

An abstract artwork featuring a dark, textured background with vibrant, swirling colors of red, orange, yellow, and blue. The composition is dense and layered, with a prominent, elongated, curved shape in the center. The overall effect is one of intense energy and movement.

BRIAN WOOD

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August 25 - September 24, 2017

Essay by Eleanor Heartney



CROSS
CONTEMPORARY
ART

99 Partition Street
Saugerties, NY 12477



Brian Wood. *Heartshorn*, 2017, Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in.

Brian Wood's Art Beyond Thought

by Eleanor Heartney

*The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance.*

*A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.*

*You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.*

*The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.*

Wallace Stevens, *Of Mere Being*, 1954

Wallace Stevens' poem, *Of Mere Being*, is a paean to the ineffability of the poetic imagination. It provides an incandescent image of those feelings that hover tantalizingly "at the end of the mind," not yet tugged and flattened by the operations of reason into verbalizable thoughts. Though a master of words, Stevens spent his life exploring what they couldn't do. His poems live in the gap between the intelligible and the intuitive, or, as he put it in another poem, between "the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

Brian Wood inhabits this same territory. His paintings originate in what he described in a 1994 interview as the "prelinguistic roots of consciousness." They balance on the cusp between abstraction and representation, teasing us with details that seem sharp and tangible but refuse to cohere into any definitive image or narrative. In this they resemble the operations of memory. Breaking loose from their moorings, fragments of remembered images and ideas float within a sea of inchoate sensations. Wood's paintings offer us similar glimpses of possibly recognizable things or places, but "human meaning" as Stevens would style it, remains just out of reach.

One sees this, for instance, in *Winter of '49*, a mysterious painting in which organic shapes ripple like wind swept fabric. A pinkish hue gives them erotic and even sexual overtones as they whirl around a suggestively genital orb. The orb radiates a warm light that melts into the surrounding darkness like emanations of a nascent life force. It doesn't seem a coincidence that the title of this work, with its intimations of form coalescing out of nothingness, makes reference to the artist's first year of life. *End of the Line* might be read in terms of the other end of the



Winter of '49, 2005, Oil on canvas, 58 x 78 in.

life cycle. It is dominated by a figural form (complete with two very recognizable shoes and a head dangling from the rope/line of the title) that rises with architectural grandeur to culminate in a mysterious black void. This form is offset on the left of the canvas by a translucent orb materializing out of a glowing field of grayish white – an ethereal presence that might be a realization of Stevens’ “nothing that is.”

These are both monumental works, but Wood’s smaller paintings have a similarly fluid energy as they push and pull the eye between abstraction and representation. Other oppositions are breached as well – passages of pure darkness or light evoke an absolute stillness within otherwise restlessly questing brushstrokes. Shapes and colors suggestive of blood and flesh coexist with shimmering veils of ghostly white.

Sharp talons emerge from softly modeled orbs. Bone like structures appear to bend and sway within liquid fields. Forms are continually morphing into other forms, voids are full of energy and life and colors melt into each other through virtuoso brushwork. Change is the ultimate principle in Wood’s universe.

Wood’s paintings express the kind of dynamically unstable vision of reality that has emerged throughout art history in such anti-classical moments as the Romanesque, the Baroque, Mannerism, Symbolism and Surrealism. What they have in common is a rejection of formal order and visual legibility in favor of more subliminal meanings. In these movements, as in Wood’s work, the carnal melds with the spiritual to knit the mind and the body together into a single entity.

Wood’s dynamic vision is a product of a questing mind. Raised on a farm in northern Saskatchewan, he studied physics, math and music during his student years, and paid for his university education by playing in his own and others’ bands. He arrived in New York in 1969 to pursue a painting career. During this tumultuous cultural moment, he fell in with avant-garde filmmakers Hollis Frampton and Michael Snow whose influence can still be felt in his work. He immersed himself in film-making and pursued montage and photography, gaining recognition for photo collages that mingled abstract ink drawings with cropped photo images. These explorations, built on his resistance to the camera’s single point perspective and film’s linear progression, contain the seeds of his current work. But eventually, Wood found his way back to drawing and painting, where he could create a world that more accurately represented the fullness of experience.

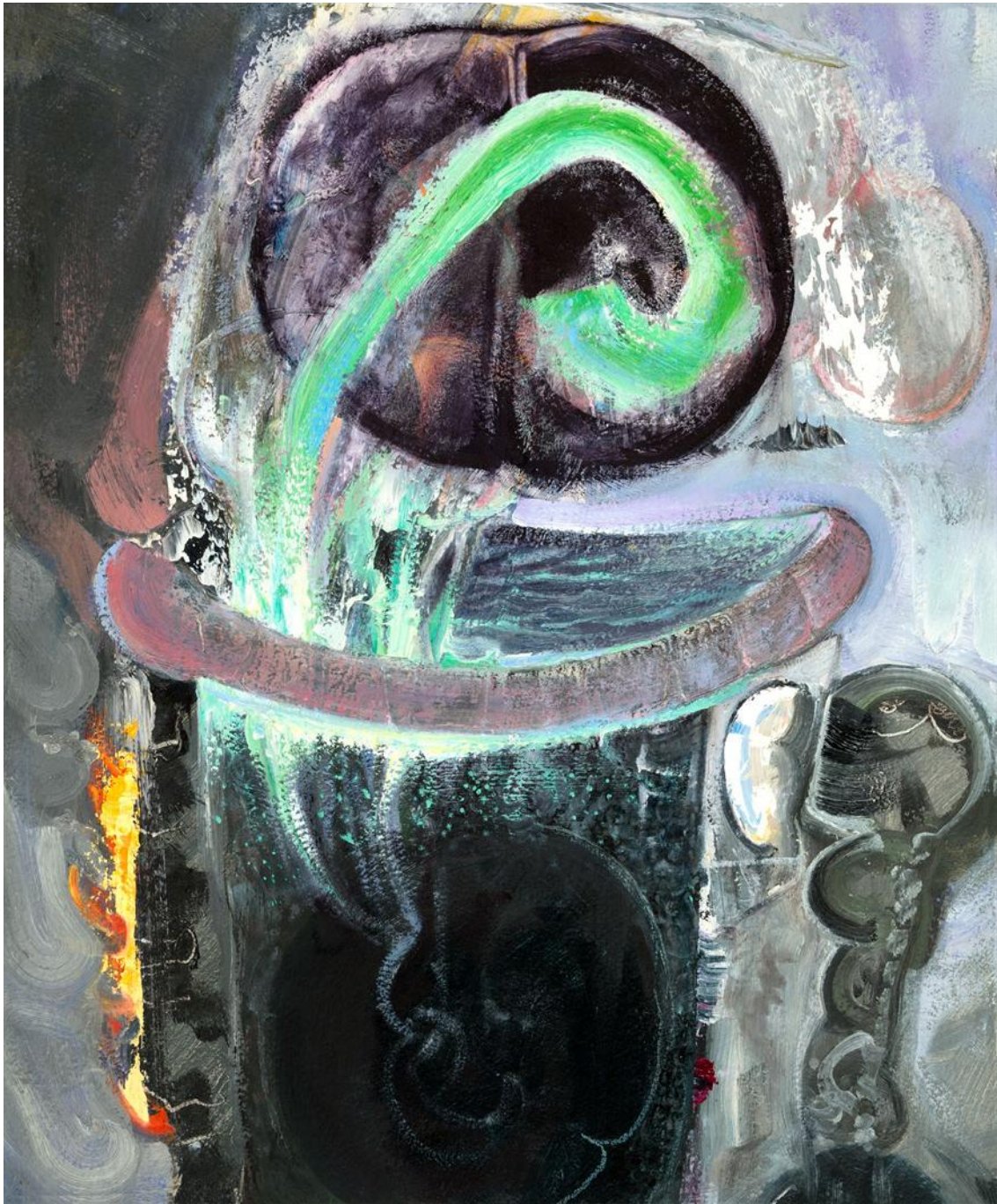
Wood’s paintings are also indebted to his affinity for poetry. Along with Wallace Stevens, he professes his admiration for visionary poets like William Blake, William Butler Yeats and Rainer Maria Rilke. He also follows contemporary poetry. In a collaboration with American poet Robert Kelly, Wood’s paintings become the inspiration for lyrical meditations on history, mythology, magic and the nature of art. In one of these poems, Kelly says “resemblances are the death of art,” a warning against overly literal interpretations of art or poetry. For both poet and painter, language is not a prison that captures meaning and holds it hostage to logic and reason. Instead, it is a means of opening the mind to the infinite possibilities rippling out from a reality that we will never fully grasp.



End of the Line, 2017, Oil on linen, 72 x 52 in.



Twin, 2008, Oil on wood, 14 x 11 in.



Phos, 2015, Acrylic & oil on paper, 17 x 14 in.



Curcubite in Tongues of Birds: for Robert Kelly, 2015, Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in.



Slipper, 2013, Oil on wood, 30 x 24 in.



Locks, 2015, Oil on wood, 9 x 12 in.



Feeder, 2015, Acrylic on wood, 45 x 19 in.



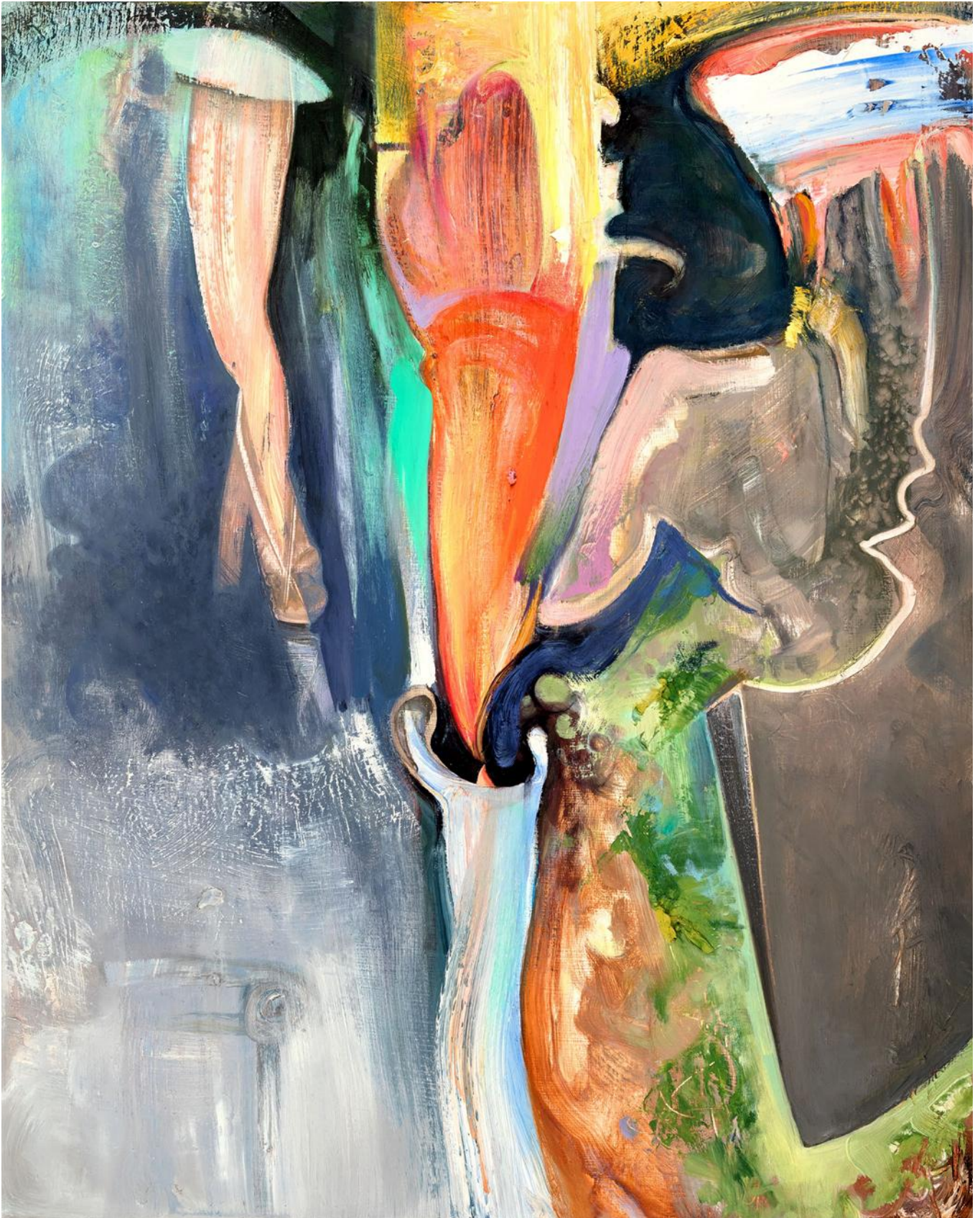
Catcher, 2013, Oil on wood, 11 x 14 in.



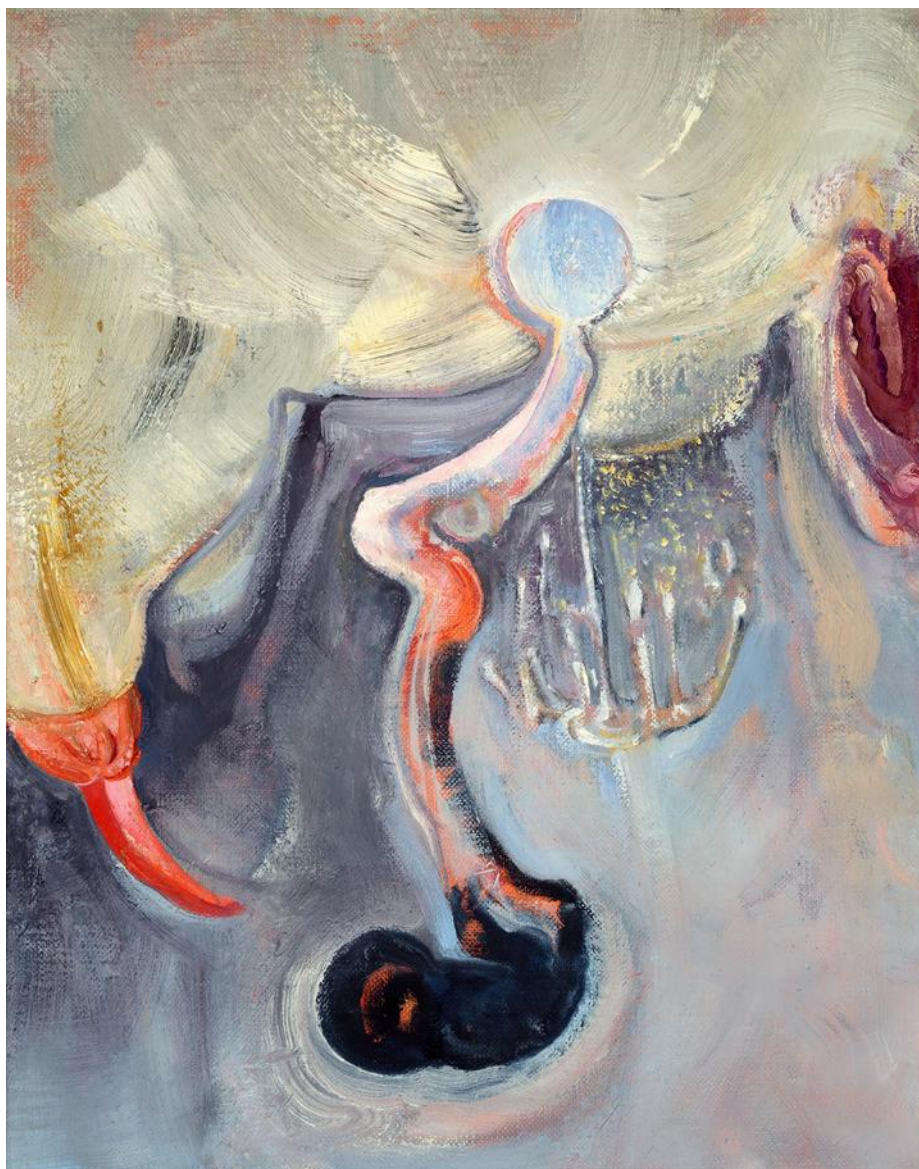
Fravarti, 2015, Oil on linen, 20 x 16 in.



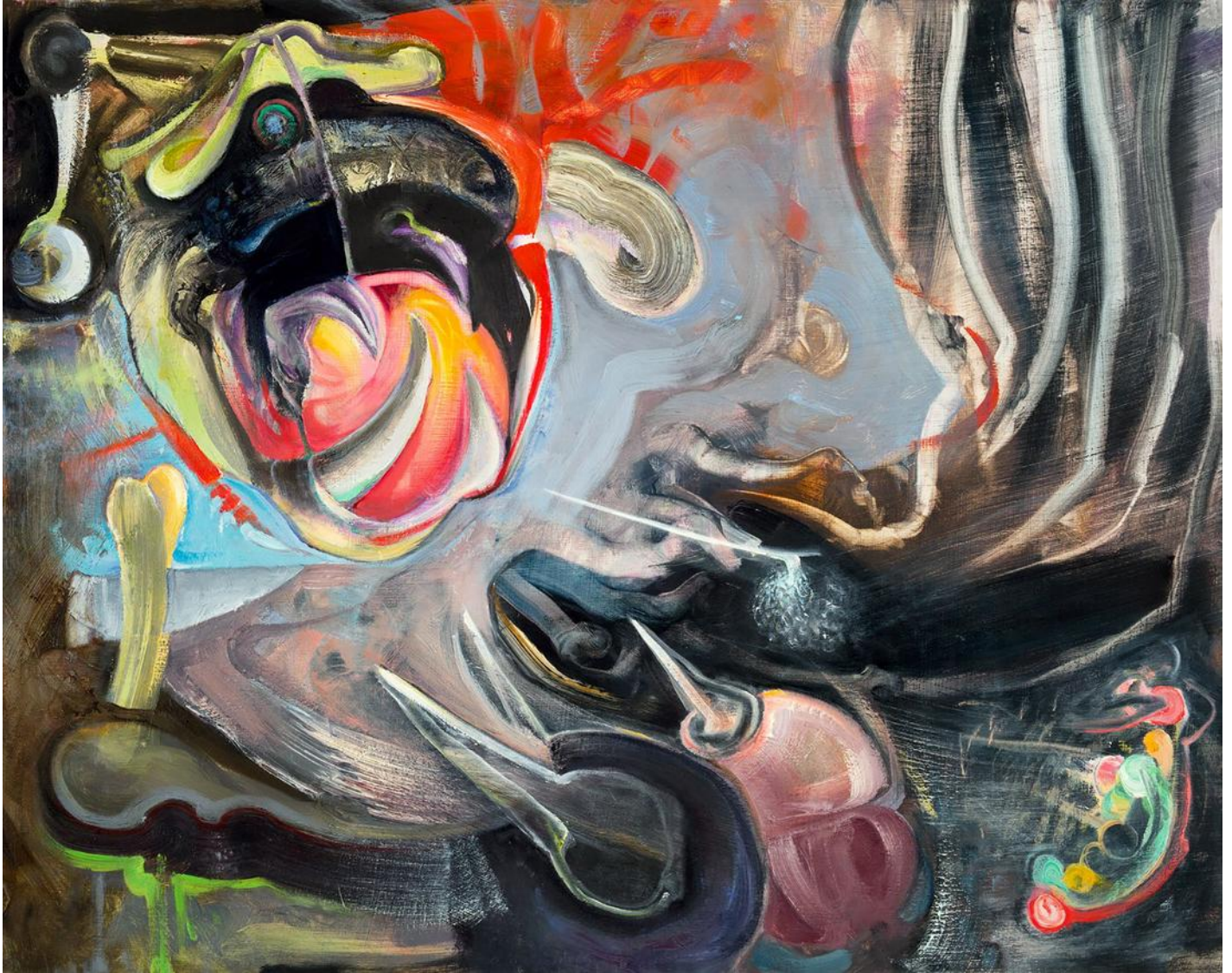
Alia, 2015, Oil on wood, 30 x 24 in.



Prequel, 2015, Oil on wood, 20 x 16 in.



Gibbet, 2015, Oil on linen, 14 x 11 in.



Bog, 2014, Oil on wood, 16 x 20 in.



Mercury, 2012, Acrylic & oil on paper, 12 x 9 in.



Fig, 2014, Oil on wood, 12 x 14 in.



Mother and Child, 2015, Oil on wood, 11 x 14 in.



Sine, 2015, Oil on wood, 14 x 12 in.



Rend, 2010, Oil on canvas, 12 x 14 in.



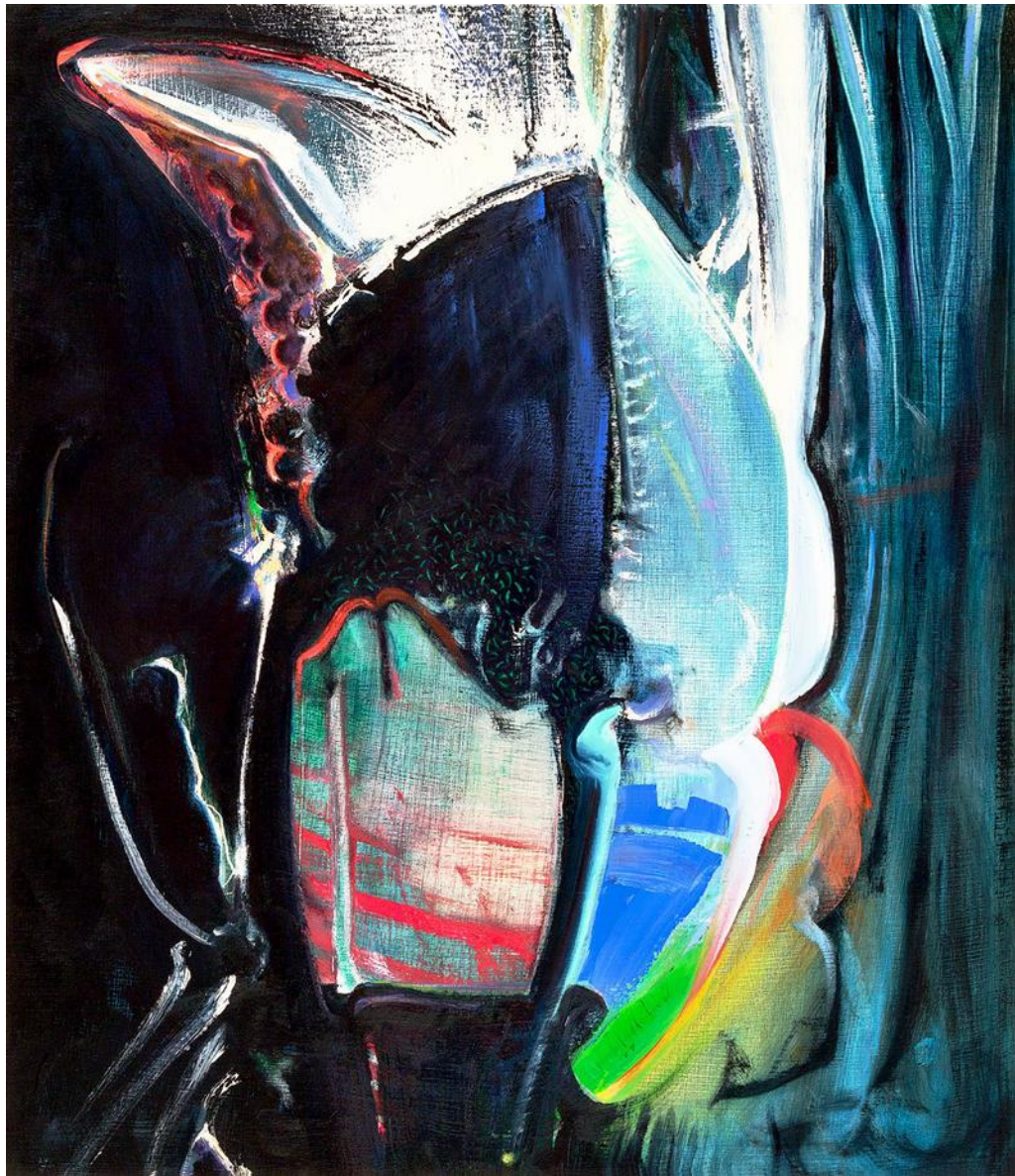
Emerald Mountain, 2013, Oil on wood, 11 x 14 in.



Volute, 2012, Oil on wood, 14 x 12 in.



Intendere, 2011, Oil on canvas, 36 x 30 in.



Field, 2008, Oil on wood, 14 x 12 in.



Verge, 2008, Oil on wood, 14 x 12 in.

Brian Wood is an internationally exhibited artist. His work is held in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum; the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Houston Museum of Fine Arts; the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, TX; the Tampa Museum of Art; the National Gallery of Canada; the Montreal Museum of Fine Art; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal; the Museum of Modern Art in Prague; the Ludwig Museum in Cologne and many others. Wood's awards include the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, the National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, the New York Foundation for the Arts Grant, numerous Canada Council Grants including the prestigious "A" Grant, and the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship.

Eleanor Heartney is a New York based art writer and cultural critic. She is Contributing Editor to *Art in America* and *Artpress* and a contributing writer to *Artnews*, *Art and Auction*, *The New Art Examiner*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*. Heartney's awards include the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism and the New York Foundation for the Arts grant, the Asian Cultural Council grant, and a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, France. Heartney is a former President of the American section of the International Art Critics Association. A collection of her essays was published by Cambridge University Press titled "Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads" in 1997. Other books include "Postmodernism," Tate Gallery Publishers; "Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art," Midmarch Arts Press; "Defending Complexity," Hard Press Editions; and "Art and Today," a survey of contemporary art from the 1980s to the present published by Phaidon in 2008.

Thanks to Jen Dragon for mounting this exhibition and to Ford Crull for his enthusiasm that led to the show. Thank you to Eleanor Heartney for her keen attention to the paintings and her very thoughtful and perceptive essay – I feel she plumbed the heart of my endeavor. My love and thankfulness to my wife Ashley Garrett for her deep-seeing eye, love, and support. I feel honored to thank Robert Kelly and Charles Stein for reading their powerful art at this exhibition. My special gratitude and thanks to Robert Kelly for his wonderful, complex poetry written in response to my paintings – Robert's writing was an important influence to my work for decades before we met so I'm especially touched that now our work is in direct dialogue. And thanks to Charles Stein for sharing his special presence, both in writing and mind, and for articulating so precisely his experience and seeing in front of my paintings.

