

# Thresholds: Ever Baldwin's Paintings

David J. Getsy

Ever Baldwin's paintings halt us at the edge. The voluptuous curves of the charred wood frames mime decorative excess in a dance with the painted images they do not contain so much as extend and mirror. Neither the inner painting nor the outer frame can be extricated from their symbiosis.

Only at a threshold do we have the ability both to look out and see in. To delay at the threshold is to inhabit that condition of the pivot and its potential. It can mark a beginning or an end. To tarry at the threshold is to perceive the overlaps of the what-was and the what-will-be. When we pause at a threshold, we are both inside and outside. I see Baldwin's paintings as attempts to conjure the condition of the threshold.

This aim is signaled most adamantly by the swaggering frames, which are bulbous and bumptious, refusing to be overlooked. There have been a lot of elaborate frames in the history of art, but we are often told to pay them no mind.<sup>1</sup> Barred from the hygienics of modernism, the decorative frame was seen as competition with or contagion of the image. By contrast, Baldwin's paintings embrace the thickness of their borders to the point where such hierarchies become moot. Vying for attention, the frames shape and direct any entry into their guarded canvases. Each has been blackened with soot and charring, a Japanese technique (*yakisugi*) for making wood exteriors resilient and waterproof. Unlike most carved picture frames, Baldwin's are hardened in a way that they could endure the outside, but they have arrived inside. This duality is no contradiction, since Baldwin's paintings, too, refuse to be merely contained within. Each unfurling frame has been carved by Baldwin as an extension of the painting it holds, with shared elements that traverse the borders between canvas and wood.

The painted forms push into this interlaced space of image and object, meeting us head on. The paint and canvas are, themselves, stubbornly dense and material. Baldwin modified conventions of oil paint, adding thickening agents such as wax and, most remarkably, marble dust. The wax suspends the pigment, resulting in the color no longer being merely a surface epidermis but a layer of tissue with depth. Baldwin remarked to me about the excitement of “sculpting with the paint, which becomes so thick that you can push it around and build areas up against each other. The edges are modeled.” In addition, the dust from stone gives a rough texture while also reducing any shine or reflection. Visually, shine and reflection call attention to surface exteriors (from bling to Brancusi), but Baldwin’s paintings are resolutely matte due to their incorporation of that classic material for sculpture—marble. Just as much as the frames carry forth lines and forms into three dimensions from two, the paint also presents itself as a girthy integument of pigment, wax, and stone. Again, Baldwin’s paintings arrest us at the threshold between their enmeshed sculptural and pictorial traits.

Baldwin’s two-step between image and object speaks to a central preoccupation in the long history of painting. It is a long-running cliché to say that a painting is like a window to be looked through, and this conceit has governed the technologies of illusionism that are a dominant story (among the many) of oil painting. In that tradition, the conventional rectangle of painting would signal its orientation—vertical for portrait, horizontal for landscape—but the supposed neutrality of this standardized format was meant to reinforce painting’s transparency as a window pane to the perspectival world behind it. Some

modernist abstraction sought to break that plane, and called our attention to materiality, the contingency of signs, and the ways that forms could be evocative without offering resemblance to the observed world. In turn, the canvas’s shape, for some, became more pronounced or irregular as a means to alert us to the object-nature of painting. In reaction, illusion, figuration, verisimilitude would often return to save painting as an image-making practice—and so on in the back and forth between pictorial illusionism and painted flatness and between verisimilitude and literalism. Across this (admittedly schematic, hopelessly simplified, and confessedly reductive) crib sheet of Western painting that I summarize here, I would suggest that these moves in the game of painting have been ruled by a set of binaries that are conjugated from a foundational one for all practices of representation—image/object. Many artists have signaled or subverted this binary, and the history of art could be told as a history of the choice of which direction to take at this threshold, asking if a painting is a *picture* or a *thing*. Baldwin’s paintings relish in compelling us to stay poised at this crossroads.

In their imagery, Baldwin’s works signal that pivot between abstract object and painted picture by looking to a formative early moment in the history of painterly abstraction. Baldwin’s willfully imperfect handling of lines, shapes, and forms recalls the early proponents of modernist American art of the 1910s and 1920s. Namely, it is the group of painters such as Marsden Hartley, Georgia O’Keeffe, Arthur Dove, John Marin, and Charles Demuth who departed from illusionism or depiction (and, sometimes, returned to it). They employed degrees of abstraction as means to evoke intellectual, spiritual, bodily, or emotional

resonances.<sup>2</sup> Baldwin cites these artists in the paintings, claiming “the idea there could be unseen forces captured in the work” as one line of connection to this earlier moment.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, Hartley’s humble intensity—whether in his unprecedented abstractions or his portraits of the people and terrain of coastal Maine—have been a guide to Baldwin, who also draws imagery from the daily lived experience of the rural landscape.<sup>4</sup> Hartley’s embrace of the patterns and look of folk and vernacular traditions has been echoed by Baldwin’s schematic forms that suggest but do not depict nature or people or places, exactly. They do not give us a recognizable picture or an observed world or body. Nevertheless, they flirt with the recognizable image. In particular, these paintings’ approach to abstraction is shadowed by the symmetries of the face, the figure, and the body. Even though none of these ever come into focus, the paintings seem to match our peering in with their own outward regard. The painted shapes are sometimes crudely yet carefully drawn, with a willful refusal of the perfect match or mirroring. The images seem poised between character and scene, so much so that as soon as one might determine to see a face, it becomes a set of parting curtains, a vegetal tendril, or merely the found knot in a wooden plank.

The productive multiplicity of the painted forms and suggested half-images is hard won. When I asked about how a painting comes about and develops, Baldwin told me that they often start as a landscape or a space, but then that coherence and perspective have to be thwarted and modified. When a painter looks out into a landscape, the impulse is to survey, to relate, and to position. The history of the genre is caught up with these

impositions of spatial control and order. Rather than that looking out, Baldwin collapses that space through focusing on a detail or a thing, which suggests something more tactile or bodily. A tree trunk in the distance, for instance, might become a fingertip and a branch an eyelid. Many of Baldwin’s canvases are square; they sometimes get rotated or flipped by the artist midway through the long process of painting them as a means to jostle any comfortable gravity or space. Changes and evolutions come from the images having been worked and reworked over long periods of time. Consequently, they are the result of many layers of that thick paint, with each image becoming the ground for the next. The sculptural qualities of the paint also result from this stacking and imbrication of successive epidermal layers, with each new image bearing the thick history of the transformation of the picture into many different possible things. “I don’t want to choose a point of view,” Baldwin said. This is not ambivalence, but rather an attempt to avoid the comfortable inside and outside of painting and the spaces it can conjure. These paintings have been through a lot to make it here.

The paintings’ transformations, however, do return to some familiar grounds. Baldwin often arrives at a bilateral symmetry for the images. Clearly



FIG.4  
*Untitled*, 2018  
 Oil on canvas,  
 styrofoam, spray  
 paint, and hydrocal  
 28 x 28 x 1 ½ inches  
 71.1 x 71.1 x 3.8 cm

divided into left and right, the paintings frequently call to mind (but do not depict) both opening curtains and facial forms. While they retain their commitment to abstraction and open-endedness, they give the feeling of both stages for performance and eyes peering back out. It's important to say that any simplistic hunting for these as depicted symbols is fruitless and vain, but nevertheless the paintings hauntingly suggest both being looked into and looking out. In both their imagery and their materiality, they work hard to keep us in between.

Baldwin characterized the paintings as “the closest to being inside looking out. I would like them to feel like looking out, under hair, but feeling like what it's like on the inside.” I take this to mean that the feeling Baldwin attempts to convey is of both being inside and outside—seeing outward and being seen. When we talked about this inhabitation of such a threshold, Baldwin brought up an earlier painting, from 2018 (fig.4): “I did a self-portrait that half was male and half was female, and the two profiles made a frontal view of a face.” This painting came from a daily experience of visualizing transition. “I was looking in the mirror all the time, doing the magic eye trick—seeing oneself as male or female.” This painting troubles the idea of the face as an image of the person, replacing it with an allegory of layered and successive multiplicity. It is not Janus-like; it is both two faces and one. This early painting was catalyzed by Baldwin's own acts of self-regard accumulating over time, but it also came to capture the complex experience of feeling looked at by others—of being seen and remaining not fully seen. This proved to be important, and the painting came to convey some of the sense of struggle with others' scrutiny. People rush to assign gender on first look, and this oppressive visual categorization is relentlessly enacted in interactions both major and minor.

Baldwin's self-portrait speaks to the endurance of those visual inquisitions. It captured the feeling of “being inside and wondering if you are seen the same. That is very much how I feel on a daily basis, and the painting launched a whole exploration for me.” In this, Baldwin's work can be understood as being in alignment with other transgender artists who have explored the lived experience of navigating others' visual scrutiny and taxonomic desire. Examples include Mark Aguhar, Cassils, Jonah Groeneboer, Gordon Hall, Jade Guanaro Kuriki-Olivo, Young Joon Kwak, and Erica Rutherford, to name only a few.<sup>5</sup> Across these varied practices, questions of inside and outside are not merely formal but rather are sites of intense political, emotional, and conceptual attention. Baldwin's development of a painting practice that conjures the condition of the threshold can be seen, similarly, as a mining of the history of painting for its resources to vex the idea that merely seeing is knowing.

In this exhibition, we have some of the paintings that followed the self-portrait and that bear the traces of its composite face. This line of descent is perhaps why so many of them combine bilateral symmetry and faciality. But, the paintings are much more than that. Strategically, they keep us at that pivot point in which our seeing is slowed by these compacted, bulky paintings that hint that they are both closed to and look out at us. These newer paintings are no longer self-portraits, and each channels a different situation, memory, character, or emotion. With their bordering sculptural extensions and their citations to the practice and history of painted illusions and abstractions, Baldwin's paintings demand that we pause in a place of undecidability and potential. They challenge us with the question of just what it is we think we are looking to see.

1. For a defense of the importance of frames, the classic study is Henry Heydenryk, *The Art and History of Frames: An Inquiry into the Enhancement of Paintings* (New York: J. H. Heneman, 1963). See also Nicholas Penny, *A Closer Look at Frames* (London: The National Gallery, 2010). While simplified frames became the norm for much modernist art, the frame's relationship to painting had been an important arena for experimentation by earlier modern artists. See Eva Mendgen, *In Perfect Harmony: Picture + Frame 1850–1920*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum / Waanders Uitgevers, 1995).
2. See, for instance, Jonathan Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory: The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); and Rachael Z. DeLue, *Arthur Dove: Always Connect* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016)
3. It is also worth noting that these American modernist painters also explored synergistic relationships between their paintings and frames, a practice which has informed Baldwin's work. This tendency has been featured, for instance, in exhibitions about John Marin (*John Marin's Watercolors: A Medium for Modernism*, Art Institute of Chicago, 2011) and Georgia O'Keeffe (*Preserving a Legacy: Frames of Mine*, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, 2016–2019). On Marin, see Bobby Sexton, "John Marin's Frame of Mind," Art Institute of Chicago blog (28 January 2011), <https://www.artic.edu/articles/138/john-marins-frame-of-mind>.
4. In conversation, Baldwin mentioned specifically the autobiography of Marsden Hartley, *Somehow a Past*, ed. Susan Elizabeth Ryan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
5. For discussion, see Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, eds., *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), esp. Che Gossett, "Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility," 183–90. See also Cyle Metzger and Kirstin Ringelberg, "Prismatic Views: A Look at the Growing Field of Transgender Art and Visual Culture Studies." *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 2 (August 2020): 159–70. For individual artists, see David J. Getsy, "Seeing Commitments: Jonah Groeneboer's Ethics of Discernment." *Temporary Art Review*, March 8, 2016, <https://temporaryartreview.com/seeing-commitments-jonah-groeneboers-ethics-of-discernment/>; Gordon Hall, "Reading Things: On Gender, Sculpture and Relearning How to See," *Walker Art Center Blog* (August 8, 2016), <https://walkerart.org/magazine/gordon-hall-transgender-hb2-bathroom-bill>; Eva Hayward, "Painted Camera, 'Her,'" *e-flux* no. 117 (April 2021), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/117/385172/painted-camera-her/>; Young Joon Kwak, "Mark Aguhar," *Brooklyn Rail*, July–August 2016; Ross Simonini, "Puppies Puppies: Trials and Transitions" [interview], *ArtReview* (1 January 2020), <https://artreview.com/ar-january-february-simonini-puppies-puppies/>; Jeanne Vaccaro, "Embodied Risk: Cassils," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 112–16.





52



53

*Flight Gate*, 2022  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
47 x 43 x 5 inches  
119.4 x 109.2 x 12.7 cm



58



59

*Champion*, 2022  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
34 x 34 x 6 inches  
86.4 x 86.4 x 15.2 cm



60



61

*Bread and Butter, 2022*  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
49 x 42 x 4 inches  
124.5 x 106.7 x 10.2 cm



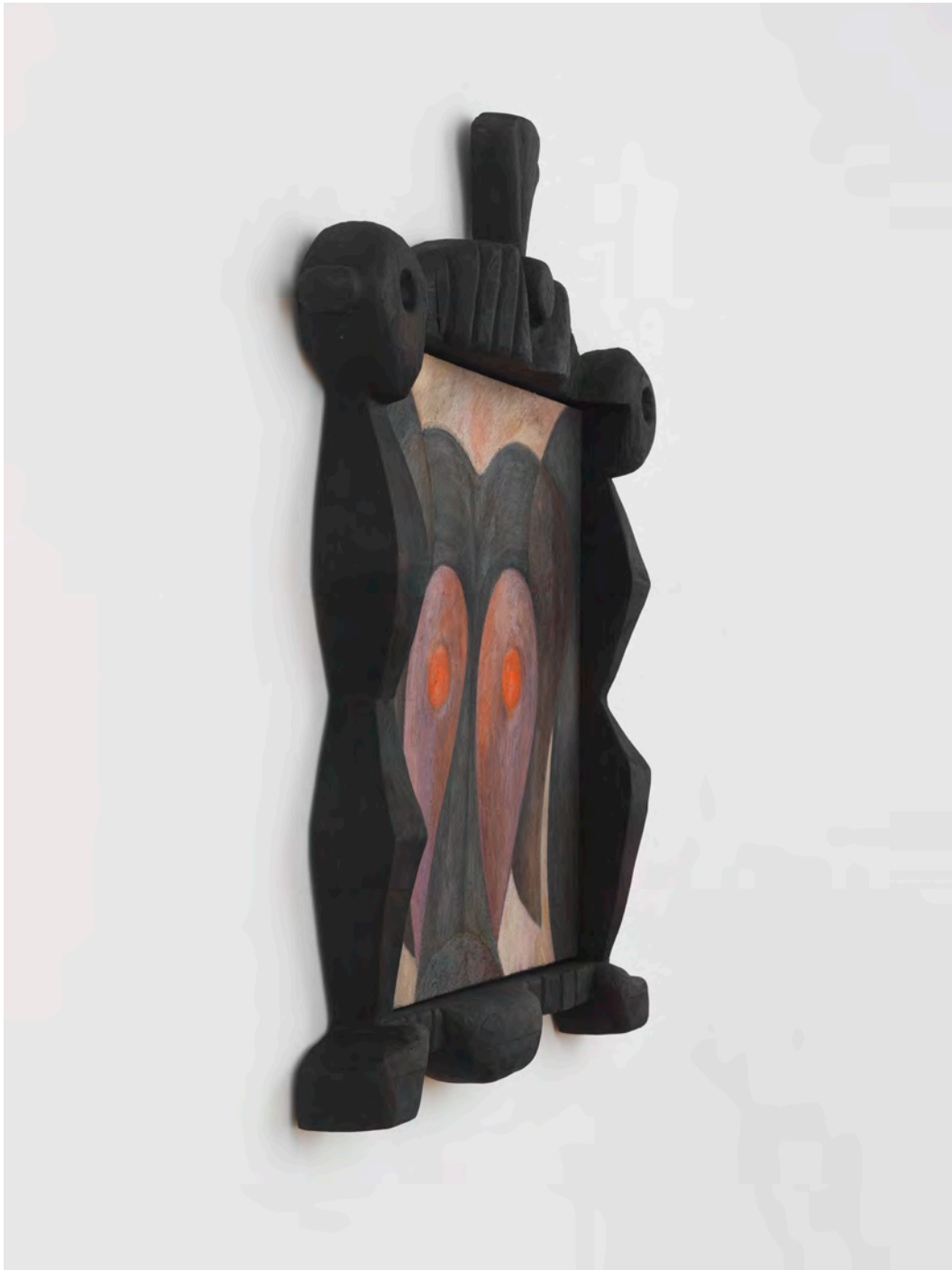


62



*Underside, 2022*  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
39 x 25 x 4 inches  
99.1 x 63.5 x 10.2 cm

63



64



65

*Momentary Split*, 2022  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
48 x 44 x 4 inches  
121.9 x 111.8 x 10.2 cm

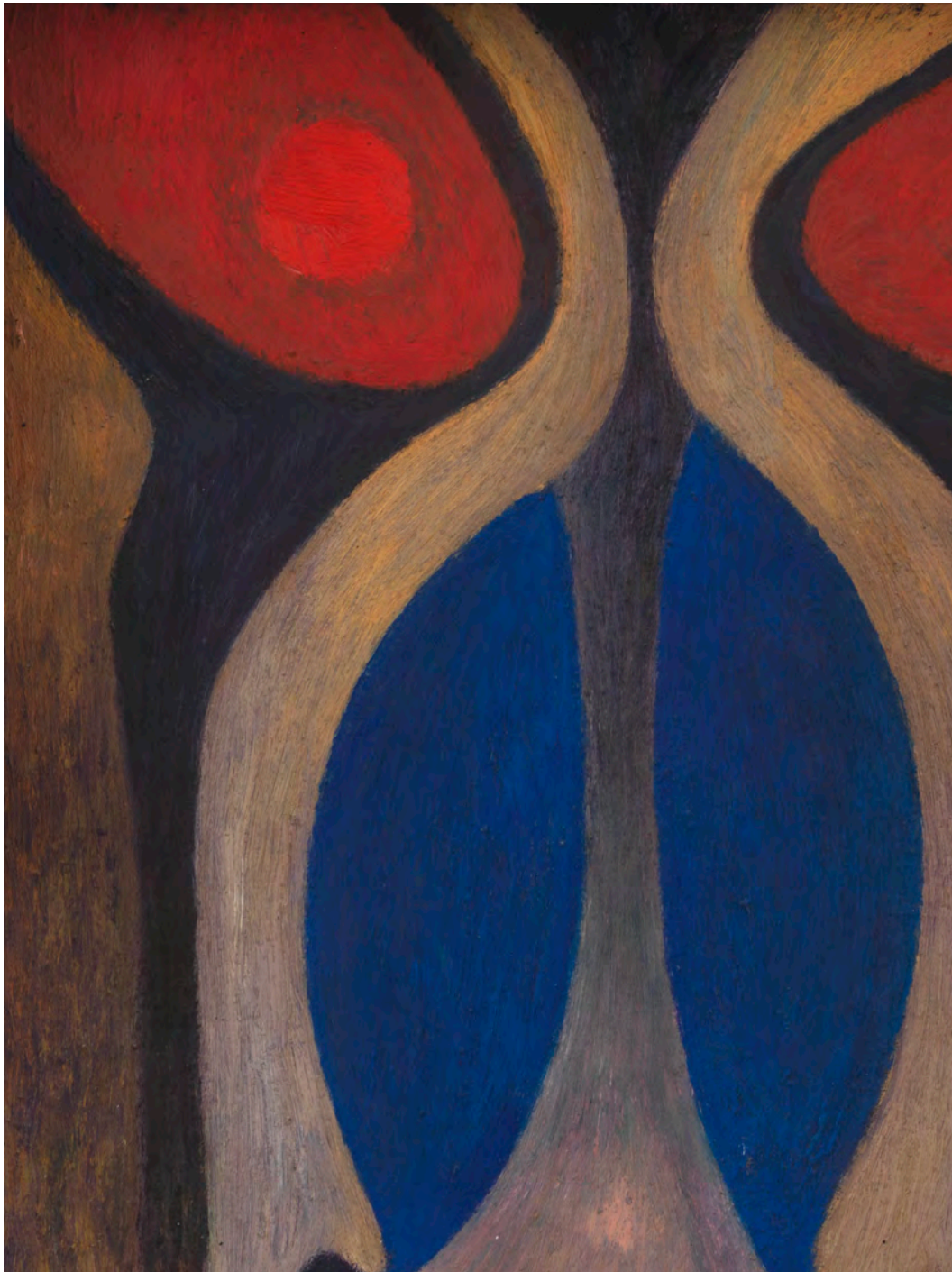


*Hatching*, 2021  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
24 x 22 x 4 inches  
60.9 x 56.8 x 10.2 cm



*Boards, 2020*  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
24 x 26 x 4 inches  
60.9 x 66 x 10.2 cm





80

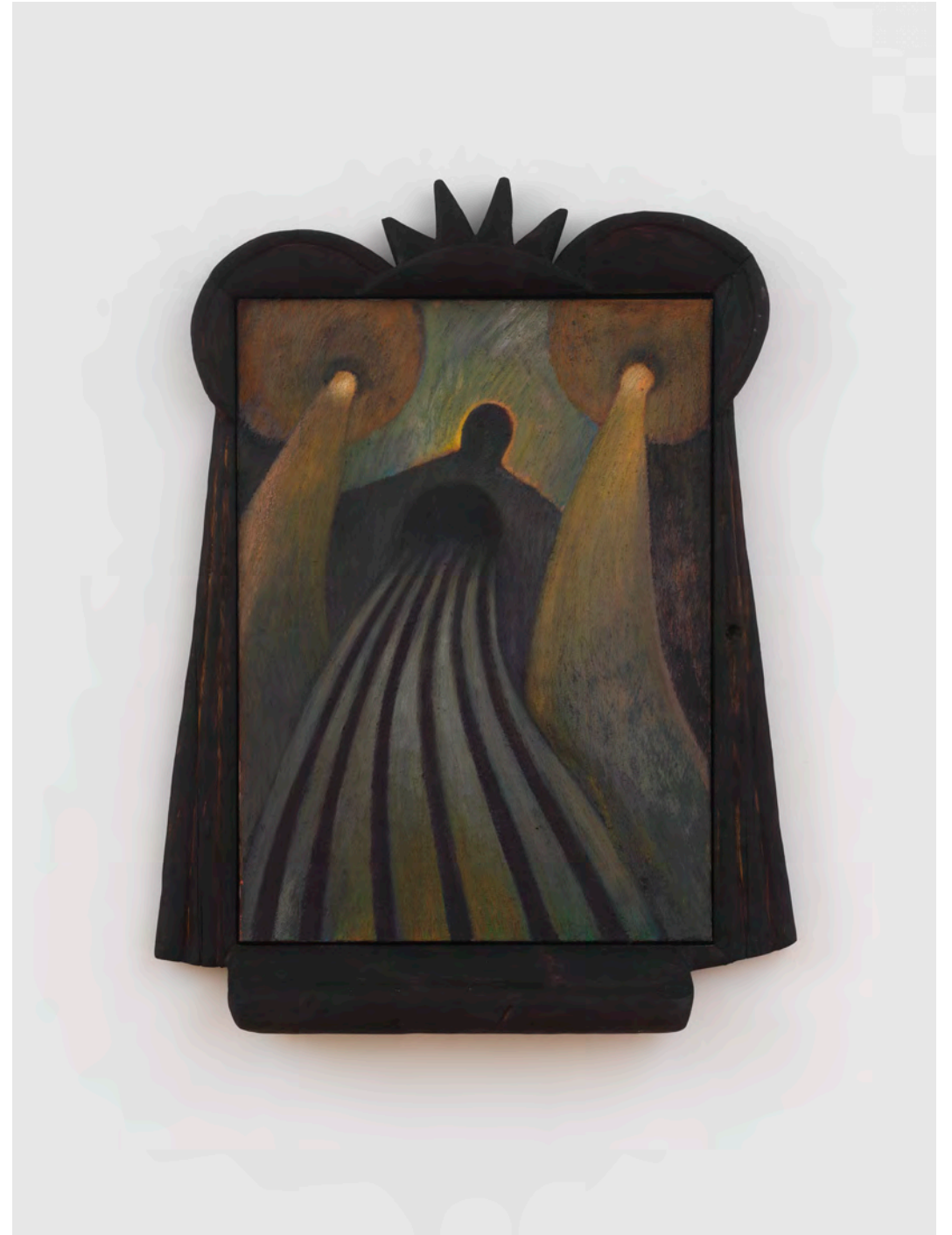


81

*New Fit, 2022*  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
30 x 26 x 6 inches  
76.2 x 66 x 15.2 cm



102



103

*Channel*, 2022  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
40 x 30 x 4 inches  
101.6 x 76.2 x 10.2 cm





86



*Skateaway, 2022*  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
42 x 22 x 4 inches  
106.7 x 55.9 x 10.2 cm

87



April, 2021  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
27 x 30 x 4 inches  
68.6 x 76.2 x 10.2 cm





108



109

March, 2022  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
42 x 33 x 6 inches  
106.7 x 83.8 x 15.2 cm



124



125

*Hold your own, 2021*  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
36 x 34 x 4 inches  
91.4 x 86.4 x x 10.2 cm



126



*LouLou*, 2021  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
26 x 30 x 4 inches  
66 x 76.2 x 10.2 cm

127



# Ever Baldwin Down the Line

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Cover: *Your Contribution*, 2022  
Oil on canvas in charred wood frame  
52 x 32 x 4 inches  
132.1 x 81.3 x 10.2 cm