

The Artist as Harlequin

BARRY SCHWABSKY

It works like this, as it often does: I saw some works—paintings and drawings—by Cathrine Raben Davidsen and something about them made their mark on me. I wanted to know more—to see more. And the best way to do it turned out to be by visiting her in her studio. I saw more, and I learned much more: this artist has a fascinating mind. Later, after she asked me to write some words for her publication, we met again, and again—even more than the first time—I found myself captivated not only by the works themselves, but by the rich inner life that they reflect so beautifully but, of course, indirectly. In particular, as a writer, I was interested in exploring some of her literary and historical stimuli. I found myself delving into Ovid’s *Heroides* and the poetry of Karin Boye, of which I had not heard before, and unsuccessfully attempting to search out a text by Selma Lagerlöf that seems to have been out of print in English for ninety years. I found my reading, as well, about Gerda and Einar Wegener, a pair of Danish artist/illustrators who had a fascinating but ultimately tragic story: Einar, a transvestite, became the main model for the female characters in Gerda’s erotic images. Eventually Einar underwent a series of sexual-reassignment operations, taking the name Lili Elbe, and the marriage dissolved. Lili stopped painting—that was only Einar’s thing, apparently—and complications from one of her then-entirely experimental operations led to her death. A strange and disturbing allegory of sex, death, art, and identity.

From all this reading I found myself appreciating more and more the range of Raben Davidsen’s curiosity about what is after the essence of our love of art, namely a desire to understand the nature of human feeling, and getting a deeper sense of her intuition about the role of gender, and of the politics of gender, in the structure of feeling. At the same time I began to feel that I was nonetheless getting further away from her art, which is not an illustrative or didactic art but one rich in sensations, constructed of layers and textures rather than propositions and clear outlines—an art in which, as Boye wrote in her poem “The Trees,” “our word ‘understand’ / becomes empty smoke and wind.”¹ I came to realize the need for a less discursive mode of empathy in order to enter into the spirit of this art.

Raben Davidsen’s earlier works, the ones that had first caught my eye, were portrait-like in form. And yet these did not seem to be representations of people one might have met on the street, at a party, or in an office—they were not inhabitants of daily life as I know it. And yet one felt they called for an intimate rapport. How to initiate this relation, however, was a difficult question. These figures seemed to come from so far away—their pictures, to be portraits of ghosts. Typically, the backgrounds and figures in these works, with their sparse and pale colors, were left open, undefined, as if incomplete; only the faces were given a greater sense of volume and detail.



ZEBRA

2010 - Charcoal on paper - 303 x 240 cm / 119.3 x 94.5 inches



THE BODY

2010 - Charcoal on paper - 297 x 240 cm / 116.9 x 94.5 inches



THE PATH

2011 - Charcoal, ink on paper - 50 x 70 cm / 19.7 x 27.6 inches



PATIENT-HEARTED (ARGOS)

2005 — Oil, spray on canvas — 220 x 130 cm / 86.6 x 51.2 inches



THE FORTUNE TELLERS

2008 - Collage, Oil, crayon, spray on paper - 200 x 200 cm / 78.7 x 78.7 inches



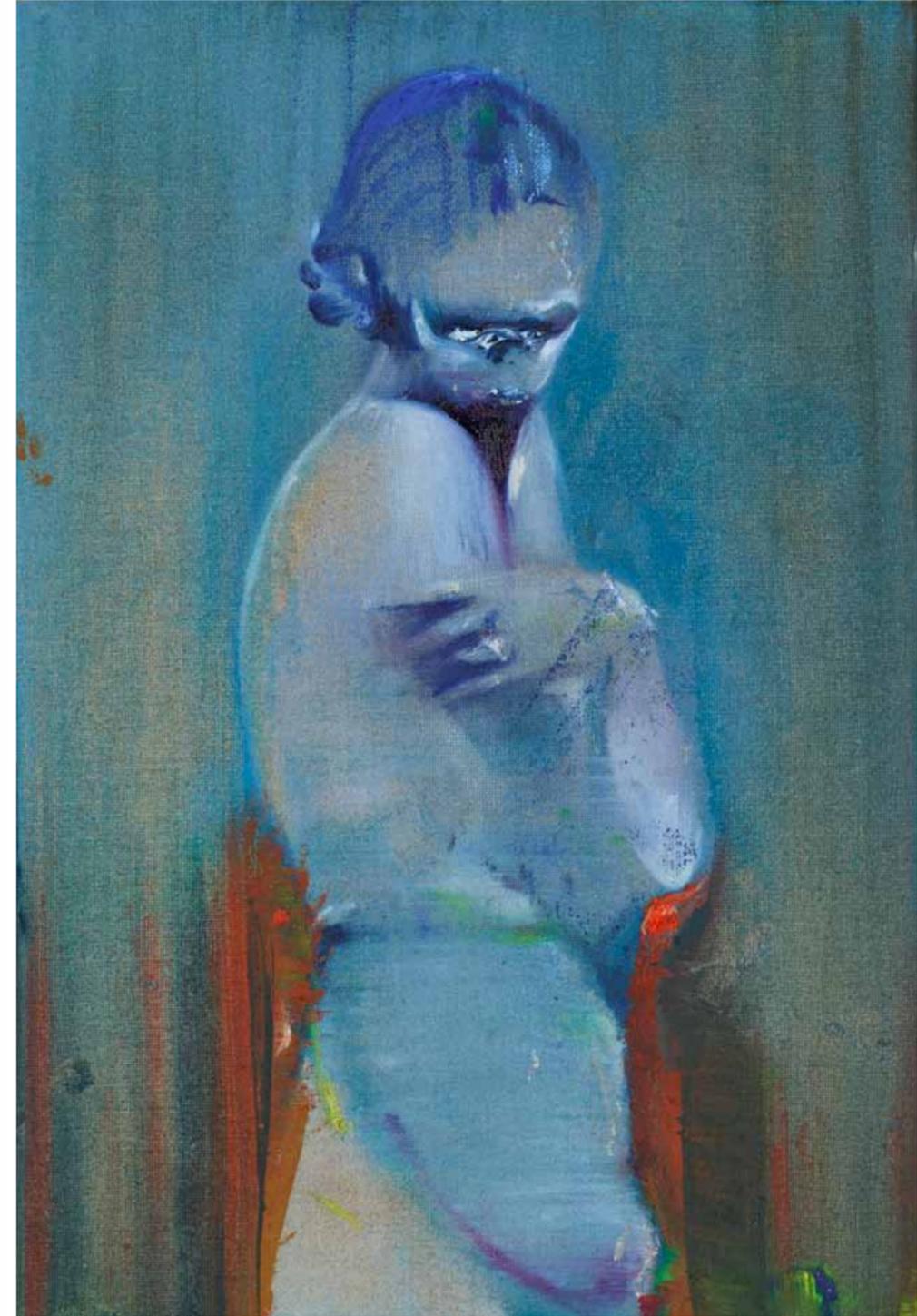
WITHOUT YOU I AM BLIND

2010 - Oil, crayon on linen - 130 x 100 cm / 51.2 x 39.4 inches



COSTUME OF A BRIDE

2005 - Collage, charcoal, spray, pastel on paper - 165 x 70 cm / 65 x 27.6 inches



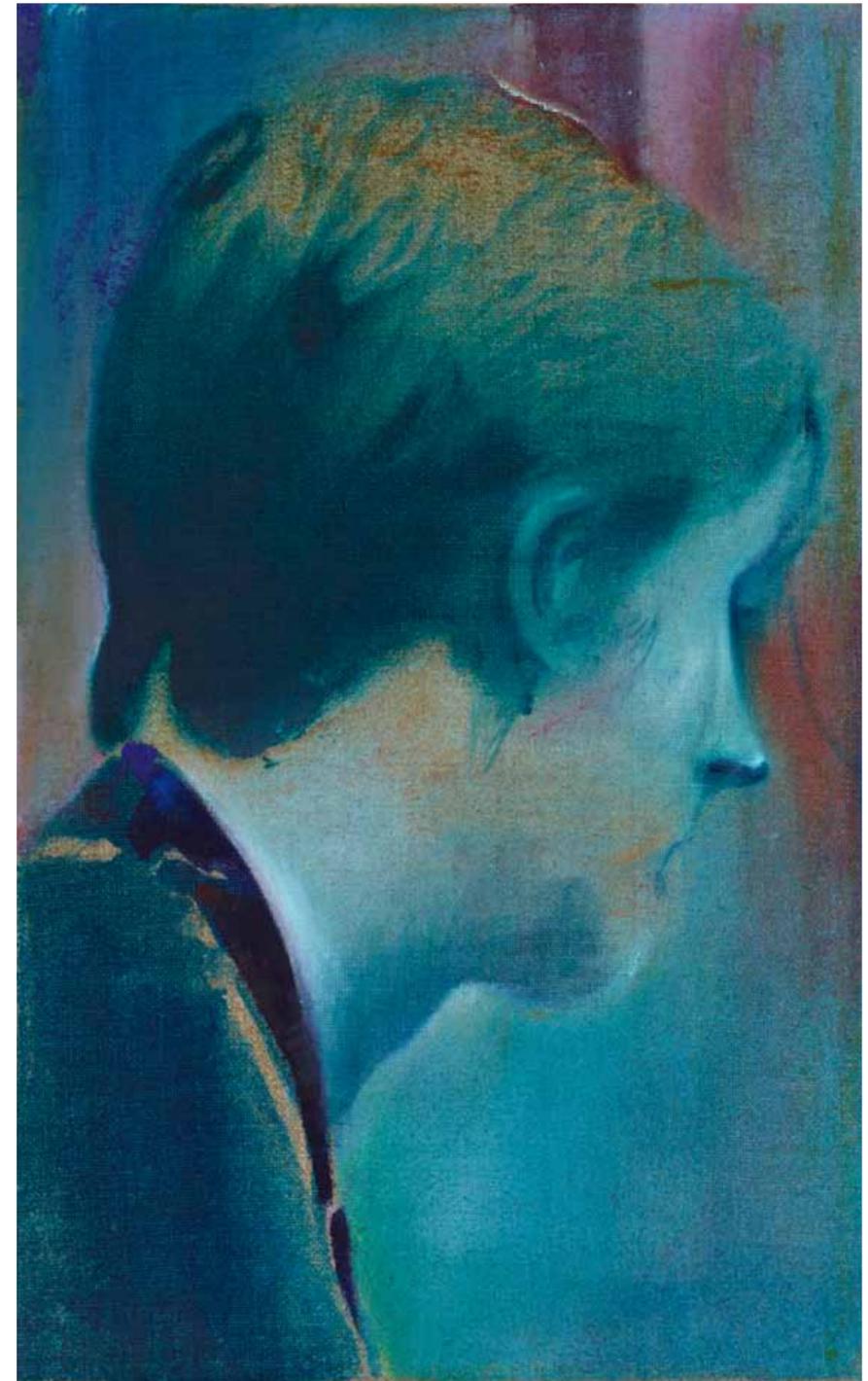
THE WORSHIP

2012 - Oil, pigment, oilbar on linen - 36 x 25 cm / 14.2 x 9.8 inches



PUPPET

2013 - Oil, pigment on linen - 65 x 45 cm / 25.6 x 17.7 inches



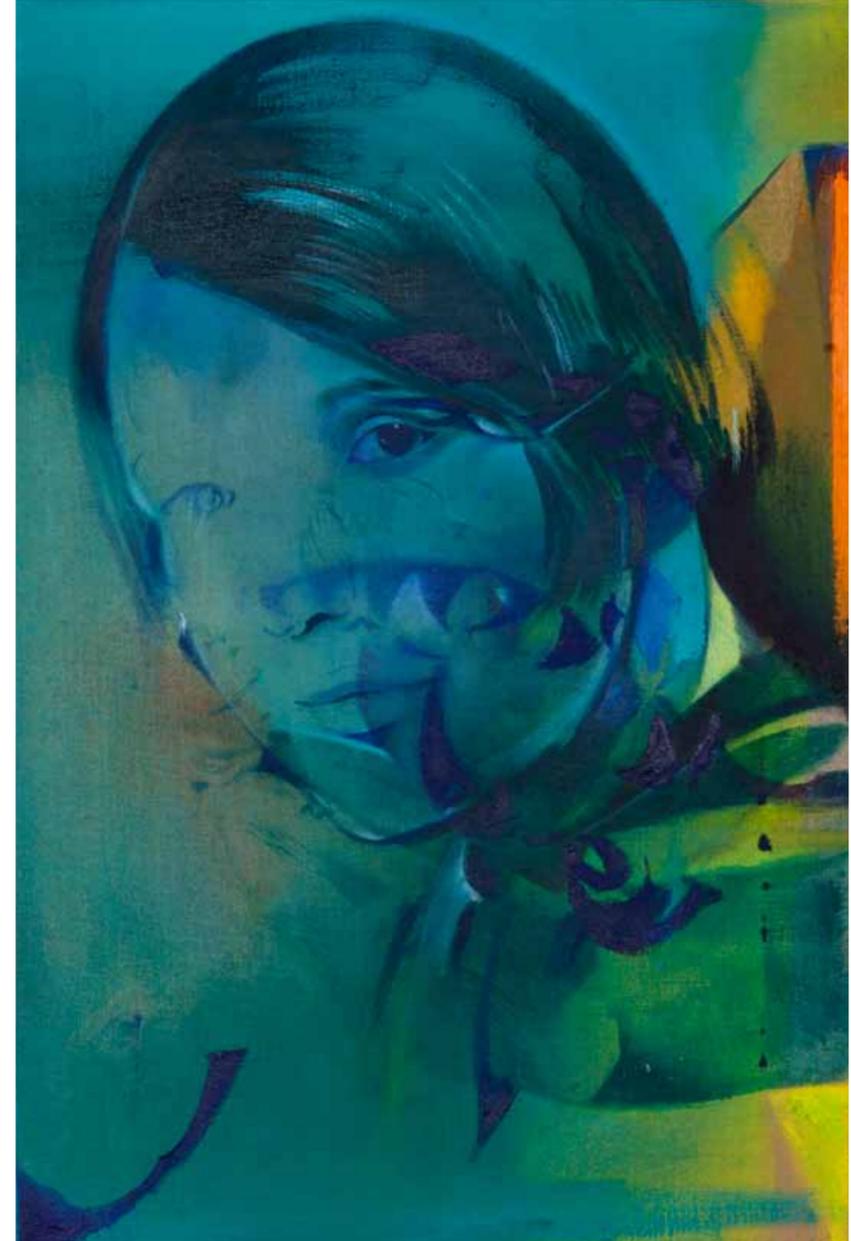
RYAN

2012 - Oil, pigment, oilbar on linen - 29 x 22 cm / 11.4 x 8.7 inches



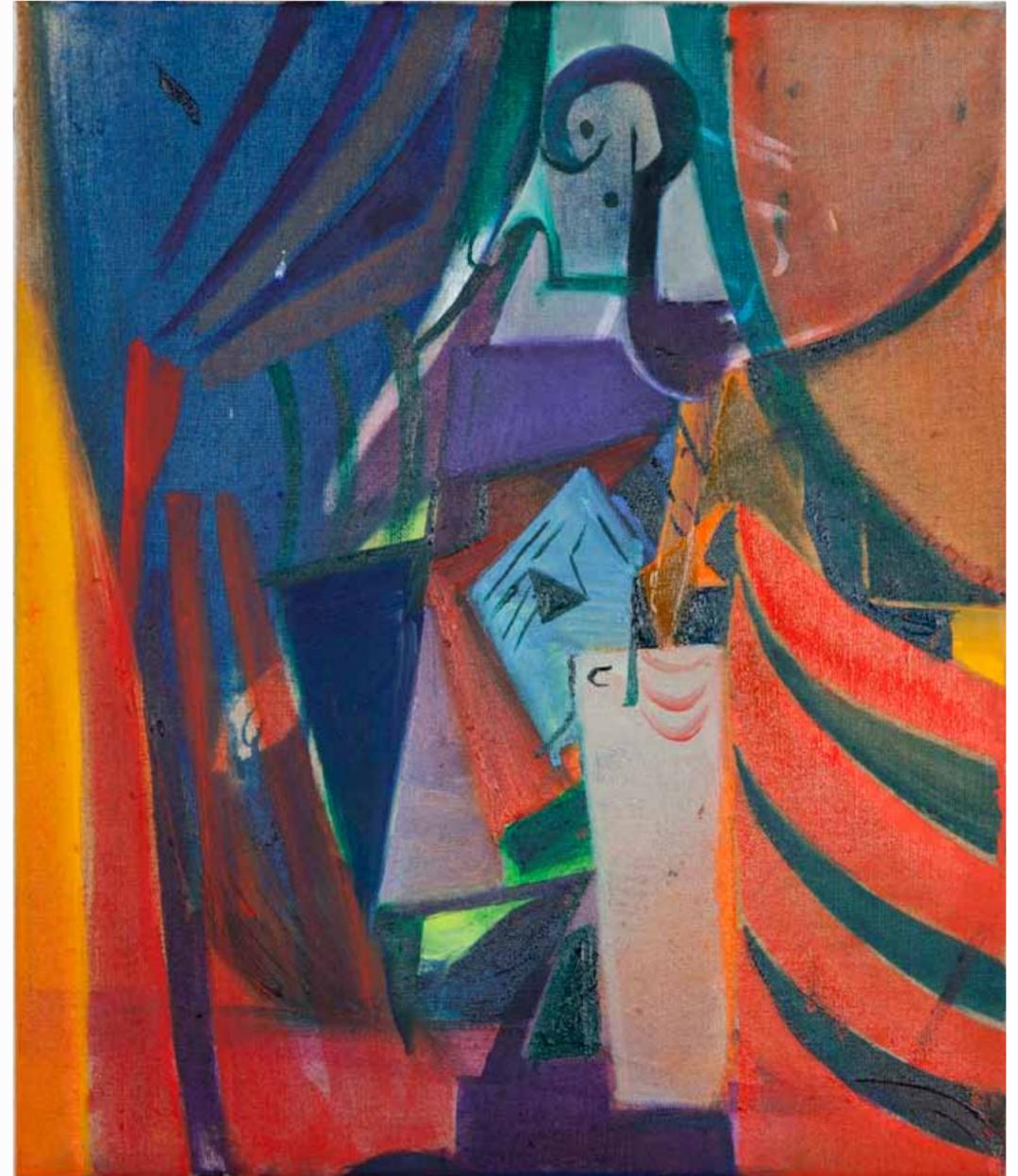
GANSEVOORT

2011 - Oil, pigment, rabbitglue on linen - 240 x 240 cm / 94.5 x 94.5 inches



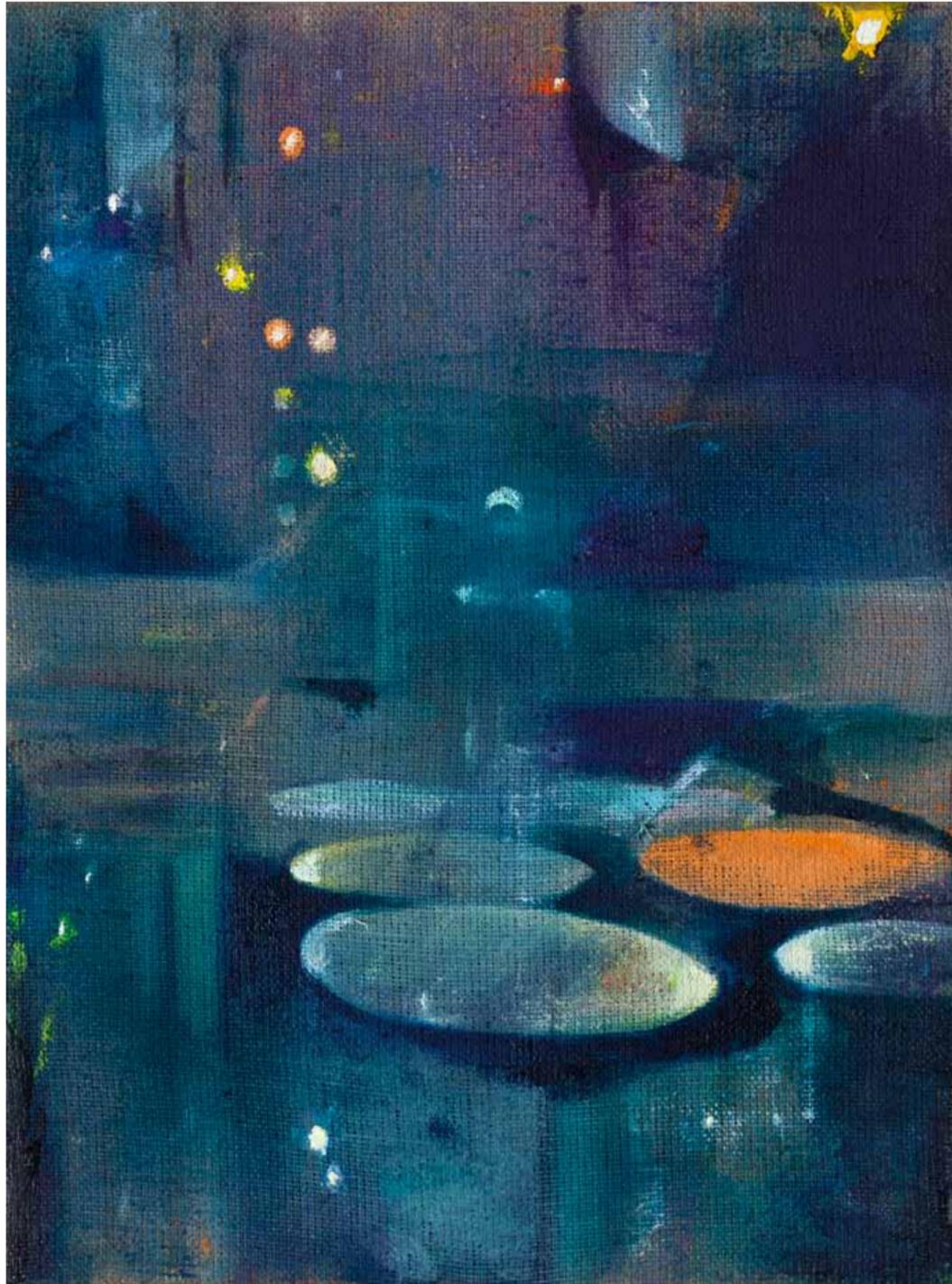
KARIN

2013 - Oil, pigment, oilbar on linen - 53 x 35 cm / 20.9 x 13.8 inches



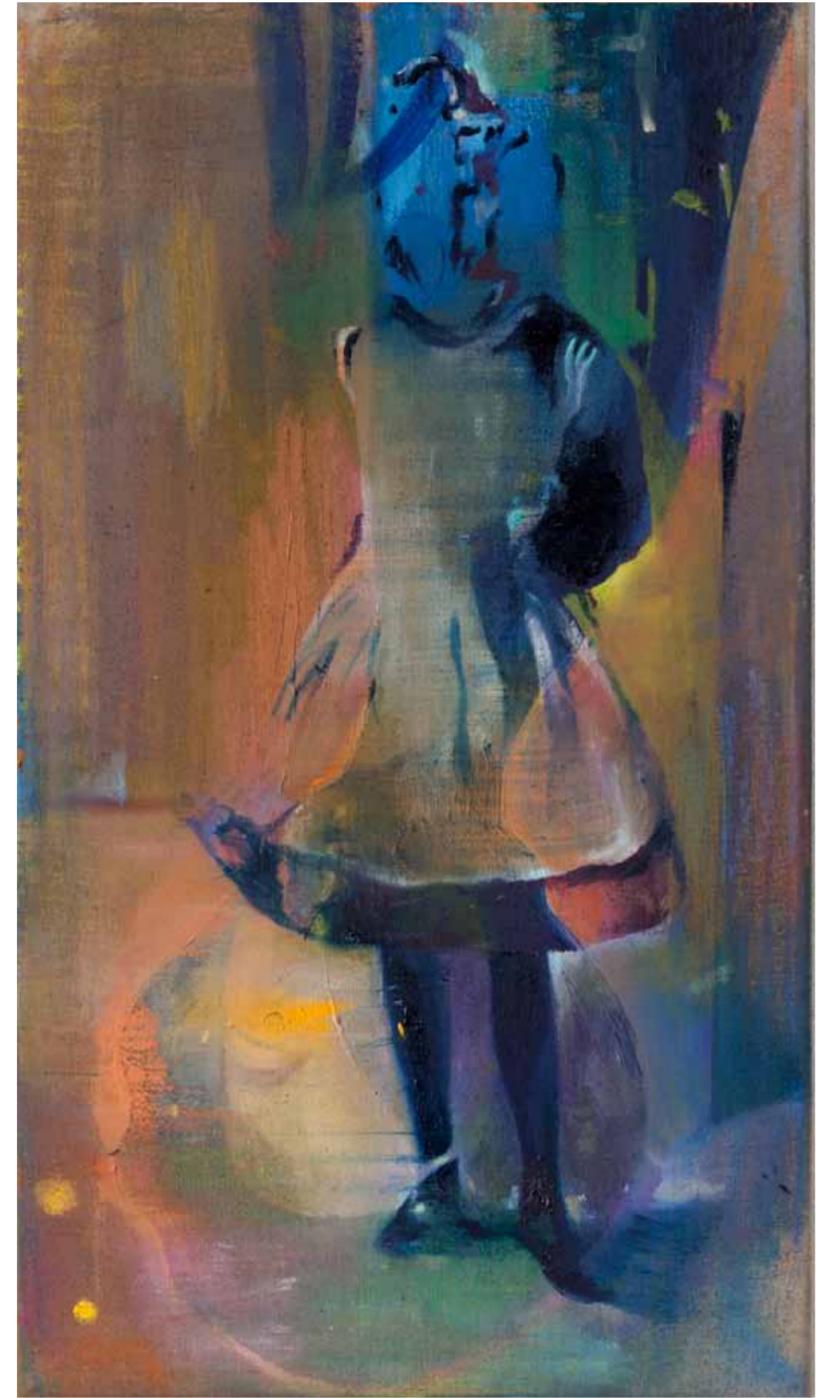
DECO MANNEQUIN

2013 - Oil, pigment on linen - 37 x 31 cm / 14,6 x 12,2 inches



THEATRE (WITH INGRID)

2011 - Oil on linen - 30 x 25 cm / 11.8 x 9.8 inches



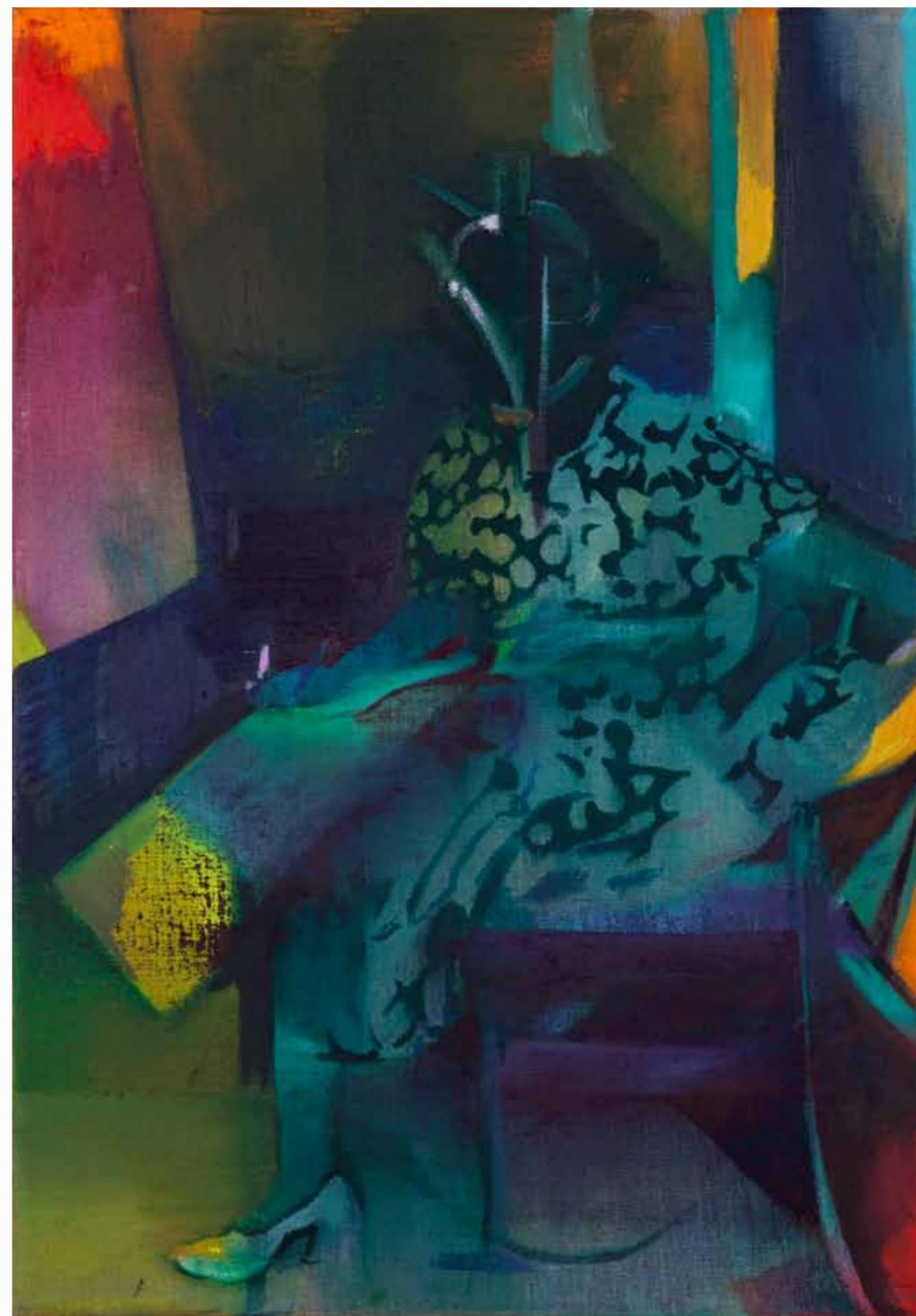
THE ACT

2011 - Oil, pigment on linen - 63 x 36 cm / 24.8 x 14.2 inches



EFIALTES

2011 - Oil, pigment on linen - 34 x 23 cm / 13.4 x 9.1 inches



GERDA

2013 - Oil, pigment, oilbar on linen - 50 x 35 cm / 19.7 x 13.8 inches