

Josephine Halvorson

*As I Went Walking*



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Sikkema Jenkins & Co.  
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2	Introduction
6	Erin Yerby: <i>"Something There Is That Doesn't Love A Wall"</i> or <i>On "Making The Gaps" While No One Is Looking</i>
	Robert Frost: <i>Mending Wall</i>
12	Paintings & Works on Paper Details to Scale
46	Biographies
50	Acknowledgments

*As I Went Walking* includes a series of life-sized oil paintings made in the western Massachusetts town where Halvorson lives and votes. The exhibition's title is borrowed from the first line of a missing stanza from Woody Guthrie's anthem, *This Land Is Your Land*, rediscovered in the 1990s.

*As I went walking I saw a sign there / And on the sign it said "No Trespassing." / But on the other side it didn't say nothing, / That side was made for you and me.*

The lyrics echo Halvorson's artistic practice and subject matter. Wandering the woods near her home, she encounters signs of neighbors, dead and alive. Naturalized marks of ownership animate and declare themselves. Wherever one's eyes land, there are human claims and natural reclamations.

Halvorson makes paintings from direct observation, en plein air. She finds herself working at the limits of private and public property. The feet of the easel, the table and the artist trespass and straddle invisible boundaries. A day's work leaves its physical imprint in the tamped-down ground. But the painting itself, in its portability and self-contained rectangle, leaves the site of its making without a trace. Once removed from its original context, the painting metaphorically extends the boundary line.

Working within arm's length of her subject over the course of daylight hours, Halvorson's position foregrounds attention, experience and locale. For the last decade she has employed the mediumistic quality of paint to connect with the world, rendering visible that which is felt but not necessarily seen: time, emotion, history. Touching the surfaces of her subjects through the thick, short strokes of her brush, she gets up-close and personal. This intimacy is conveyed in a face-to-face encounter with the paintings themselves.

For this exhibition, Halvorson also presents works on paper made with gouache and silkscreened elements. Alluding to other visual and informational formats, such as maps, calendars, and newspapers, these works include a measure and printer's marks as keys for calibrating the unquantifiable. Standardized units are drawn by hand, reminding us of the abstraction in every act of description. Through perceiving a patch of ground and translating it to scale, Halvorson registers what lies before us.



USA

"Something There Is That Doesn't Love A Wall" or  
On "Making The Gaps" While No One Is Looking  
Erin Yerby, 2017

Driving together down the narrow dirt road, her arm extended through the open window—*it has to be open* or I get claustrophobic, she explains—Josephine points out the small, mostly bright orange signs as they blur past us—the reoccurrence of a prohibition:

POSTED  
PRIVATE PROPERTY  
HUNTING, FISHING, TRAPPING OR  
TRESPASSING FOR ANY PURPOSE  
IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN  
VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED  
Name \_\_\_\_\_

Nobody sees these signs, or if they do the fact of their haphazard repetition almost makes them forgettable. Nobody sees them, but Halvorson seems *unable not to see them*—to see that which the rest of us habitually overlook.

The fact of their ubiquitous presence is so perplexing, Josephine tells me, because they are just signs—*just images*—and not physical borders or boundaries. The sign is not a fence, it's not a wall—they are just images posted on trees. "And images we can ignore," she tells me, or so it would seem on the surface. Yet this is precisely what Halvorson does not do—she does not ignore the surface. Her practice is a honing of attention—an almost trance-like communion, through the medium of paint and brush, to the materiality of surfaces before her as sites of *encounter*. It is through this uncanny attention to the ordinariness of things in the world that Halvorson communicates the sensation of things into images—itsself a kind of magic, to transfer the sensation into another matter, and so doing, make it another matter for us. Or, more precisely, to transfer the encounter into paint: paintings of *encounters* with things.

At moments it seems as if every other tree carries such a sign. And by their very repetition—orange and yellow blurs littering the sides of country roads as they cut through a seemingly undivided expanse of forest—their power to prohibit, *to be a boundary*, seems invalidated.

*Mending Wall*  
Robert Frost, 1914

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*Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, /  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun; / And makes gaps even two can pass abreast. /  
The work of hunters is another thing: / I have come after them and made repair / Where  
they have left not one stone on a stone, / But they would have the rabbit out of hiding, /  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean, / No one has seen them made or heard them*

Their presence, "its almost an accusation! Defensive, threatening..." Josephine tells me, and yet the ground, the authority upon which such a prohibition rests is the presumption of "respect for the privacy and boundaries of others." One imagines invisible property owners running around, bleary eyed, in a paranoid fervor, posting one sign next to another—a Sisyphean task of endless repetition.

*Signs, as Images, can be ignored.* But don't be fooled by the seeming ineffectiveness of such signs, as these paintings seem to remind us, to do so is to forget their dormant power. They await patiently the transgressor who may never come—and when finally she does *ignore the sign*, the power of the law is, as if by magic, immediately awakened. As if by magic, you are no longer an innocent walking through the commons of "nature" but have crossed an invisible wall. And isn't this the magic of private property realized in our social contract, where, in a Lockean imaginary, property is the transformation of labor into possession, realized in the alchemical equation of labor + nature = property? Locke, anyway, considered property to be natural, a natural right and thus an inalienable right, with the caveat that one claimed only so much, by labor, as could be used for subsistence. Enter money, itself a quasi-magical substance that deceptively naturalizes the accruing of wealth beyond subsistence, by acting as an abstract third-term in the equally magical-exchange of one kind of good for another. This is the loophole Locke loops for us, extending the noose around our necks: in accruing money, we can have property beyond what is needed for subsistence, as money is a commodity that does not *go to waste*—unlike his example of the rotting apple fallen from a tree on someone's land, or nature itself accused of being *wasted if not cultivated*, as if awaiting human deliverance from its own useless extravagance.

Lurking within the social contract is then that fundamental question, propelled into the foreground in every one of these paintings: What does it mean to belong or not belong to the land, *to possess, or maybe be possessed, by land* for that matter? We are, most of us, in the North American landscape in which Halvorson's work abides, as inheritors of settlement's dispossessions—dispossessors. Dispossessors who can no longer imagine, in much of the long cultivated and privatized New England landscape, what came before.

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*made, / But at spring mending-time we find them there. / I let my neighbour know beyond the hill; / And on a day we meet to walk the line / And set the wall between us once again. / We keep the wall between us as we go. / To each the boulders that have fallen to each. / And some are loaves and some so nearly balls / We have to use a spell to make them*

In this sense, perhaps each POSTED sign is a performance enacting the repetition of this division between mine and yours; each sign an encounter with the originary problem of division and enclosure, of what is private and public, of what is wild and tamed, itself recalling *the before*, the prehistory, of settlement. After all, settlement is never a once-and-for-all thing, it is something—a violence—repeatedly enacted on those who were here First, as much as against an encroaching wilderness that must be continuously cleared, contained, and enclosed. Settlement is work, as these paintings subtly remind us: each season the walls must be mended, the stones replaced to hole up the "gaps" that appear "while our backs are turned," as Robert Frost writes in his poem *Mending Wall*.

And yet, through the gaps, less evident signs of forgotten histories become visible, specters lingering in Massachusetts' forests, of what came before. Despite their best efforts to do what they do—to issue an imperative across time—gaps emerge upon the faces of these standardized, mass produced signs and the standardized language they hold. But time is against them, as are the trees. Torn, as in *Cracked in Half* or even erased by time, as in *Ghost*—where we see only the outline of what was a sign imprinted on the bark of a tree—we witness the material fragility of the law, as much as of language. In *Posted Branch*, a branch literally grows across and thus interrupts the legibility of the sign itself. The weathered plastic tie in *Fallen Fence Post*, still holding on, doing its job as marker of property, even though the fence that prevents trespassers has long since fallen. There is both a stubborn determination in these plastic markers, so slow to disintegrate, and an impotent surrender, in their confrontation with the power of nature's decomposition. In the tiers of orange and pink ribbons in "Pink Ties," these boundary markers appear as almost cheerful plastic parodies of the law—almost mistakable for the lingering streamers left in the after-math of a child's birthday party.

It is work to "set the wall between us once again," especially when that invisible force—call it entropy—is also working against our walls, even our creations. What, to take up Robert Frost's questions once again, is that "something there is that doesn't love a wall"? That makes the wall continuously give way to cracks upon its surface? What is that force

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*balance: / "Stay where you are until our backs are turned!" / We wear our fingers rough with handling them. / Oh, just another kind of out-door game, / One on a side. It comes to little more: / There where it is we do not need the wall: / He is all pine and I am apple orchard. / My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines, I tell*

of Nature that makes all walls yield to entropy, which by stealth creates gaps in the edifice when our backs are turned? Here, is order interrupted by what we so glibly call NATURE, a nature which now threatens to entropy us, as we spiral headlong toward environmental catastrophe.

By showing the tension between boundary and an encroaching nature, Halvorson's work also makes visible a tension within painting itself. Not unlike the walls erected on a property, or the signage posted, paintings are themselves a kind of enclosure—frames congealing sensation. In Halvorson's paintings this *something* that operates *while our backs are turned* comes into view, and expresses the very entwinement of order and chaos, of private and public, of spectral pasts haunting the present.

This work subtly presses us, particularly now as we face a cloudy political space where all that is solid melts into "alt-fact," as these paintings confront the sensation of surfaces as deeply political facts of an *insistent materiality*—of trees as much as of signs, the carriers of words and immaterial imperatives. Attending to, and thus intensifying these *facts of sensation* of what a body encounters, makes Halvorson's practice itself a political act, forcing us to confront the materiality, and thus the fragility, of the natural world as much as the laws and walls that order everyday life.

Within the frame of the painting the materiality of the subject matter appears almost hyper-real: the bark of the tree, in *Birch or Spotted*, is so bark-like, as to be almost more like-bark than bark itself. This partial rendering of the tree—not the whole tree but a frame of bark—invites us to attend to the specific and delimited events of perception in time. That is the genius of these strange en-framings, and what makes them decidedly non-representational. The painting is not a representation of bark, but of the facts of sensation of bark-ness, qualities transposed onto paint and canvas.

To call these paintings *partial-objects* is to see them as "entryways and exits," takes on the world that invite us in, or propel us in new directions, or stop us in our tracks—in any case, partial-objects as carriers of desire, meaning and sensation are themselves political,

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*him. / He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours." / Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder / If I could put a notion in his head: / "Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it / Where there are cows? But here there are no cows. / Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offence. / Something there is that doesn't love a wall, / That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him, /*

especially because they do not refer back to pre-given wholes, or grids of meaning, but are like fragmentary vehicles—"lines of flight." For a long time now Halvorson's paintings have impressed upon me their strange window-like quality, spaces we can enter into as worlds unto themselves—yet never fully—they make us dwell on the surface of things.

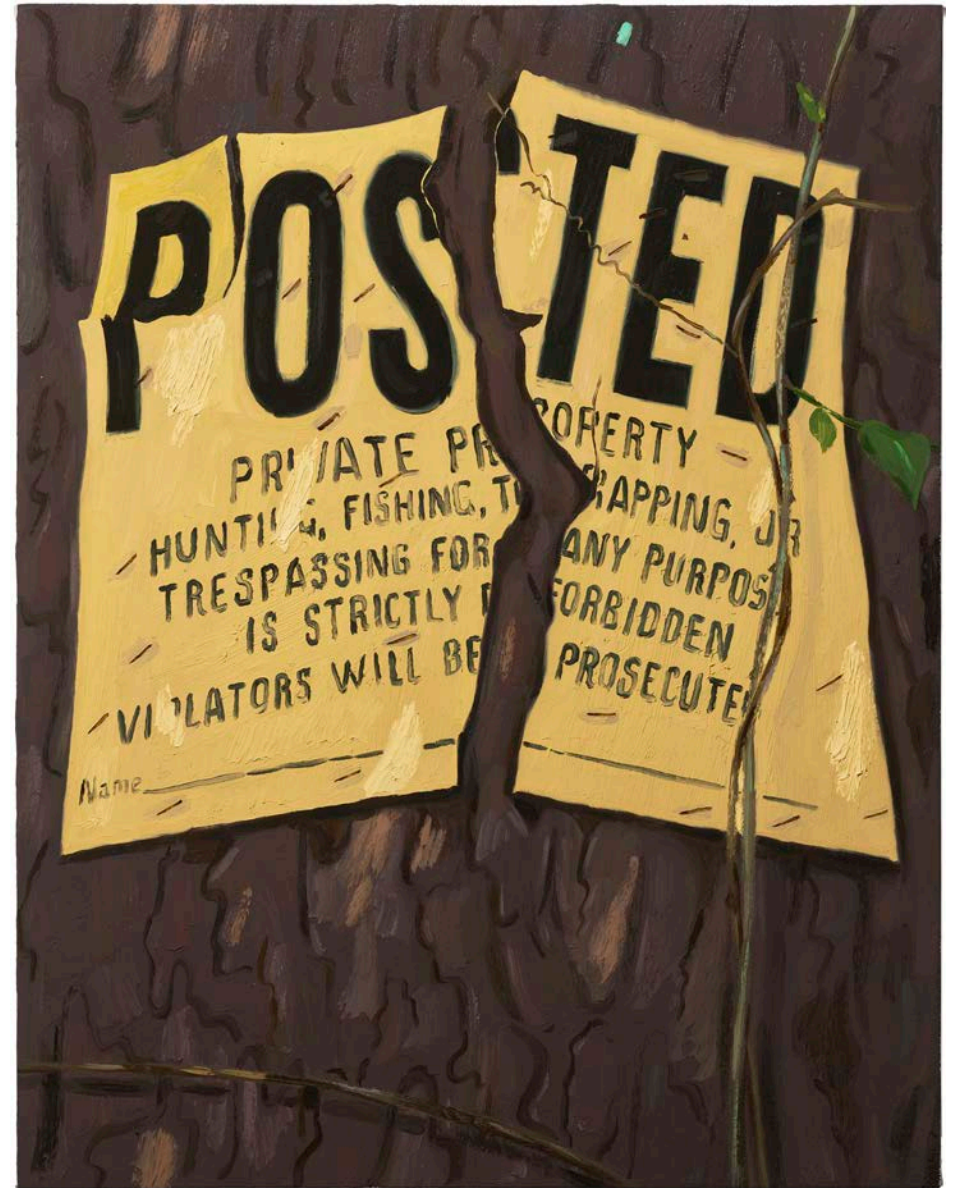
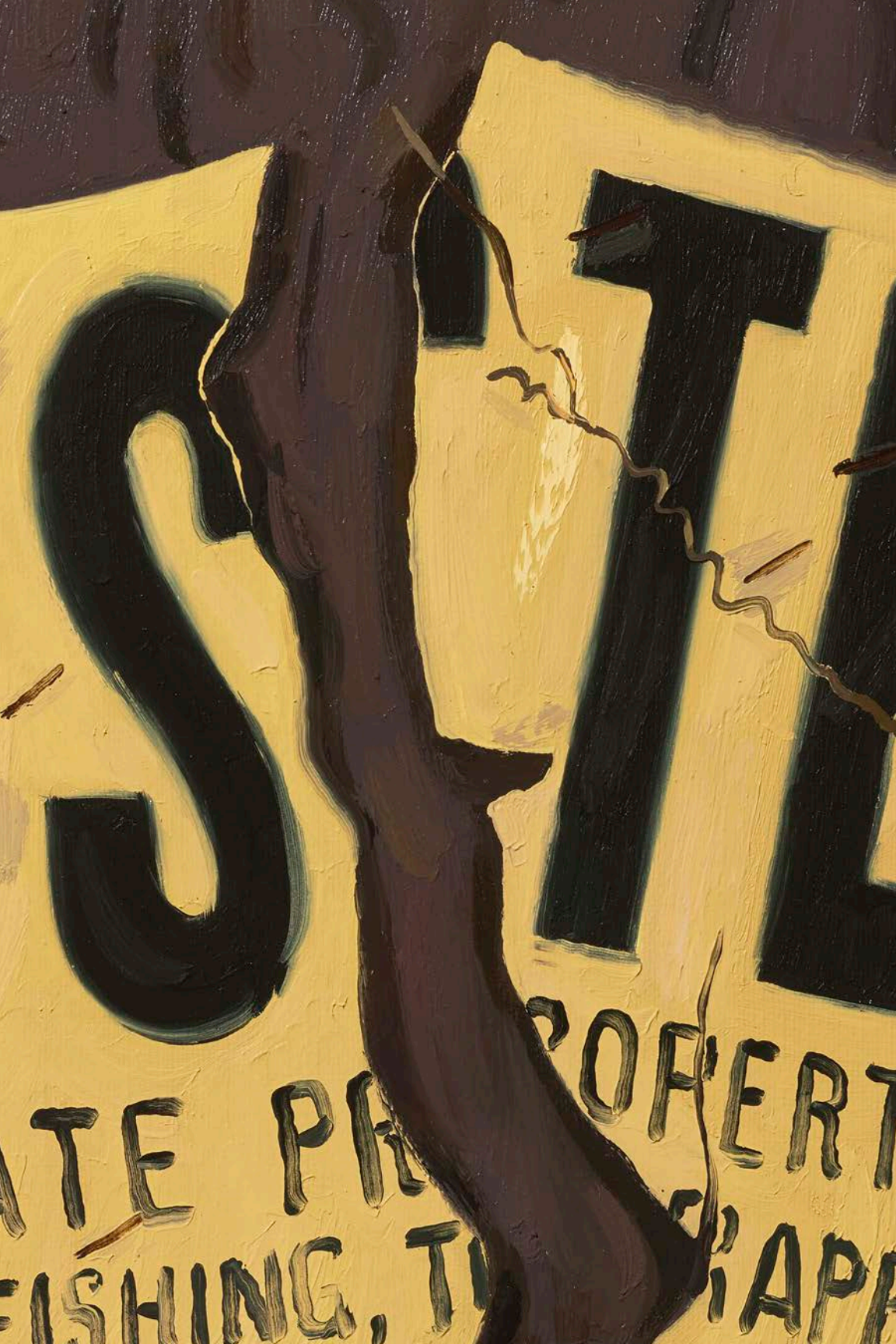
The insistent, even stubborn, materiality of these partial-objects seems to me to give them what William Pietz, in his famous reflections on the origin of the fetish, called an "untranscended materiality." If there is something fetish-like about Halvorson's paintings, it is not in the modern ideological sense, as something deceptive that covers over the "real", as in the upside-down value of the commodity's glimmer. Rather, as Pietz traces its meaning, the fetish is not firstly about deception, but about the materiality of a thing as it congeals a singular event of religious or psychic import. By congealing such events in a material object, the fetish *fixes* these otherwise ephemeral moments of attention, investment, desire and sensation. The potency of the fetish seems to lie in its particular power to have stopped time and frozen an event of fixation in a material body, and thus has the power to return us to the event, again and again.

Or, Halvorson's paintings discover the materiality of things in, paradoxically, transforming things into images—not exactly as fetishes, but as facts—*facts of sensation*. Far from deceptions, these paintings are matter-of-fact evidences of the profound, if subtle, workings of material forces entangling nonhuman and human life.

In Halvorson's practice, and perhaps in any act of creation, one finds this power to become fixated, but as an *active* giving-oneself-over, faithfully (a little faith is needed!), to the event of sensation. Giving herself over to the unknown within the mundane (from the Latin *mundus*, or world) is perhaps what makes Halvorson's practice so interesting, and what reveals its ethical dimension: an ethic of giving herself over to the thing—within an always fixed frame of time, the course of a day's work—in which she actively, and faithfully, takes control of the sensations that these encounters transmit. It is as if the paintings are themselves *residues* of this double movement: of the event of being fixated, and at the same time, of fixing something, making the event of sensation endure beyond its moment.

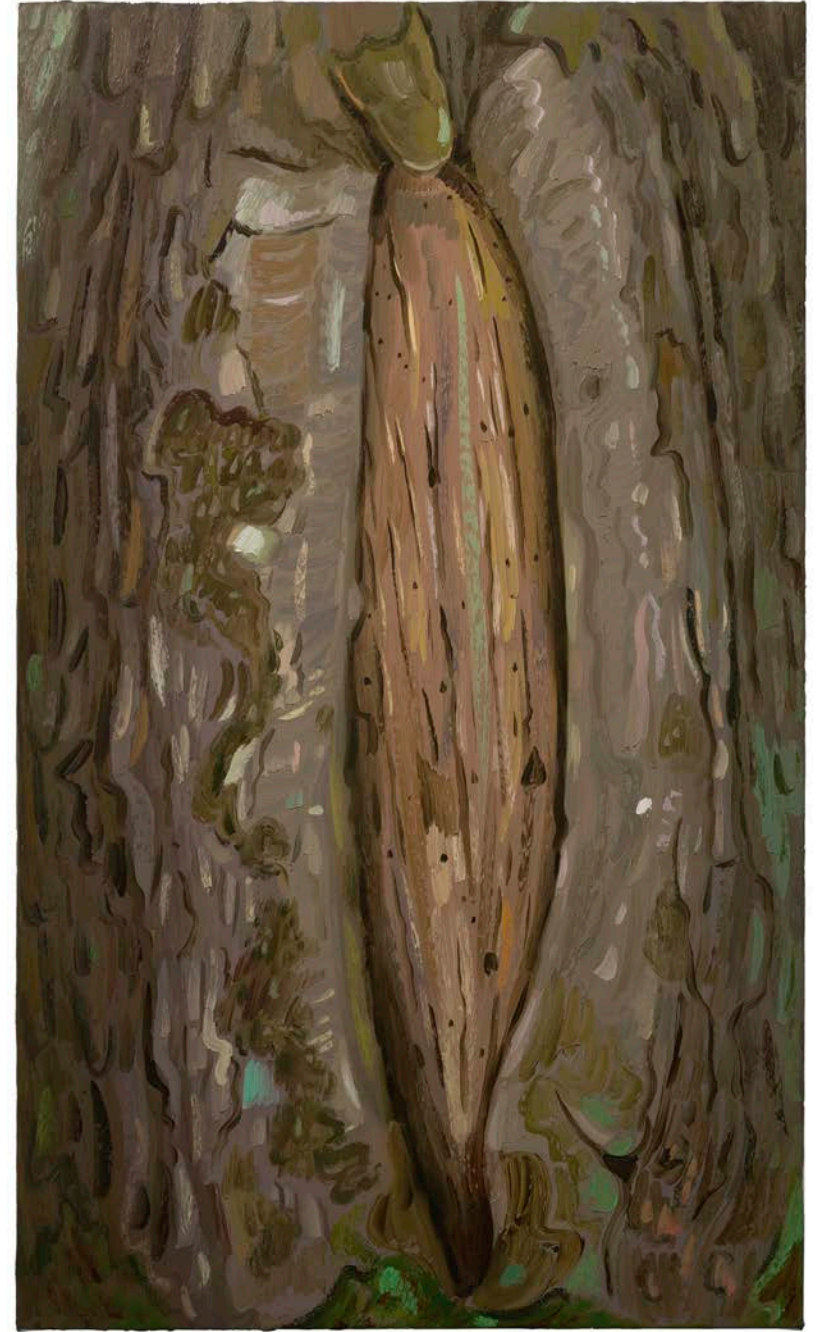
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*But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather / He said it for himself. I see him there / Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top / In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed. / He moves in darkness as it seems to me, / Not of woods only and the shade of trees. / He will not go behind his father's saying, / And he likes having thought of it so well / He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."*

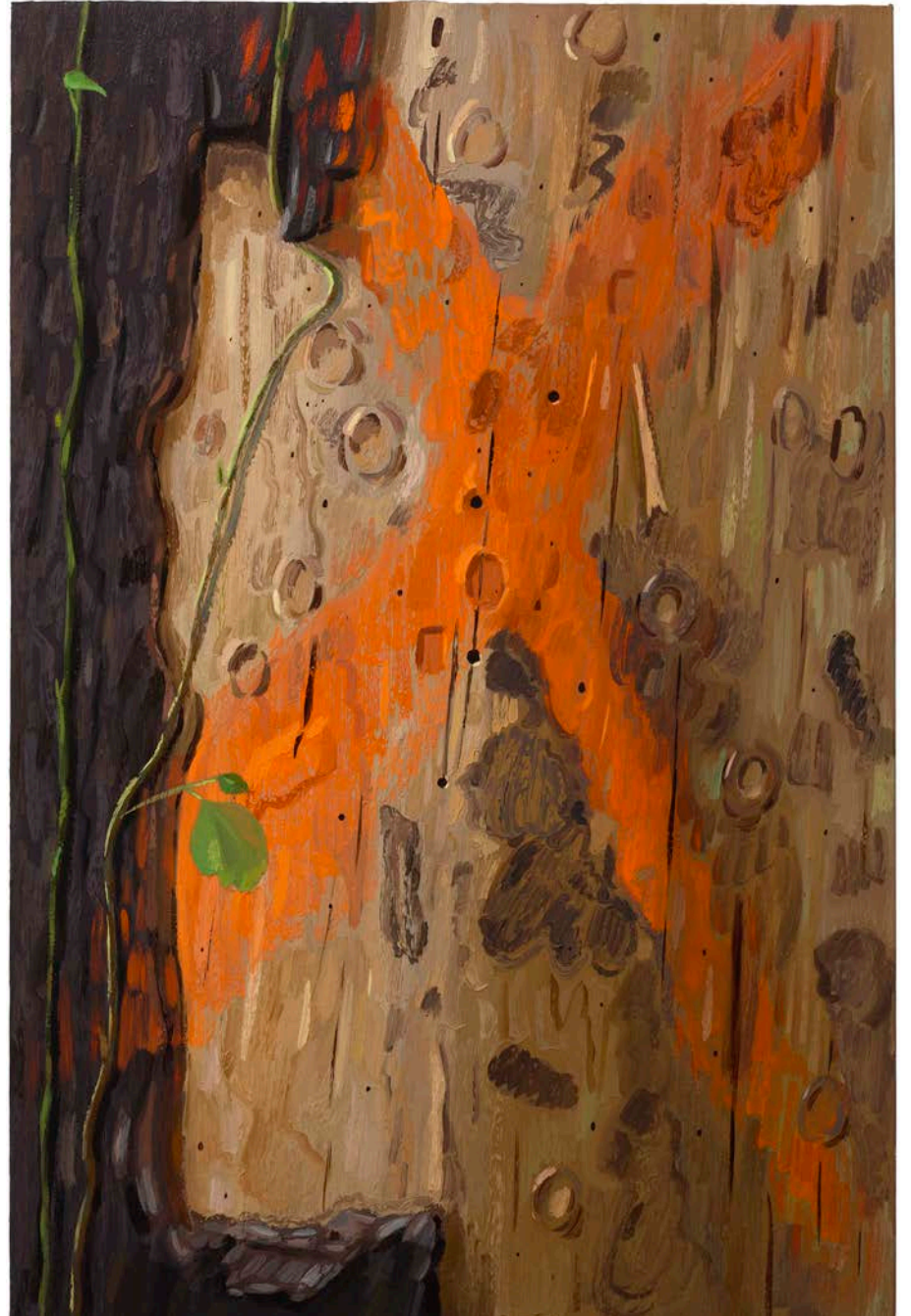


*Broken in Two, 2017*  
Oil on linen, 23 x 18 inches (58,4 x 45,7 cm)

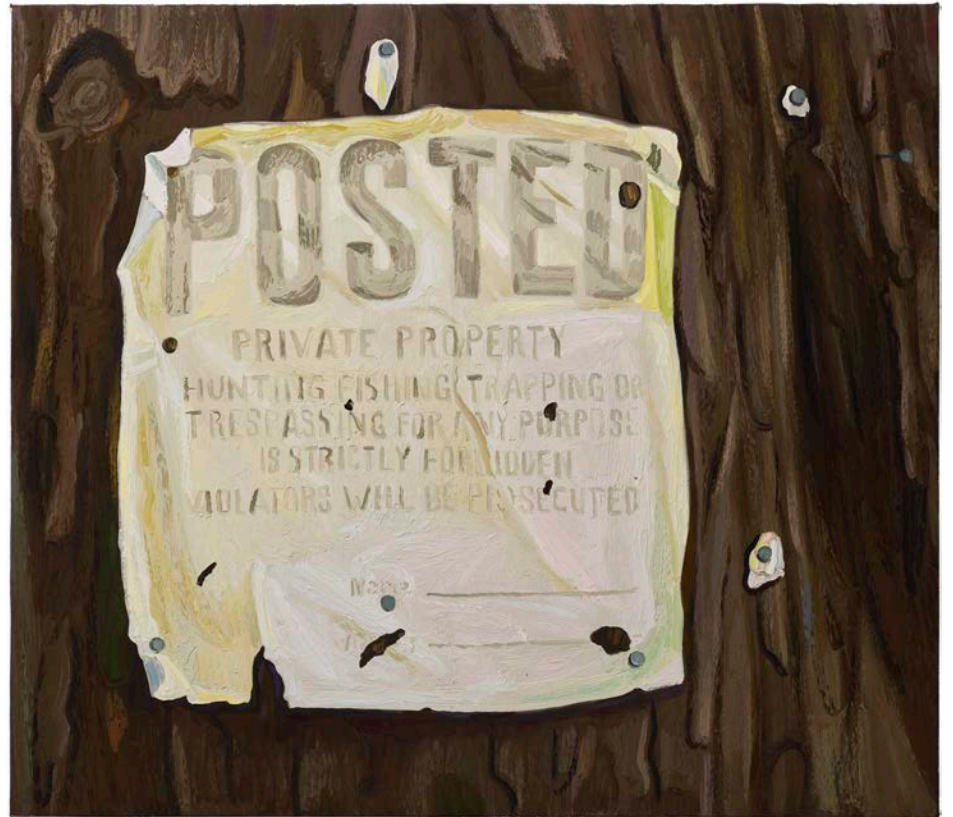




*Callus*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 27 x 16 inches (68,6 x 40,6 cm)



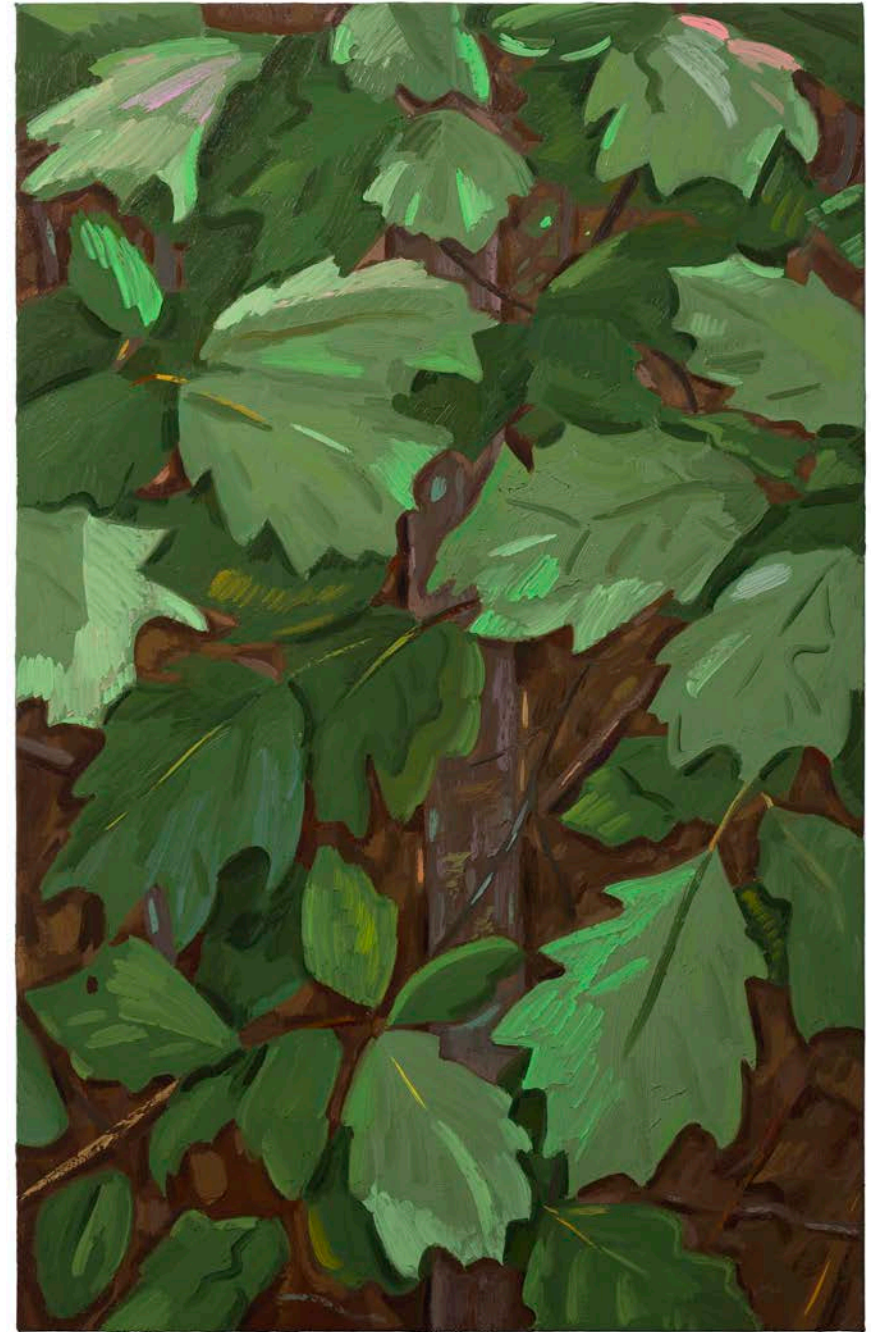
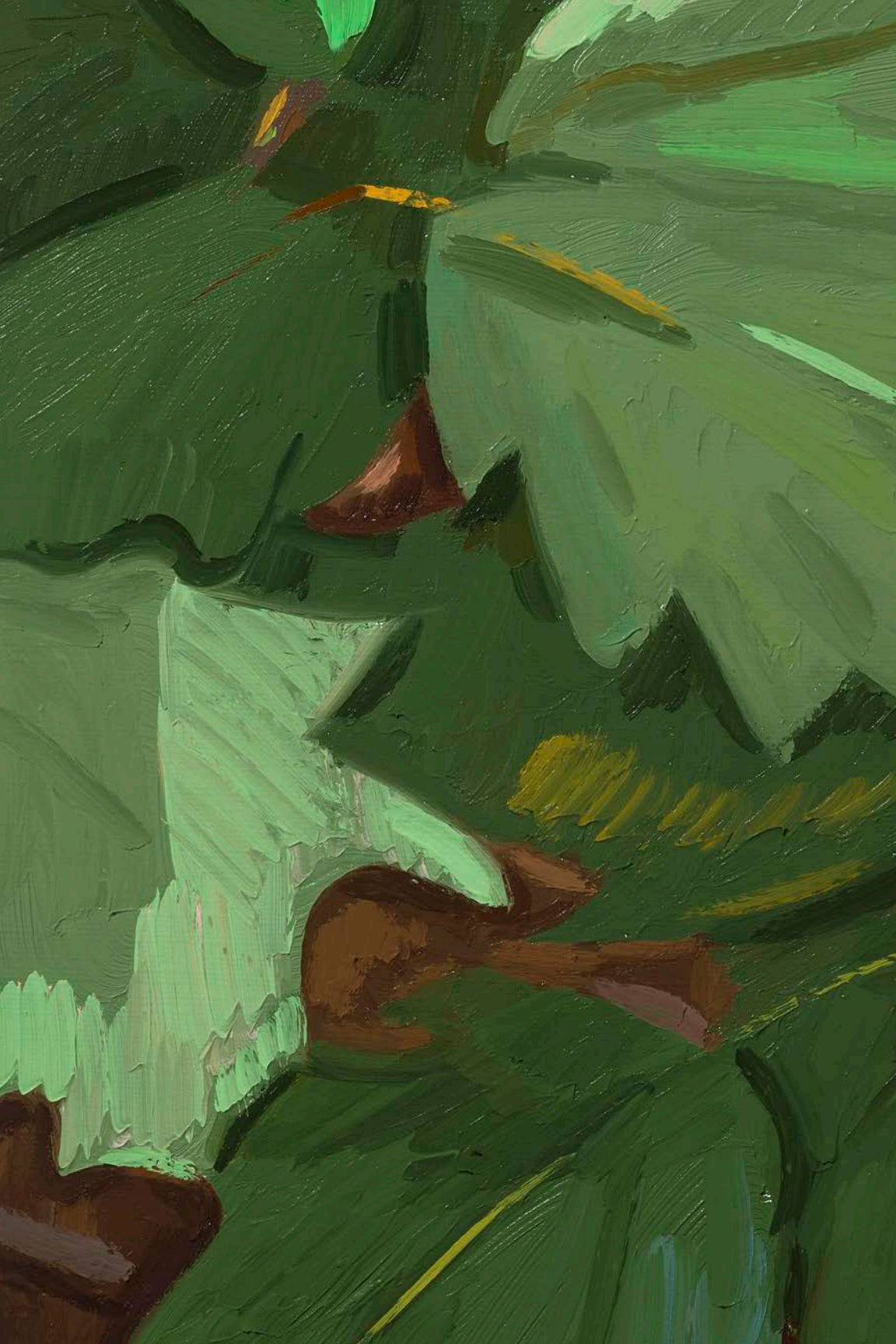
X, 2017  
Oil on linen, 27 x 18 inches (68,6 x 45,7 cm)



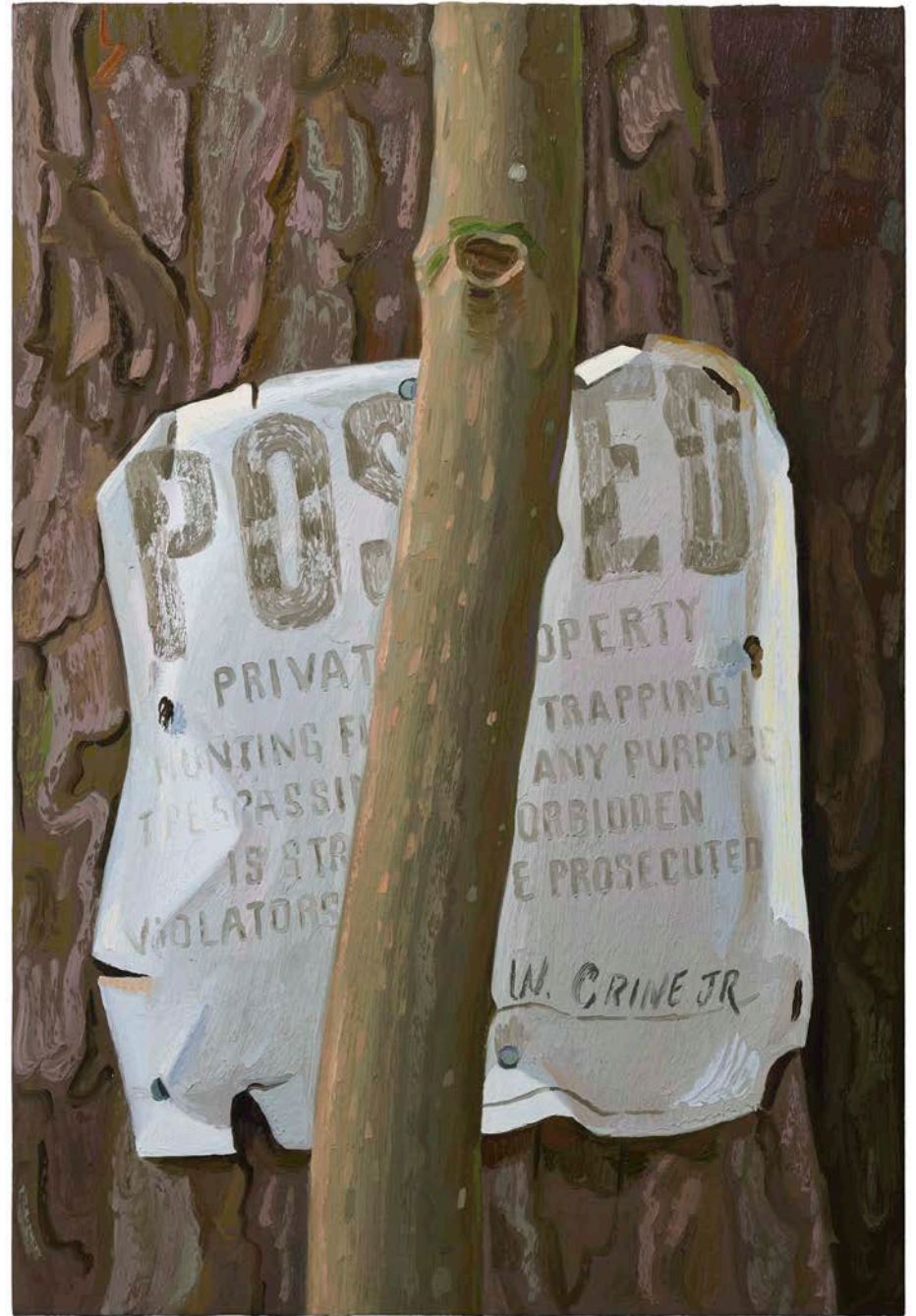
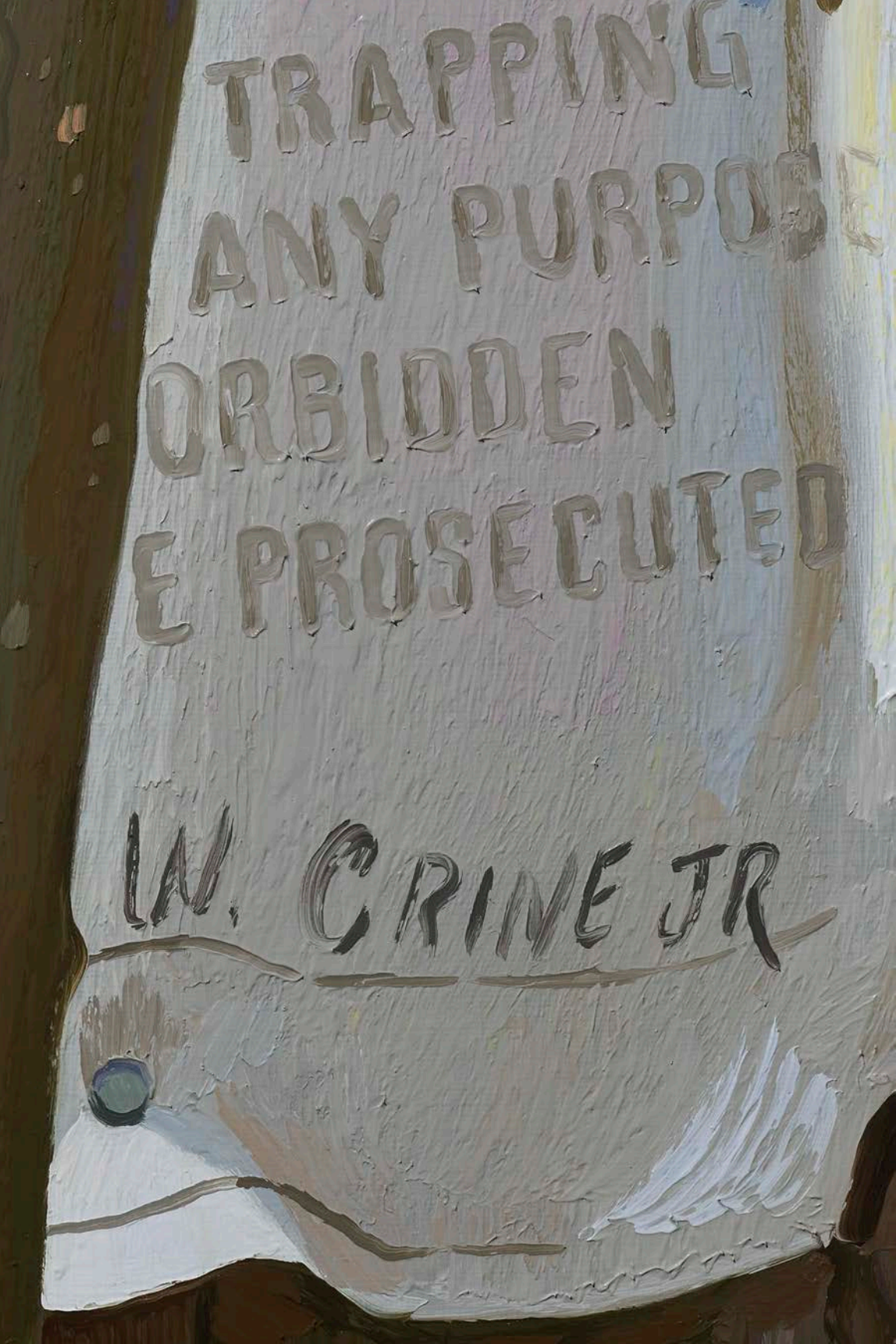
*Pale Posted*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 21 x 24 inches (53,3 x 61 cm)



*Fallen Fence Post*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 17 x 26 inches (43,2 x 66 cm)



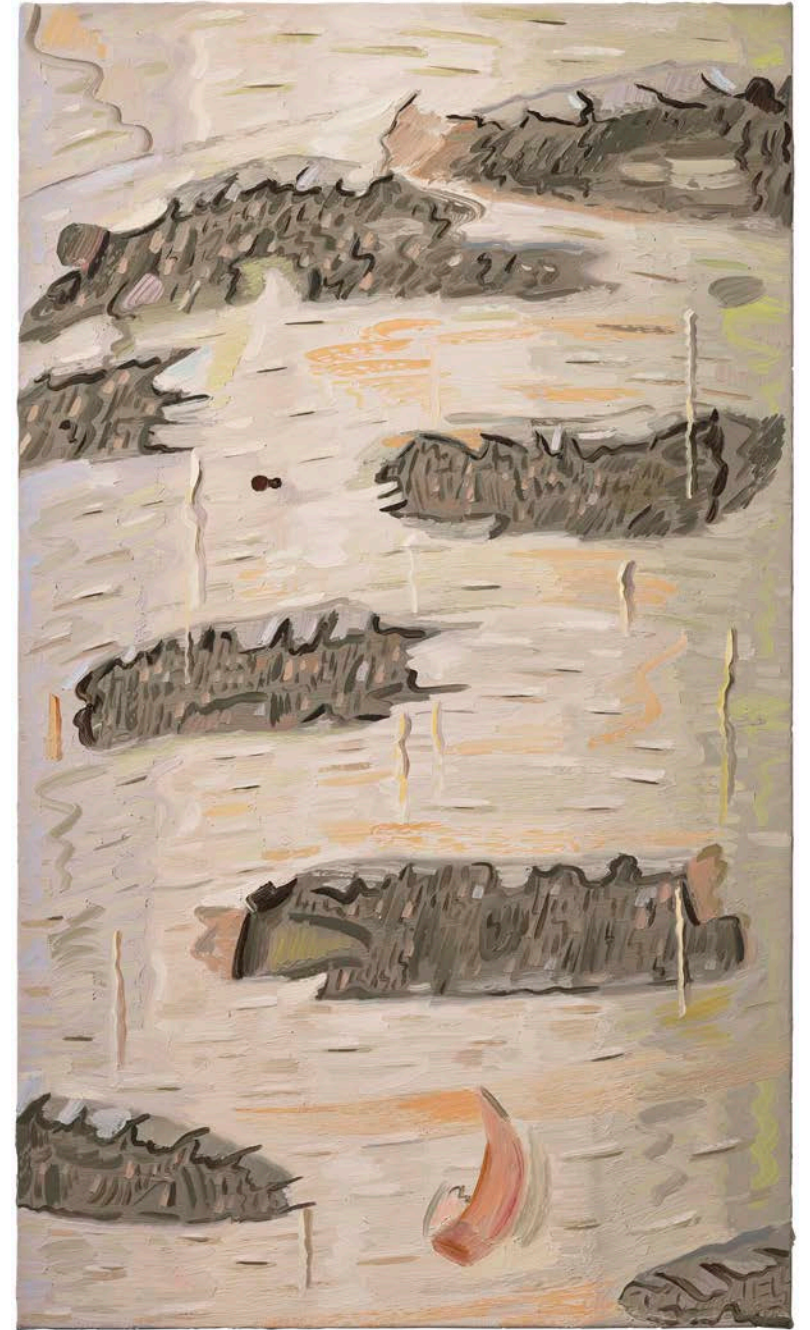
*Perimeter Leaves*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 25 x 16 inches (63,5 x 40,6 cm)



*Posed*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 25 x 17 inches (63,5 x 43,2 cm)



*Former Corner Marker, 2017*  
Oil on linen, 19 x 22 inches (48,3 x 55,9 cm)



*Birch Skin, 2017*  
Oil on linen, 24 x 14 inches (61 x 35,6 cm)

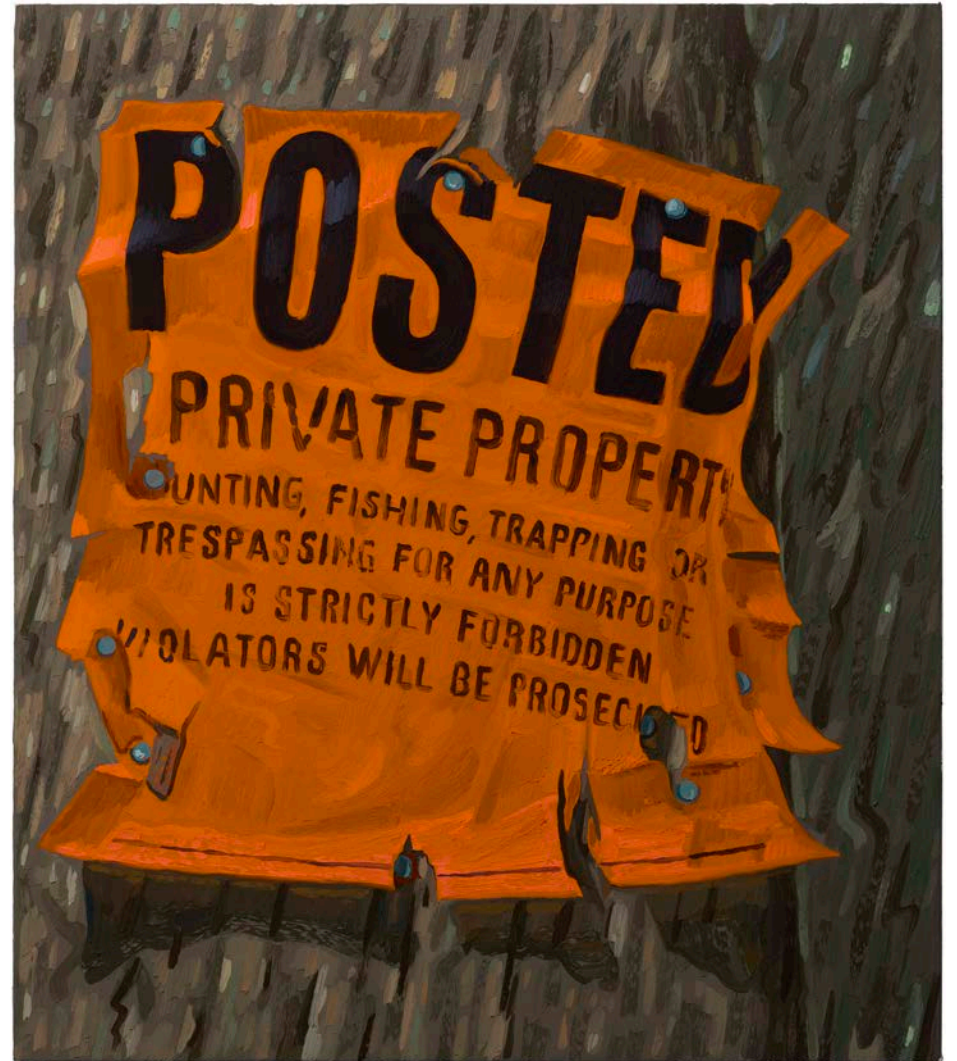




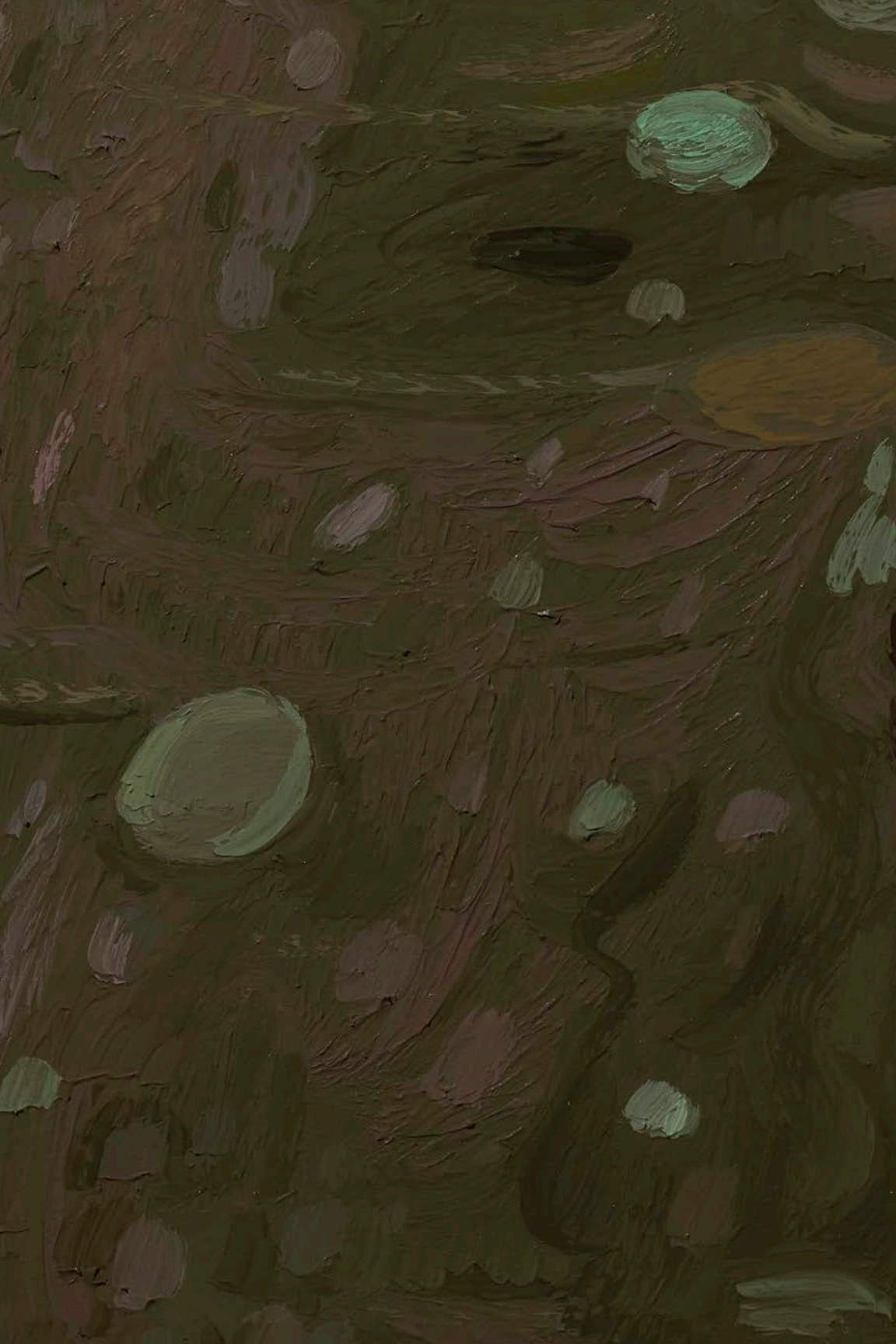
*Ghost*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 23 x 15 inches (58,4 x 38,1 cm)



*Juncture*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 17 x 24 inches (43,2 x 61 cm)

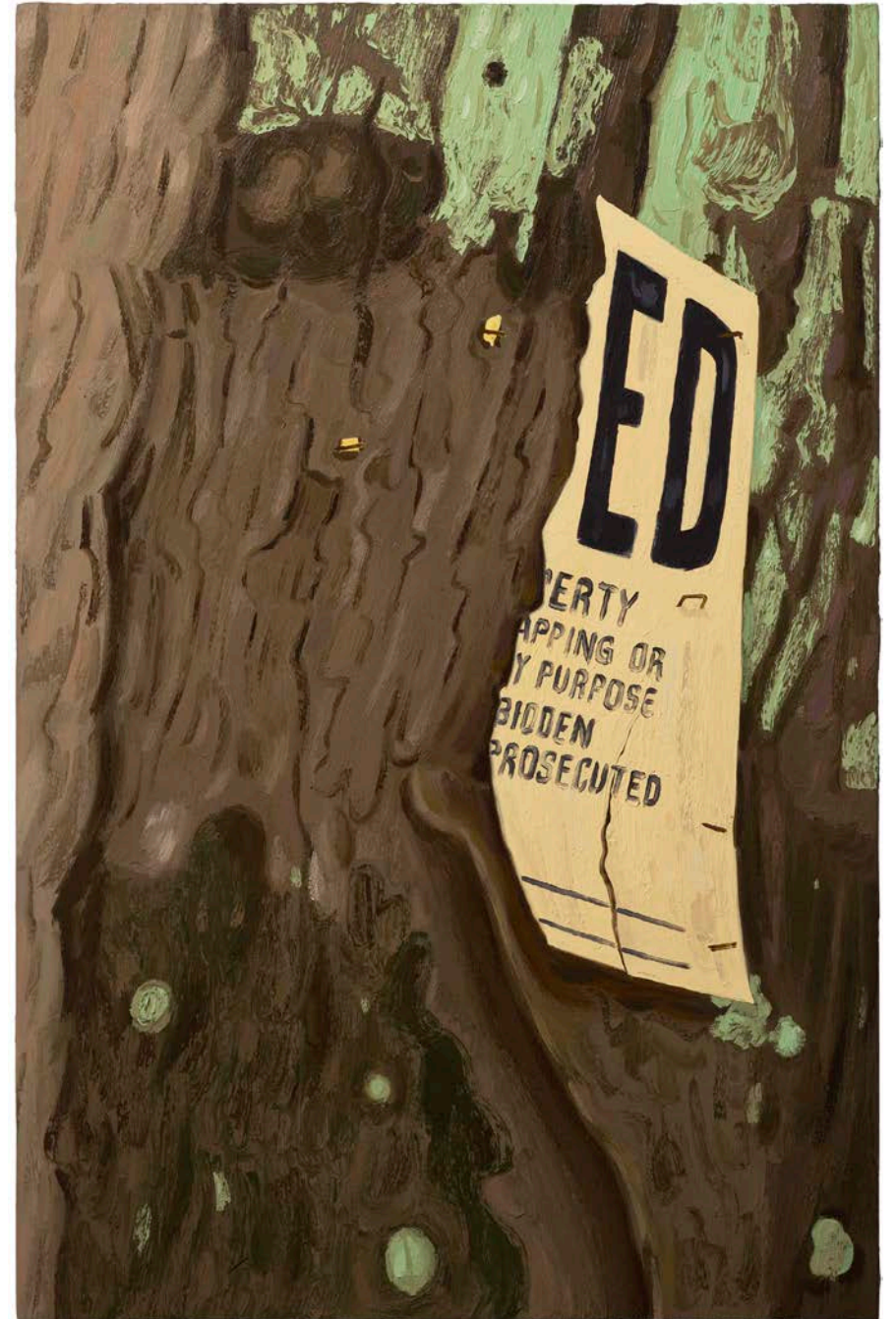


*Jagged*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 23 x 20 inches (58,4 x 50,8 cm)



*Eye*, 2017

Oil on linen, 30 x 16 inches (76,2 x 40,6 cm)



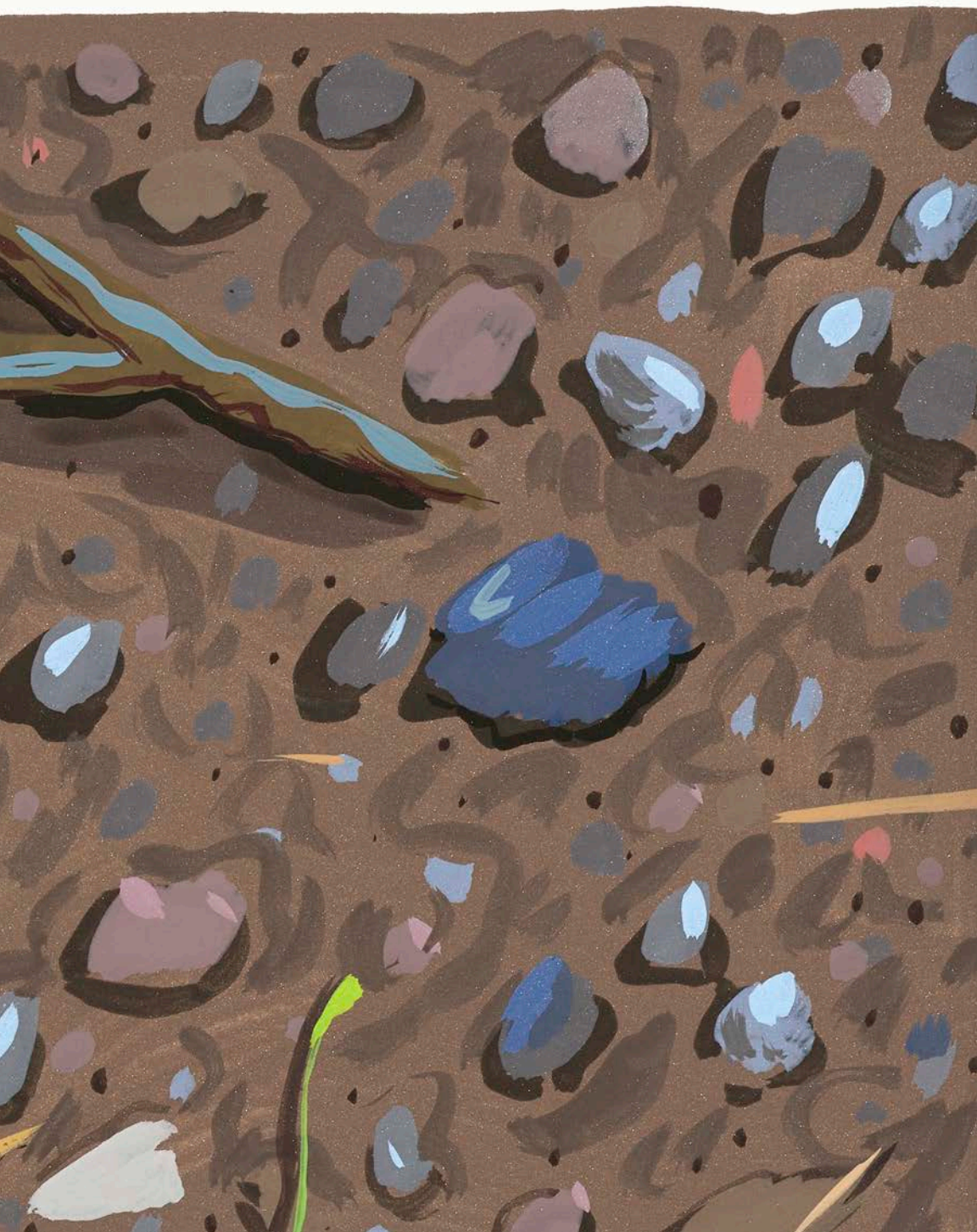
*What Is Left*, 2017  
Oil on linen, 26 x 17 inches (66 x 43,2 cm)



*Broadsheet (Ring)*, 2017  
Gouache and silkscreen on paper, 22.5 x 24.5 inches (57,2 x 62,2 cm)



*Broadsheet (Threshold)*, 2017  
Gouache and silkscreen on paper, 22.5 x 24.5 inches (57,2 x 62,2 cm)



*Broadsheet (Ground)*, 2017  
Gouache and silkscreen on paper, 22.5 x 24.5 inches (57,2 x 62,2 cm)



### Writer

Erin Yerby is an anthropologist and writer whose work enfolds word, image and body. Her manuscript, *Spectral Bodies of Evidence: The Body as Medium in American Spiritualism*, is based on extended fieldwork amongst Spiritualist mediums in New York state, and engages the sensory, affective and temporal shaping of the body into a medium for spirit communication, within the spectral landscape of North American settler colonialism, its violences and elisions.

The problem of mediation occupies her work: how invisible and immaterial affects and sensations are mediated, materialized, and made sensible to a body, as much as to a public. In particular, this concerns the mediation of intensive bodily states—religious and spiritual experience, patho(s)-logical states, and artistic practices.

Her writings on art emerge from her interest in the practical and theoretical intersections of art and ethnography. She approaches art writing as an ethnographer: as the conrescence of an intimate space of encounter and collaboration with the artist, and the artists' practice, over time.

Yerby holds a PhD in Anthropology from Columbia University, an MA in Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature from the University of Minnesota, and an MTS in Theological Studies from Duke University. She has taught in the Core Curriculum at Columbia, Bard's Language and Thinking program, the Global Center for Advanced Studies (GCAS), and is a Visiting Lecturer at Brown University.

### Artist

Josephine Halvorson makes art from observation in relation to a particular object and place. Her artistic practice foregrounds attention and experience, taking the form of painting and also sculpture, printmaking and drawing.

Growing up on Cape Cod, Halvorson first studied art on the beaches of Provincetown and later with Barnett Rubenstein at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. She attended The Cooper Union School of Art (BFA, 2003), Yale Norfolk (2002), and continued her interdisciplinary education at Columbia University's School of the Arts (MFA, 2007).

Halvorson has been awarded a number of residencies including a Fulbright Fellowship to Austria (2003-4); a Harriet Hale Woolley Scholarship at the Fondation des États-Unis, Paris (2007-8); the Marie Walsh Sharpe Space Program (2009-10); Moly-Sabata in Sablons, France (2014, 2017); and the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation in Captiva, Florida (2016). She was also the first American to receive the Rome Prize at the French Academy at the Villa Medici, Rome, Italy (2014-2015). In 2017, Halvorson was an artist-in-residence at Flying Horse Editions in Orlando, Florida, where she printed the silkscreened elements of the works on paper in this exhibition.

Halvorson's work has been exhibited widely. In 2015 she presented her first museum survey exhibition, *Slow Burn*, at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, NC, curated by Cora Fisher. In 2016 she exhibited large-scale painted sculptures at Storm King Art Center, as part of the *Outlooks* series curated by Nora Lawrence. Her work has been written about extensively in various publications and she is one of the subjects of Art21's documentary series, *New York Close Up*.

Josephine Halvorson has taught at The Cooper Union, Princeton University, the University of Tennessee Knoxville, Columbia University, and Yale University. In 2016 she joined Boston University as Professor of Art and Chair of Graduate Studies in Painting. She lives and works in Massachusetts.



## Acknowledgements

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Photography credits: Stewart Clements

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p. 1

*Permit*, 2017 (detail)

Oil on linen, 21 x 23 inches (53,3 x 58,4 cm)

pp. 4–5

*Road Drain*, 2017 (detail)

Oil on linen, 17 x 22 inches (43,2 x 55,9 cm)

pp. 48–49

*Broadsheet (Measure)*, 2017 (detail)

Gouache and silkscreen on paper, 22.5 x 24.5 inches (57,2 x 62,2 cm)