



Sabine Meyer

IS-CITY

LATE PAINTINGS

An exhibition to commemorate the
first anniversary of his passing

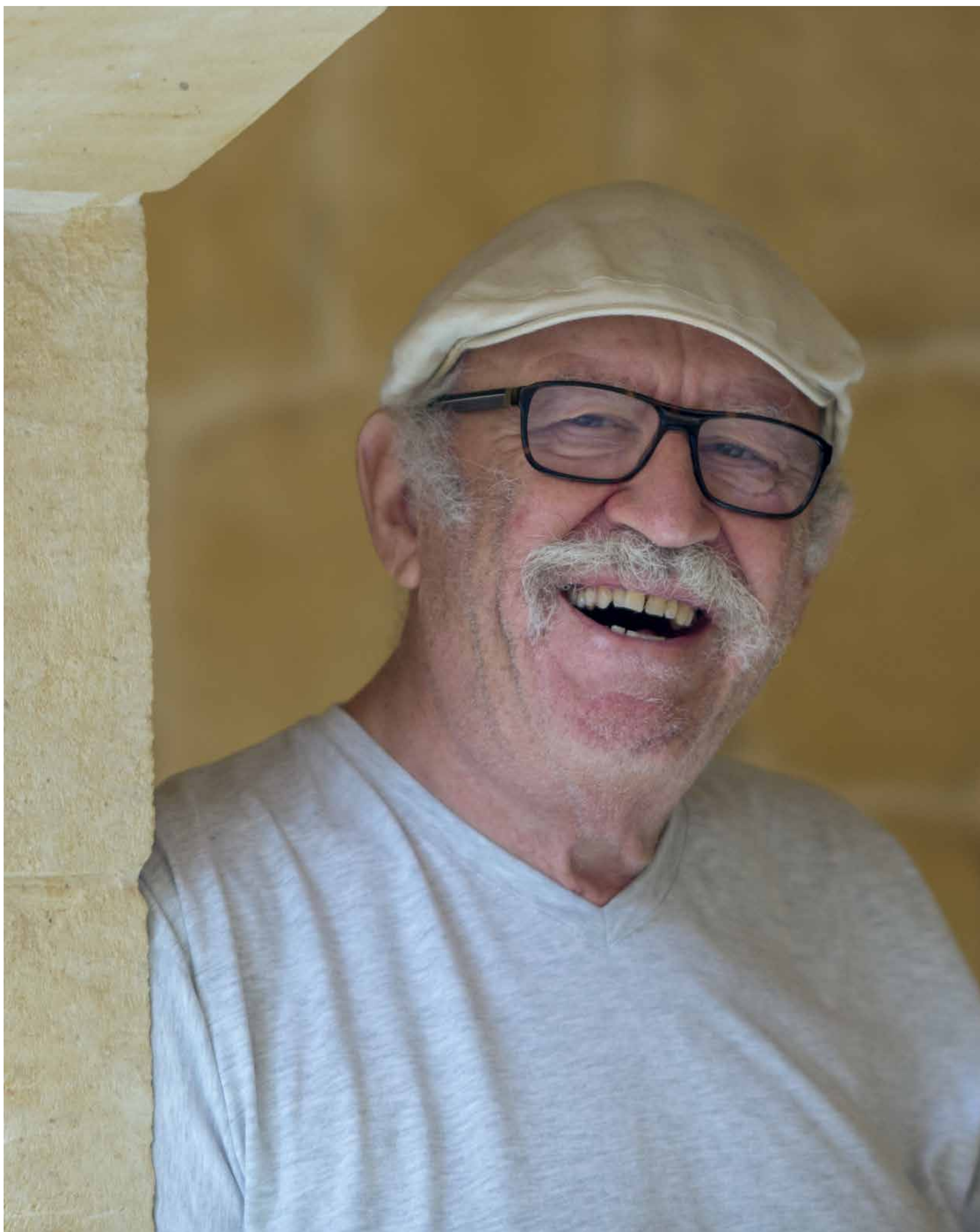
CURATED BY AUSTIN CAMILLERI

16 - 26 FEBRUARY 2023

134, OLD BAKERY STREET, VALLETTA



THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA
RESEARCH, INNOVATION
& DEVELOPMENT TRUST



PROCEEDS IN AID OF RIDT
FOR THE SETTING UP OF
THE CHARLES 'CITY' GATT
AWARD IN JAZZ & IMPROVISATION
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

CHARLES CITY GATT

Biography

Born in Żebbiegh in 1944, Charles Gatt inherited the family nickname and became popularly known as 'City'. His interest in both music and painting started more or less at the same time. He joined the Education Department in 1961 and pursued a training course at St Michael's College of Education. He taught art from 1968 to 1975 when he joined the staff of the School of Music, teaching percussion. He eventually served as principal of the same school (1995-2005).

Gatt furthered his studies at Berklee College of Music in Boston, USA in 1978 and 1979. He formed part of Andy Jaffe's ensemble, played in David Kikoski's trio and Joe Mahkolm's Big Band, and was also a regular percussionist with Boston's Melrose Symphony Orchestra. He also recorded works for solo percussion by Charles Camilleri whose music he performed at UNESCO-sponsored North-South Encounter in the Netherlands, at London's Royal Festival Hall and the Barbican Centre. Over the years he also performed in several cities in North Italy, at the Kathmandu Jazz Festival in Nepal, the Ortigia Jazz Festival and the Tollwood Festival in Munich, Bratislava Jazz Days in Czechoslovakia and at other festivals of contemporary music in Greece, Spain, North Africa, the USSR, and Australia.

Charles Gatt is probably best known locally as Malta's "father of jazz", having spearheaded the Malta Jazz Festival in 1991, acting as its musical director for its first fifteen years (1991-2005).

As a member of the local Art Group 'Start' his installations were part of exhibitions at 'Cityspaces' in Valletta, Blitz in Vittoriosa (2005), 'Borders' at Pinto Wharf (2003), curated by Rapheal Vella, and 'Escape' at the Old Prisons, Citadel Gozo (2003), curated by Austin Camilleri. In 2013 he took part in 'Re-Visit the Contemporary Face of Faith', curated by Vince Briffa.

He also exhibited solo-work called 'What it does to me' (2012), in Zebbug and 'Drumming' (2018), in Valletta among others.

Gatt was also a member of the European art group 'Frequenzen'. Recent exhibitions and venues with this group include Borgo a Mozzano, Italy (2017, 2006), Gozo (2018) Vesprem, Hungary (2016) 'Umshlagplatz Coburg' Germany (2016), Neumarkt a.d. Raab Austria (2015, 2012, 2008), Higuera and Castellon in Spain (2014), Le Rocher d'Ongles, France (2013, 2019) Rosenheim, Germany (2009) Ascoli Piceno, Italy (2004, 2009), Triumphforte, Innsbruck (2003), Galerie Hallman Strauss, Munich (2010, 2005), Chongju and Gaya, South Korea, Tüchersfeld Frankische Schweiz Museum, Germany and National Museum of Fine Arts, Valletta.

In 2017, the Malta Society of Arts (MSA) awarded him its prestigious Gold Medal Award in recognition of his contribution to the arts. In 2020, he was awarded a lifetime achievement award from the Arts Council Malta.

IS-CITY, PAINTING.

AUSTIN CAMILLERI

Curator

"We try to infuse our work with adventure"¹

Charles Gatt

Charles City Gatt is a household name in the visual artistic circle, even though he is best known as a musician. The current exhibition is a tribute to the painter on the first anniversary of his passing.

I first met Charles in 1996 when one of my paintings was chosen as the poster image for that year's Malta Jazz Festival. Ever since, in a fast-growing friendship and artistic camaraderie, I always felt that he meant every word in the above statement. It's taken from an interview he gave as chair of Piazza Teatru Rjal but can be easily translated into all he did, whether music, painting, installations, or simply instigating discussion.

This exhibition is not meant to be a retrospective. It is not its scope, even though the time will come for such a show. Because City, as a visual artist, is not just a painter; he has extensive work in installation, objects, and performance. He was a founding member of StArt, a contemporary art group created and exhibiting in the early 2000s, and a member of the group Frequenzen, with whom he regularly showed abroad. Painting, as installation, an essential facet of his visual vocabulary, was very close to his heart. Yet the leitmotif of his work was never too far from his essence: music. Interestingly

enough, most of his plastic works resonate between his soundmaking objects, mainly his chimes and the silent installations. Typical examples are his jukebox exhibited in *Escape* 2003 or his camouflage-packed jazz ensemble exhibited in *Blitz* 2005.

This is an exhibition that has been long in the making. I remember him telling me about it as early as January 2020 when he asked me to help him curate it. I used to visit him regularly as he was keen on showing me the work he was producing and how I would relate to it, technically at first, emotionally later. In a way, this exhibition is one by a living artist, a collection he intended to present. I'm just taking the liberty to take a little detour: I'm including a few examples of works from all previous painting exhibitions - *In a Silent Way* (1989), *Moods* (1991), *Paint* (1996), *What it does to me* (2012), *Drumming* (2018) and examples of his extempore work produced with the group *Frequenzen*, where he contaminated painting with other systems, mainly text, objects, and readymades to bridge all his practices. With these few excursions into works of earlier periods, we are trying to trace a timeline and, more importantly, the very loose osmotic reference of earlier works in his development of his painterly practice.

Most of the works presented have never been shown. They are the fruit of intense production from his show at the Malta Society of the Arts in Valletta through 2021. Once *Drumming* was over, he immediately went back to his studio, the entrance to his Mosta house, where he immersed himself in his beloved acrylics again. He felt rejuvenated. And, because most of his musical performances were cancelled due to covid, he found refuge in his canvasses and boards.

In describing art forms, we use similar descriptive terms across most art disciplines. Music, dance, painting, drama, and architecture use terms such as repetition,

intensity, rhythm, dialogue, balance, and so on. In City, as a visual artist, we have a process that is parallel to his process in composition or in his jazz performances. Both are closely knit. Both use an inherent translated vocabulary, and we are obliged to use these shared adjectives.

Synaesthesia, or the blending of senses, is a late 19th century concept describing music and visual art connection. The idea emphasises that sensory perception of one kind can manifest itself as a sensory experience of another. Colour was considered a core element in sensory perception and in seeing colour it has been asserted that one can hear certain sounds. A concept further developed by Kandinsky, who, after attending a concert by composer Arnold Schoenberg, attempted to put order to tonal colours. In his essay Concerning the Spiritual in Art he explained how specific instruments could be linked to individual colours; blue with the sound of a cello, yellow with the trumpet, red with tuba, and so on.

In the late 40s, 50s, artist Edward Stuart Davis tried to find a similar style of painting after listening to the music of jazz piano players Earl Hines and Fats Waller. He likened his colour intervals to the way Hines used space in his music.

All ingredients are part of City's work as a painter. He doesn't detach himself from his music-making, and he doesn't make any adjustments to his *modus operandi* or way of thinking. He occasionally reiterated with his unmistakable smile: 'In a jazz band, you are as good as your least common denominator'². So he treated his compositions with the same rigour and ethos. A fluid

jamming session with total immersion in the world of colour. Trying to create an energy within the corners of the canvas or board that eludes time and ideally removes weak spaces. As if painting has an overarching element that dominates and makes chaos seem orderly, just as a jazz rhythm will bind together the virtuoso escapades of individual players.

In 1991, critic Emmanuel Fiorentino described City's work as "paintings that satisfy the intangible regions of the inner spirit"³. He states that the directness of the impulse, a vital quality in those abstractions, is there to communicate his soul, to express something of an inner self. His process is more direct.

The critic Harold Rosenberg thought painting provided a place to act⁴. And City used that space as a performative space, acting with the paint's layers, doses, opacity, and transparencies, creating rhythm from chance. His earlier paintings have single concentrations of energy, gravitating mainly on a single gesture of mark-making. His gestures and actions vector across and over a system of monochromes. His markings land in incoherent places, with instances, where image and ground resonate separately.

They gravitate our attention.

The more time elapsed, the more minimal his compositions became. Few evocative strokes, more effective, sometimes more lyrical. Wide blemishes of chroma, in which the trace of the brush is seldom seen. They seem to focus more on swatches and colour fields than mere actions. His attention slowly and maybe more consciously shifted to paint, the medium.

His work doesn't want to portray nor to conceptualise. He underlines the nature of painting as a painting rather than the role of painting as an altered model of reality. Even when his work is inspired by figuration, by the Mosta dome, for instance, his work has an abstract quality, one

that focuses on rhythm rather than mere representation. He wants paint to live on its own. As if to emphasise “that the medium does not exist except in potential; it is always about to become, it never *is*—for the very action or work that describes it, in turn, prevents its definition.”⁵

City always speaks of his paintings in terms of material. This focus on the medium and process is present very early in his painting excursions. Thus, the title of an early exhibition in 1996, just one word, *Paint*, looks like a manifesto. In fact, Dominic Cutajar effortlessly puts it: *‘Paint to emphasise the detachment from the lyricism of the creative moment.....a rarified atmosphere of pure sensation’*⁶. It is as if the medium is always in front of us, ready to be put to work. Energies pass through it in order to become visible.

Also, as opposed to John Cage's “exploration of nonintention,” where the artist's personality is removed, where an abundance of white space represents silence in music, City is the author.

City orchestrates chance methods; his white is not silent. It is another brick in his composition, another denominator.

All these denominators are steps in his long adventure.

1. Veronica Stivala, 'Sounds of the City', Encore Issue No 1, 2015, p. 46.
2. One of the many conversations between AC and Charles Gatt, in his home kitchen, usually over undisclosed glasses of wine or whiskey.
3. Emanuel Fiorentino, “Moods of a Single Spirit”, Exhibition brochure, Nov 1991
4. Alex Kitnick, 'Notes on Gesture', Art in America, Nov 2018
5. JMary Josephson, “Warhol: The medium as cultural artifact,” Art in America, May–June 1971, p. 45.
6. Dominic Cutajar, 'Paint' Paint exhibition brochure, Dec 1996

LEGACIES ARE MADE OF THIS.

WILFRED KENELY

CEO – Research, Innovation & Development Trust

I got to know Charles personally late in his life. Before that time I followed him, like many others, from a distance and in awe. There was something magical about him and his music, which invited me to get closer and to further absorb myself in what he was doing. My emotions were exactly the same when I first encountered his visual talent. Two versions of the same expression, just like reading a book first and watching the film later, or vice versa. That is how I remember Charles – the rhythmic and the visual.

We first mentioned the idea of a collaboration with the University of Malta while enjoying a *Fenek biċ-Chips* in Żebbiegħ. Charles was keen to support our research programmes and was open to fundraising ideas. We explored areas of research that could become the beneficiaries of such collaboration and we discussed possible venues. One idea that was definitely not on the table during our discussions was that this collaboration would eventually end up being Charles' own legacy. He was not thinking on these lines, and neither was I.

With his musical and visual expressions Charles affected the lives of so many people, over a stretch of six decades. He shaped the lives of countless musicians, young and not so young, particularly those studied at the Malta School of Music during his years as its head. To these we need to add the hundreds of art students whom he taught in his earlier days as an arts teacher.

With the establishment of the Charles 'City' Gatt award in Jazz and Improvisation at the University of Malta we will ensure that he will continue to make a contribution to future generations. We also hope that, just as he did in his life, Charles will be an inspiration for others to follow on what we are doing in his name. The building of a legacy does not start on our demise, or a year later. It starts way before that. In Charles' case his legacy was built all along the various milestones of his colourful life. We tend to associate Charles with the creation of the Malta Jazz Festival in the early 1990s, but before that he had already laid the foundation to his legacy during his years as an arts and music teacher and the role of mentor he often played.

Everyone leaves a legacy. Some do it consciously, others don't.



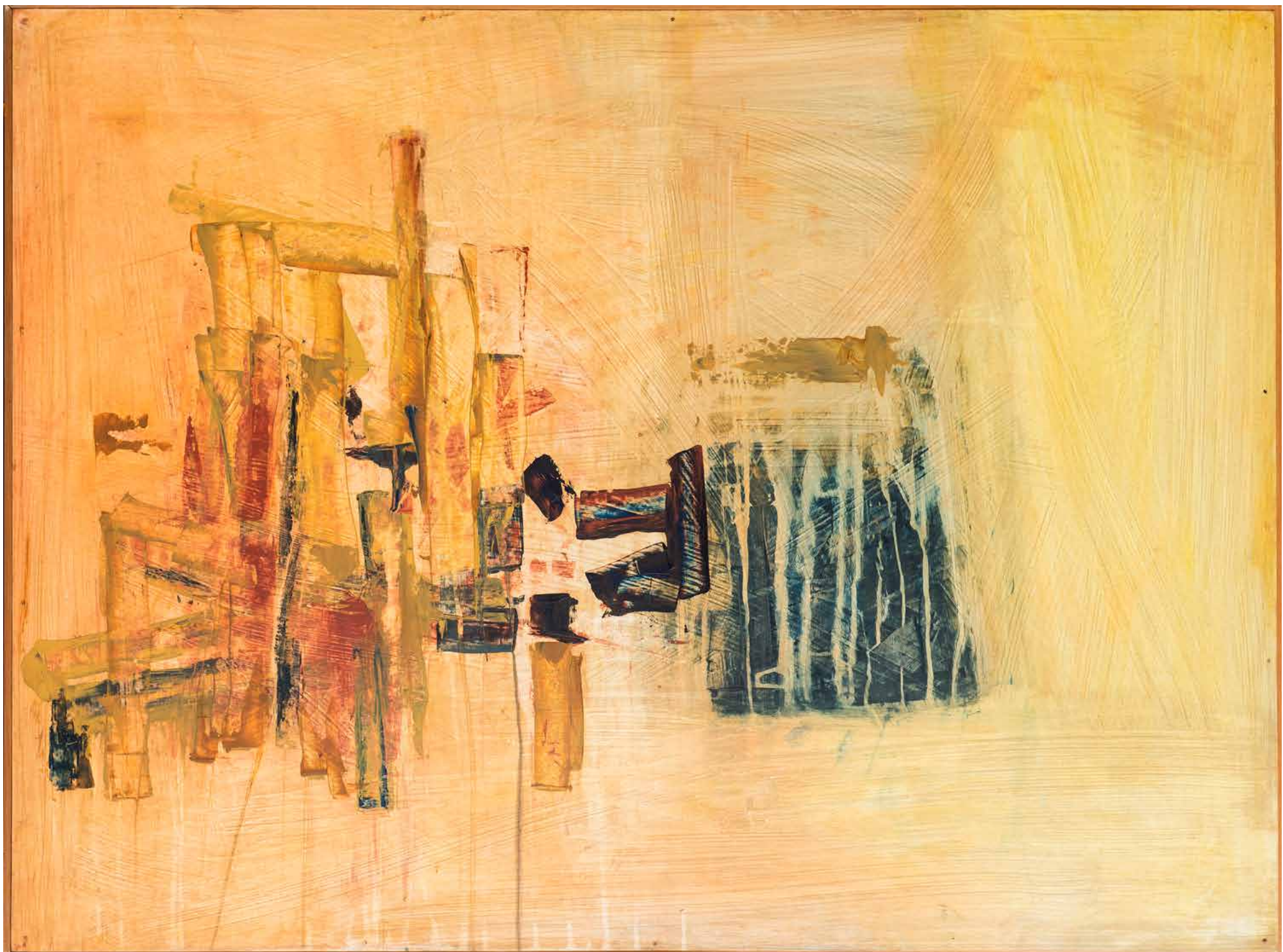
1

Tryptich, Private Collection, Acrylics on board, 50x66cm x 3



2

'In a Silent Way', Private Collection, Acrylics on board, 61x92cm



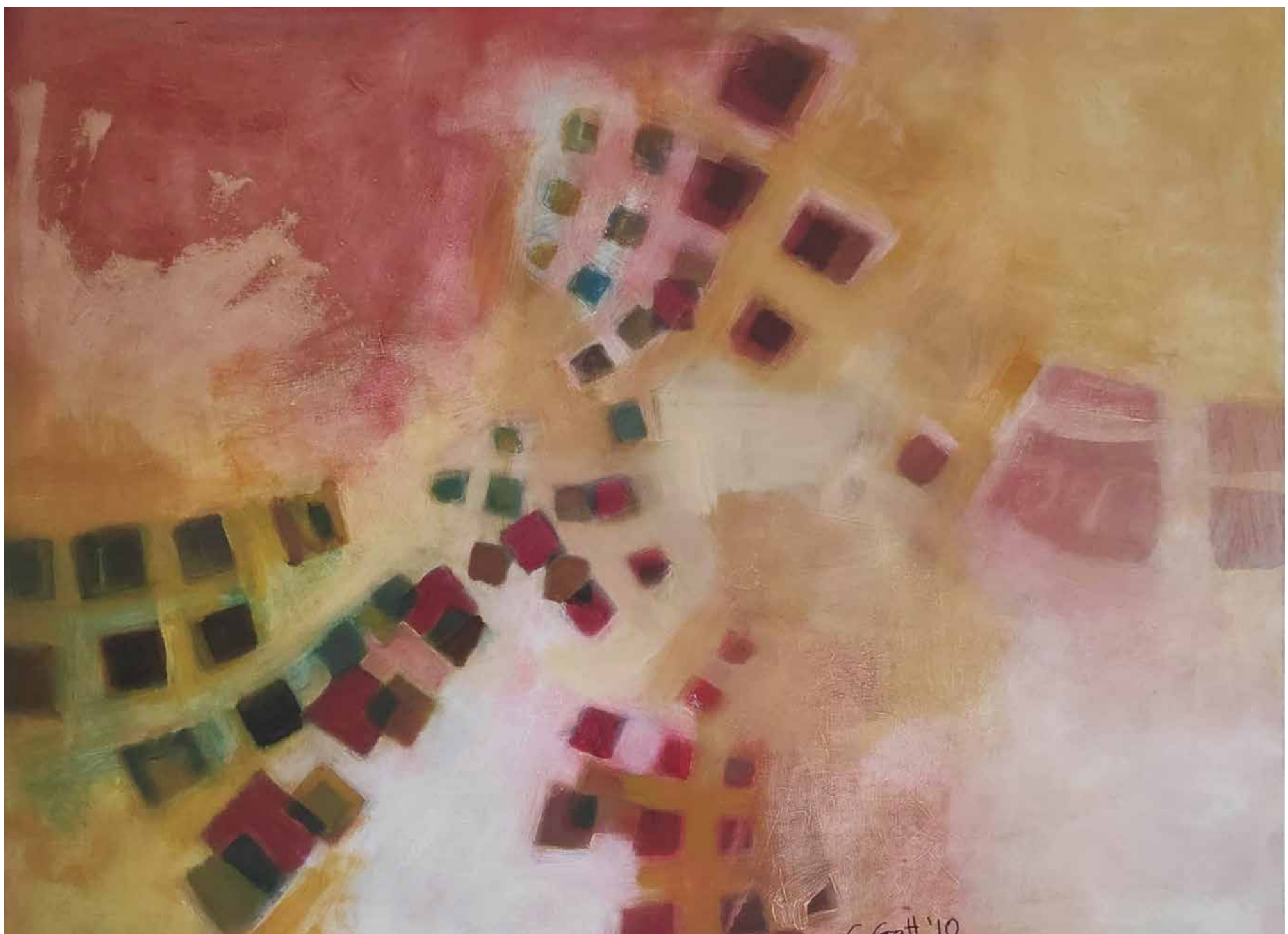
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'Paint', Private Collection, Acrylics on board, 92x123cm



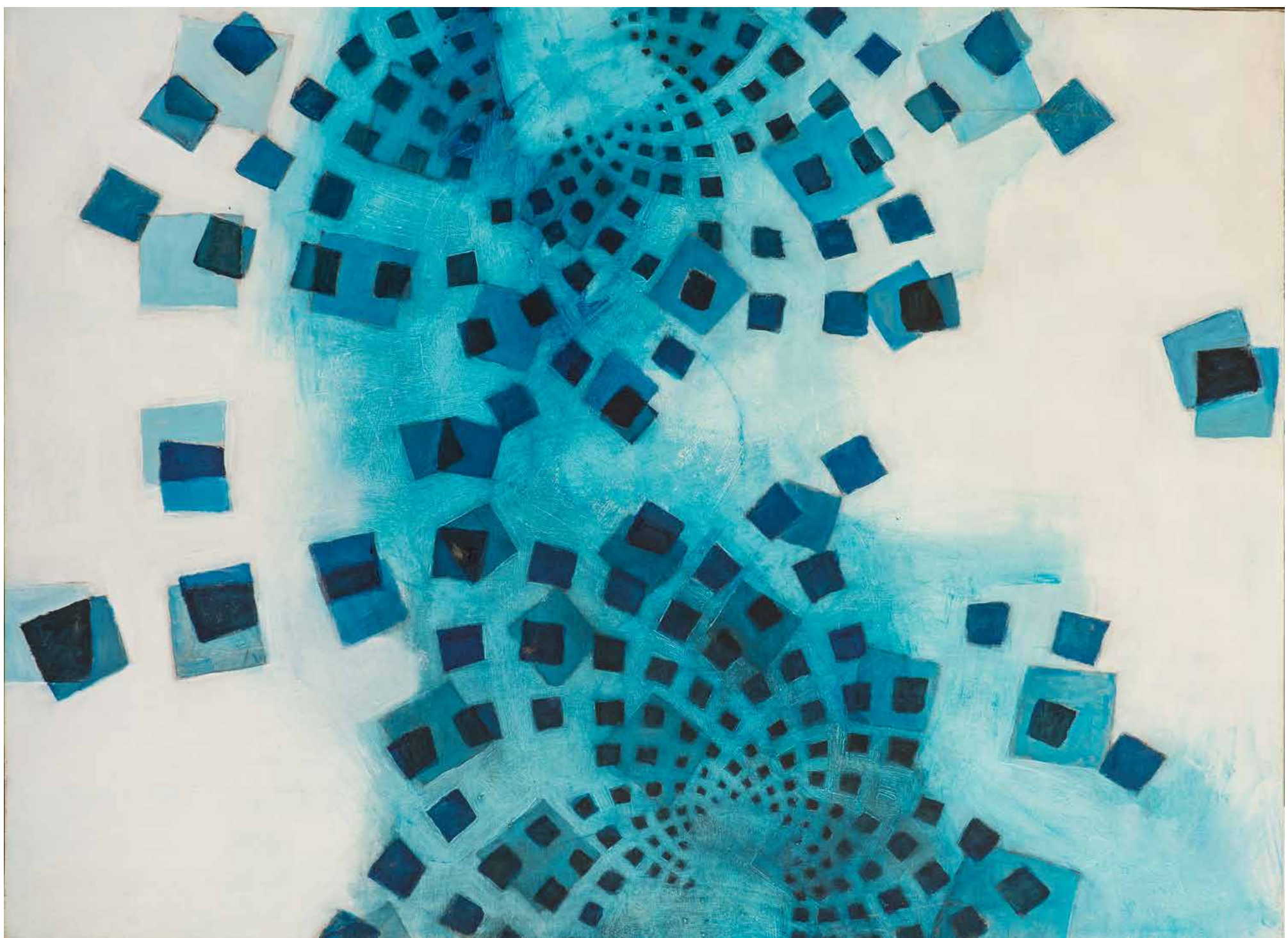
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'What it does to me III', Acrylics on board, 91x122cm



5

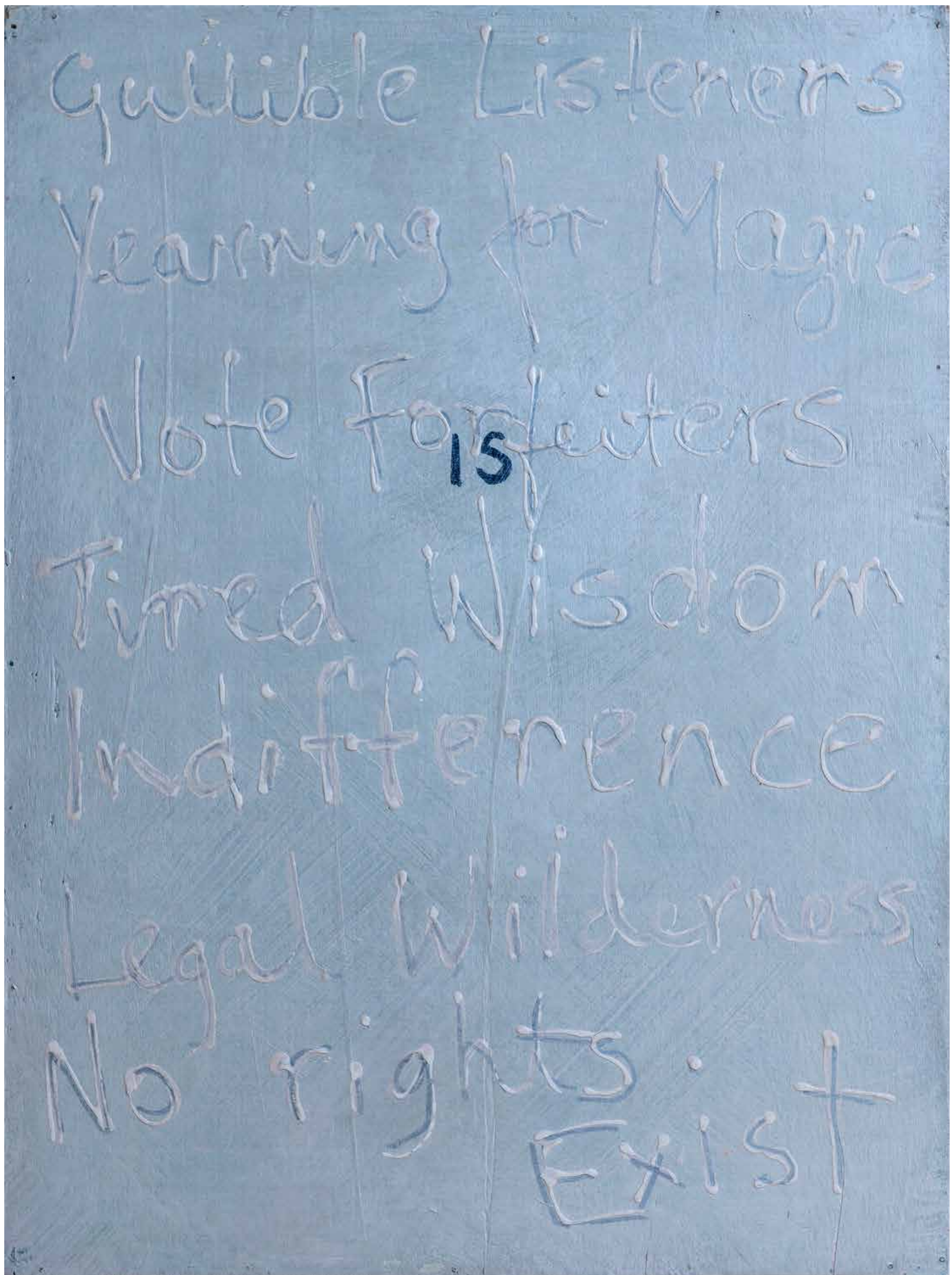
'What it does to me I', Private Collection, Acrylics on board, 91x122cm



6

'What it does to me II', Private Collection, Acrylics on board, 91x122cm

Collective Revenge
End to Security
Extreme Humiliation
Death of Civilians
and Innocent
Passers-by
Apartheid
Ethnic Cleansing



8

'Untitled', Private Collection, Acrylics on board, 67x50cm



9

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 91x91cm



10

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 91x61cm



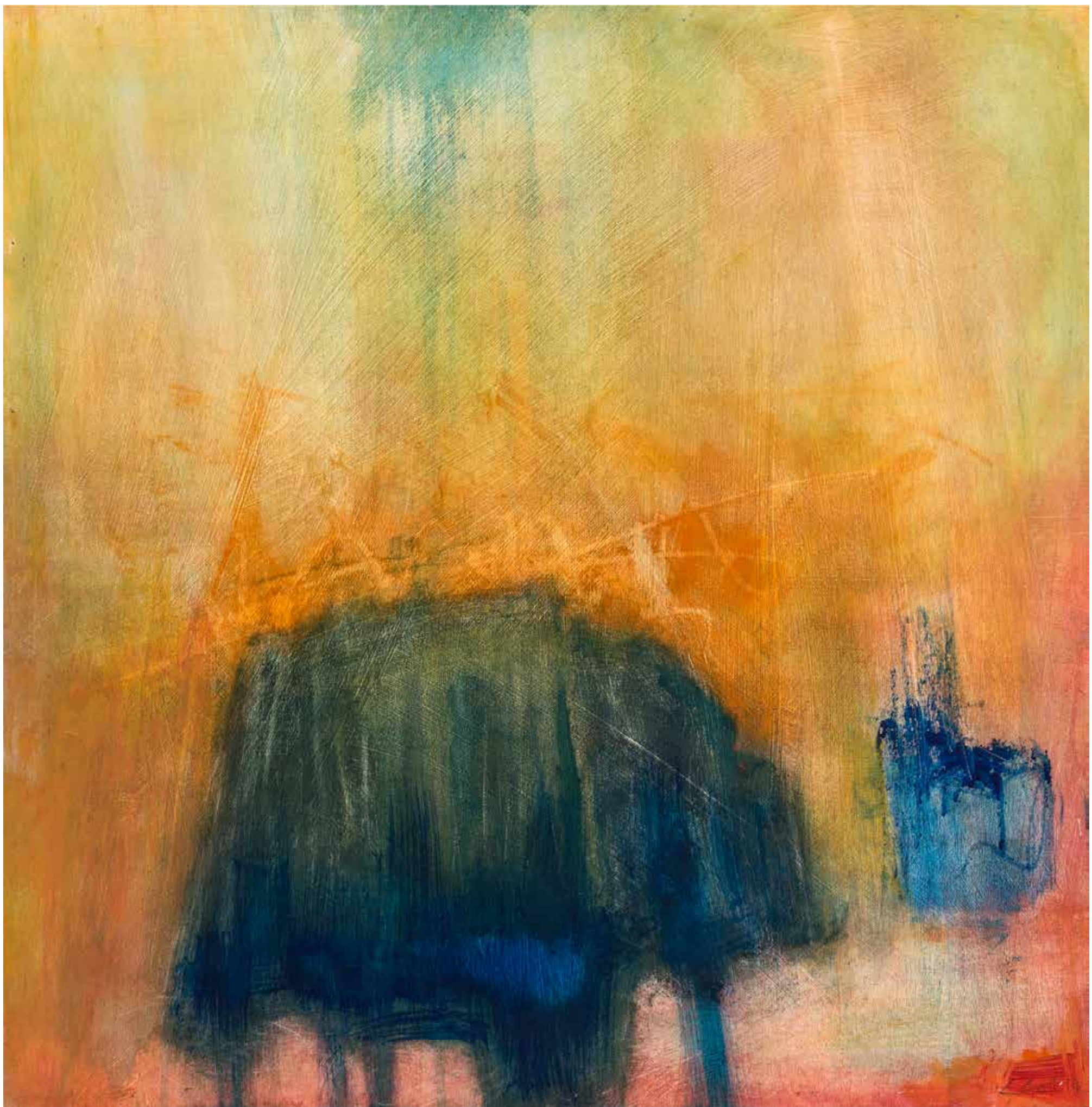
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'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 91x61cm



12

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 91x61cm



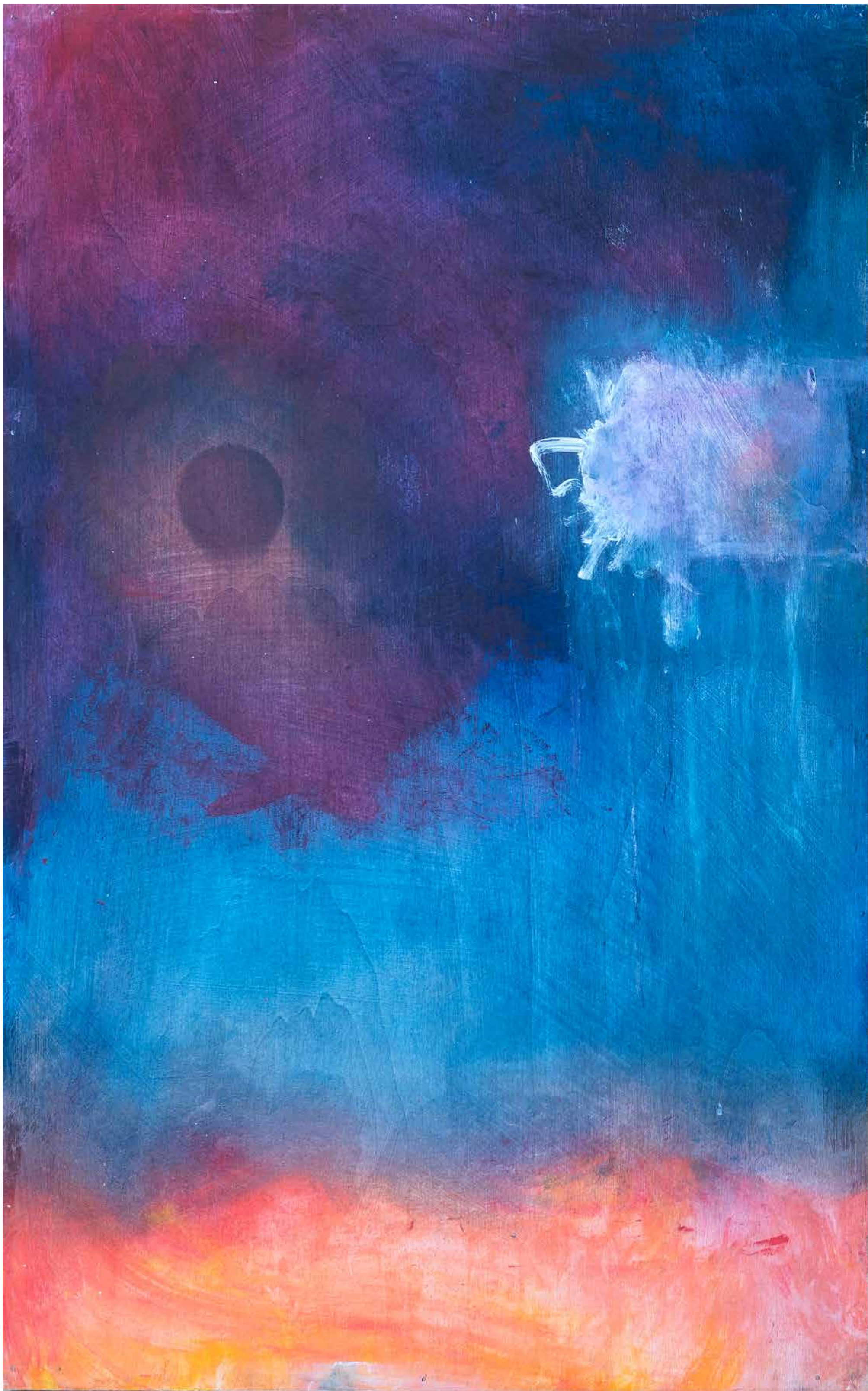
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'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 80x80cm



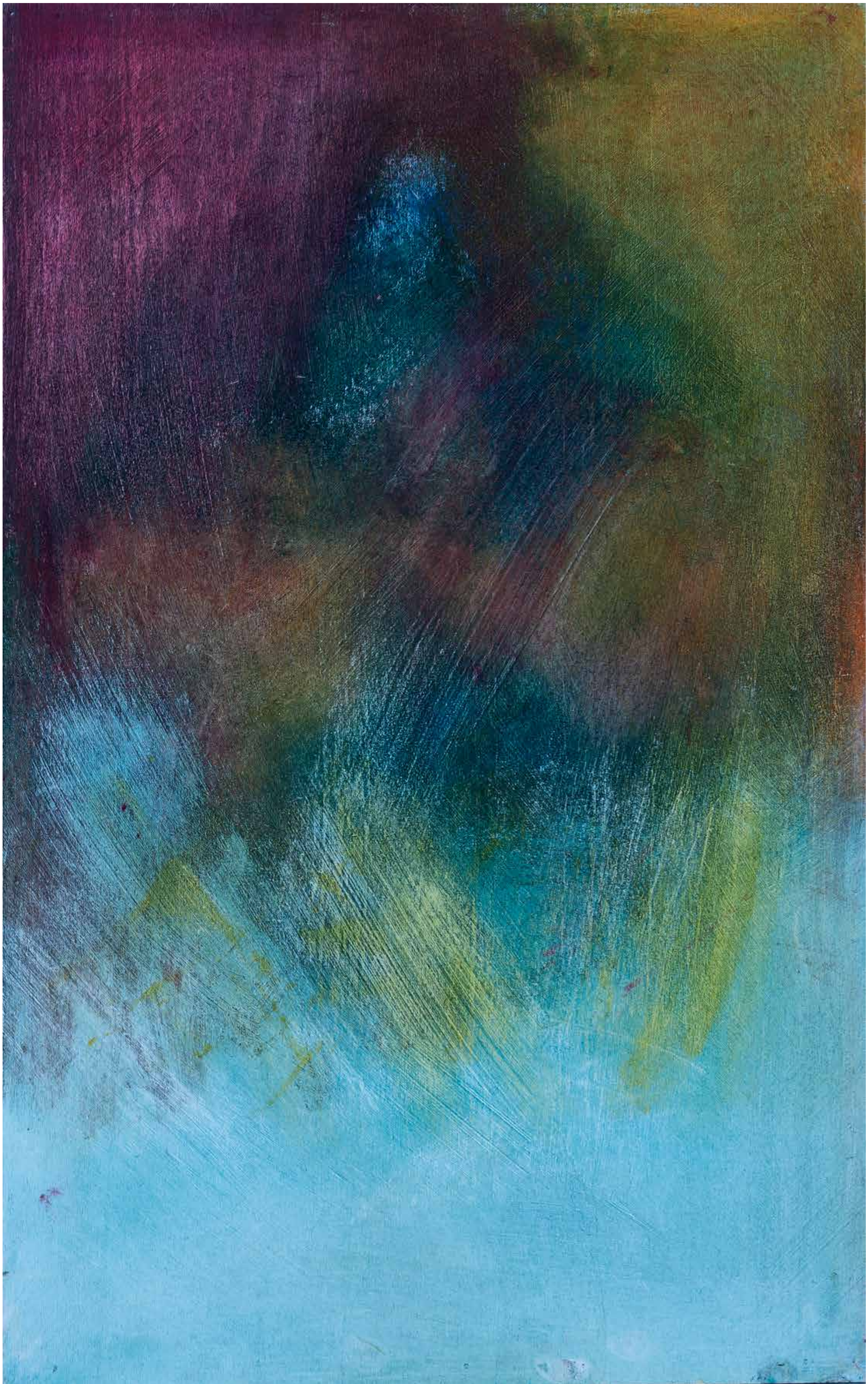
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'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 50x40cm



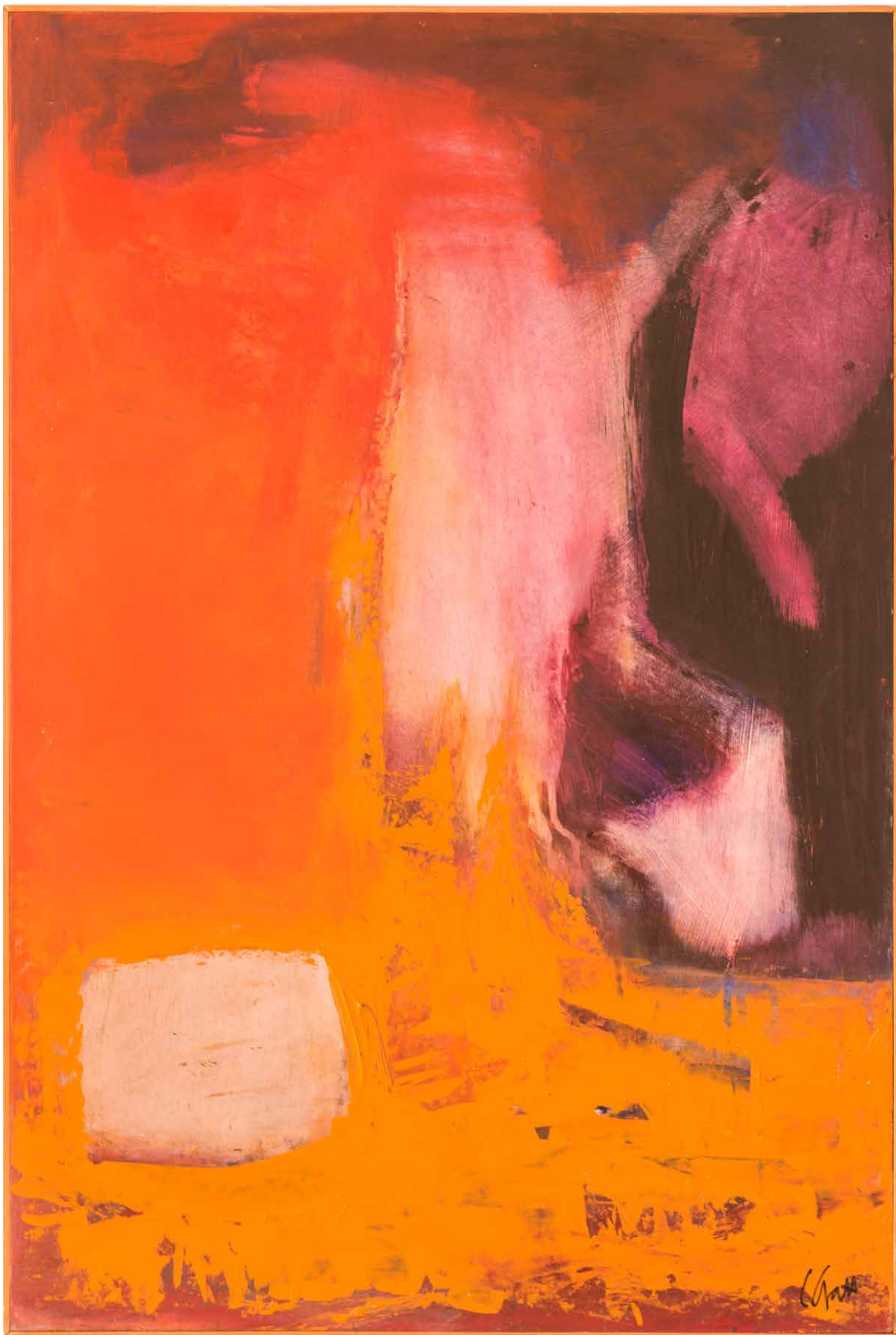
15

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 80x50cm



16

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 80x50cm



17

'Untitled' 1998, Acrylics on board, 92x62cm



18

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 70x51cm



19

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 70x51cm



20

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 91x61cm



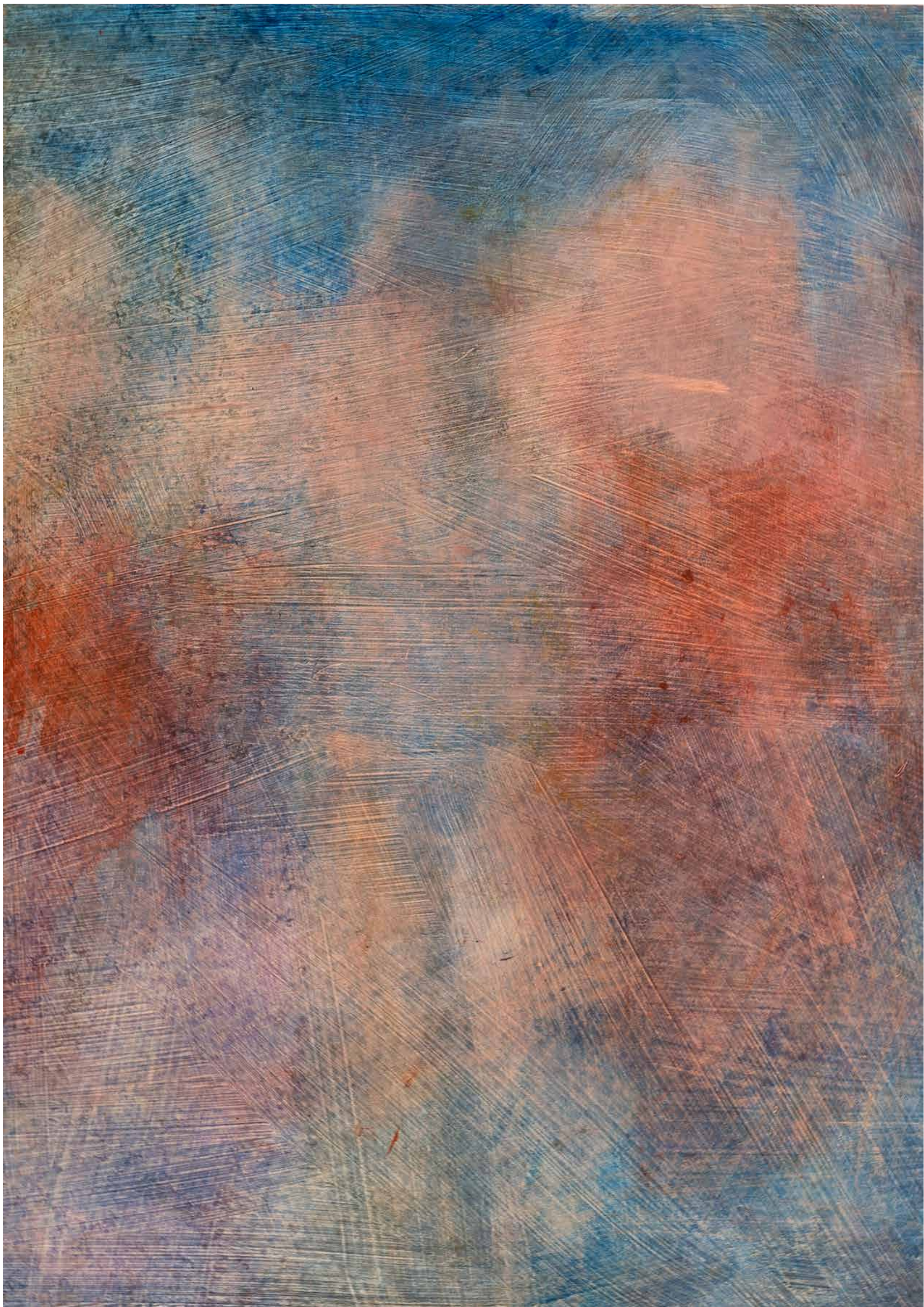
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'Untitled', Private Collection, Acrylics on board, 70x51cm



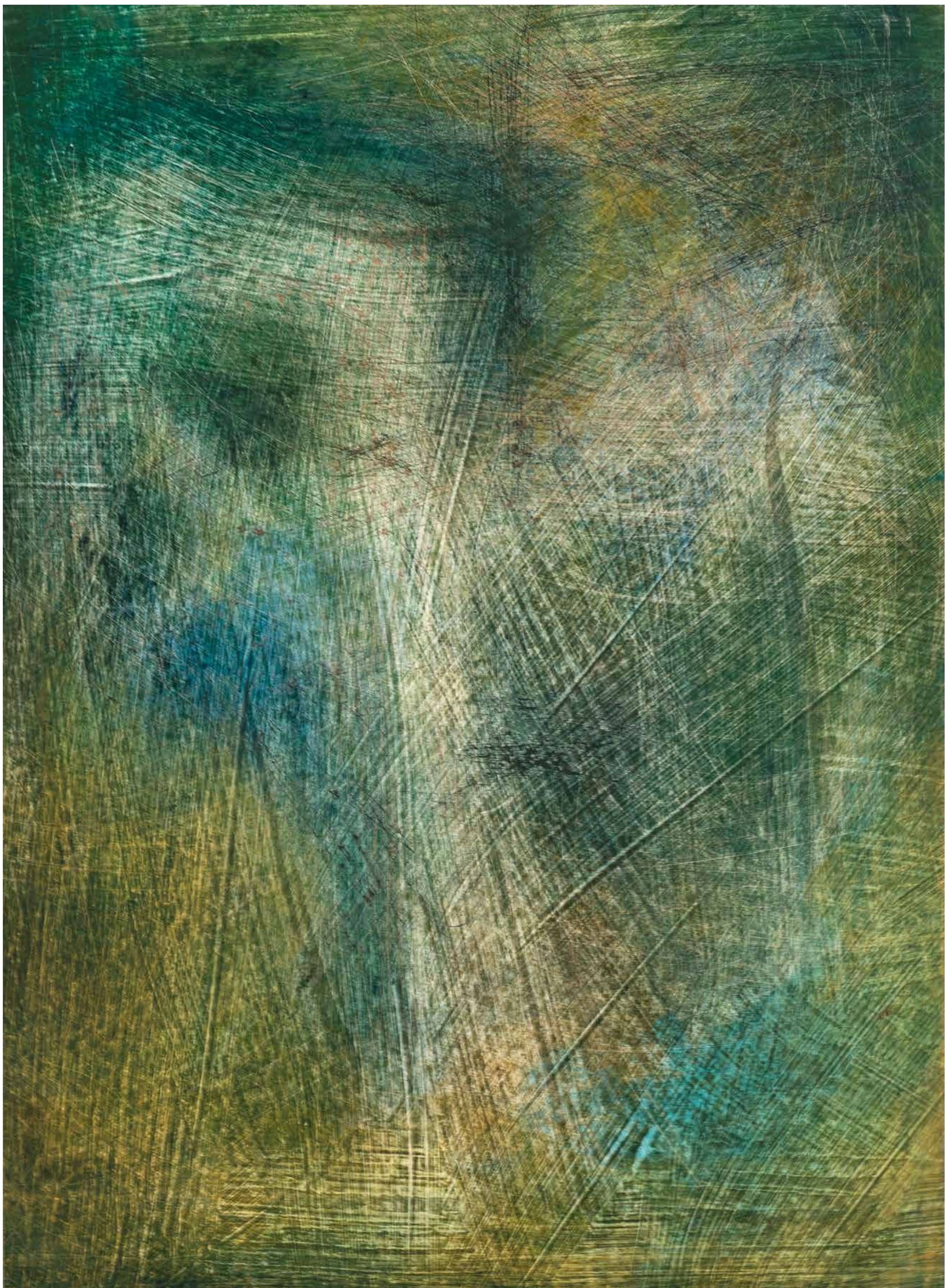
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'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 93x63cm



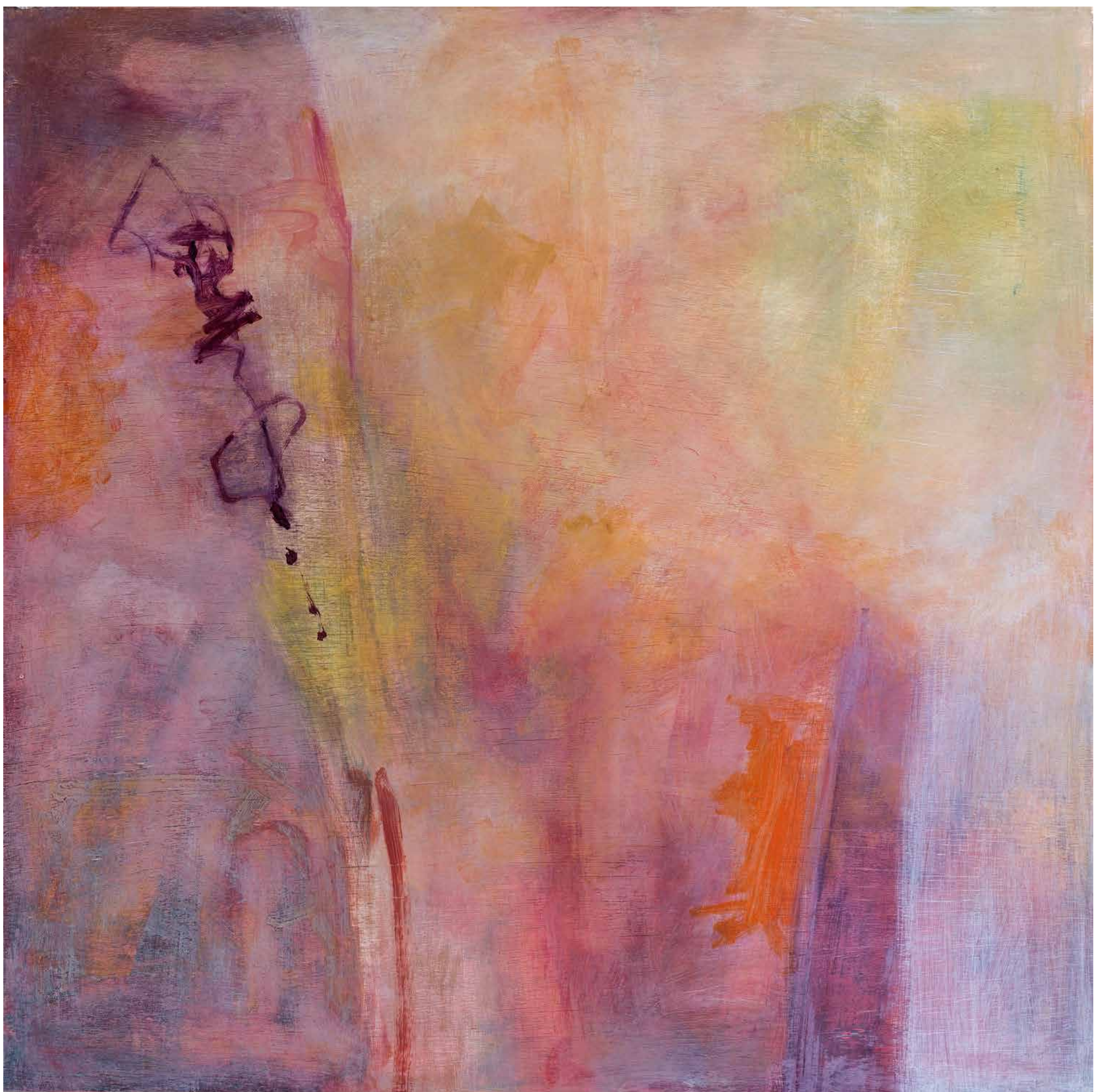
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'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 68x48cm



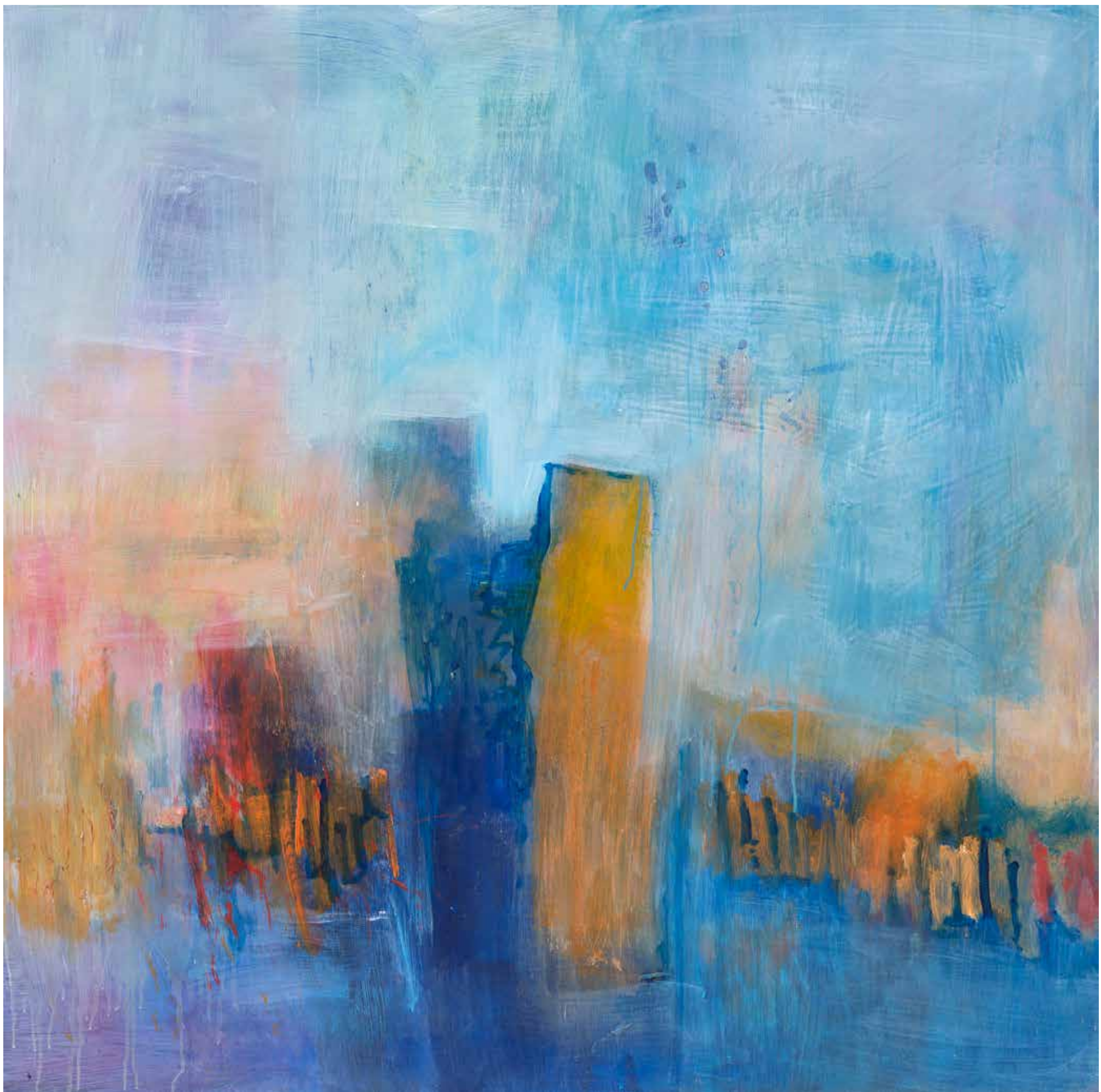
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'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 65x45cm



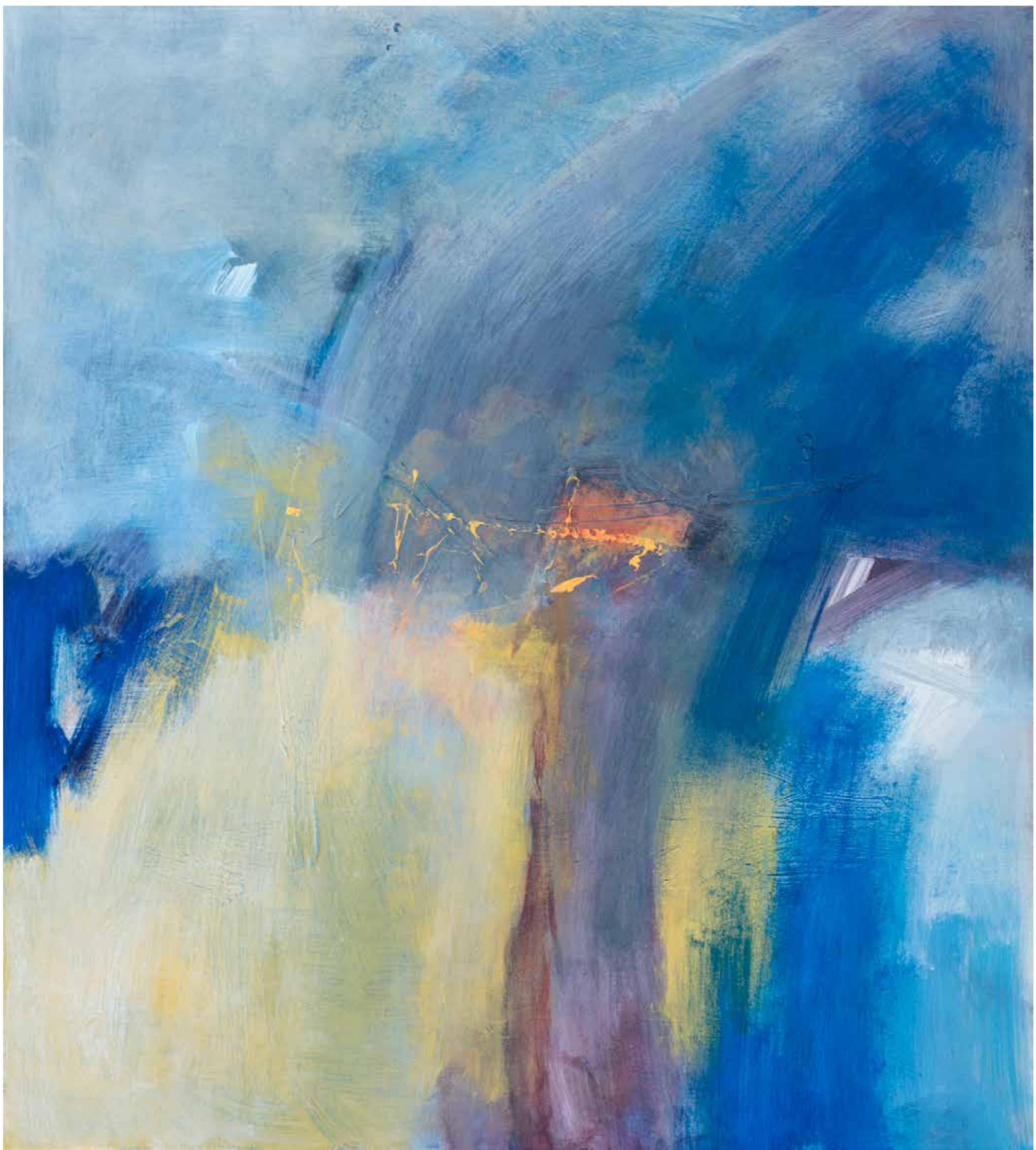
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'Talking II', Private Collection, Acrylics on board, 91x91cm



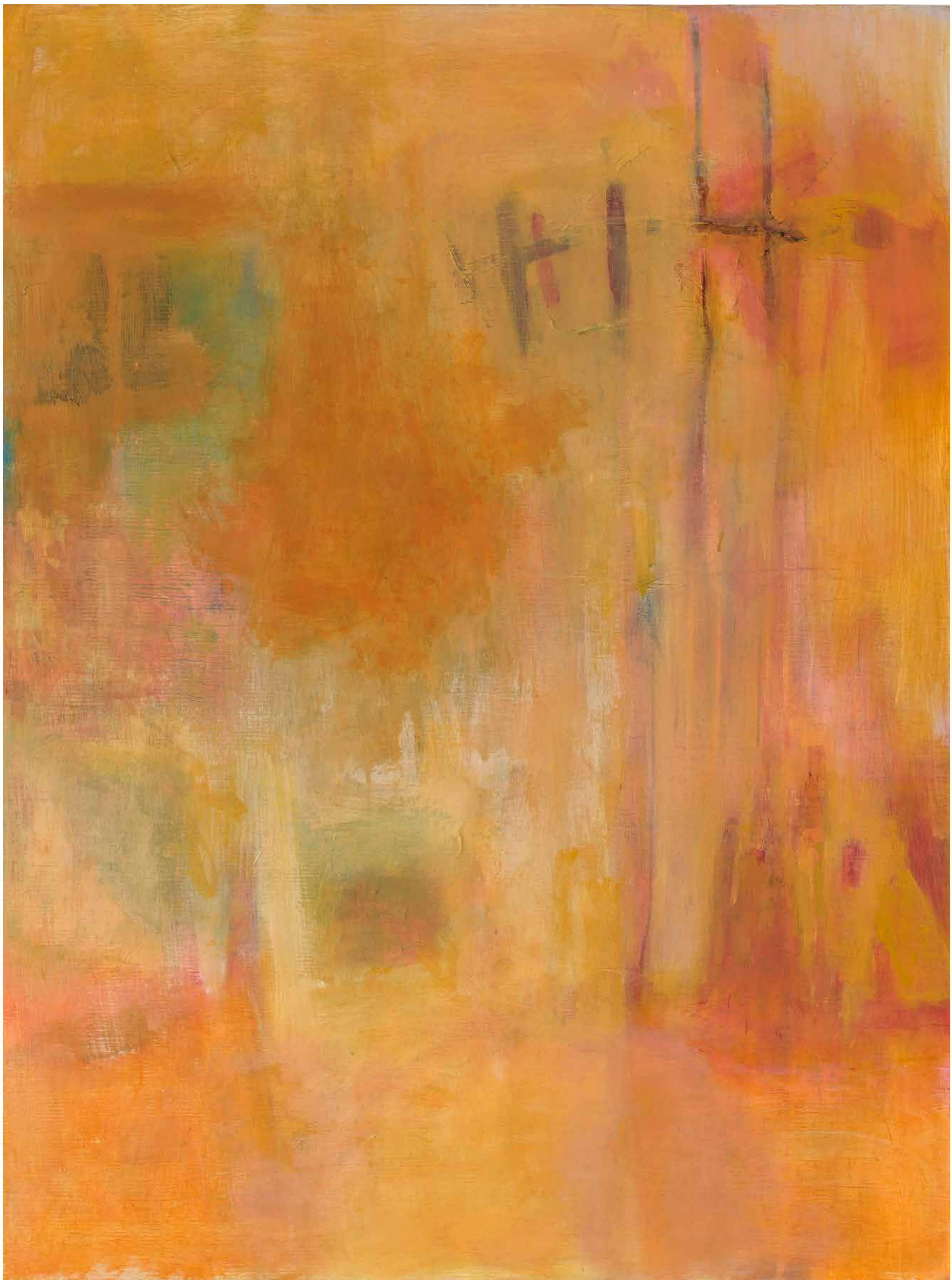
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'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 106x106cm



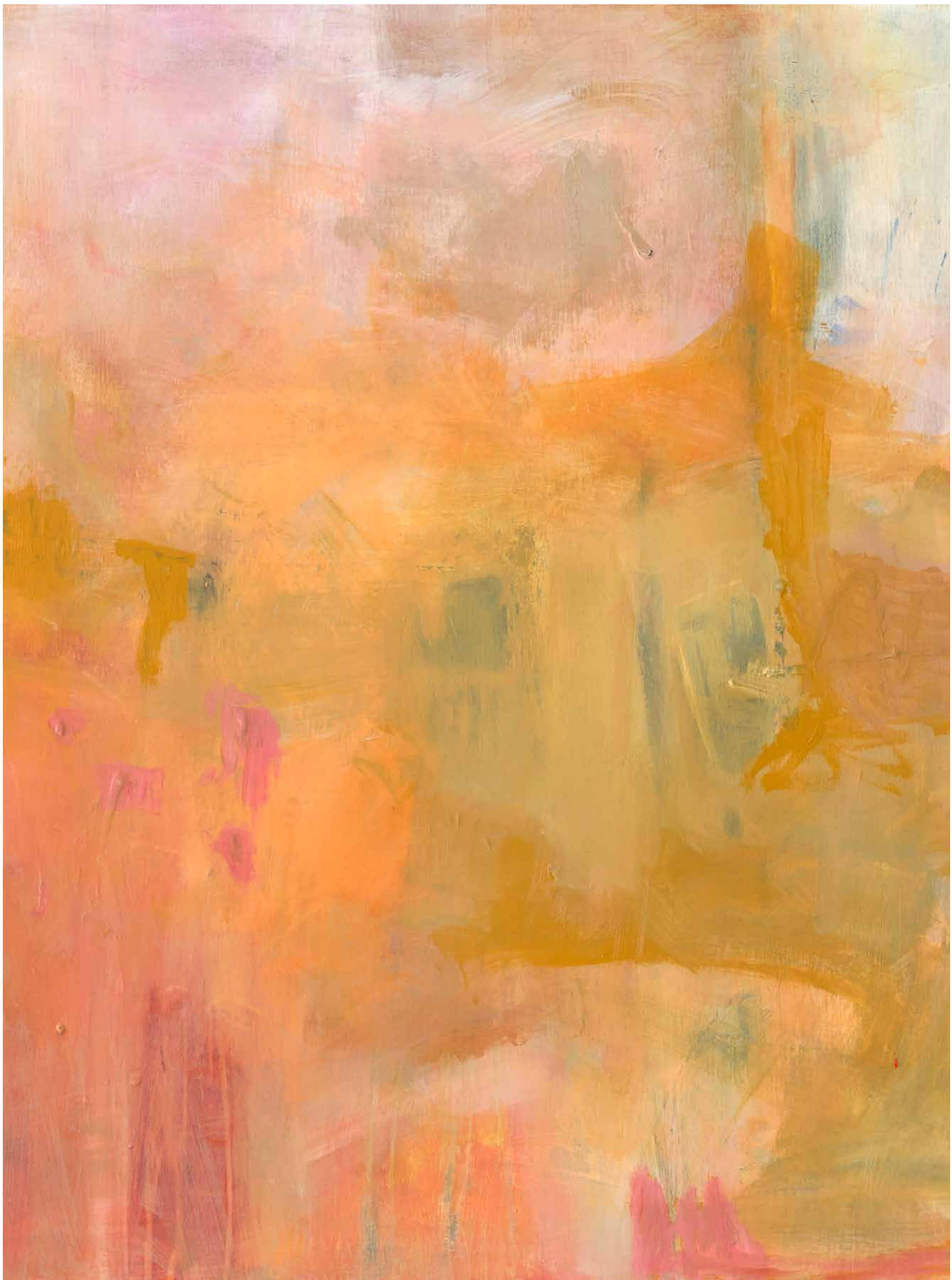
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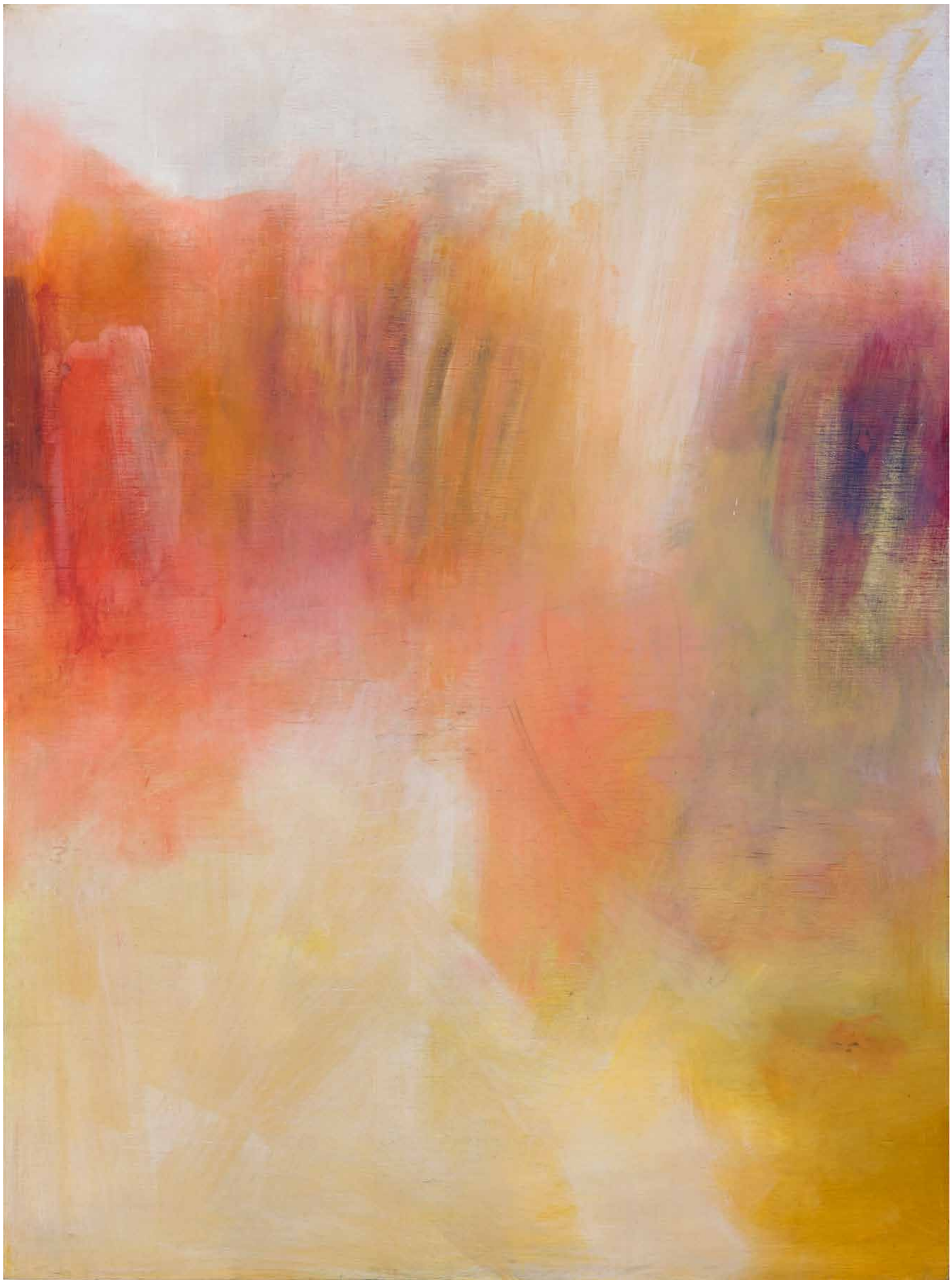
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'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 122x91cm



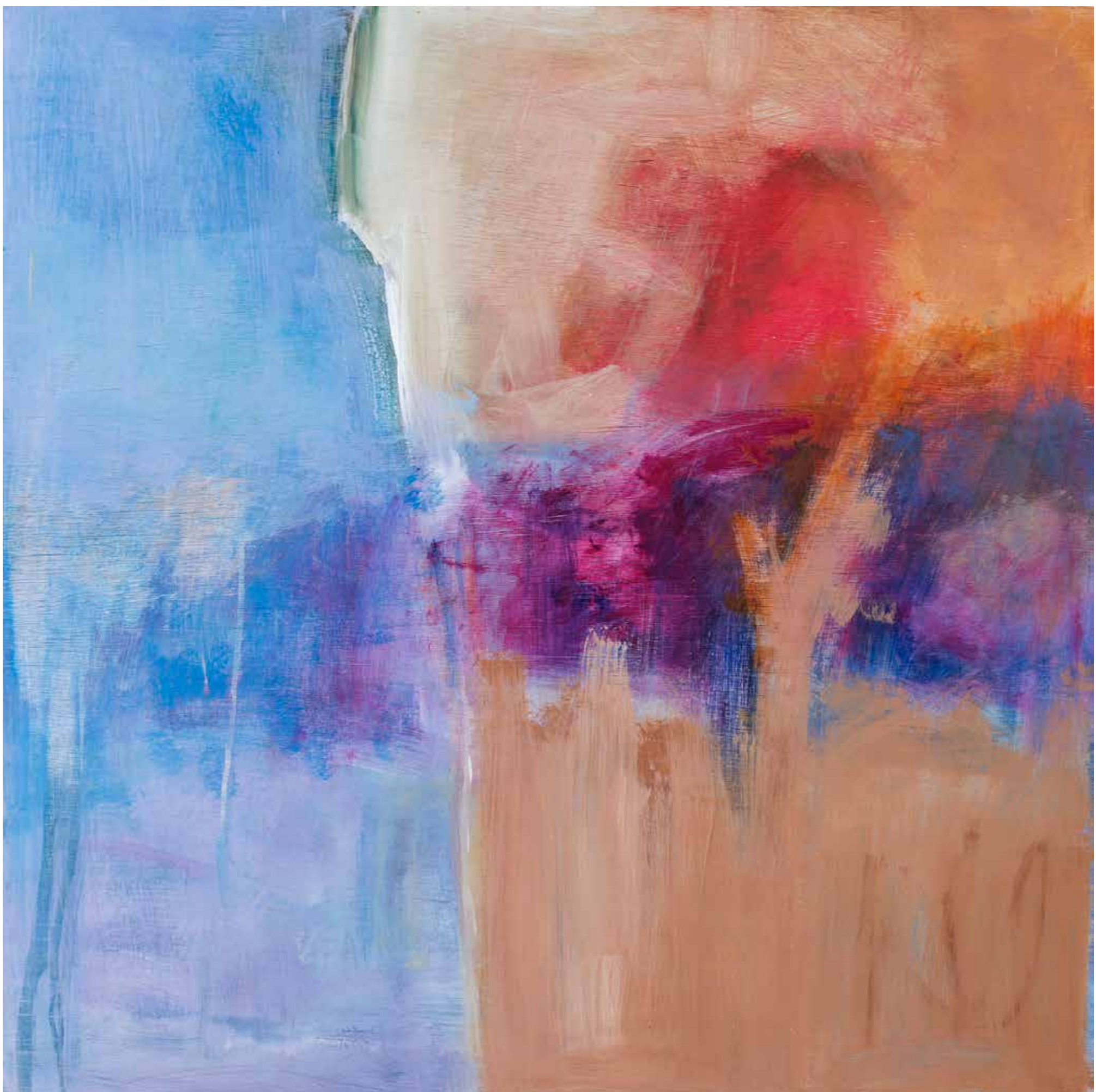
29

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 107x91cm



30

'Untitled', Acrylics on board, 122x91cm



31

'Talking I', Private Collection, Acrylics on board, 91x91cm

THANK YOU

RIDT is grateful towards a number of individuals, companies and entities who made this exhibition possible. Without their help, ideas and sponsorships we would not have been able to keep our promise to City.

Our thank you goes to:

Carla and Ariana (City's daughters)
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Anthony Saliba, Joseph Camilleri and all
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A special thanks to our sponsors:

