

CIRCA  
LONDON

**Alessandro Papetti**  
*I Live Here*



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## Painting as Insight, Angst, Enjoyment

### A Conversation with the Artist

*[The painter's studio in Milan, a winter's afternoon. The rain is pouring on the glass roof.]*

**Pia Capelli:** This is a turning point in your work. While in your most recent exhibition, 'La pelle attraverso', you focused on the border between the Self and the world, here you have 'come back,' showing landscapes that are closer to mental spaces. I know that these works are the result of a long period of transformation. What is changing in your work?

**Alessandro Papetti:** I used to work on motionless things, finite thoughts: I would use my way of painting, my quick gestures, to animate the object and give it a sense of movement and speed. Now, instead, I'm working on the flow of my thoughts as they come to me, when the idea is being conceived. This has a great deal to do with memory, which usually offers images of objects that are complete and finished. Anticipating memory is impossible, I know, but it is as if over these last few months of work all I had to do was try to steal milliseconds to be able to paint the moment when an idea, a thought, is born. It was not a rational attempt; it was the need to follow, or anticipate, the flow of my thoughts.

PAGE 1

*Reperti* 2015  
mixed media on paper mounted  
on canvas  
210 x 204 cm



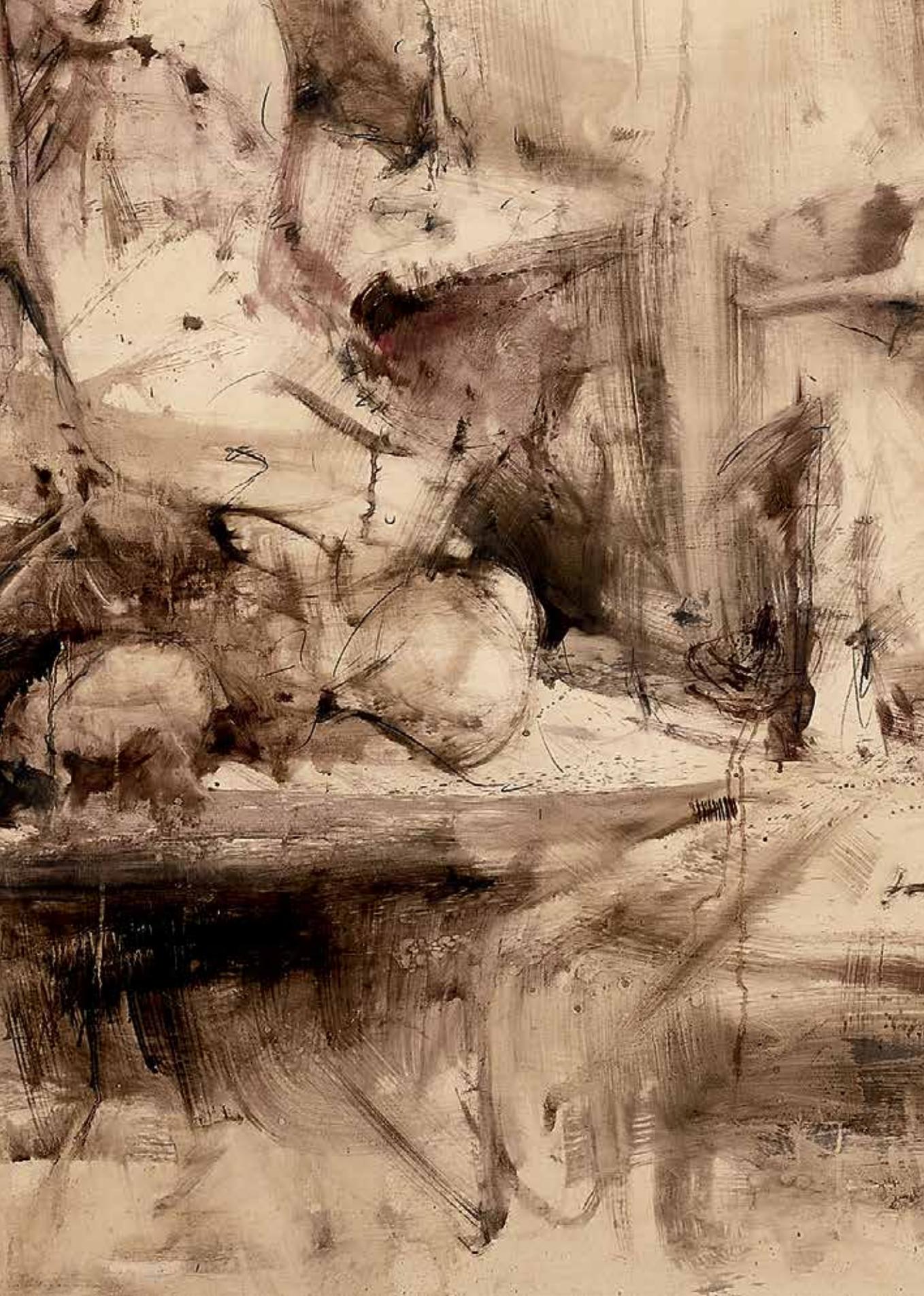
**P: So these are interiors, in that they are the interior of your mind, traces of your thoughts?**

A: Quite right, even if they are recognisable as interiors – and as such I painted them. My gestures have also taken a different path. To me, changing the subject is not an aesthetic or a thematic choice, but a choice of elements. Oddly enough, for years I painted things that are very much linked to solidity, to earth, to the iron of industrial objects, and then there were other moments when I managed to approach water as a subject, and after that there was a cycle on wind, which was more abstract.

It's as if by painting the 'usual' subjects – interiors, portraits, woods, cities – I was able to reach the vital elements that are part of our structures. They are, after all, not only elements of nature but actually part of us: it was a big effort for me to 'be air', and 'becoming water' was also very difficult.

When I painted water for the first time, for ten years I'd had that liquid sensation in mind. In my past series of paintings, there were traces of what I am doing now, there was an insight that was just glimpsed but remained undefined. Once all the elements had been probed I came to a point where I felt that I shouldn't change the subject any more. What I needed to change was the method. I felt a distance growing between what I had always done and what I felt I could do. So I chose a subject that was the most traditional of all for me, the interior, and I challenged it. My back was up against the wall. I couldn't cheat. I acknowledged the fact that for some time I'd fail, and for the first six months I destroyed everything I painted – I still do so every now and then (the artist points to a pile of paper strips), but then I started making progress and couldn't stop.





**P: What do you mean by 'a new method'?**

A: What I mean by that is letting myself go, navigating without a specific route, letting the painting lead the way. Now, when I start working on a painting, I have absolutely no idea how it will turn out. Even before, I never knew how a painting would turn out but I had an idea of its construction: for example, the shape of a room. Here, I start from the idea of an interior, but I don't know where it will lead me. For the same reason I find that for the first time I can return to a painting in a second moment if I wish. With these works, I have the feeling I could continue to paint forever, I could create some openings, check the dripping, intensify some of the areas, open up other spaces.

This required a change in the technique. In order to 'open' some points in the painting I had to use oilier materials. The liquid nature of the work has always been present because my gesture calls for the brushstroke to move smoothly. But now things are different: the material is oilier and somehow more nourished. I did so many experiments with the materials that there would be times when I'd go back to the studio in the morning, convinced that I had worked well the day before, and found out instead that the painting was gone: it had all dripped onto or sunk to the floor. The first works on paper took two, three, four months to dry. I realised they would never dry completely. I used acrylic and oil together, but also chalk, charcoal, different types of oil, even furniture wax and glue.

I destroyed the first works or else they destroyed themselves; then I realised how I could adjust my aim by using only acrylic and oil, playing precisely on their incompatibility, exploiting them to achieve openings on the canvas and the paper, which would not have happened had I used other techniques. It's almost like magic: you mix several substances and some colour and it all opens up; it leaves a void ... But the

resulting forms weren't created at random, I wanted them this way, I learned how to make them.

**P: What's the shape of a thought? How do you paint it?**

A: To me, a thought is a flow of things that leads to others, all within a circular movement. My way of painting also follows this wavering, slow, but powerful movement. I found myself creating interiors that are different from the ones I painted in the past. In the new ones, for example, there isn't a single corner. For years there were corners in all my paintings: in interiors, industrial landscapes, nudes in a studio. This new method has led me to create rounder forms, to leave open spaces. But I didn't find a formula to paint a thought – at least, I hope I didn't, I dislike formulas. I conceive thought to be a pure form of energy. So I stand still as if watching a train go by. At that speed I let myself go and see what comes out of it.

**P: Even the long perspective lines we were used to are making way for spaces of a different nature. There's a play between a finite space and an infinite one, there are corridors that open up on 'unknown spaces', and we have the impression that these canvases contain different moments in time.**

A: Yes, you might say that the movement here is even deeper, because there is no end to each line, there is no industrial warehouse that ends up against a wall. You don't really know where you're coming from: you might have entered from here, or from there. You might have been born there – maybe you *were* born there, I don't know.

In some of the paintings I've tried to create two different situations, a synthesis of what was there before, and of what would be there afterwards. I found my rhythm.

**P:** The fact that your paintings retain their mystery even to you after you've painted them is intriguing. Maybe this is what you mean when you talk about anticipating memory?

**A:** Memory is an immense archive, but it can be deceptive too. Memory creates models, and blocks you inside them. I want to leave some room for doubt. We could say I'm working on the initial spark, on the insight, more than on a sensorial knowledge of things. I find the word 'knowledge' to be unsuitable because it shuts me in. I'm fine with the fact that a painting can remain something that's not entirely comprehensible, it's what I want: you leave a door open here, then you go through that door and you open two more doors there. The fact that the 'finished' paintings still leave me with a sense of wonder is an excellent result. The curious thing is that this exhibition could have been just a single, thousand-foot-long canvas, because the flow of thoughts is never-ending. And it would have been fine: if you roll out the longest canvas I'll keep painting for months without ever stopping.

**P:** I find it interesting that it's not just one canvas, though. Working on small sheets of paper, is the most revolutionary for you, and the most different from the past: it captures each of these thoughts into a different 'state,' as if just shards of something larger.

**A:** Yes, these are thoughts I capture on the spur of the moment, fragments. In fact, I started understanding this new method when, while working on sheets of paper that were growing longer and longer, sixteen, twenty inches long: within them I identified squares or rectangles of painting, some of which even just thirty by forty inches, that contained all I actually needed from

the painting, and I started to tear things up and keep only those small painted rectangles. In a way, this chance of destruction is what got me going again, gave me a new speed. It was a great act of freedom and then I really enjoyed painting for this exhibition – in the sense of sheer pleasure, even of the physical kind.

**P:** Speed has always been a characteristic of your painting.

**A:** Yes, because speed prevents you from thinking rationally about what you're doing. My head has always worked on two tracks at the same time, and that's how it works best. At school the teacher would shout out 'Papetti! Stop drawing and pay attention.' But they soon realised I paid better attention if I kept drawing. When I really want to work I have to be doing something else at the same time. More often than not, in my studio there's music playing, or there are voices from the radio. My rational mind follows them, and that's how I trick it. That's when my painting will go where it needs to go.

**P:** You trick your rational part so that your instinctive brain ends up on the canvas? Over the centuries, many intellectuals and artists have tried to 'trick' their rational side by using drugs, or by getting rid of visual modules and going to work elsewhere, to the Tropics, or in unfamiliar contexts. Is this what you do?

**A:** I want to reach the most authentic part of myself, the one that hasn't been filtered by reasoning, or by visual codes; it's the part that's truly free and uninfluenced. It used to be slightly influenced before – by the presence of a subject – while here I hope I've managed to anticipate it, again, by a





second. Going to the Tropics would be useless for me: I'd take myself along, I would not be able to leave my rationality behind.

P: This sounds like a 'medium' at work: an understanding crossing through you, without going through your rational side.

A: I don't want to say either yes or no, but of course my ultimate amazement upon seeing what I actually painted has to do with this: the painting came out on its own. I made it, but it's as though I hadn't, as though I wasn't conscious at the time it was made. I am aware that the method I have developed involves distracting a part of me. It's funny: sometimes I see myself in the videos my son makes while I'm working, and I feel like laughing, I see myself working with such a rhythm and a speed that I wonder: what on earth am I doing? It's almost like a dance, a ceaseless one.

P: I know: I've seen you paint, while we chatted or listened to a concert by Keith Jarrett with the volume turned all the way up, and I've always been amazed at how you could make such huge paintings without ever stopping, without even moving away from the canvas to evaluate what you were doing as a whole.

A: The fact that I am always inside the speed of the gesture helps me achieve what I want. When I first started painting these things I knew I had truly found my freedom. Here I paint things that aren't things, they are objectless forms. Here, for the first time ever, I can't tell what the subject of the paintings is, and when I show them to some people they see completely different things in them. Where someone sees a shipyard, someone else thinks it's a crowd of people in a 'piazza'. One painting, that

was supposed to be an interior, ended up looking like a street in Genoa during a flood, at night, instead.

P: Perhaps you have accustomed those who know your paintings to the fact that they are both conceptual and figurative – two things that are not mutually exclusive – so people feel free to read them as they wish. After all, even Giacometti, who was one of 'your' artists, was figurative and conceptual at the same time.

A: He too had stood with his back to the wall, he'd set himself an impossible task: he'd say, 'I want to make a head for what it is.' But there is no 'head for what it is'. And he, too, after digging for a long time, would find little or nothing in his hands. Many of his works were saved by his brother who would remove them from of his studio and take them to the foundry. Giacometti sought the essence. He wanted reality, but reality does not exist.

P: This is where a whole different discussion begins – which I know you hesitate to take part in – about your particular sensitivity for things that can't be seen. I believe that your public feels this sensitivity very much. It is perhaps the part of your work that, at times, is the most frightening to the viewer. Some of your older paintings are very much defined as objects: portraits or 'water' paintings – which in themselves are not dangerous subjects – have been perceived as vibrant by some, and disturbing by others. I remember that a while back a woman fainted in front of one of your strongest works.

A: It has always happened. In front of the same painting I've heard someone say, 'How disturbing, this figure in dark waters!' and someone else say, 'This woman in twilight gives me such a feeling of

Detail of *Tempo Fermo* 2015  
oil on canvas  
205 x 328 cm

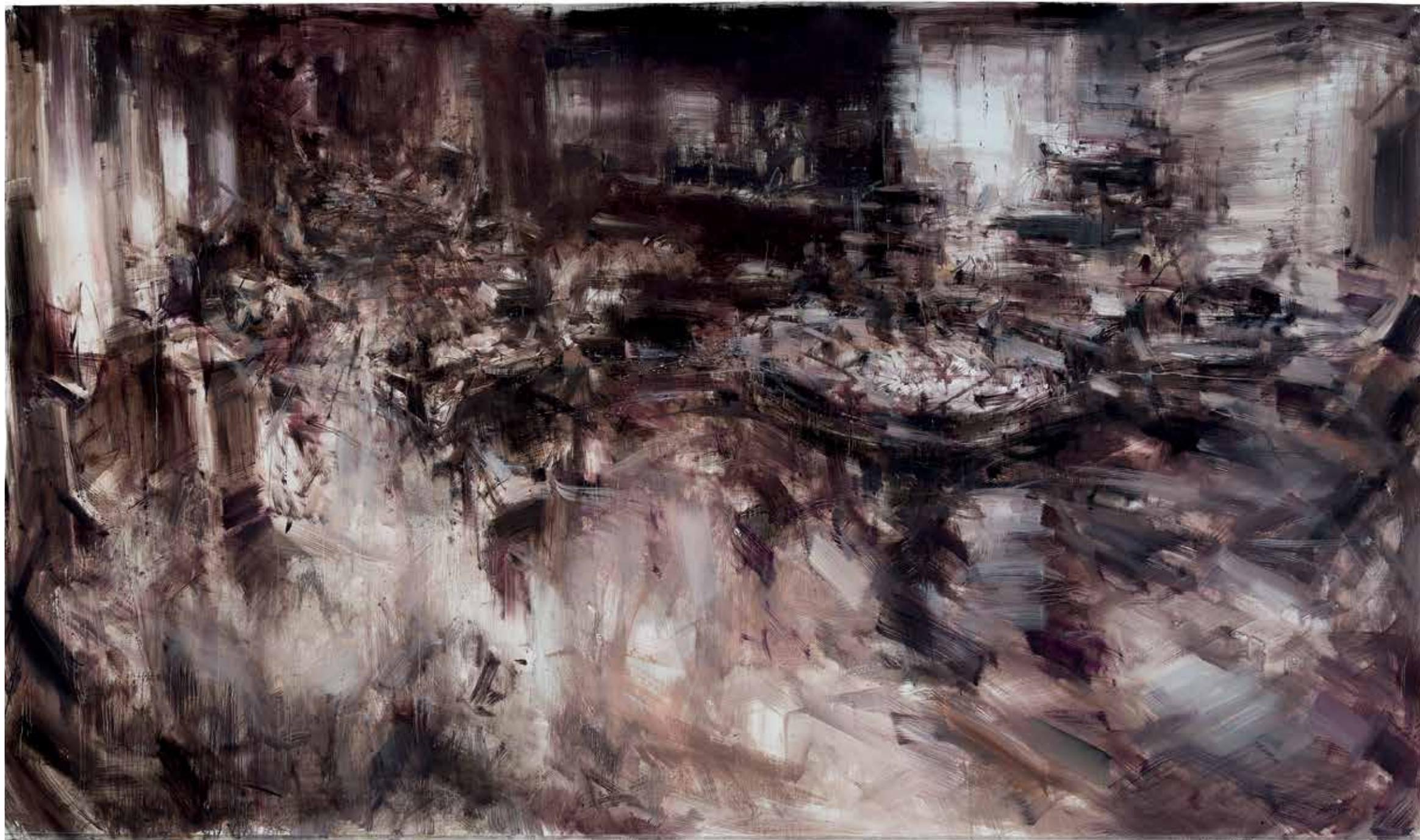


peacefulness.' Many people feel reassured by the fact that they recognise a specific subject in the scene, but then there's a hidden side, my hidden side, which speaks to the viewer's hidden side. Some are frightened, others are enthralled. I'm comfortable with both, because it means I've upset them, but in a good way: I've triggered a mental mechanism. It happens without me forcing it.

**P:** In the work of contemporary painters you often find a deliberate attempt to upset the viewer. What sort of art do you look to?

**A:** I don't like art that explains everything from the outset. The most dramatic things are the ones that are the most hidden – of course, they're also the ones that are the hardest to communicate. Personally, I find Velázquez's *Innocent X*, with his mouth open like he's really breathing, is more disturbing than Bacon's version, or Munch's *Scream*, where mouths are agape. It's easy to play on someone's stronger emotions, but I don't like the idea of a painting telling things too explicitly, explaining how you're supposed to feel. I like the kind of things that, the longer you look, the longer you want to, because you never finish seeing them.

*Pia Capelli – Art critic and writer  
2015*

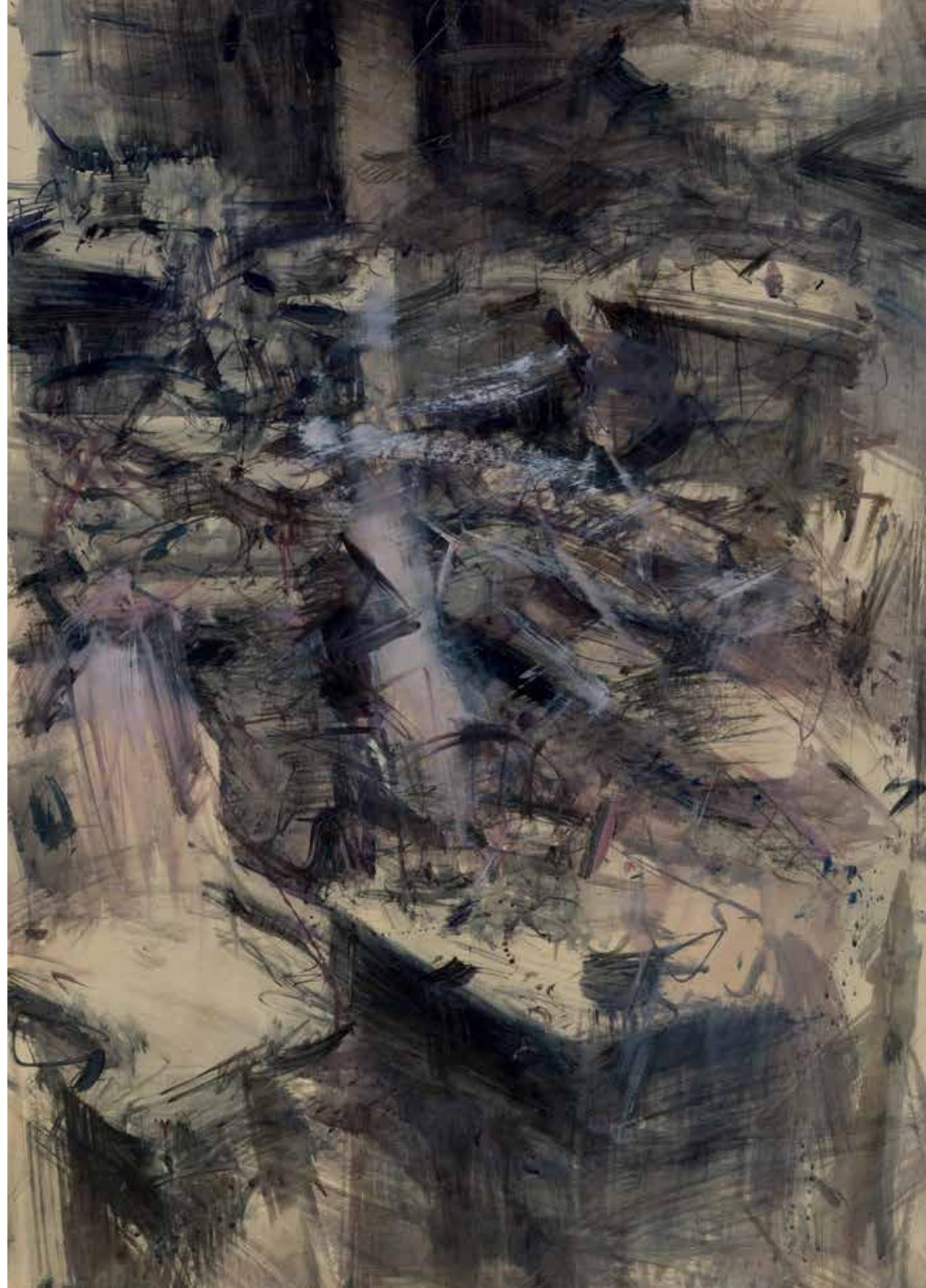


*Reminiscenza* 2016  
oil on canvas  
150 x 260 cm



ABOVE AND RIGHT (DETAIL)

*Reperti* 2016  
mixed media on paper mounted on canvas  
125 x 74 cm

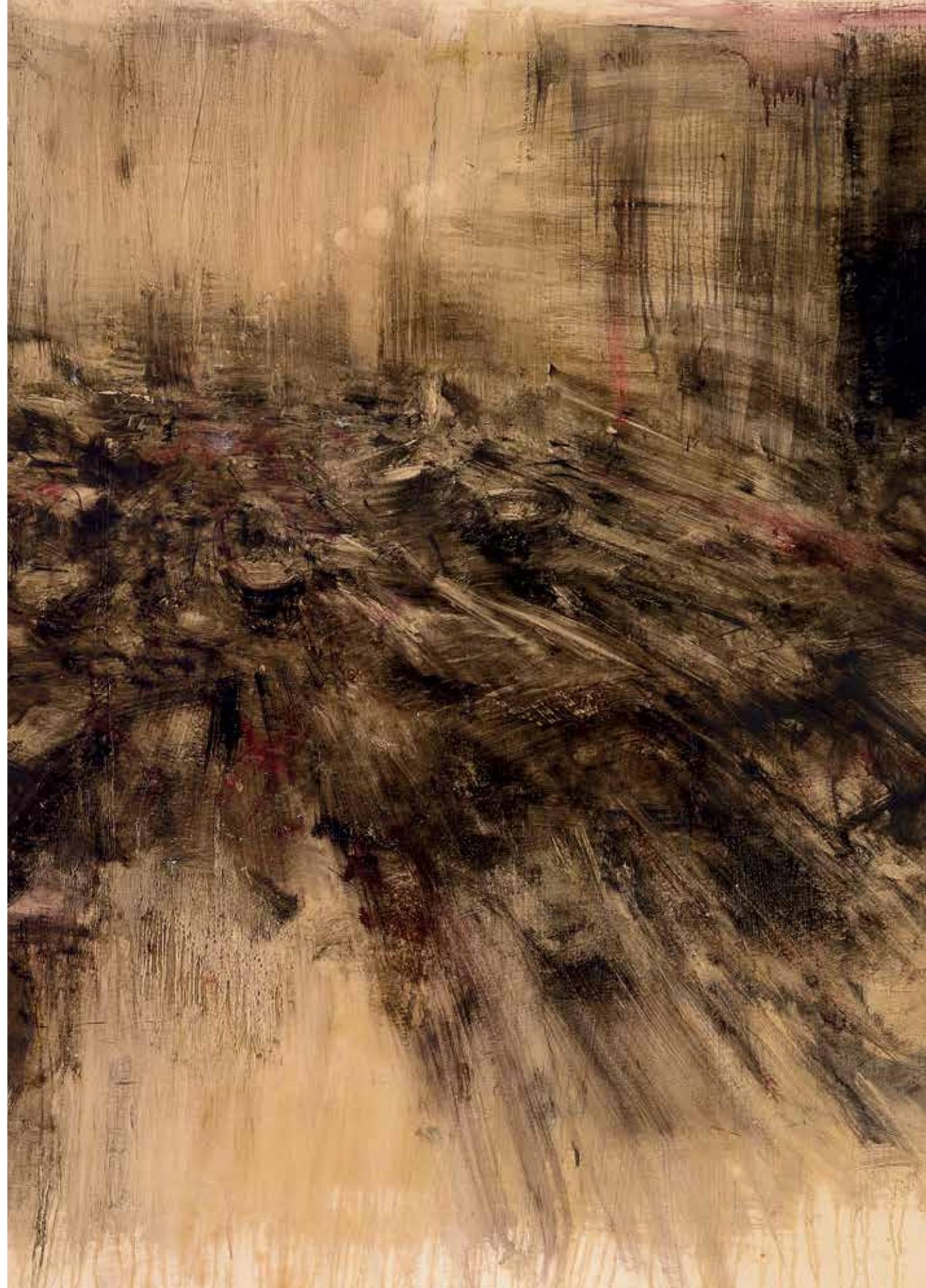




*Io abito qui* 2015  
mixed media on paper mounted on canvas  
205 x 203 cm



*Reperti* 2015  
mixed media on paper mounted on canvas  
210 x 204 cm



ABOVE AND RIGHT (DETAIL)  
*Metamorfosi* 2015  
mixed media on canvas  
205 x 251 cm



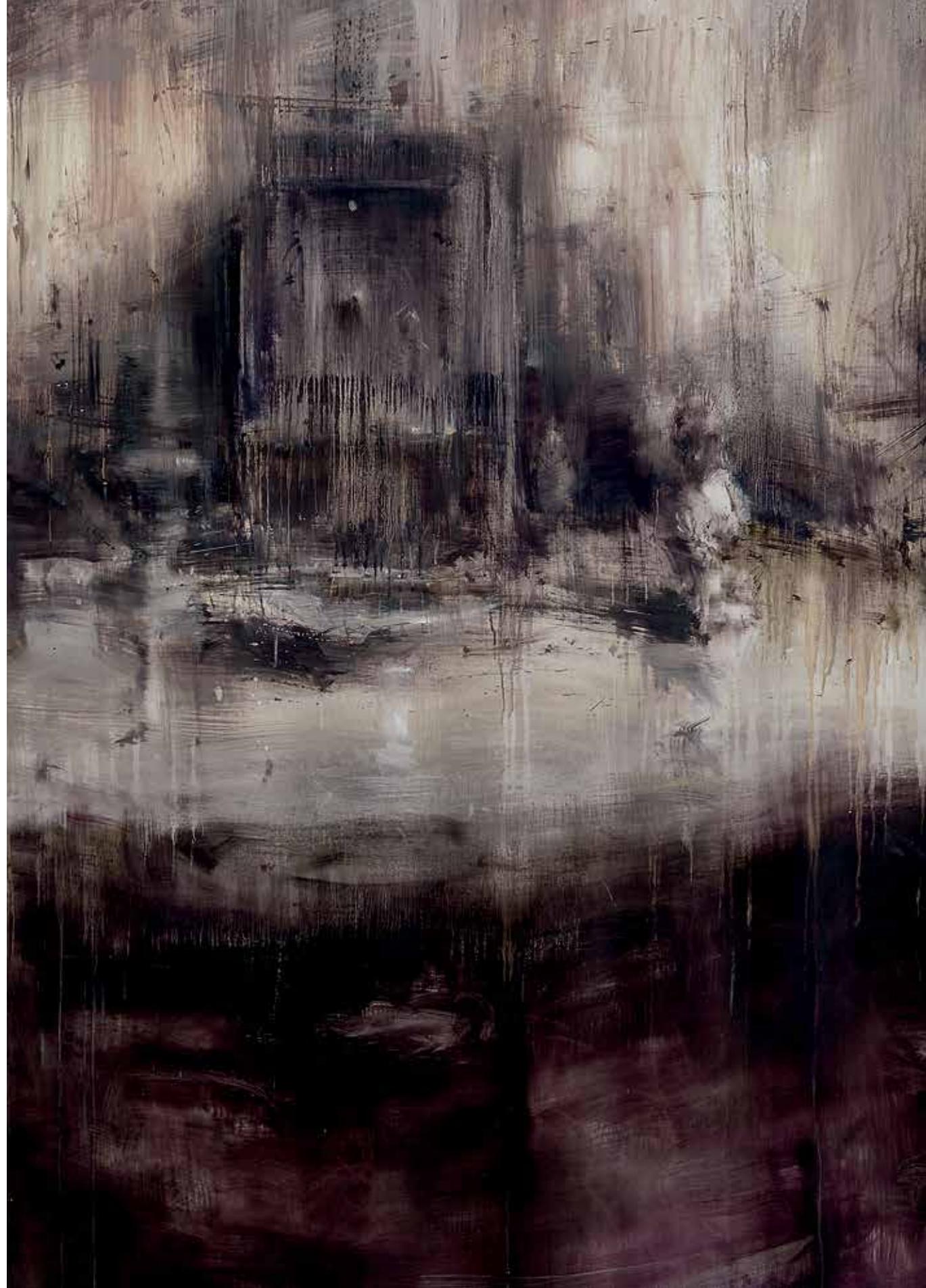


PAGE 22-23  
Detail of *Avenimento* 2015  
oil on canvas  
205 x 300 cm

ABOVE AND LEFT (DETAIL)  
*Reminiscenza* 2016  
oil on paper mounted on canvas  
205 x 200 cm



ABOVE AND RIGHT (DETAIL)  
*Reminiscenza* 2016  
oil on canvas  
205 x 170 cm





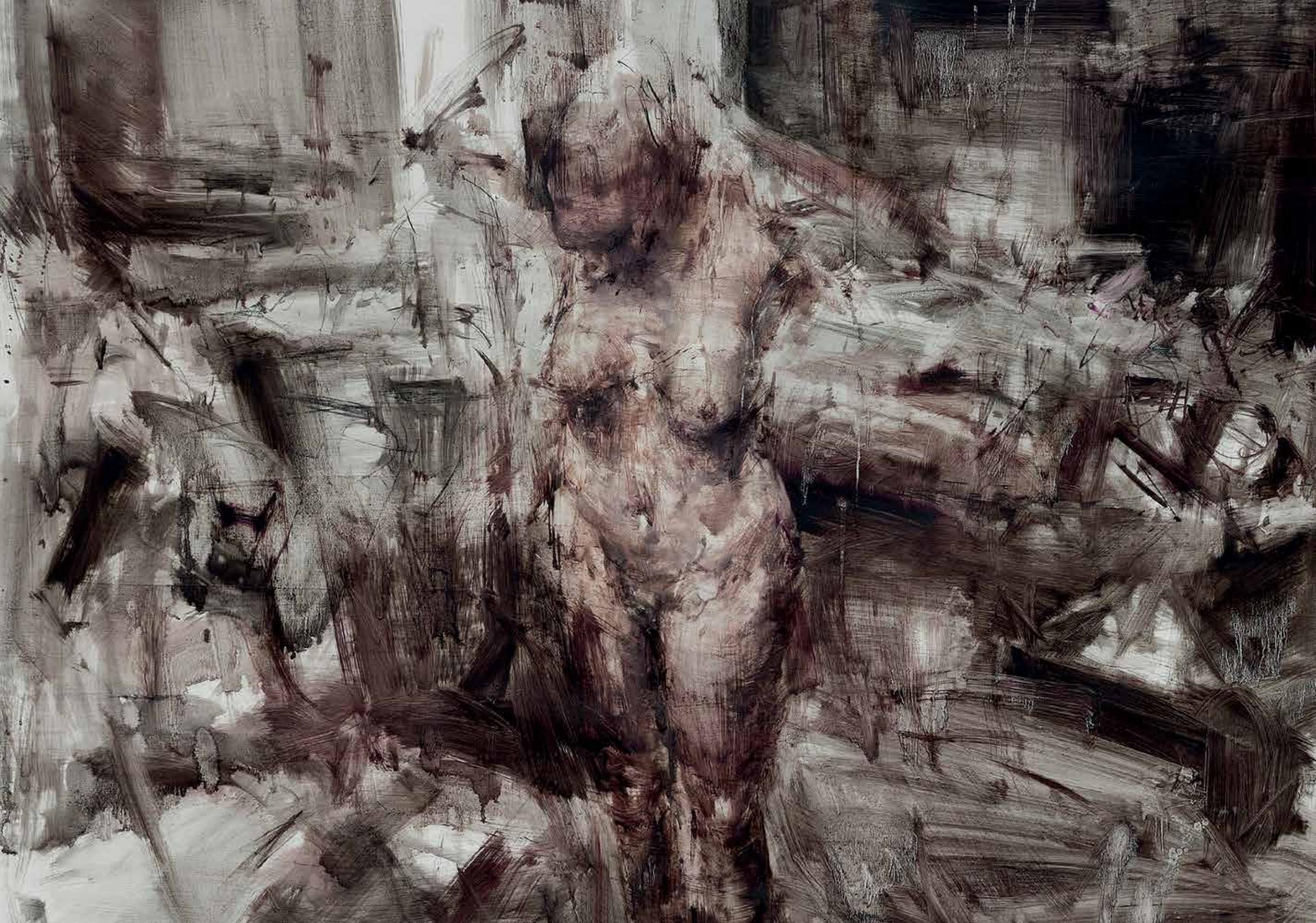
ABOVE AND LEFT (DETAIL)  
*Notte insonne*, 2015  
oil on canvas  
205 x 300 cm



*Tempo Fermo* 2015  
oil on canvas  
205 x 328 cm

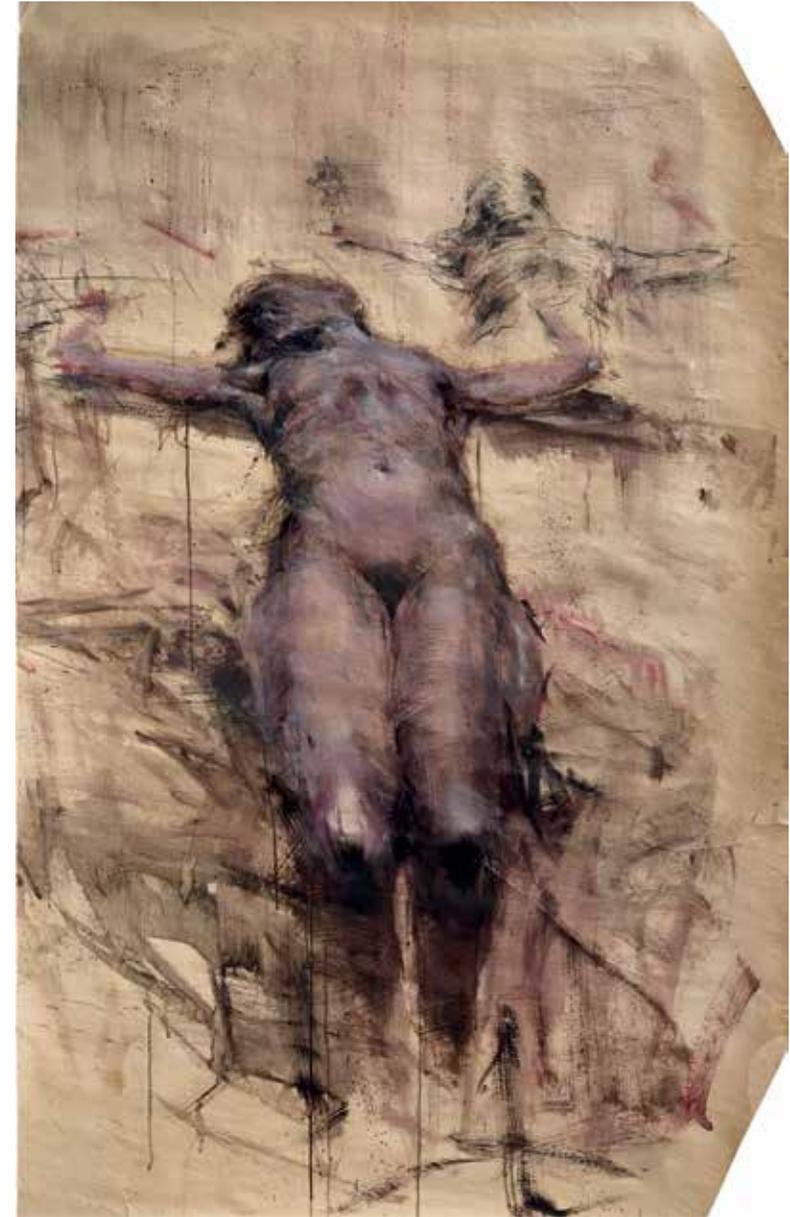


*Pelle* 2014  
oil on canvas  
200 x 300 cm





ABOVE AND PAGES 34–35 (DETAIL)  
*Nudo* 2015  
 oil on paper mounted on canvas  
 140 x 150 cm



ABOVE AND PAGES 38–39 (DETAIL)  
*Nudo disteso* 2015  
 oil on paper  
 197 x 125 cm





*Brevita di percorso 2014*  
oil on canvas  
200 x 270 cm

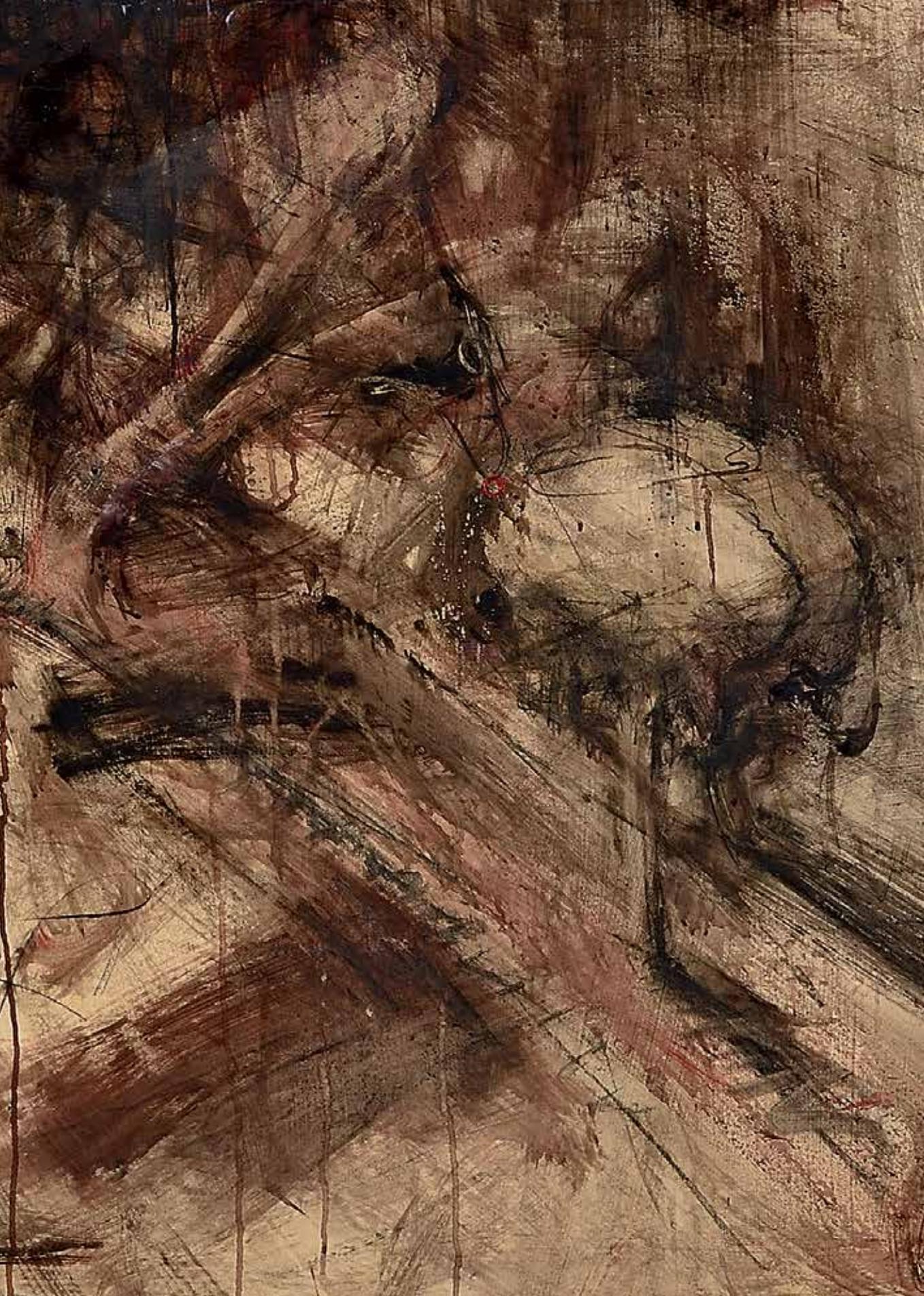
## Musings on Alessandro Papetti's Recent Paintings

Massimo Recalcati

### Memory and Oblivion

The creative act always lives poised between memory and oblivion. During the act of painting the painter cannot subtract himself from art history, from all that took place before him, from the past that preceded him; yet, at the same time, as Franz Kline would say, if the painter loves the past too much his personal style will find it hard to define itself, to come out as a unique style.

To make the creative gesture possible it is important each time not to overlook the legacy of those who came before. At the same time, however, one must forget it, separate from it, let it fall into oblivion. Only in this wavering between memory and oblivion is the invention of a style possible. If, instead, the one prevails over the other, the artist's gesture is equally mutilated: if it is memory that prevails over oblivion, the work will be reduced to a cloning of what has already been, it becomes a mere reproduction of the past, an inert memory. If, instead, it is oblivion that prevails over memory, it risks evaporating into an uncertainty without depth, being inconsistent. Only the memory of art – of art history – can give depth to a painting, but only the oblivion of this history will allow for the creative act, which, in any case, can never take place in opposition to or



in the absence of memory, but always and only as its unique crossing.

The outcome of this crossing, when it occurs, as it does with those who are great, leads the painter to an uninhabited, deserted zone, detached from all that took place before. He exits the memory of art history, breaks through the system of the great Other, inventing an unmistakable line, impossible without that story, but absolutely central to it. This means that every artist inherits the memory of those who came before him, but he can only be realized as such – as an artist who has invented a style that makes him unique and recognizable – if he knows how to earn this legacy back in a unique way.

In Papetti's case, as has been recalled by many critical texts on his work, his painting inherits the fundamental lesson of both Giacometti and Bacon, along with the existentialist experience of post-World War II Lombard realism. From an art-historical point of view, this is the memory with which he comes to terms – despite the fact that he has always considered himself to be self-taught – as he wrestles with his work. But exactly what is at stake in this confrontation? Certainly not that of finding a label to define his work (figurative or informal, existential or metaphysical?), as much as of making the relationship between memory and oblivion a recurring constant of his own poetics. This is, if you wish, his most specific stylistic code: lingering in a border area, a crevasse, in the boundary that separates oblivion from memory. And this is so not just in his relationship with his masters and with the memory of art history. All Papetti's artistic work speaks of the precarious balance that joins and separates the time of memory from the time of oblivion. He has always been interested in how memory also inhabits the most abandoned, apparently timeless places. And in

how the oblivion of abandonment makes these same places even more steeped in other people's memories. They are the so-called phantom places: the absence of the human presence that had at one time lingered there massively turns these places into mysterious syntheses of memory and oblivion. The first studios, the empty spaces of the great abandoned factories, of the shipyards, the pools and their mysterious inhabitants, the cities, the human bodies sculpted by time – for Papetti it is always a question of trying to capture the movement that precipitates the figure toward the chaotic plot of the shapeless real (oblivion), and, as though in an essential counterpoint, of trying to move upstream, re-emerge, extract, recuperate the possibilities of the figure of that plot (memory).

#### **'lo abito qui': Reaching Openness from Inside**

In this recent and very intense cycle of works the comparison between oblivion and memory takes on an unprecedented meaning. The artist enters a never-ending discourse not so much with the memory – acquired for some time now – of his fathers (Giacometti, Bacon, Baldini), but with the memory of his own work. The legacy becomes meta-critical within a deep movement of anamnesis where he crosses his entire pictorial oeuvre as if in a singularly retrospective gesture. By calling this exhibition 'lo abito qui' ('I Live Here') he offers us a clear indication: come, see, observe where I am, where I live, where my work has generated my name, come see the fruit of my tree! Come to this place where I live that escapes me, to this desert populated with images, ghosts and voices that transcend me, to this world of contorted signs

that you recognize as being my style!

This is the invitation that Papetti openly offers us. Re-emerging like detached pieces, scattered fragments, objects in disguise are all the great protagonists of his poetics: the studios, the factories, the phantom-objects, the findings, the perspectives, the interiors, the exteriors. Yet devoid of human figures (another great theme dating back to his early work because anamnesis forces him into a sort of folding back onto himself, into a rigorous excavation that temporarily cuts off every bridge with his others, by no accident, like anonymous atoms devoid of a definite individuality.

Even the persistent use of the monochrome no longer replicates the colours of the past (first and foremost blue and gray), but is accomplished through unusual colours (light yellow, earth, ivory, and shades of brown often marked by charcoal lines, purplish red) perhaps precisely to indicate the discontinuity, the self-reflexive relief that the latter works take on with respect to all the others.

I insist on wanting to point out the novelty of this most recent cycle, the fact that it is a unique moment of balance and of great synthesis in Papetti's oeuvre. While his progressive effort in these past years has been that of gradually freeing himself from 'interiors,' of coming out into the open, reacting to the claustrophobic condition of his first works (does this perhaps express the need to free himself from his fathers, especially Bacon and Giacometti?), toward openness, the exterior, the shipyards, the city, water, wind, he now returns to the interior bringing with him all that he has newly acquired by being exposed to the outside.

Hence, it is not a question of a simple regressive movement, but – and this, to my mind, is the essential lesson of 'lo abito qui' – of a new way of achieving

the outside. No longer as opposed to the interior, but from the interior. While the cycles of the Reperti and of the industrial archaeology of abandoned factories were part of the artist's exploration of the substance of the living being, into his solid, organic state, into his existential structure ('the mapping of the skeletal structure of what is real'), in these recent works everything seems more rarefied, cloudy, devoid of gravity. Indeed, what took place in the middle was the artist's necessary passage from water to wind. The ferrous solidity is thus watered down and becomes lighter. Papetti has acquired with more depth the mental, introspective psychically re-elaborative register of his work. And indeed, it is this register that achieves a singular peak in 'lo abito qui': the interiors that reappear are revisited from a wholly different perspective (from the perspective of water and wind?) with respect to the past. Closedness as opposed to openness – interior as the opposite of exterior – is no longer at play here, nor is their extrinsic opposition, as the artist's work on closedness and on the interior becomes an unprecedented and very fertile path which can be used to reach the outside and the exterior. The opening and closing of spaces. This is another pivotal leitmotif in Papetti's poetics, who refers us to his personal re-reading of his two major pictorial referents; the claustrophobic closing of space (Bacon), and the opening, or extreme expansion, of space (Giacometti).<sup>2</sup> Here, Papetti tries to recompose this contrast originally: his space is, at the same time, open and closed, interior and exterior. This is why he refuses the realist scheme that offsets the interior with the exterior, choosing the topology of the Moebius strip instead, which includes this opposition upon a single surface. Indeed, it is only the close-knit and silent confrontation between the artist and the Other who inhabits his interior world that enables him to

throw his memory out toward the exterior, conceive memory not as a closed space but as an infinitely open one. In this sense, the new chromatic timbres truly take on an exquisitely mental statute. This use of colour reflects the exercise of the ascent of this anamnesis, which never yields to the spectacle of the virtuoso. Rather, it is his entire past as a painter that appears to be consolidated upon these large-scale canvases or upon their fragmentation, from which small drawings emerge as if they were the dismembered parts of a whole.

### Crossing Over into the Invisible

Freud also believed this: memory is never just the memory of things. The chance of an objective, photographic memory does not exist, because memory always contains an interpretation of memory. Remembering is never just reproducing what was, but, rather, reinterpreting it, giving it life a second time around, making it visible once again. Memory is not so much reproduction as it is creation. It does not involve drawing from a primary source by moving backwards, nor does it mean going back to the 'real memory,' for every memory can only take place in the present time which fatally alters its physiognomy. This is why for Freud every memory is always a 'memory of defense.' Memory is never a memory of the facts; it is a memory of phantoms, traces, signs, impressions, 'not yet memory.' Our memories do not lie in a drawer like objects that have already been identified and are known to us. Appearing on Papetti's large-scale canvases is the stratified density of signs that thicken without every clearly and distinctly revealing their contents. More than representing memory it is a question of safeguarding its mystery. There is

Detail of *Brevita di percorso* 2014  
oil on canvas  
200 x 270 cm

no photographic precision in Papetti's anamnesis; only a density of signs that comes into being and then becomes frayed, that thickens and empties out, tangles, anamnestic magma, spectral objects, evocations, overflowings, apparitions, exteriors that become interiors, interiors that are exteriorized, figures that pass over into the informal, and figures that rise up from their informal foundation.

Papetti's memory resembles Morandi's (even the light yellow and ivory hues allude to the works of the Bolognese artist from afar); the objects seem to be dematerialized, to acquire a weight that comes from another world, that overflows into the invisible. But unlike the great Bolognese master, Papetti does not realize a calculated program for the retrieval of memory and its metaphysical code; his anamnesis is more contorted, tormented, feverish. It is not simply an archaeology of the Self, it does not reconstruct with medical precision the history of his symptoms. Rather, because it is a 'not as yet memory,' it comes to light from the painting itself, it takes place only *après coup*, retroactively, only when the work has been concluded. During loss, a loss of center, bewilderment. Papetti does not methodically prepare, as Morandi did, the *mise-en-scène* of the still life as the object of memory; rather, he exposes himself to the risk of loss, he throws his own body into the pursuit of memory.

### Does a Memory of the Hand Truly Exist?

Only by turning upon the work he has produced can the artist see whether or not the anamnestic sedimentation of traces and signs generated by the continuous and frenetic spasm of his gesture was capable of breathing life into a new form. From this point of view, the critical indication that has often

concerned the anamorphosis finds its most genuine justification. The hand and arm anticipate, like some sort of haphazard, irregular, crooked autonomy, the rectilinear and geometric gaze of the logos. First it's the hand, then it's the gaze. This is how Papetti's anamnesis takes place, overturning Morandi's: the gaze can only contemplate, at a later stage, what the hand convulsively seeks and creates.

Could this be 'écriture automatique'? Is the electricity of the hand completely autonomized from the gaze? Is the hand, that nervous and very intense gesture of the hand from which, from the beginning, Papetti's painting rises up, an organ connected to memory? But does a memory of the hand even exist? Is it not perhaps precisely this memory that is 'not yet memory' that which Papetti seeks in these most recent works?

The exquisite kindness of the man, his calming and meditative presence, make way for a fever that alienates him from the world as he works. It is the electricity of the hand that prevails over the theoretical gaze. This is not a battle, a wrestling with the painting, as is instead the case, for instance, with action painting; rather, this is an exposition to the abyss of the painter's own subconscious, a delving deeply into himself, a path through his own phantoms. The artist navigates 'without a specific route, letting the painting lead the way ... I start from the idea of an interior, but I don't know where it will lead me.'<sup>3</sup>

It is at this point that another great theme in Papetti's poetics acquires new value, it is the theme of the speed of the pictorial gesture. Obviously, this is not speed laden with energy, as was emphasized by the Futurists, especially from a literary point of view; it is the exact opposite, the other face of the void and of motionlessness, of phantom-like, deconsecrated, abandoned places that have constituted an essential

code in his work. The speed of the views of Milan, or that of the *Ciclo del tempo*, for instance, do not at all contrast with the motionlessness of nothing; rather, they are one of its expressions. It is the close relationship between Papetti's painting and the themes of philosophical existentialism, but also with the Biblical tradition of the Ecclesiastes: everything is dissolved, everything disappears, everything slips away, everything is dispersed, everything is dust. Yet in the shamanic speed of his painting Papetti embodies a point of resistance of nihilistic temptation – which instead inspires so much of the art that is contemporary to his own – of a sinking into chaos. He remains a painter, there are no short-cuts, he remains loyal to the gesture of the painting: meeting the void, the inconsistency of all things, makes the memory of what appears in the world even more miraculous. What remains? What does not cease to exist? What endlessly chases after our lives? This is another key that helps us to understand his profound Giacomettian legacy: always being poised on the void. The painting's redemption is not deleting the void, nor is it sinking into the void. Rather, it is remaining on the border between being and nothing, between memory and oblivion.

Akin to all the great twentieth-century masters Papetti appears to have been visited by painting more than being its master. Something moves within him whose strength the Self can never completely control. On this is based his open mistrust of art that exalts the technical mastery of the artist and his medium. The perfectionism in Papetti's technique is merely an exorcism before the risk of becoming lost that the art of painting always involves. In his experience the surface of the work necessarily appears to be overturned, imprecise, crooked, seismic. Technique does not help him to rule the subconscious; rather,

Detail of *Brevità di percorso* 2014  
oil on canvas  
200 x 270 cm



it helps him to re-emerge each time from the subconscious. In this sense, this most recent cycle is deeply inspired by one of Papetti's major options, the one according to which each work of art 'if it is genuine is always autobiographical, it is born from personal experiences. I search within myself.<sup>4</sup> Searching within oneself not to reach the motionless treasure of memory, but to generate this very search, step by step, sign by sign, new, unknown memory, memory as infinite surprise. This is why in these most recent works, as Papetti himself points out to us, the interiors don't even have a corner,<sup>5</sup> precisely because it's not a question of reducing the memory to a container but of opening up its productive strength. It is the same strength that guides the artist in his relationship with the canvas in a movement, which seems inexhaustible, of painting. The problem is to avoid closing the painting, it is to avoid making it instantly comprehensible: the movement then becomes 'even deeper, because there is no end to a line, there is no industrial warehouse that ends up against a wall. You don't really know where you're coming from: you might have entered there from there, or from here, you might have been born there... The curious thing is that this exhibition could have been based on a single canvas measuring three hundred meters in length, because the flow of thoughts is never-ending.'<sup>6</sup>

### The 'Mud'

This is a veritable immersion, an exploration without a compass, during the course of which Papetti gradually gives back to us the signs of his memory. In this sense, memory is not already constituted, but ongoing, alive, throbbing, in the 'future anterior' as Lacan would

say. Papetti does not want to be a slave to a memory that acts solely as an inexorable repetition of what has already been, of what has already been seen, the already known. He wants to subtract himself from the memory that makes what is new impossible. For him, memory is not historical, philological, dead, stiff, it is not merely a container of memories. His efforts lie in freeing himself from this memory-archive; he bestows new life on memory by allowing himself to be surprised, thrown off course, struck, circled, exposing himself to its unpredictable returns. But it is always the hand, as I wrote before, that guides the gaze, and not the other way around. This means that memory is not so much what allows you to remember the past, but an invention of the future. This is why the gaze is forced to pursue the hand, and it is the hand, only the hand, not the gaze, that can generate a new memory made up of unprecedented surprises and encounters and not just repetitions.

This is another nerve center in Papetti's painting: art draws from the shapeless layers of time, from that 'mud',<sup>7</sup> as the artist himself suggestively expresses it, which makes up the deepest plot of the subject. Mud, magma, layers of signs, 'passive syntheses' in the words of Husserl. This is the shapeless bottom of memory. Anamnestic traces that do not as yet generate images. Dust, a disorderly, muddled up, strange, inarticulate swarm in search of a figure. All the great themes of Papetti's poetics return (as phantoms?): the abandoned factories, the mysterious objects, the quick perspectives of the city, the sword-like beams of light, the deserted stations, the still lifes, the crania, the skulls, the sacred atmospheres of the crucifixion and, above all, the interiors. All these figures reappear like the suggestive relics of a distant shore, scattered members, undecipherable objects such as in *Tempo fermo* (what exactly are those

objects hanging from the wall: meat, jackets, rags?).

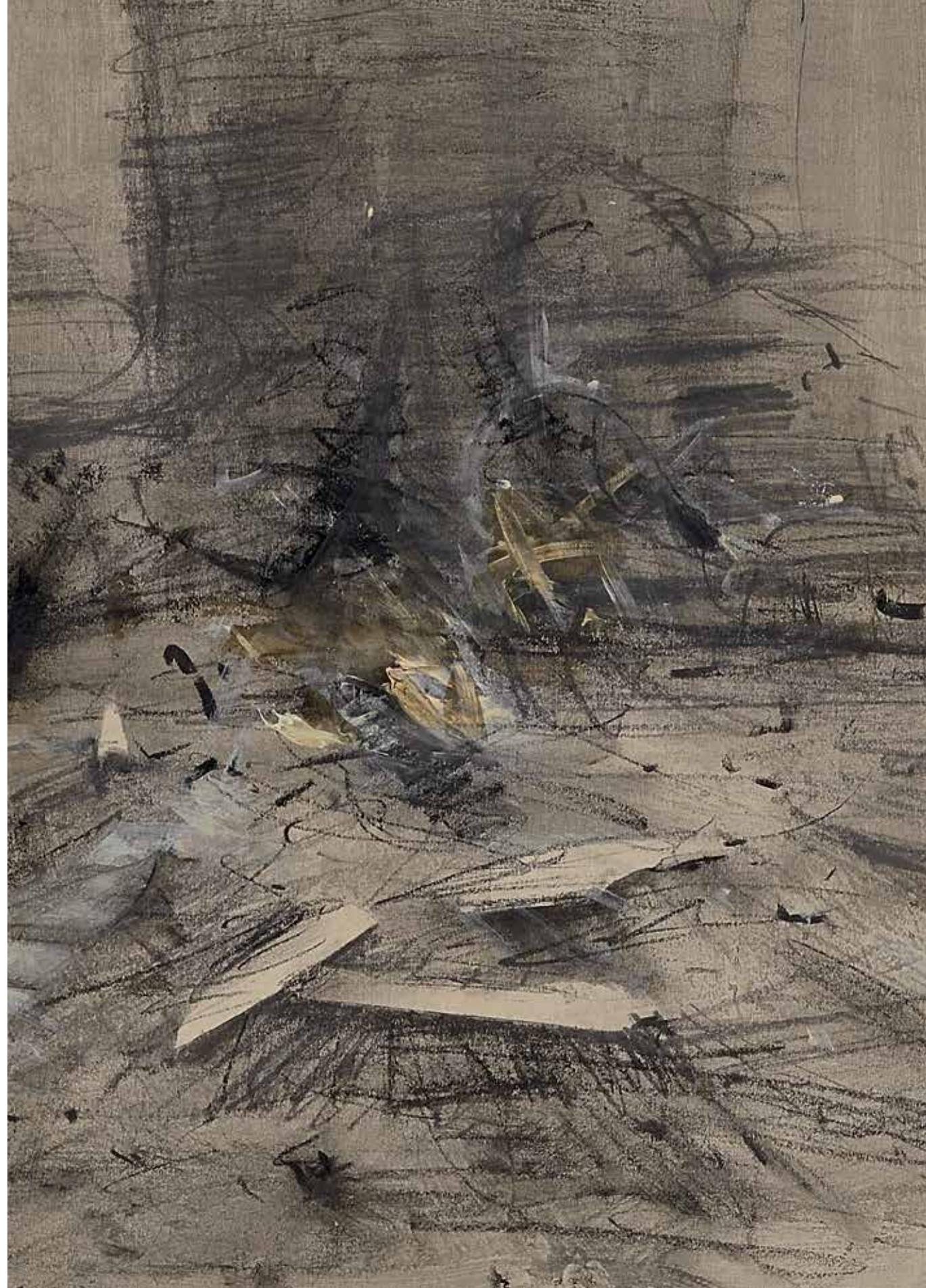
The miracle of painting is that of hosting this anarchical army of images, thoughts, voices. The mud is given back filtered poetically by the artist's gesture. At times more dense and illegible (such as in the case of the small drawings, in *Anamnesi* or in *Non ancora memoria*), at other times in more lyrical and evocative forms, for instance, in works of rare intensity like *Reminiscenza* or *Tempo fermo*.

Papetti fears neither chaos nor the ontological disarray of life. He does not back up, take refuge, restore illusions. He does not hide this chaos under a veil of technical virtuosity, under a conceptual game, or under its sterilely provocative emphasis. Papetti is a true painter because he does not destroy form; rather, he leads it in the direction of the burning clash with what is shapeless, with the mud of what is real. Bion defines this ability to know how to linger before chaos, a nameless abyss, what cannot be represented, 'negative capability.' Indeed, this is what Papetti's work is about. Working in the mud of existence, sinking into it to transform what is left into poetry each time. In this high sense his attitude is never either philological, nor historicist. Even when, such as in the case of *Reminiscenza*, the object seems to be more clearly outlined, with the semblance of an object that is finally recognizable (a tabernacle, an old chest of drawers, a small closet?) that suddenly comes to mind, it is always a question of renewing the mental perception of the object more than of describing the objectivity of its presence.

1. 'Industrial structures interested me in the same way that skeletons, animal skulls, or the shapes of objects did. My intention was to come close to mapping the skeletal framework of the real. To my mind, the shapes of industrial plants were like veined skeletal systems. I was drawn to them as organic and strongly physical forms.' A. Papetti, in *Pittura per i ciechi. Una conversazione con Alessandro Papetti*, 6 e 9 Aprile 2005, in Alessandro Papetti. *The uneasiness of painting*, edited by G. Quadrio Curzio, Mudima, Milan 2005, p. 34.
2. *Idem*, p. 24.
3. Cf., A. Papetti, *Painting as Insight, Angst, Enjoyment. Pieces of a Conversation between Alessandro Papetti and Pia Capelli*, here on p. 147.
4. Cf., A. Papetti, *Pittura per ciechi*, p. 18.
5. Cf., A. Papetti, *Painting as Insight, Angst, Enjoyment. Pieces of a Conversation between Alessandro Papetti and Pia Capelli*, here on p. 148.
6. *Idem*, p. 148.
7. Cf., A. Papetti, *Pittura per ciechi*, p. 20.
8. Pp. 76-77, here on.
9. *Idem*, p. 45.
10. *Idem*, pp. 98-129.
11. *Idem*, p. 89.

*Non ancora memoria*

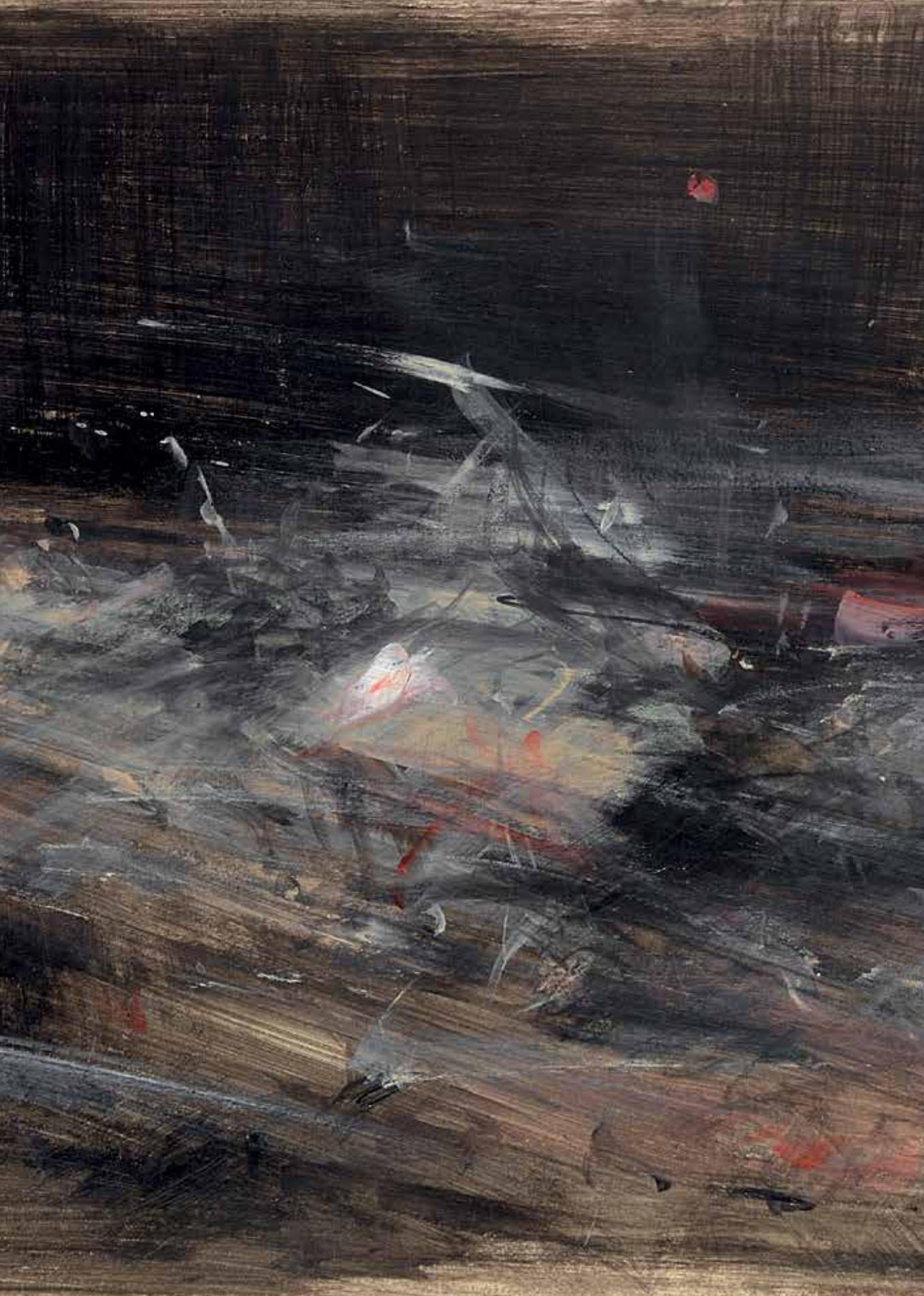
*[Not yet a memory]*



ABOVE AND RIGHT (DETAIL)  
*Non ancora memoria* 2015  
mixed media on paper  
49.5 x 69.5 cm



ABOVE AND LEFT (DETAIL)  
*Non ancora memoria* 2015  
mixed media on paper  
50 x 64.5 cm



ABOVE AND LEFT (DETAIL)  
*Non ancora memoria* 2015  
mixed media on paper  
50 x 64.5 cm



ABOVE AND RIGHT (DETAIL)

*Non ancora memoria* 2015  
mixed media on paper  
50 x 64.5 cm





ABOVE AND PAGES 62-63 (DETAIL)  
*Non ancora memoria* 2015  
 mixed media on paper  
 49.5 x 69.5 cm



ABOVE AND PAGES 66-67 (DETAIL)  
*Non ancora memoria* 2015  
 mixed media on paper  
 49.5 x 69.5 cm





## Alessandro Papetti

Alessandro Papetti is one of Italy's foremost contemporary painters. Born in 1958 in Milan, where he continues to live and work today, he has exhibited widely for almost 30 years, notably at the Venice Biennale in 2003 and 2011, at major museums in Milan, Paris, Moscow and Tokyo and at commercial galleries around the world, from Vancouver to Cape Town.

During the first two years of his career, he concentrated on the theme of *Ritratti visti dall'alto*, a series to which Giovanni Testori devoted an article in *Il Corriere della Sera* in 1989. This wide-angle view of real life was followed by a series of paintings created between 1990 and 1992 entitled *Reperti* (Relics), in which his attention was more focused on detail and on the marks left by time in factory workshops and interiors. His studies of what he calls 'industrial archaeology' would become more in-depth in the years that followed – as demonstrated, for example, in the 1996 exhibition at the Musei Civici in Villa Manzoni, Lecco.

From 1992, Papetti began participating in exhibitions in public spaces and art fairs in Europe and the United States. In 1995, he started working between Milan and Paris. That same year, he met writer and biographer James Lord, who dedicated an important critical text to him in 1996. During this period, his portraits and depictions of interiors ran parallel with his studies on the nude – which became the subject of the show *La forza dell'immagine, la pittura del realismo in Europa*, held at the Gropius Bau Museum in Berlin in 1996, and *Sui Generis* at PAC in Milan, commissioned by Alessandro Riva.

These studies led him to create the paintings in the series *Acqua* (Water) from 1998 onwards, exhibited for the first time at the Studio Forni in Milan in 1999. Here we find bodies suspended motionless in swimming pools, or – as in the series *Il bagno di notte* (Night-swimming) – caught just before plunging into the blackness of a sea illuminated by a livid, lunar light. These were some of his first images of figures in outdoor settings.

The result of his new pictorial series and of the preceding series dedicated to industrial environments was the production of *Cantieri navali* (Shipyards). In the 2002 show dedicated to this theme, Papetti exhibited the landscape of industrial ports, dry docks and gigantic hulls, together with a series of huge faceless nudes. It was an expression of the bodies of ships and humans in all their epic scale and fragility.

During 2003 and 2004 Papetti was invited to take part in several museum exhibitions – including one dedicated to Giovanni Testori at the Palazzo Reale in Milan and another entitled *La ricerca dell'identità*, commissioned by Vittorio Sgarbi and showing in various public spaces through Italy.

In 2005, Papetti took part in the exhibitions *Miracolo a Milano* at Palazzo della Ragione and *Il paesaggio italiano contemporaneo* at Palazzo Ducale in Gubbio. In the same year, the Fondazione Mudima dedicated a retrospective of his work entitled *Il disagio della pittura*, in which Papetti exhibited the last twenty years of his oeuvre in a selection of paintings ranging from *Testorian* figures viewed from



above to the paintings on the theme of the *Città*. This was followed by a show six months later entitled *Il ventre della città*.

In all these years, Papetti has regularly reworked themes and subject matter, exploring urban scenes on the streets, interior and exterior spaces – and the spill-over between public and private spaces. His interest in industrial archaeology led to a series of paintings dedicated to the former Renault factory, exhibited in 2007 at the Musée des Années 30 in Paris, in a show entitled *Île Seguin*. In 2007, Vittorio Sgarbi also invited Papetti to take part in the show *Arte italiana. 1968–2007 Pittura* at the Palazzo Reale in Milan. This year also saw him take part in the exhibition *La nuova figurazione italiana. To be continued...* at the Fabbrica Borroni in Bollate.

In 2009, Papetti participated in the show *No Landscape – La sparizione del paesaggio*, held at the Fondazione Bandera in Busto Arsizio and the group exhibition *L'anima dell'acqua* at the Ca' d'Oro in Venice. In the same year, he also exhibited his series of circular paintings dedicated to water, the forest and the wind, in the exhibition *Il ciclo del tempo* at Palazzo Reale in Milan, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva. In these monumental works (each painting is eight metres in diameter), the viewer's sense of perspective is disorientated by the format and scale of the paintings.

In 2010, Papetti had three solo exhibitions – in

Tokyo, Vancouver and the Palladio's Villa Manin (Italy) – and in the following year he attended the Biennale di Venezia at the Italian Pavillon, curated by Vittorio Sgarbi, and the Cuban Pavillo. Still devoted to industrial archaeology, his 2012 show entitled *Factories of Utopia* was held at the Moscow Museum of Architecture – Muar. At the end of the same year, his solo exhibition *Autobiografia della pittura* was held at the Contini Art Gallery, with a critical essay by Luca Beatrice published in the catalogue.

During the Spring of 2013, several significant solo exhibitions took place outside of Italy including at the Everard Read Gallery in Johannesburg; in Berlin at the Halle am Wasser @ Hamburger Bahnhof, curated by Frederik Foert and Gianluca Ranzi; and in Paris at the Mairie du 1er arrondissement.

At the beginning of 2014, Papetti participated at the exhibition *Doppio sogno*, curated by Luca Beatrice and Arnaldo Colasanti, held in Palazzo Chiabrese in Turin. In June, he opened a show at the Palazzo della Penna of Perugia, entitled *La pelle attraverso* and curated by Luca Beatrice.

Over the last fifteen years, Papetti has exhibited his works at major art fairs and collaborated with several foreign galleries. He is one of Italy's most innovative and exciting contemporary painters. This is his first solo exhibition in the UK.

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