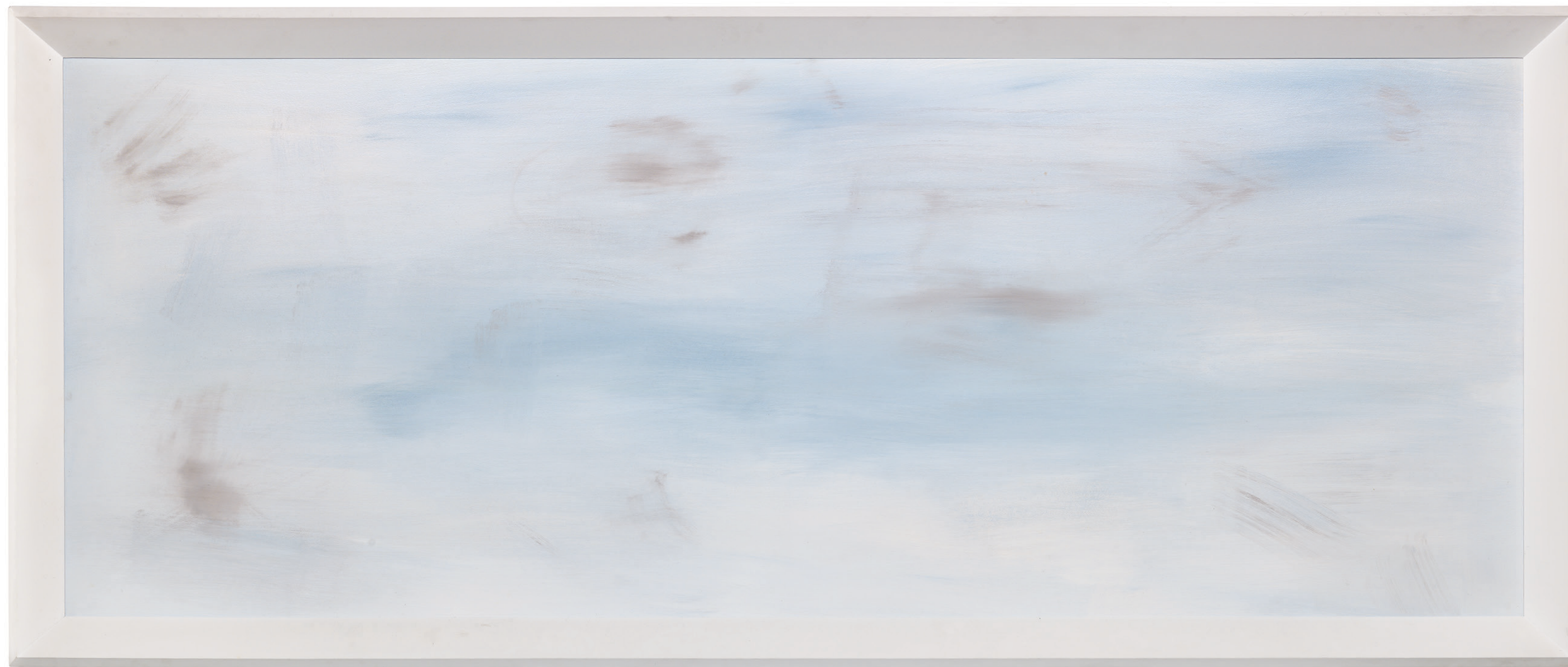
Wood Grain #1, 2003
Acrylic on wood panel, 72 × 48 in. (182.88 × 121.92 cm)



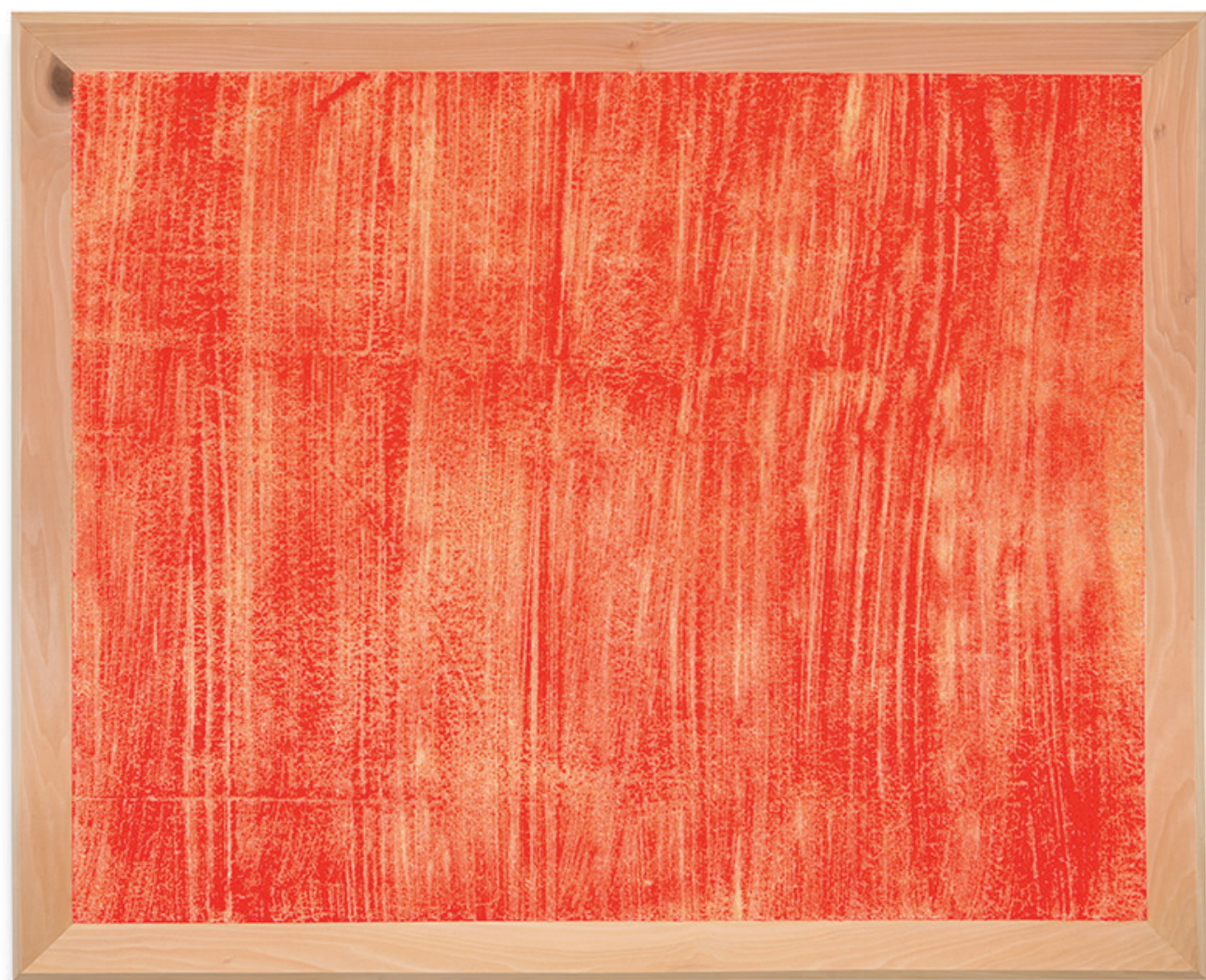
Wood Grain #2, 2003
Acrylic on wood panel, 72 × 48 in. (182.88 × 121.92 cm)



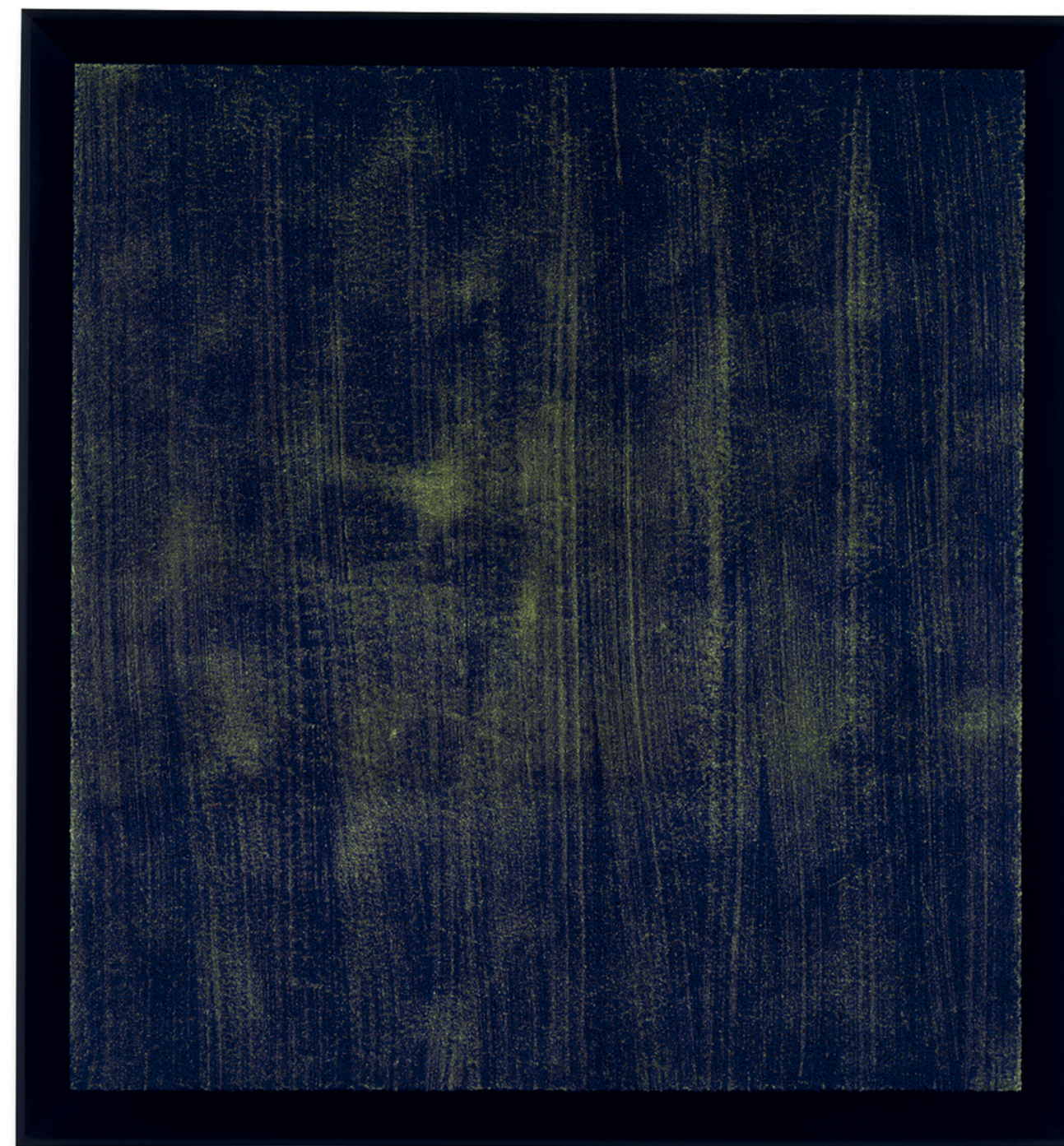
Wood Grain #3, 2003
Acrylic on wood panel, 72 × 48 in. (182.88 × 121.92 cm)



Wood Grain #10 (Variant), 2003
Acrylic on wood panel, framed, 32 1/8 x 76 1/4 in. (81.60 x 193.68 cm)



Carpet #2, 2003
Acrylic on carpet, mounted on wood panel, 40 1/8 x 49 1/8 in. (101.92 x 124.78 cm)



Carpet #3, 2003
Acrylic on carpet, mounted on wood panel, 52 3/8 x 49 1/4 in. (133.03 x 125.10 cm)



All Pink Inside, 2008–09
Acrylic on canvas with custom frame, 28 3/4 × 22 3/4 × 2 in. (73.03 × 57.79 × 5.08 cm)



Charlie Brown's Existential Interior Painted from Memory, 2008–09
Acrylic on canvas with custom frame, 23 × 19 × 2 1/2 in. (58.42 × 48.26 × 6.35 cm)



Sci-Fi Cock, 2008-09
Acrylic on canvas with custom frame, 20 × 16 × 1¼ in. (50.80 × 40.64 × 3.18 cm)



Sex Slaves of the Informe, 2008-09
Acrylic on canvas with custom frame, 42¼ × 30½ × 1¾ in. (107.32 × 77.47 × 4.45 cm)

To call Mike Kelley's art activities diverse and far-reaching is to say nothing new about them, but should nonetheless be stipulated before undertaking an exegesis of one particular painting. Mike certainly wasn't a "painter," but he made a lot of paintings, and a lot more things that he considered to be such but might more profitably be understood as "meta-" painting. Either way, within his sprawling body of work painting was a consistent and persistent receptacle (associations to garbage understood and intended) for many of his preoccupations.

Mike and I were friendly, but not close friends. We knew each other for about twenty years, exhibited our work in a few of the same art galleries, and over the years had a couple of great conversations that gave me a modicum of insight into some of the attitudes and inclinations embedded in his work. These conversations revealed two of his preoccupations that really got my attention: mass incarceration (which unsettled me because I'm claustrophobic and controlling) and science fiction (to which I related because I've been an avid reader of the genre since I was a kid).

The prison theme manifested itself in numerous ways (plans, drawings, sculptures, installations of all these), but most apposite to the present subject was his fascination with the artwork of men in jail. He managed to acquire enough paintings by same to include a wall of them in at least one large installation I recall seeing, and notions of painting as a serious hobby or as an "idle hands do the devil's work" sort of art therapy infused the aesthetic attitude he brought to bear in his own work.

Subjects and narrative conventions from science fiction appear throughout Mike's artwork and his writing. His long-running *Kandor* investigation, which took as its point of departure the Superman origin story, is perhaps the best-known example, but creepy aliens and disgusting amoebic blobs are rife in his pictorial universe, and he also referred to the conventions of the genre as metaphorical constructions in his theoretical and critical writing.

In 2008–09 Mike made a large group of paintings, one of which is *Sex Slaves of the Informe*. They were painted in acrylic on what seem to be the sort of standard size, readymade canvases that one finds shrink-wrapped on the shelves of most art

supply stores, and they were presented in decidedly pre-modern, ornate but lowbrow picture frames that could have been found at a rummage sale and refurbished. As objects they convey a sense of sincere and tasteless amateurism, but as pictures they convey something altogether more unsettling. The content that emerges from this interplay offers a look into the heart of Mike's vision.

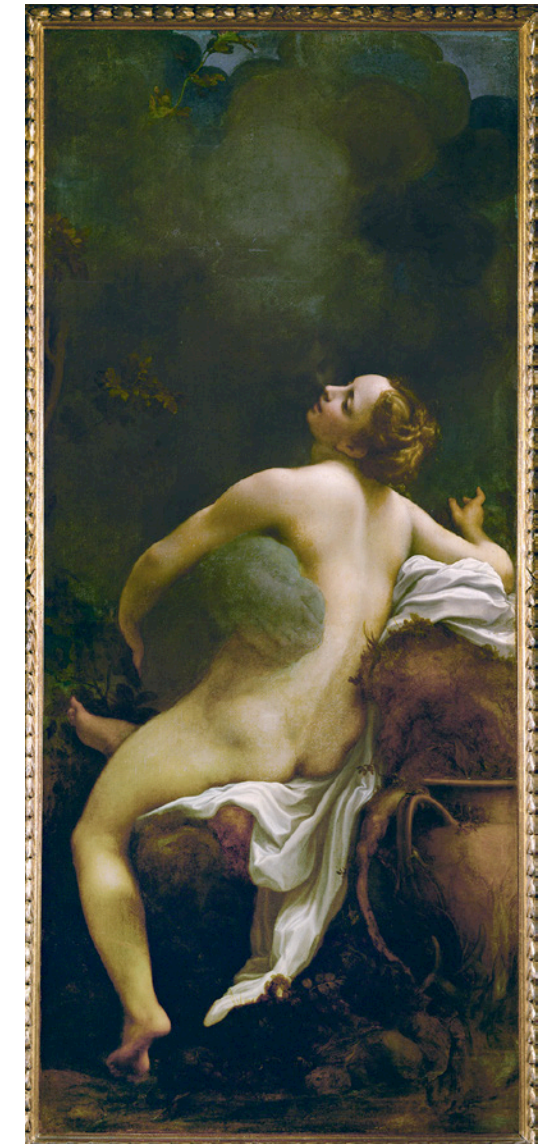
Sex Slaves of the Informe depicts two brunette humans (approximately Caucasian, nominally female) and a strangely shaped grey blob caught in a feverish three-way whose narrative vectors are ambiguous. It's unclear where this is taking place; the layering of elements that creates the space of the painting implies a shallow and claustrophobic interior, but there is no real description of architecture. In addition to panels of lurid pink and yellow, the background consists partly of a lattice screen twinkling with the sort of light one might associate with Hollywood depictions of Arabian harems or with the inner sanctum of a decadent chieftain in Conan the Barbarian's universe. The humans are adorned with tattoos and jewelry of a similarly "exotic" cast, but their haircuts wouldn't be out of place on goth teenagers (the silver skull earring on the person in the foreground is a nice touch). None of the cultural references feel specific or authentic.

The blob forms itself into a vaguely avian profile (one thinks of Max Ernst's chimeric creatures) as it emerges from the field of black paint that fills the bottom of the painting. The person in the foreground, whose body and hence sexual identity are invisible to us, seems to study us for a reaction while she (he, they) performs fellatio on a massive cock-like extrusion from the blob. The tiara-sporting human in the background has the body of a "hot" woman, hips cocked suggestively, but with a massively engorged erection and full, pendulous balls. "Her" mouth hangs open in a look of either cartoonish arousal or exhausted amazement, the dribbles of white fluid rendered on her chin seeming to indicate the recent completion of another blob blowjob. Presumably these humans are the "sex slaves," and the blob is "the Informe."

Mike lifted the term "Informe" from Georges Bataille, who first put forward the idea of "l'informe" in 1929. It is a slippery (and very French) concept originated in an attempt to isolate tendencies in early Modernism and Surrealism that

we might call "anti-formal" or "debased," while also acknowledging the pre-linguistic, chthonic source and underpinnings of that sensibility. Usually (and inadequately) translated as "formlessness," it was more recently taken up by Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss as a way to frame the discussion (in an exhibition, and later a book, *Formless: A User's Guide*) of a range of post-war and contemporary art not previously considered through this lens. Mike's work and that of numerous others he admired (Lucio Fontana, Jean Dubuffet, Wols, Asger Jorn) were included in this investigation, so one can't simply put down to sour grapes or ridicule his representation of this philosophical idea as a horny pile of plasticine. The painting actually takes the concept almost too earnestly by pictorializing an extremely abstract idea in quite flat-footed pictorial language. But there is nothing in either Bataille's or the more recent scholars' formulations that would suggest within "l'informe" a consciousness or a capacity for direct participation in human relationships. It is meant to reorganize our discourse as a category, or an influence, not as a "character." Mike's treatment reminds me of Correggio's *Jupiter and Io* (1532–33), where Zeus enters the human dimension as a cloud of black smoke, sufficiently embodied to initiate sexual union and share carnal rapture with the woman who is the object of his divine lust.

But the tone of Kelley's painting is quite different; these humans are "slaves," and very particular slaves at that. The one in the background might be a genetic freak, the product of a secret laboratory, or just a trans kid lost to sex work. I'm sure I never discussed "gender" with Mike, and at the time he died I don't think our cultural discourse around that increasingly vexing topic had achieved anything like the traction and momentum we see today. I doubt he would have referred to his sex slaves as "gender non-conforming," both because the term was not yet common and because the tone is so clinical. That is what they are, but they come from a darker parallel subculture where tweaked-out "chicks with dicks" or "horny hermaphrodites" satisfy the needs of fetishists with corrupted libidos. The important thing is that they exhibit the secondary sexual characteristics of all of us, and they have no apparent choice but to remain "in service" to the agenda of an inscrutable and endlessly demanding master.



Caption TK, Richard Hawkins. *Mike Kelley's Uncanny Ability to Read Low-Brow Pop Cultural Reference into even the Most Non-Representational of Works*, 2019. Digital collage, no dimensions

Strangely decorated, chronically aroused with no hope of satisfaction, obedient to the imperatives of a blind and possibly mindless authority whose agenda can never be satisfied, trapped in a tacky chamber of looping horrors from which there is no visible exit, straddling the border of this world and a black dimension whose scale and nature is incomprehensible . . . any of this sound familiar? On its face the scene in *Sex Slaves of the Informe* might be taking place in an exotic harem or in a crappy motel on the set of a porno. Or our protagonists could be encased in a spaceship on the endless trip to Alpha Centauri. But, as William Gibson has said, science fiction's visions of the future are always really about our present. Some artists have the dubious privilege of channeling aspects of their cultural moment into alarming reflections of our situation, and Mike was certainly one of these. This small gem of a painting might initially grab us with its sordid narrative, but its deeper power resides in its chilly accuracy as a mirror.



Shell Flower 1, 2008-09

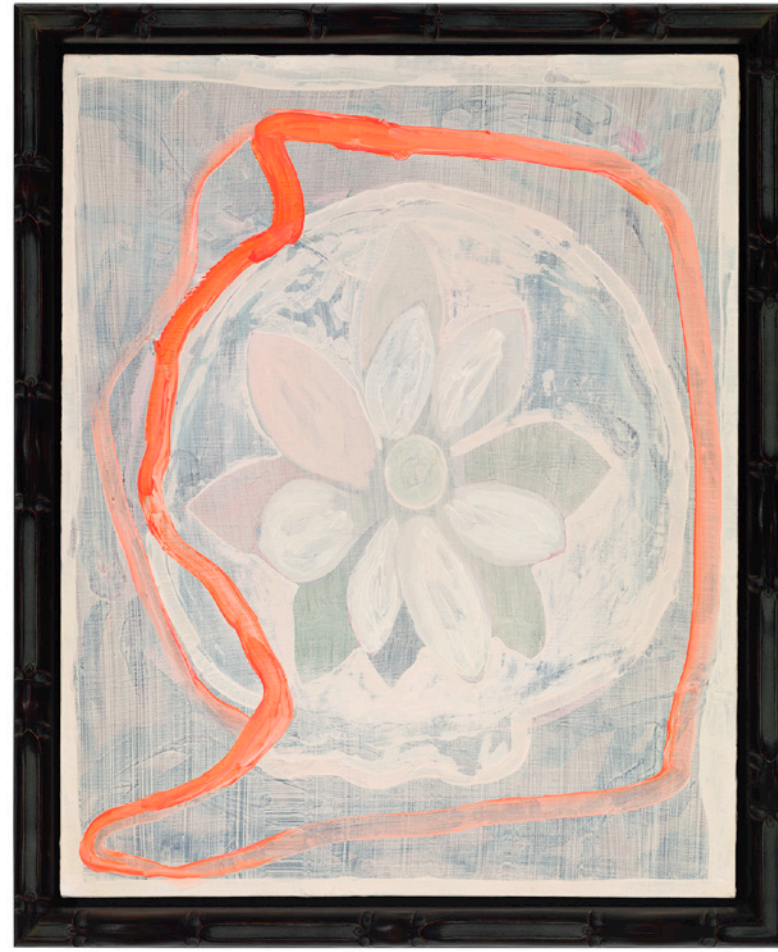
Acrylic on canvas with custom frame, 22 ¼ × 8 ¼ × 2 in. (56.52 × 20.96 × 5.08 cm)

Shell Flower 2, 2008-09

Acrylic on canvas with custom frame, 22 ½ × 18 ½ × 1 ¾ in. (57.15 × 46.99 × 4.45 cm)

Shell Flower 3, 2008-09

Acrylic on canvas with custom frame, 20 ¼ × 20 ¼ × 2 in. (51.44 × 51.44 × 5.08 cm)



Daniel Guzmán

The ass, the ass represents life like french fries . . .

—Francis Picabia

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.

—Joan Didion

My Dear Mr. Kelley:

While looking at the painting *Twin Henrys* (2008–09), a couple of free spiritual associations popped into my mind. First, that in 1990, at the beginning of my career, I used the same image of the Henry cartoon character in some drawings, now lost. Back then I had no knowledge of you as an artist who cross-referenced aesthetic and cultural icons—particularly in your early work. Like many of the teens who grew up in the shadow of so-called “alternative rock,” my first encounter with your work was on the cover of the 1992 Sonic Youth record, *Dirty*. Around the same time, I also had the opportunity to see your work first-hand in an NYC gallery. I have to admit that I did not understand any of the ideas behind those pieces. What did happen when I confronted your work, though, was an emotional and “irrational” response—akin to the experience of listening to a song or a melody, or reading something that goes right through you, through that person who is you, without meditating whether it’s the head, the heart, or the soul that is connecting with “that.”

The second association that came to me, while attempting to give form to my thoughts, was Picabia’s statement, “the ass represents life.” From head to toe, each of us is a totality, yet we all prefer to overlook certain parts of our body, or who we are. So, the way we act and live our lives, that is what I see represented in your painting: repression, blockage, omission. Both *Henry* twins are the ass, the eye, the mouth, and the head—the beginning and the end of the person and all the rest of his “narrative.” Meaning, the character’s absent body represents the proscribed zone of our vision. How we see things, our own social language, and those missing pieces required to put this complex puzzle together—these are the hidden elements we carry within ourselves. . . . You know, this is what I wanted to tell you about.

I’ve heard about your legendary skepticism, mistrust even, concerning other people’s opinions about your work—be they “art specialists” or peers who share your profession. But I’m allowing myself to say all of this since you now find yourself on another plane of the reality that the rest of us on this planet call “life.”

Finally, I’d like to wrap this up on a personal note that includes friends and colleagues who thank you, again, from deep in their hearts, for all of the inspiration that your work has given throughout the years. And if you ever come to México as the friendly ghost you now are, you will be a most welcome guest in our homes, always.

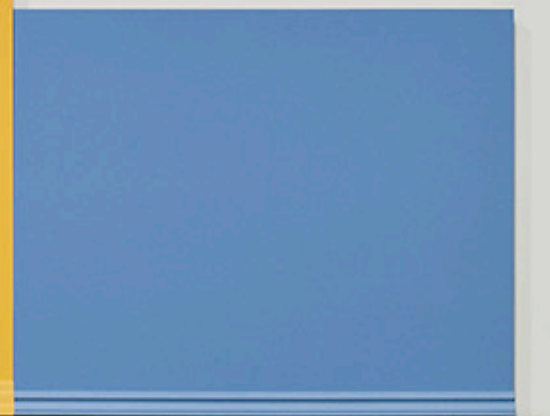
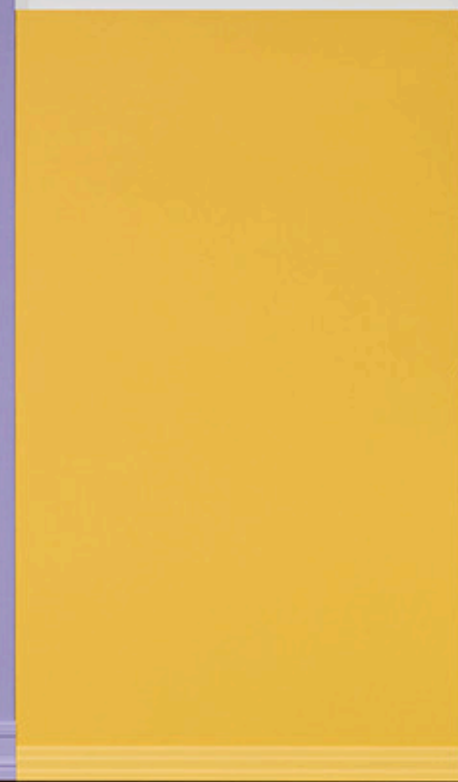
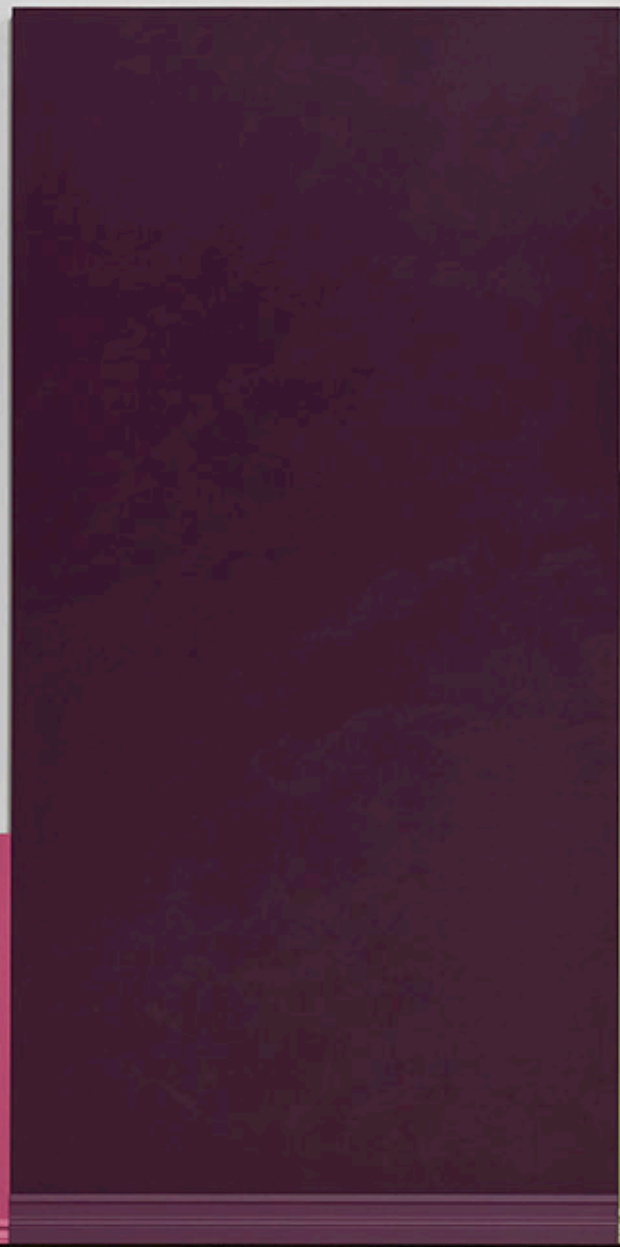
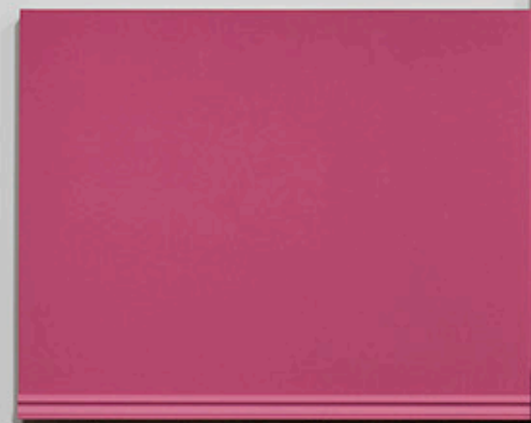
Daniel Guzmán, Guadalajara, Jalisco
May 2019

P.S. My dear grandmother Raymunda, who is no longer with us, embroidered an image from *Dirty* on a T-shirt that I still lovingly keep. I include an image of it for you to see.



Untitled 13, 2008–09
Acrylic on wood panels, 96 × 92 × 5 in. (243.84 × 233.68 × 12.70 cm)





Untitled 2, 2008–09
Acrylic on wood panels, 96 × 249 ½ × 5 in. (243.84 × 633.73 × 12.70 cm)





Untitled 9, 2008-09
Acrylic on wood panels, 99 × 224 × 5 in. (251.46 × 568.96 × 12.70 cm)



Untitled 10, 2008–09
Acrylic on wood panels, 98 × 149 1/4 × 5 in. (248.92 × 379.10 × 12.70 cm)



Untitled 14, 2008-09
Acrylic on wood panels, 100 × 189 ½ × 5 in. (254.00 × 481.33 × 12.70 cm)



