

This interview took place on 26 August 2019 in Christina Quarles' studio in Los Angeles.

# David J. Getsy

I think we should just dive in and talk about your process. How does one of your paintings begin and unfold?

# Christina Quarles

I don't start with sketches or any sort of preconceived idea. It begins pretty abstractly, a lot of fragmented shapes and abstract brush strokes. I try to resist the urge to complete the figure. I slow down the process by really looking at what I've laid down, and challenging myself to complete the form in an unexpected way. As the figure starts to get more fleshed out, I will photograph the work and bring it into Adobe Illustrator to sketch on top of the photograph at that stage of the painting. That's usually when I start to bring in the patterns and the planes and the areas that really start to interrupt the figure. It's a way for me to have the freedom to explore anything and everything without doing too much that will compromise the larger areas of raw canvas and the piece.

#### DG

You've often talked about how you come from a drawing background and how one of the initial challenges was trying to figure out how to translate drawing into painting. This is one of the reasons you paint on raw canvas and leave large areas of it exposed in the final paintings. It is interesting to me that you start with this mode of drawing and then move to a screen-based version in order to fully realise the paintings. When planes and patterns are introduced in this second stage in Adobe Illustrator, that's where the indication of a pictorial space starts to really happen. It's the dialogue with the flatness of the digital screen that allows you to get to pictorial illusion rather than just drawing on a surface.

#### C

Exactly. So much of the work on canvas happens in relation to the scale of my body. Because of this, the bodies stay the same size and they have to fit within the frame. The brushstrokes are largely 'shoulder scale' in the paintings. In the screen space, however, I will sometimes lay down a digital mark that's supposed to just be a stand-in for something that I'll paint by hand, but I'll actually fall in love with this digital squiggle or stroke. I'll then render that in the physical space of the canvas. Because these marks were made on a trackpad, they are scaled up 'finger scale' strokes.

## DG

Why does it always end up or start with a body?

#### C

I started working with a figure when I was 12 when I was mistakenly put into an adult figure-drawing class. I'm now familiar enough with the mechanics of the figure and with the laws of drawing it, but also from living within a body. I can play with the figure because I know how to situate it in space. I always lay down the figures first and add the backgrounds, planes and patterns later.

Previous and overleaf Installation views, The Hepworth Wakefield

Opposite
By Tha Skin of Our Tooth (detail), 2019



## DG

It's even a stretch to call them figures. They have all of these cues that remind us of bodies and that we can think of in terms of the language of figuration. There might be a particular body part that we can recognise; you focus on hands and feet, for instance. But we don't have the bounded, self-contained figure that was so important to the history of Western art.

CQ Exactly.

# DG

The figures, if we're going to call them that, are also never singular – never just one. There's often this compounding. Sometimes this reads as multiple bodies; sometimes it reads as one body unfolding in different moments. They promise but withhold the figure. This play is what makes them so dynamic, in my view. One gets lost in the tangle of things that we're assuming are arms or legs – elements that might otherwise be seen as just a stroke of paint or a drawn line.

## CQ

I like to play with the desire I think we all have to complete the image and, whenever possible, to complete it as a figure, or to imagine a face where there is none. I look for opportunities within the figure where body parts can start to morph into other body parts. I think that comes from leaving every mark on the canvas and then reacting to those marks. I start from this place of abstraction and then pull it into an image, and then pull apart that image again. I like to play with using the least amount of information possible that will make the viewer draw a conclusion, but then presenting information that can contradict that conclusion. Sometimes someone asks, 'Is it always two women in your paintings?' and I'll reply: 'Well, is it always two, and is it always women?' There's actually not a lot of information to support their argument, other than, maybe, there being four boobs in a painting. I always find that fascinating. For me, I feel like the challenge is trying to find ways that nudge people enough in the direction of questioning their initial assumptions, rather than allowing them to walk away with those same assumptions, because that would be worst-case scenario, if people could just walk away with what they came to the painting with.

# DG

That's also the thing about the human form. It is such a privileged image in the history of art, and people already think they know it and how it's operating. And if more than one body is suggested (and if there's no representation of clothing), then it must be about sex. Your paintings activate but frustrate any such presumptions. The paintings' suggestions and their contradictions generate a lot of projections onto their forms. Perhaps we could pivot to talking about hands and feet, because those are, more often than not, the most recognisable elements of your paintings.

#### CÇ

I often say that my paintings are portraits of living within a body, rather than portraits of looking onto a body. A lot of the things that interest me about gender, race and sexuality are things that I want to convey through the sense of living in a racialised body, a gendered body, or a queer body. Oftentimes that sense of living within your body doesn't at all line up with what it is to look onto your body or to look onto another body. One of the devices I've used is to emphasise the hands and the feet. I think a lot about how we are able to see our own hands and feet as the outer most extensions of ourselves. The faces are often more vague, because I find that one of the disadvantages we have going through the world is this unknowability of our own face. We see others as these complete and whole beings represented by this face that we don't ourselves have.

I think we're in an interesting moment with painting. This return to the figure is often by people who are able to tell their own stories for the first time. So it's an assertion of this visibility that didn't exist before, say, for the

black body painted by a black artist. But I feel like my work is this assertion of anything but a fixed visibility. It's an assertion of the unknowing of yourself, but also intimate discovery of yourself.

So I guess also what these figures are doing is they're becoming – and also unbecoming – themselves. It's like they're coming in and out of focus, and that is a very intimate thing to happen, especially if it's done around other people.

# DG

Our own bodies come in and out of focus all the time, and it is important to think about why living in a body is different than dealing with others' bodies.

CC

Nobody knows you better than you know yourself, but you're always fragmented, even to yourself. You know the continuum of yourself as well as a lack of continuity, because you've experienced yourself in so many different situations. But we experience another person in a fixed relationship to ourselves.

#### DC

That's why I think the choice, generally, you make to avoid the face is so important. Neurologically, we're predetermined to look for and respond to faces. By leaving them out, it allows a different kind of relationship to the figures that you paint. It might seem like a contradiction, but there's something really intimate about the paintings, in part because there's no one looking back from the painting at us. This allows us to get lost in the confusion of one form to the next, which is more like our experience of ourselves than of other people.

CQ Exactly.

## DG

Again, we draw on the accumulated history of having a body. It reminds me of Auguste Rodin, who was famous for fragmenting the body and implying skeletal structures that couldn't exist. One of the reasons for his popularity is that this allowed viewers to look at his sculptures less as characters, mythologies, or stories and more directly as bodies in action. He emphasised the way the body felt from the inside as well, by fragmenting and twisting and accessing the viewer's proprioception. Proprioception is not just the sense of the body from the inside. It's also an accumulated knowledge that accrues from birth onward. We learn what happens when we twist an arm a certain way, or stretch. We learn what is comfortable and uncomfortable - and how that changes over time. It's all very different depending on the particularities of one's own body, because we have different capacities and histories. But Rodin used his extreme twisting, fragmentation and contortions of his figurative sculptures as a means of addressing viewers through their accumulated proprioceptive vocabularies. You no longer needed to know mythology or the Bible or history to understand a statue. You needed to know what it felt like to be in a body.

#### CO

One of the things that made me interested in drawing the figure from such an early age was the idea that I could relate to the feeling of what I was drawing. Mr Gatto, my figure-drawing teacher in high school who was really influential to me, said that, when you're drawing a model, to imagine the pain and the strain on the hip in this particular position and what it would be like to hold this position for 20 minutes. He wanted us to emphasise that in the drawing, and

to not treat all parts of the body the same. Because the model has all their weight on one leg and one hip, that area needs to be drawn differently than the arm that's relaxed on their side, and the hair needs to be drawn differently than the face.

### DG

That's great advice. I have never heard it said so clearly. Now, let's talk about something other than the figures, because there are other things in the paintings, too. As we were saying before, you use partial planes to establish space. Some are painted; some are raw canvas. With them, you give just enough to indicate that there might be a pictorial space in which these compound figures exist. Importantly, the planes are often highly patterned as well. They're not just establishing space.

# CQ

The patterned planes are a newer element to the work, relative to the figures, and they are continually being influenced by my daily experiences and the things that I drive past on the way to the studio, or just observe on Instagram. Your brain can easily latch on to a pattern, and it feels comfortable and it eases you into something. The pattern I use the most is a repeated daisy-like, five-pointed flower pattern. I look for patterns that can offer the same sort of punning or double meaning that can happen with written language. The daisy pattern can represent flowers in nature, like in a field or on a body of water, but it can also function as a printed image of flowers, like on a bed-spread or a tablecloth. The pattern anchors the figures to something that feels really solid, but the visual punning of the pattern places that solid thing in multiple locations.

## DG

I love this idea of the flower printed pattern that can be both a field of flowers and a bedspread or the tablecloth, suggesting at the same time very different scenes. In the history of painting, as you know, patterns have been considered as an enemy of pictorial illusion (with a couple of important exceptions), because when something is heavily patterned it calls attention to surface. Patterns hide what's underneath. That's why we wear patterns, sometimes, right? In the flat field of a painting, a bold pattern can perform the opposite operation from carving out pictorial space. It calls attention to the painting's flatness. In your paintings, you capitalise on this push and pull. What's interesting with all of these receding, overlapping and interpenetrating planes and patterns in your work is that they all seem to be performing as two or more of these options at the same time. It's as if they are suggesting spaces and defeating them at the same time.

#### CC

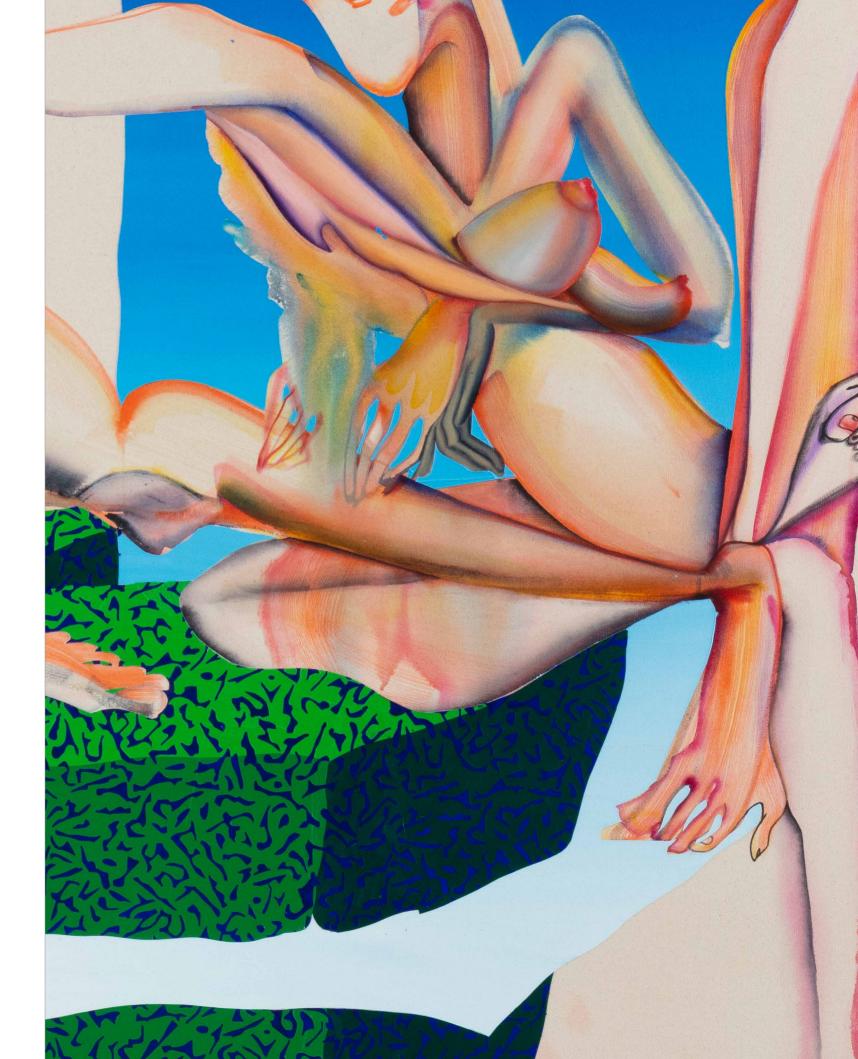
I would say more recently I've been playing with the idea of individual works having visual punning or double meaning more explicitly rendered in the piece. For instance, in *Carefully Taut* (pp.18–19) there's the two transparent triangles on the floor that turns the raw canvas into a plane that bends on top of the floor. It's like a transparent edge that suddenly makes the whole plane of the canvas rest on top of another plane behind it.

# DG

There is a theme we've already touched upon, but I want to return to: every element in your paintings – whether it's one of these planes or one of the figures – is multiple. So, each one is also more than one. Strategically, there's a doubling, or echoing, in each element. This clears different pathways that we can take from the same form. You present these as options for the same thing being seen in two or more ways.

## C

That is an important thing that I try to work towards, and it's very difficult to not fall into a binary way of thinking and to get to an idea of multiplicity or



multifacetedness that doesn't just swing to another side of the pendulum. I do find that punning and this play with how things can change within contexts have been a way to step into something that doesn't have to be fully one or the other, because it's kind of both/and.

# DG

Maybe this would be a good point to talk about some of the larger priorities that inform these formal manoeuvres. There is an urgency in this idea of being both / and, or not. You have talked about this work in relationship to your own personal history and also to larger questions about how our presumptions about gender, sexuality and race are limiting. These moves in the paintings aren't just pictorial gains. To perform how the same thing can be read in different ways is to defend a position that evades a binary characterisation.

This definitely comes from understanding my own set of identities - how I've come to terms with certain things and how I haven't really figured out how to describe others. Context affects how I am seen. For instance, my sexuality becomes readable because I identify as a cisgender woman, and I'm married to somebody who identifies as a cisqender woman, so that kind of clears that whole thing up when we're seen together. But, because I don't walk around with my parents every day, there's not as clear an understanding of my race. I'm usually misread as white, although my father is black and my mother is white. So, I've had a much more difficult time reconciling what my racial identity is. I have found no fixed point to fully express my sense of race, including the idea of being mixed race, or even biracial, even that doesn't really explain my experience, because I look very light skinned. So, I don't really guite fall into the same category of mixed or biracial as other people who are half black and half white, or as other people that have completely different sets of racial make-ups based on their parents.

So when I'm around white people, that's when I most feel like a person of colour. But if I'm in a space carved out for the black community, that's when I feel the most white. That's when I think maybe I shouldn't be here. I think we use groups of solidarity to feel the most like ourselves because they are spaces where we don't have to explain ourselves. You can have a conversation without having to get everyone on the same page. Sometimes you want to be around just queer people so you can talk about other things or have a more nuanced conversation rather than having to explain to the room the big picture of being queer, It's in those moments, especially with my race, that I feel the most othered, so it's actually these spaces that are carved out to make you feel the most like yourself where I feel the most different from everybody else.

Because of my race, I feel an ongoing questioning of most aspects of my identity. I've been in a position where I've had to guestion my race more often than somebody who has two parents that identify as the same race. I've had to ask what my own terms are, because no existing terms really exist to encapsulate my experience. The drive that I've had to make art has come from wanting to think through my own set of terms. At first, I tried to do this with language. As an undergraduate, I wrote my thesis about a multiply situated racial identity, but I found language to be a difficult way of getting to what I felt. One of the interesting things about using visual language is that it doesn't necessarily have as linear a read as verbal language. When you're looking at an image, things can exist simultaneously.

With painting, simultaneity can happen, and that opens you up to not having to fully rely on a binary, or a straightforward way of explaining something. You can use many different modes all at once, and then start to pull apart different relationships. So I feel that my stake in the matter has always been wanting to try to come to terms with the aspects of my lived experience that have not been fully encapsulated by language.

### DG

Earlier, we were talking about the felt experience of one's body versus relating to other bodies in the world and the potential for a blurring of the boundary

between interior and the exterior. This relates directly to the social and political issues that arise when one's exterior does not match the expectations of others - or when it does not fit the normative protocols of recognition and categorisation. That experience of the contradiction or oscillation between an account based on the outside and an account from the inside is what the paintings dramatise. But it's not that these forms can be anything or that they are endlessly open. They perform simultaneity among specific recognitions or readings.

It can be tempting to assume that it would be better to unfix identity and to exist in a multifaceted way. Theoretically, I see that, but my lived experience is one that has made it difficult to fully embrace it. Language is understood because we share in its meaning. To invent your own language that nobody else knows would be very isolating - it would fall apart as being a way of communicating. When I was trying to unpack my racial identity. I realised that I was not mixed, I was not this hybrid language that only I speak. I was multiply situated, I speak both the language of my black ancestors and the language of my white ancestors.

The profound need to be social is something that gets forgotten about when we talk about the idealistic idea of unfixing identity. We all have this deep need to be understood, to be social, and to have community. We often fracture and fragment and self-censor ourselves in order to be in part of a community. That solidarity is so much better than being isolated. I just think it is more complicated than reducing it to an idea that fixed is bad, unfixed is good.

### DG

We all have to sacrifice part of our individual complexities in order to just be in the same room with other people. For, whatever that room is at the time, everyone individually is more than one thing. Over the space of a day - let alone a lifetime - there is a need to constantly focus on or leave by the wayside aspects of our self in any given situation. I agree with you that this narrative of the unfixing of identity is very seductive to a lot of people, as is the metaphor of fluidity. But fluidity implies that everything is constantly in flux. Your paintings don't propose fluidity. They model a stance in which each element can be more than one thing simultaneously. But it's not that everything is unfixed. They show how the same element can be two or more things at once. It's contextual, as you said, but it's not like that element (or that person) is at the whim of the viewer. Aspects of the complexity of the figures and the spaces lock into the different ways we might try to read or recognise it, but this is not a free-for-all. We are presented with distinct options to weigh, to keep in focus, to let go, to hold dear. Because we can see the same thing doing two different things we also see what we lose when we read in a singular way. This is a way to allegorise identity that allows for individual particularity and complexity - but it doesn't imply a lack of solidity either. For me, this is what is exciting when thinking about gender in your paintings. Gender is workable and transformable, but it's a mistake to equate an individual's achievement of specificity or uniqueness with the anything-or-everything that the metaphor of fluidity often implies. There are moments of adaptation in relationship to the situation and the day, but by and large an individual's gender is consistent with who they know themselves to be. That's not an unfixed identity. Perhaps these concepts such as unfixing and hybridity and fluidity - that at one point made a lot of sense as a mode of resistance to binaries - aren't always very good to describe the code switching, the positionality, and the complexity of day-to-day life. Nor do these metaphors capture the ways in which identities are hard-won, can be utterly particular, and must be resilient in order to navigate the conditions of recognition and, hopefully, community.

Painting is not a space to resolve these contradictions, but perhaps it can express them. You were talking about painting's visual language operating in a different way than written language. The encounter with painting keeps us in a bodily experience of looking and perceiving, whereas with written language we move in a different way. If painting can model the cohabitation of contradictions

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of flatness and depth, of divergent figures and spaces, of one body and many bodies, of all of this – if all of those parts can live together within a painting, then maybe we can too. In this way, it can be a space of respite.

CO

I think about the paintings as spaces of opportunity for people who maybe have never had to think about the contradiction of their identity. But also, they work differently for people who are constantly grappling with that contradiction and not quite fitting in – like that idea that I was talking about before of self-censoring or self-fragmenting in order to be in a community. For those people, I like to hope that the paintings are these moments of rest where you can fall into a visual language that, like you say, does not solve the problem but that represents the contradictions. My hope is that the paintings could be a space for that and can be a respite from articulation. Again, the reason we self-fracture and compartmentalise is so that we can be understood and articulated within a community. To visualise something like that contradiction is a way of allowing understanding to happen within an un-understandable space. At least, I hope it does.

# DG

Your paintings are not didactic about these things, and one of the things I really like about them is they are not trying to make a singular statement about identity. They're trying to capture its messiness.

CÇ

I always think of the ideas of race being more located in the planes and in the fracturing and the fragmenting rather than in the skin colour. If I'm being honest about my experience of race, my skin colour is just a small part of that experience and there are so many other things that influence my own understanding of my race. So really, it's come from this long period of trying to be as honest as possible about my own actual experience rather than leaning on stock language or stock visual language.

# DG

So, when you think about a completed painting and start to map it on to some of these larger political and social questions around race, in particular, or gender or sexuality, these ideas rest in the planes that fragment the figure? It's where the figures get interrupted. No matter how intertwined one or more of them might be, this is where the world comes in.

CÇ

It's this sense of place being displaced. When the planes bisect the figures, it's a way of locating and dislocating the figures. They situate the figure, but they also fragment the figure from itself. It's just enough information to be familiar, but it's also open-ended enough to be multiply situating. This splicing and fragmentation is, for me, the articulation of my experience of race because that is the way it feels for me.

I feel like the reason why there's been a response to my paintings that's not just from people who have racially multiple parents is that we all, on some level, experience this fragmentation and search for recognition. It's just that there are certain categories of identity that are so reinforced in our language and our society, like gender and race and sexuality. Things that – if you don't fall within a clear category – you are constantly being reminded of it, in medical forms, loan applications, the airport. I think generally speaking, people tend to exceed the boundaries of definition.



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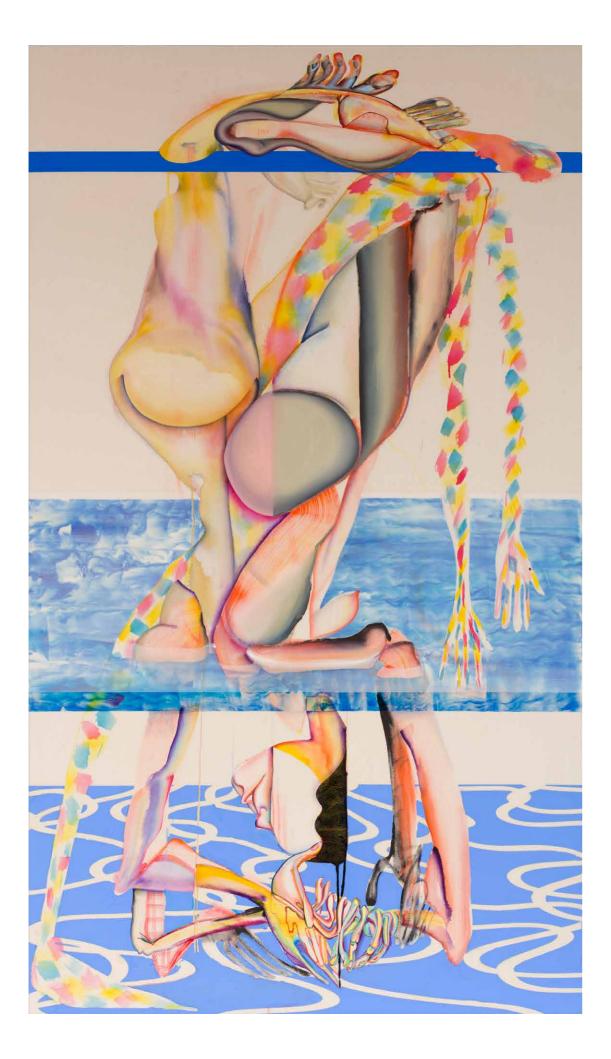


For a Flaw/For a Fall/For the End, 2018



Let Us In Too (Tha Light), 2018

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# **Christina Quarles**

Christina Quarles currently lives and works in Los Angeles, USA. She received an MFA from the Yale School of Art in 2016. She was the inaugural recipient of the 2019 Pérez Art Museum Miami Prize. Recent solo and group exhibitions include Christina Quarles / MATRIX 271, UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley (2018); Made in L.A., Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2018); Trigger: Gender as a Tool and as a Weapon, New Museum, New York (2017–18); Fictions, The Studio Museum, New York (2017); and Reconstitution, LAXART, Los Angeles (2017). Her work is in the collections of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Tate Modern, London; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

# **Andrew Bonacina**

Andrew Bonacina is Chief Curator at The Hepworth Wakefield where he has curated exhibitions including Lynda Benglis; Enrico David; Disobedient Bodies; Anthony McCall: Solid Light Works; Magdalene Odundo: The Journey of Things; Magali Reus: Particle of Inch; and Alina Szapocznikow: Human Landscapes.

# David J. Getsy

David J. Getsy is the Goldabelle McComb Finn
Distinguished Professor of Art History at the School of
the Art Institute of Chicago. His books include Abstract
Bodies: Sixties Sculpture in the Expanded Field of Gender
(Yale 2015), Scott Burton: Collected Writings on Art
and Performance, 1965–1975 (Soberscove 2012), Rodin:
Sex and the Making of Modern Sculpture (Yale 2010),
and the collection of artists' writings, Queer, for the
Whitechapel Gallery's 'Documents of Contemporary Art'
book series (MIT 2016).

# Works

2–3	Casually Cruel Tate: Presented by Peter Dubens 2019	2018	Acrylic on canvas	195.5 × 243.8 cm
4–5	For a Flaw/For a Fall/For the End Courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias Gallery	2018	Acrylic on canvas	139.7 × 243.8 cm
9	Let Us In Too (Tha Light) Peter Dubens Art Collection	2018	Acrylic on canvas	182.9 × 152.4 cm
12–13	Sumday (We Gunna Rest on) Sunday Aïshti Foundation, Beirut, Lebanon	2019	Acrylic on canvas	182.9 × 243.8 × 5.1 cm
14–15	Yew Brought it Up Aïshti Foundation, Beirut, Lebanon	2018	Acrylic on canvas	139.7 × 218.4 cm
16–17	By Tha Skin of Our Tooth	2019	Acrylic on canvas	195.6 × 243.8 × 5.1 cm
18-19	Carefully Taut	2019	Acrylic on canvas	213.4 × 243.8 × 5.1 cm
20	Cut to Ribbons	2019	Acrylic on canvas	243.8 × 139.7 × 5.1 cm
42-43	Two Can Easily Become a Crowd	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
44-45	I Kno, I Kno, I Kno, I Kno	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
46-47	When You Start to Fade	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
48-49	Check	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
50-51	Hold Up	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
52-53	No One Knows	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
54-55	It'll be OK	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
56-57	Rise Up	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
58-59	Awww Shucks	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
60-61	Let Tha Sunshine In	2019	Ink on paper	33 × 48.3 cm
	All courtesy of the artist, Pilar Corrias, London and Regen Projects, Los Angeles			

# Image credits

Photography: Fredrik Nilsen Studio Installation photography: Lewis Ronald

26	Willem de Kooning, <i>Woman I</i>	1950–52	Oil on canvas	193 × 147 cm
(top)	Collection Museum of Modern Art, New York © The Willem de Kooning Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and DACS, London 2019. Photo: Scala			
26	Henri Matisse, <i>Blue Nude</i>	1907	Oil on canvas	92.1 × 140.3 cm
(bottom)	Artwork: © Succession H. Matisse / DACS 2019 Image: The Baltimore Museum of Art: The Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland, BMA 1950.228. Photo: Mitro Hood			
27	Francis Bacon, Study for Crouching Nude	1952	Oil on canvas	198 × 137 cm
(top)	Collection Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved, DACS / Artimage 2019. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd			
27	David Hockney, Two Men in a Shower	1963	Oil on canvas	152.4 × 152.4 cm
(bottom)	Collection Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art, Oslo © David Hockney			

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Front cover: Detail from *Casually Cruel*, 2018 Tate: Presented by Peter Dubens 2019

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