

EILEEN COOPER
TILL THE MORNING COMES

THE FINE ART SOCIETY

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FOREWORD

For her first exhibition at The Fine Art Society, Eileen Cooper presents *Till the Morning Comes*, a new series of works inspired by the ballet.

Classical ballet as we know it today began in 1669, when the French king Louis XIV instituted a school for dancers at the Académie Royale de Musique. The rise of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century shifted the focus of ballet away from male bravura performances, towards the ethereal new figure of the female dancers who embodied Romantic femininity. A newfound interest at the time in fairy tales, ghosts and supernatural beings, inspired the story lines of some of the most acclaimed ballet of the era such as *La Sylphide* (1832) and *Giselle* (1841).

As ballet's popularity started to decline in Paris towards the end of the nineteenth century, the enthusiastic patronage of the czars of Russia promoted its development in Saint Petersburg, which became the new capital of the dance world. Here the dance form was revitalised with new energy and athleticism, which would soon spread across Europe.

In 1909 Paris was dazzled by the ground-breaking performances of the Ballets Russes, an innovative émigré ballet company managed by impresario Sergei Diaghilev. Their momentous productions, widely credited with the creation of a new modern aesthetic in dance, were enhanced in their first seasons by the exotic set and costume design of artist Léon Bakst. When the company came to London on tour in 1913, Bakst exhibited his incredible designs at The Fine Art Society.

The impact of the Ballets Russes soon reverberated throughout the art world: artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Georges Braque designed sets and costumes for Diaghilev, while others like Auguste Rodin, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Laura Knight and John Singer Sargent drew, carved, and painted the dancers, inspired by their sinuous bodies and radical movements.

Eileen's new work is the contemporary counterpart to that of the modern artists who were so inspired by the Ballets Russes. Like them, she investigates the tension of the muscles, the grace of a ballerina en pointe, the arching of bodies - in short the moment where the human figure seems to overstretch its natural boundaries. Eileen's fascination with the dancing figure and the performance started in college and has reappeared in her practice often. This new series of work is rooted within her existing knowledge of and fascination with the female figure in motion, but it also presents a new visual vocabulary inspired by Akram Khan's recent choreography of *Giselle* for English National Ballet. While retaining her signature figures, she captures both the energy of Khan's fusion of ballet and Indian kathak dance, and the dramatic staging and story line in a unique combination of dramatic, contorted, yet strangely beautiful figures.

SARA TERZI



Catalogue cover for Leon Bakst's exhibition *Drawings for Ballets, Plays and Costumes* at The Fine Art Society, June-July 1913

SILENT POETRY

MICHÈLE ROBERTS



Eileen Cooper's new work has been inspired by direct observation of the classically trained dancers of English National Ballet in rehearsal for their new production of *Giselle*, choreographed by Akram Khan, whose challenging re-interpretation of the romantic story of love and betrayal has re-invigorated it for modern audiences. A chance conversation, in which Cooper expressed her interest in dance, led to an invitation to attend rehearsals.

Cooper was thereby offered the opportunity to explore a new method of creating her own work. Witnessing the creation of a ballet, she would be able to make drawings and paintings that acknowledged the formal patterns of the dancing, respecting its choreography, its constraints. At the same time, respecting the integrity of this other form, she would also be able to improvise, to articulate her concerns in her own, original way.

The word 'articulation' can refer to the jointed arrangement of bones in the body, to the shaping of parts of speech, the composition of sentences. To write well we need first to understand given structures of grammar, how the relationships between words help embody meaning, and then secondly we have to be prepared to break these up, re-compose them into new shapes that feel exactly right, not over-contrived just for the sake of it. This enables new bodies of meaning and suggestion to appear. It's the same, metaphorically speaking, with dance, with painting. This new project involving getting close to dancers developing their own art would let Cooper experiment with examining making itself: process, repetition, the unfinished, the not-yet-known.

Cooper has always enjoyed experimenting. She has consistently tested the possibilities of other media besides charcoal and paint, for example working in sculpture and collage, but now she was being offered the chance to engage in a dialogue with another art form altogether. She would not be taking up a secondary role, making simple illustrations of the

dancers. She would be their equal, her work responding to them as they responded to each other.

Having accepted English National Ballet's invitation, Cooper attended rehearsals and began by drawing the dancers from life. Back in her studio she made drawings in charcoal and pastel on sheets of paper. Some of these, for example *Body Talk 3* (p. 9), are displayed in this show. She also consulted photographs of the production. Back and forth she went, between ballet, observational drawing, imaginative drawing, and painting. Dancer Madison Keesler came to Cooper's studio and posed for her there. She was able to recognise the moment of the ballet shown in Cooper's sketches and immediately to take up those poses. She could also invent new gestures, for example, in *Pause* (p. 30), bending down in one swooping movement, unloosing and shaking out her hair so that it swept the floor.

Cooper subsequently made the paintings by first drawing with charcoal on canvas, then establishing a painted mark, and continuing with washes of colour. The line was then strongly re-stated, the composition developed in a process of refining and re-defining, layering and changing tones. The palette is restricted, sombre to some extent, a straightforward and unselfconscious choice made by Cooper after she watched a video of the dancers in rehearsal and perceived that the rehearsal space was given atmosphere by its relative darkness. At the same time the colours are glowing and rich. Cooper returns repeatedly to Venetian red, Indian red. The clear, vivid marks of the paintings actively reveal the process of their making, which suits their dynamic subject: bodies in constant motion. Similarly, the charcoal drawings' urgent lines reveal the ghosts of previous marks, which again suggest movement, vibrancy, change.

Cooper has always painted female figures, but her treatment of them here reveals certain intriguing developments. Some are immediately obvious and some reveal them-

selves gradually. In much of Cooper's earlier work female figures both inhabited pictorial space, becoming objects, shapes, for us to gaze at, and also seemingly inhabited a private space of reverie apart from the viewer's gaze. The faces were often expressionless, the eyes open but directed away from the onlooker somewhere off to the side, as though to indicate that the figures' own regard was an inward one rather than being fixed on the external world. On this level the paintings suggested the exploration of female subjectivity, the inner world of women's psyches. In accordance with this, the treatment of the women's physiques was not naturalistic but expressionist, thought and emotion projected into imagery and colour.

The women's bodies were unidealised, with the same sturdy limbs you see in Picasso's paintings of massive female figures. The stylised masklike faces recalled Gauguin's treatment of female Polynesian countenances, which for some viewers of his paintings can invoke notions of archetype, of universality. For others they signify time-bound, man-made notions of exotic inscrutability, of quintessential femininity. Some of us imagine these qualities as innate and natural while others insist they are culturally ascribed and in fact serve to prop up divisive social structures of authority. Cooper's work nodded to these dilemmas of interpretation but also cut through them to indicate a distinctly modern incarnation of the image of the eternal feminine. We can still find goddess-glamour all around us: in fashion photography, for example. Stillness and blankness of expression, apparent indifference, along with delicately hollowed cheekbones and sculpted lips, informs a certain kind of beauty that can work like a screen: projecting our own meanings onto it, we endow it with extra seductive force. Exploring female subjectivity can therefore include exploring the paradoxical power of passivity, of withholding, of not-speaking. This might once have appeared to be feminine good manners. It may also indicate suppressed anxiety.

Perhaps, therefore, Cooper was also exploring female ambivalence. What does it mean to become a woman in our world? Do all girls want to become women? To become mothers? These female figures in Cooper's early paintings were certainly adult in that they had breasts and hips, but often seemed childlike too, as though Cooper were painting young women in both a physical and a spiritual aspect, revealing them as on the cusp of change and also suggesting that psyche or 'soul' means lightness; something youthful, playful. The poses and gestures of some of these girl-women seem to express hesitation and doubt: if they cross a threshold into new realities what will they leave behind? Can they take their inner treas-

ure of imagination with them? Or will they become subjected to the imagination of others, objects in others' stories? What help does our culture give young women to find and create their own complex meanings for the process of maturation? Eileen Cooper's work suggests that figurative art can rehearse psychic conflicts, externalise them, dramatise them.

To some extent Cooper builds on such preoccupations in this new body of images and in another sense departs from them. She introduces significant changes of theme, and brings these exhilaratingly into focus. The figures in these Giselle paintings still suggest youthfulness but they have grown up, entered the adult world. These are hardworking women: dancers dedicated to a physically gruelling discipline. Almost raw in their intensity, the beautifully immediate charcoal and pastel drawings of the dancers in rehearsal, utterly focussed and purposeful, emphasise this. They suggest a particular, paradoxical kind of magic. The momentary illusion of weightlessness and airiness, seemingly effortlessly achieved, displaces the fact that such lightness is only realised after long, arduous years of training and repeated practice.

The dancers' power is simultaneously concealed, contained, and displayed. The dancers' slender bodies and delicately muscled limbs belie their physical strength. Their shapes are flatly stylised and decorative to some extent but simultaneously three-dimensional, capable of bearing weight. Their faces express concentration, awareness of the physical environment. Their movements are tense, controlled, exact. These dancers can leap and arc and achieve extraordinary feats of flowing movement, but their apparent transcendence is simultaneously utterly physical, their defiance of gravity human not godly. When the dancers go barefoot we see that their feet are beautiful, with long, fine toes, and also strong. These feet return lightly, firmly, onto the ground, where they flex, pivot, balance, go on pointe. On the ground the bodies stretch, arch, wrestle. It's on the ground that Eileen Cooper prefers to capture them. The earth is the ground of her paintings. It's also where we encounter male figures and understand their particular significance. They enter the picture either in literally supportive roles, as in *Interval* (p. 29) and *Centre Stage 3* (p. 9), or more challengingly as potential sparring partners, as in *Body and Soul* (p.17).

The artist's control of her medium balances that of the dancers. The lightness and joy of perfected movement co-exist with the darkness of physical risk. Fragility, danger and vulnerability are all at play; matched by the overcoming of difficulties; even revelling in them. The artist's hand dances over her surface, inventing and developing gestures of paint.



Body Talk 3, 2017
Charcoal and pastel on paper
22 x 30 in (56 x 76 cm)

Centre Stage 3, 2017
Charcoal and pastel on paper
22 x 30 in (56 x 76 cm)

She is simultaneously a choreographer of the figures she has summoned onto her canvas. We witness a three-way ballet of movement and stillness, constructed by dancers, artist, and paint. The term 'corps de ballet' gains a new meaning, for example in *Darkness and Light* (p. 33), where the four figures are simultaneously separate, each performing a different movement, and also joined; linked by being part of a diagonal stream of colour so that they become a single urgent creature, a new 'body'.

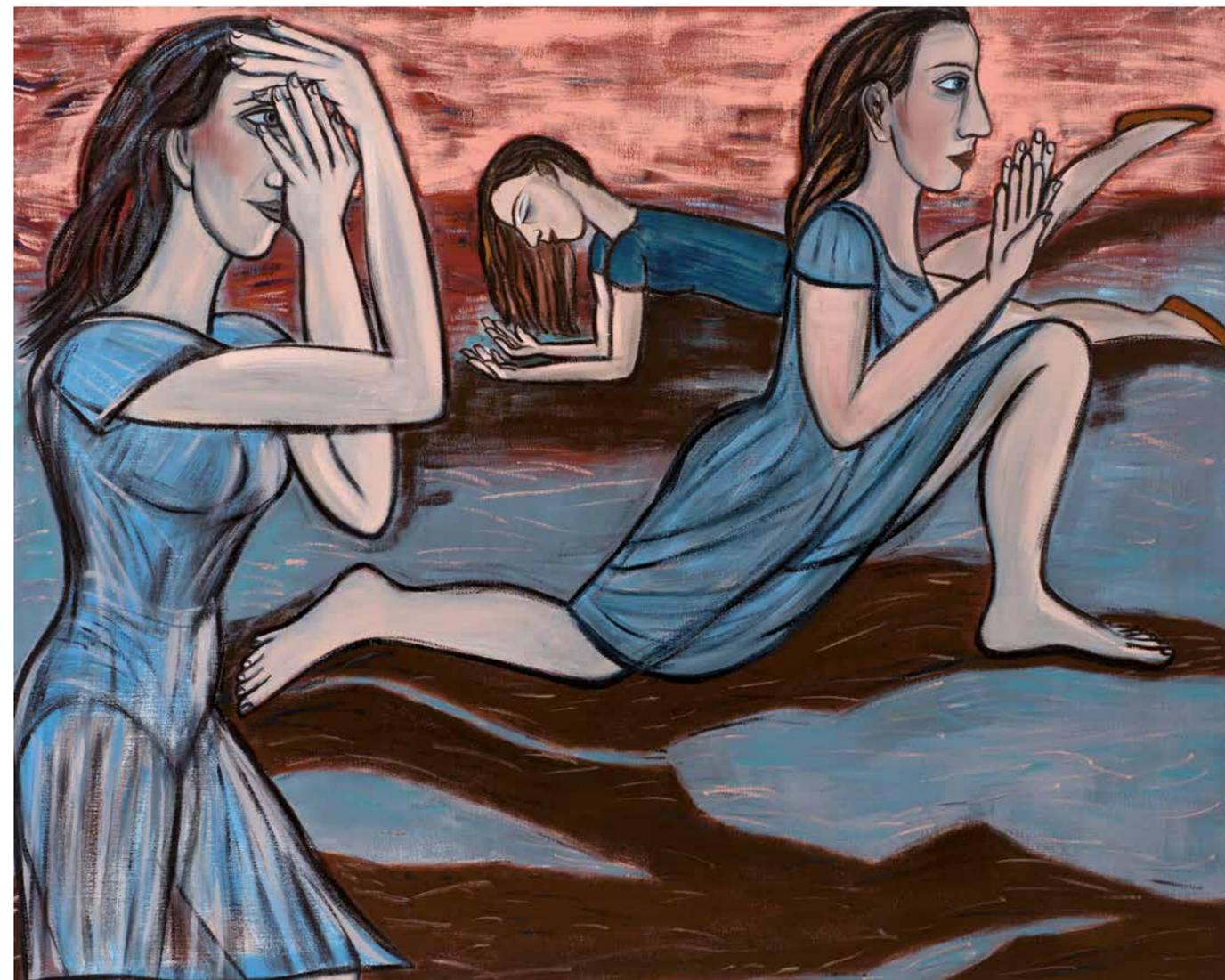
Many of the paintings depict dancing taking place inside a rehearsal room or a theatre. We glimpse floor, walls, and backdrop. In other paintings the movement seems to take place outside. The dancers have escaped from the proscenium arch framing them and entered a different world altogether, austere and desert-like. For example, in *Let It Be* (p. 25), a man and a woman engage in a passionate pas de deux that suggests their loving struggle to find equilibrium, perhaps one that did not exist before and that they have had to invent. In so doing they create the small green tree that grows between them. The bare terrain is not infertile, as it first appeared, but the ground for new growth.

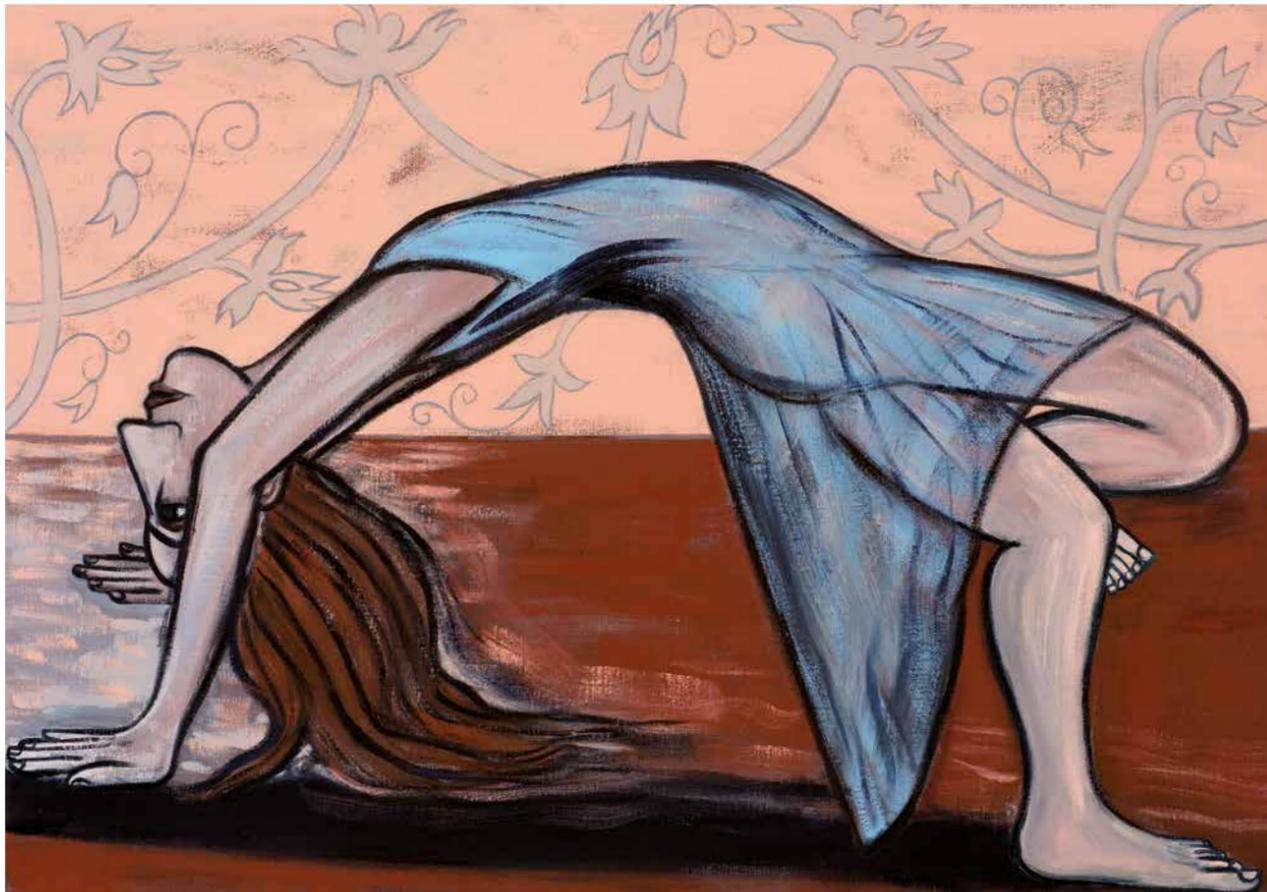
The mythical element reappears in *Heavenly Day* (p. 23), in which two female figures appear to be exploring difference and sameness, as sisters or women friends might do. Are they collaborating or competing? They simultaneously mirror each other and strain away from each other, in almost impossible poses, at the same time spinning as two movements in a single cartwheel. The ivy-clad wall behind them suggests both enclosure and the lure of escape, invites the viewer to make up a story. Are the two red-clad women inside a walled garden-paradise that they must leave once they have disentangled themselves, become separate individuals? Or are they preparing themselves to leap from the outside back inside, to hurl each other over the obstacle?

In the past, the plot of a traditional romantic ballet such as *Giselle* relied on strictly differentiated gender roles, and standard notions of class divisions. Boys in tights. Girls in tutus. Peasants and noblemen in appropriately differentiated costumes. By re-imagining the story of *Giselle*, bringing it up to date, setting the ballet in a world of migrant garment factory workers, Akram Khan has released fresh, troubling meaning from old conventions. Cooper similarly breaks new ground. If femininity has classically been a performance, a set of codes of dress, makeup and behaviour that women may obey and play with, or resist, how better to explore and challenge its rules than through drawing and painting dancers on stage energetically testing the limits of balletic performance?

If in the past Cooper's paintings have suggested that women are crucially close to nature, these new works demonstrate emphatically that they belong to culture as well. Similarly, Cooper's male figures inhabit the instinctual world as well as the cultural one, their traditional place. Ultimately Cooper celebrates the strength belonging to both sexes that is responsive and flexible, linked to tenderness. She paints a dance taking place simultaneously in inner and outer worlds. Transforming old categories of separation and conflict, this dance suggests that previously split-apart opposites can become, precariously and temporarily perhaps, re-integrated and reconciled.

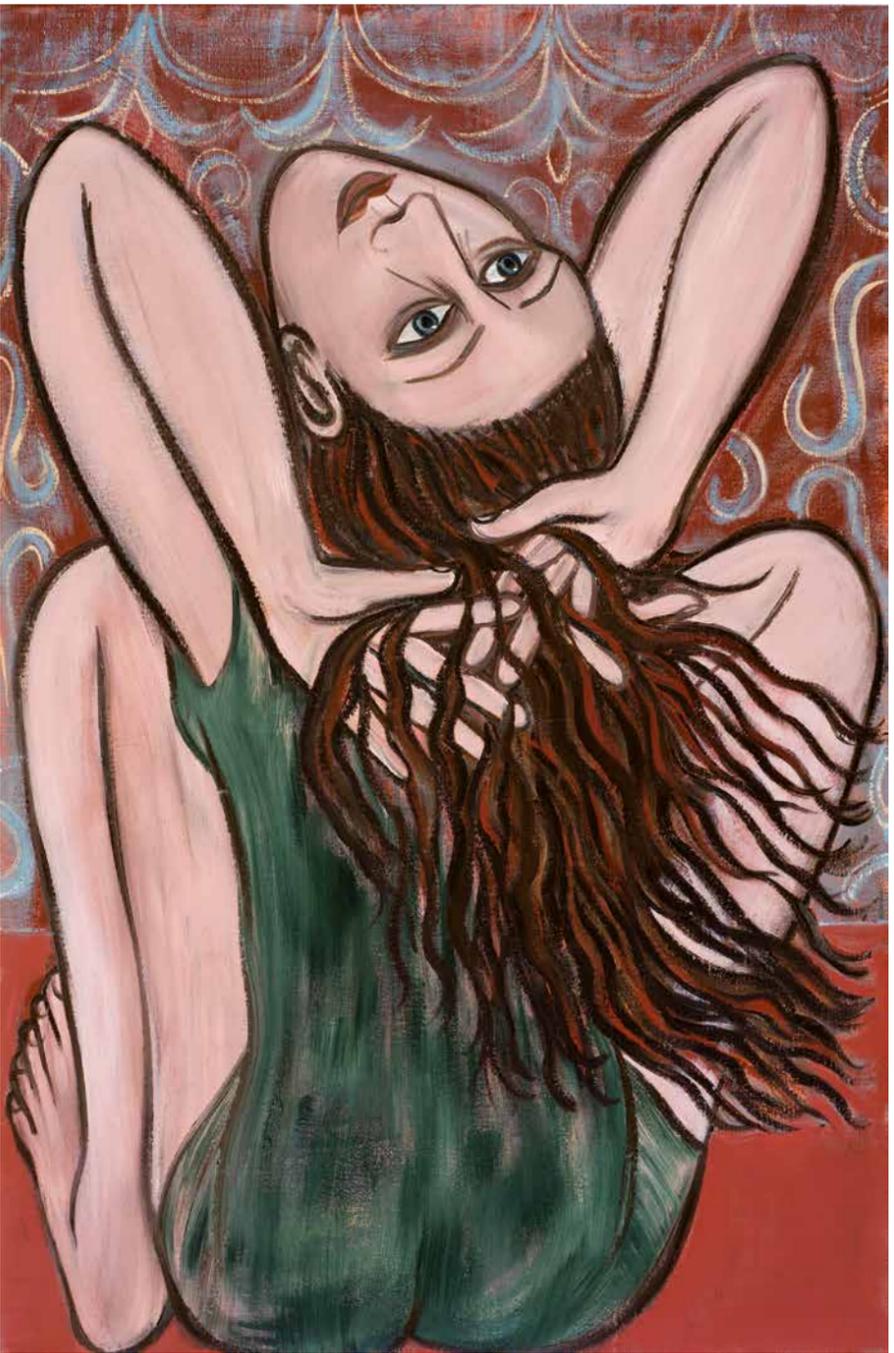
Silent Poetry, 2017
Oil on canvas
48 x 60 in (122 x 153 cm)





Peace of Mind, 2017
Oil on canvas
30 x 42 in (76 x 107 cm)

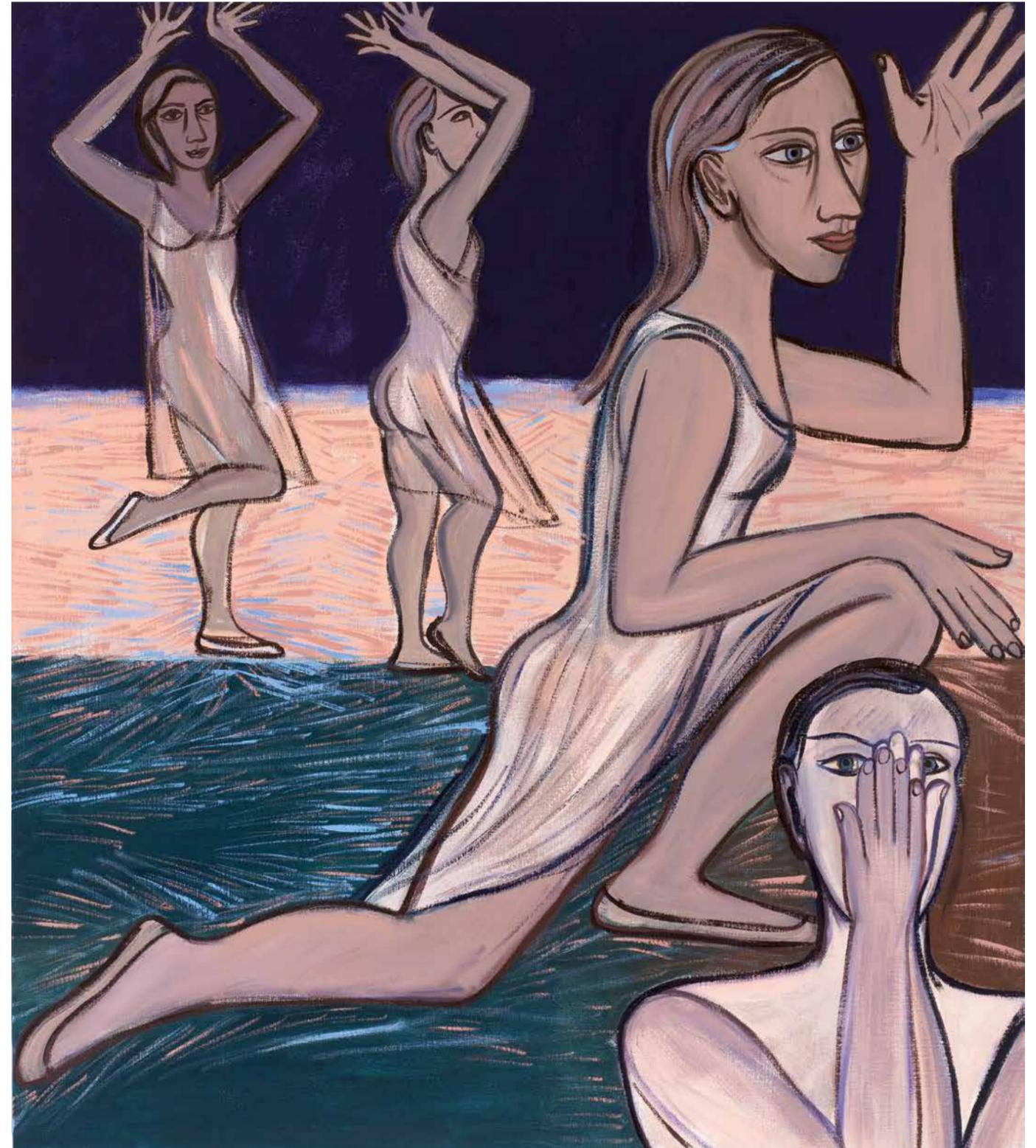
Leyla, 2017
Oil on canvas
36 x 24 in (92 x 61 cm)



Body and Soul, 2016
Oil on canvas
54 x 42 in (137 x 107 cm)



Turning Dark, 2016
Oil on canvas
48 x 42 in (122 x 107 cm)





Dancing in Limbo 3, 2017
Oil on board
20 x 24 in (50 x 60 cm)



Dancing in Limbo 1, 2017
Oil on board
20 x 24 in (50 x 60 cm)

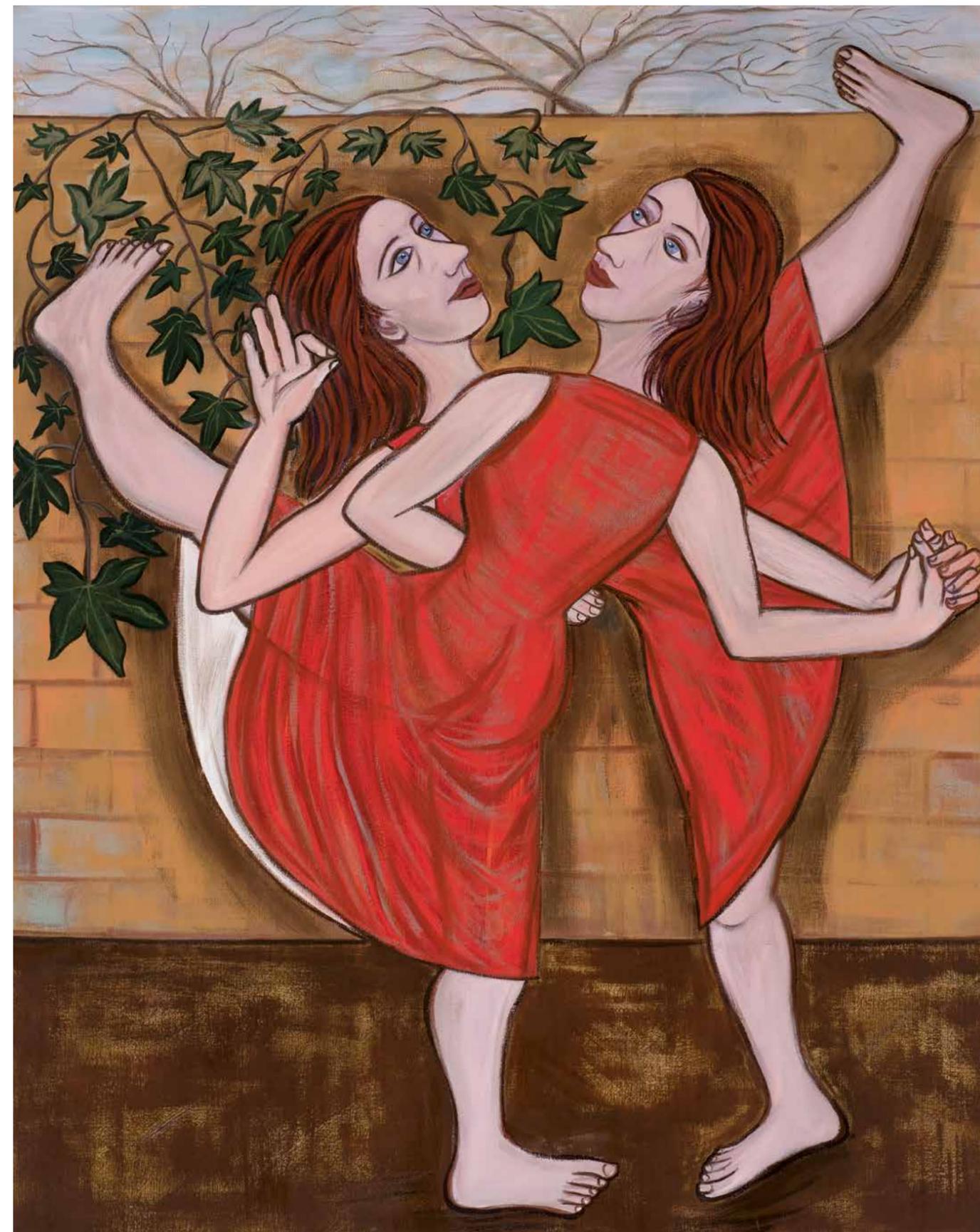


Dancing in Limbo 2, 2017
Oil on board
20 x 24 in (50 x 60 cm)

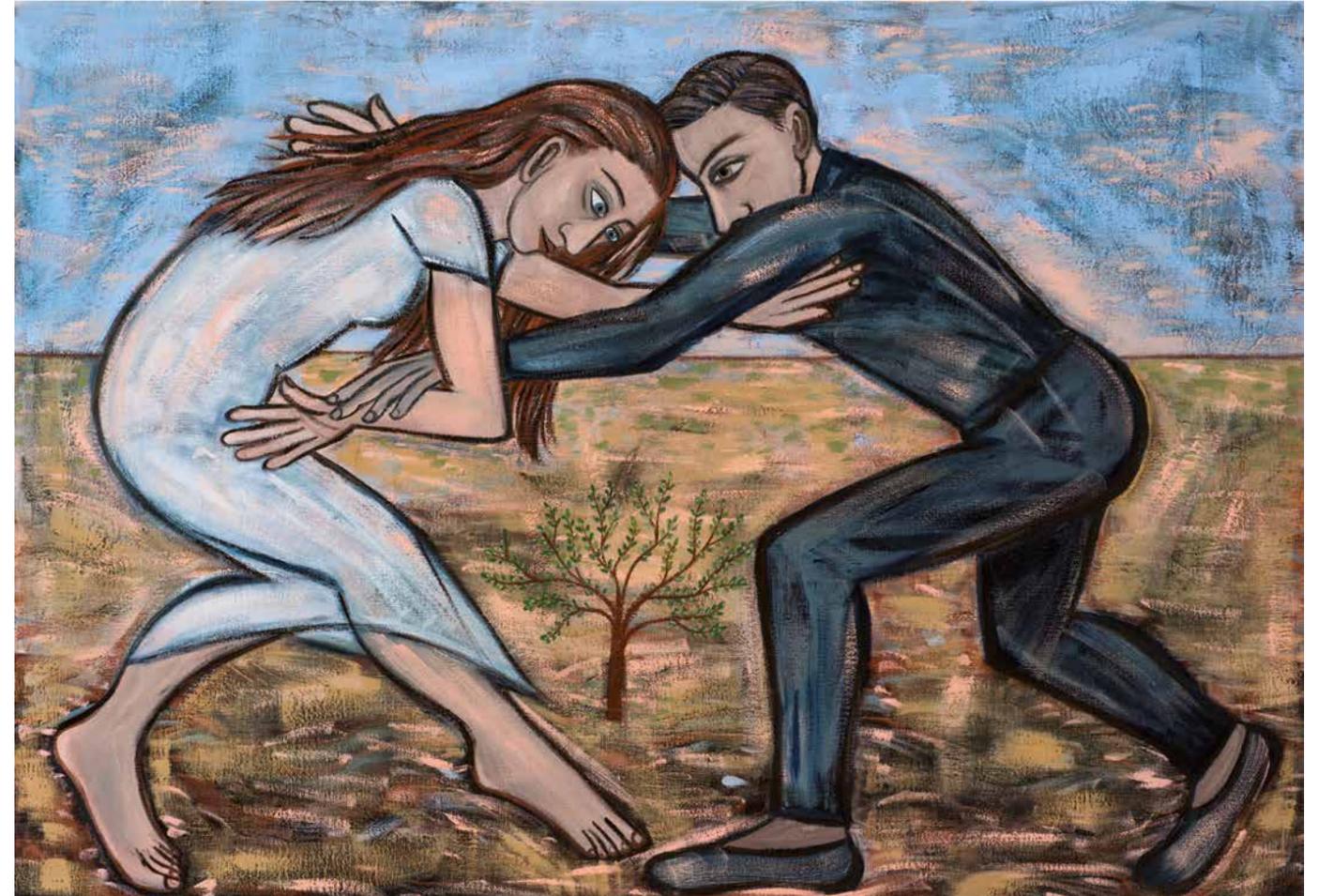


Twilight, 2016
Acrylic and oil on board
24 x 20 in (60 x 50 cm)

Heavenly Day, 2013-17
Oil on canvas
60 x 48 in (152 x 122 cm)



Let it Be, 2017
Oil on canvas
42 x 60 in (107 x 153 cm)



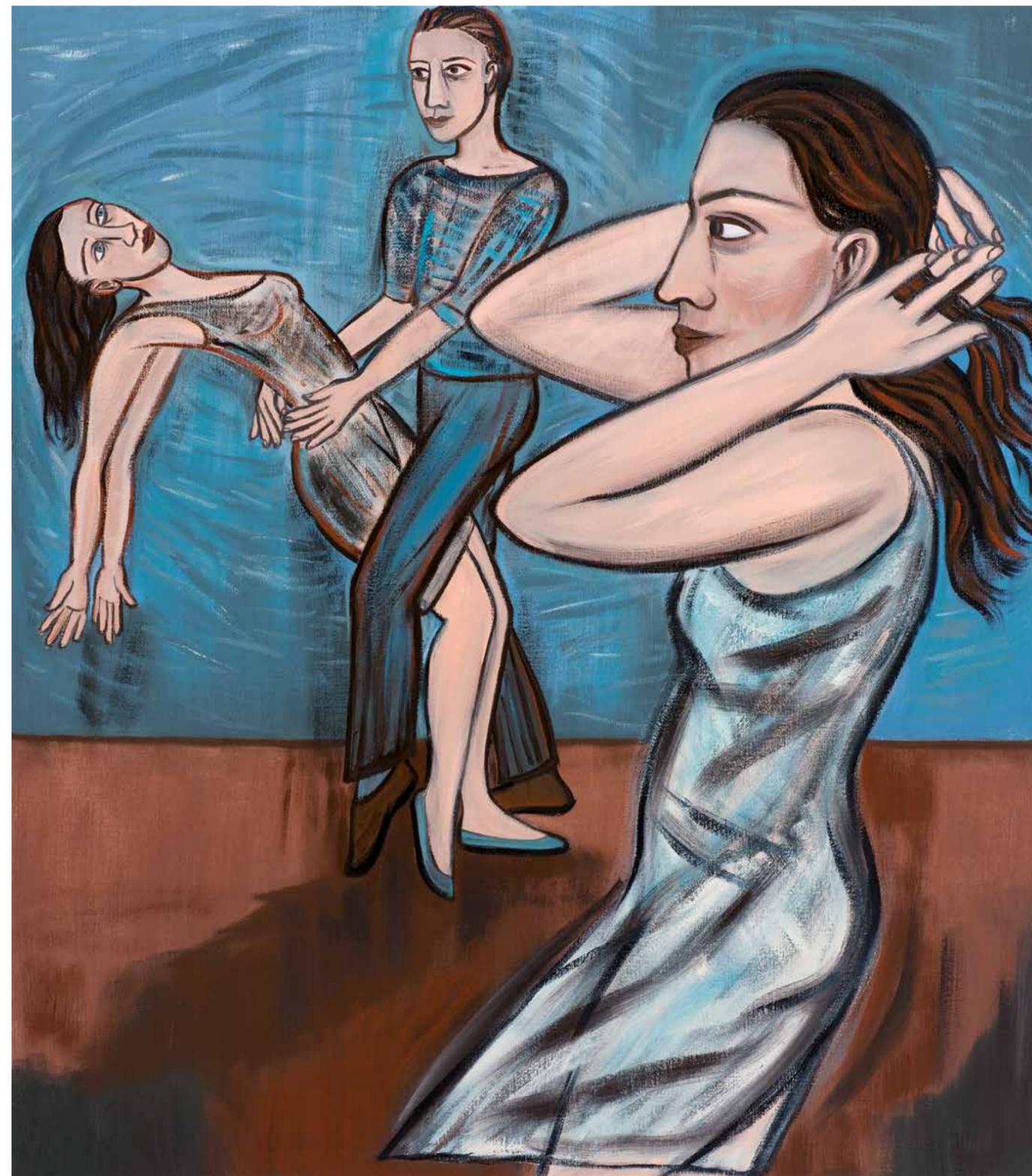


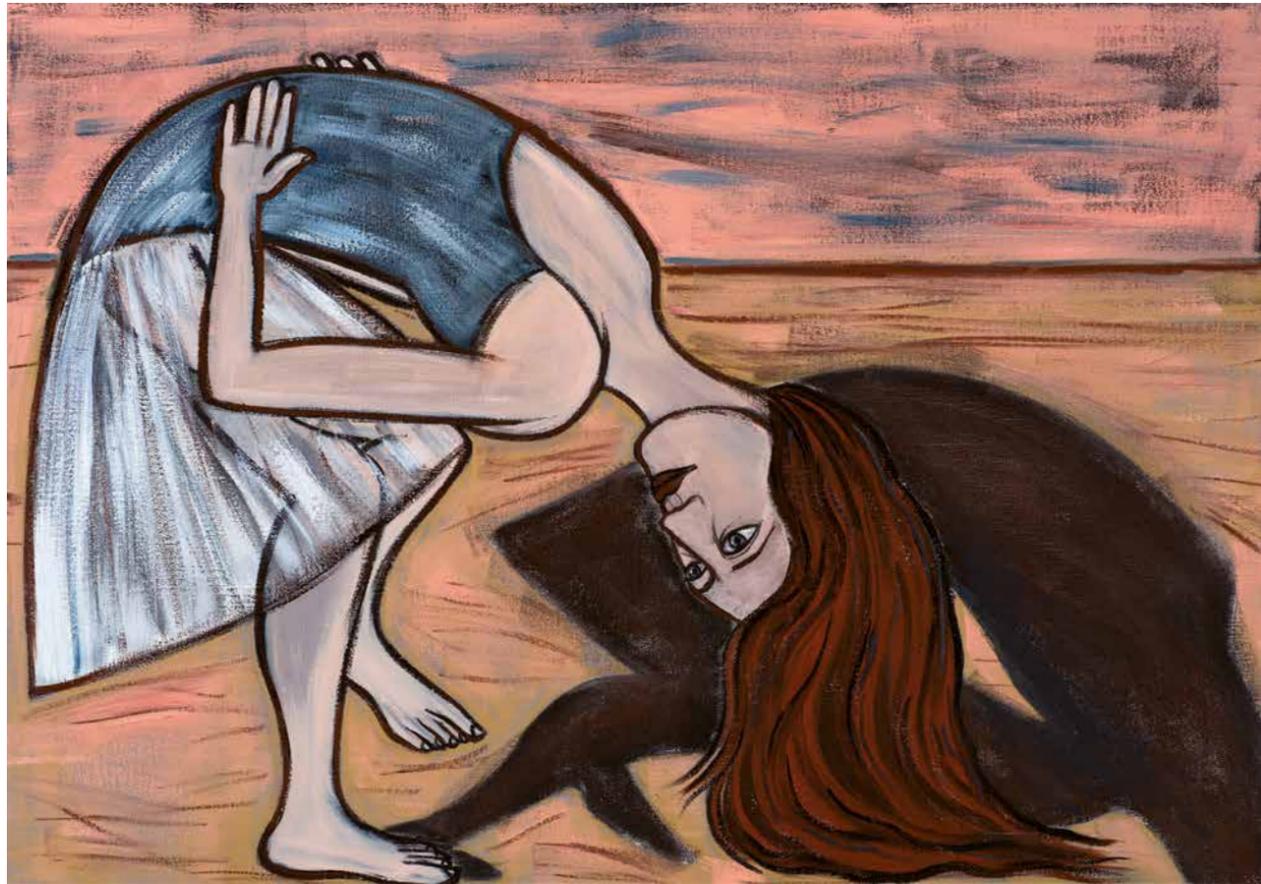
Stillness, 2016
Oil on canvas
36 x 24 in (91 x 61 cm)



Breathing Space, 2016
Oil on canvas
36 x 24 in (91 x 61 cm)

Interval, 2016
Oil on canvas
48 x 42 in (122 x 107 cm)



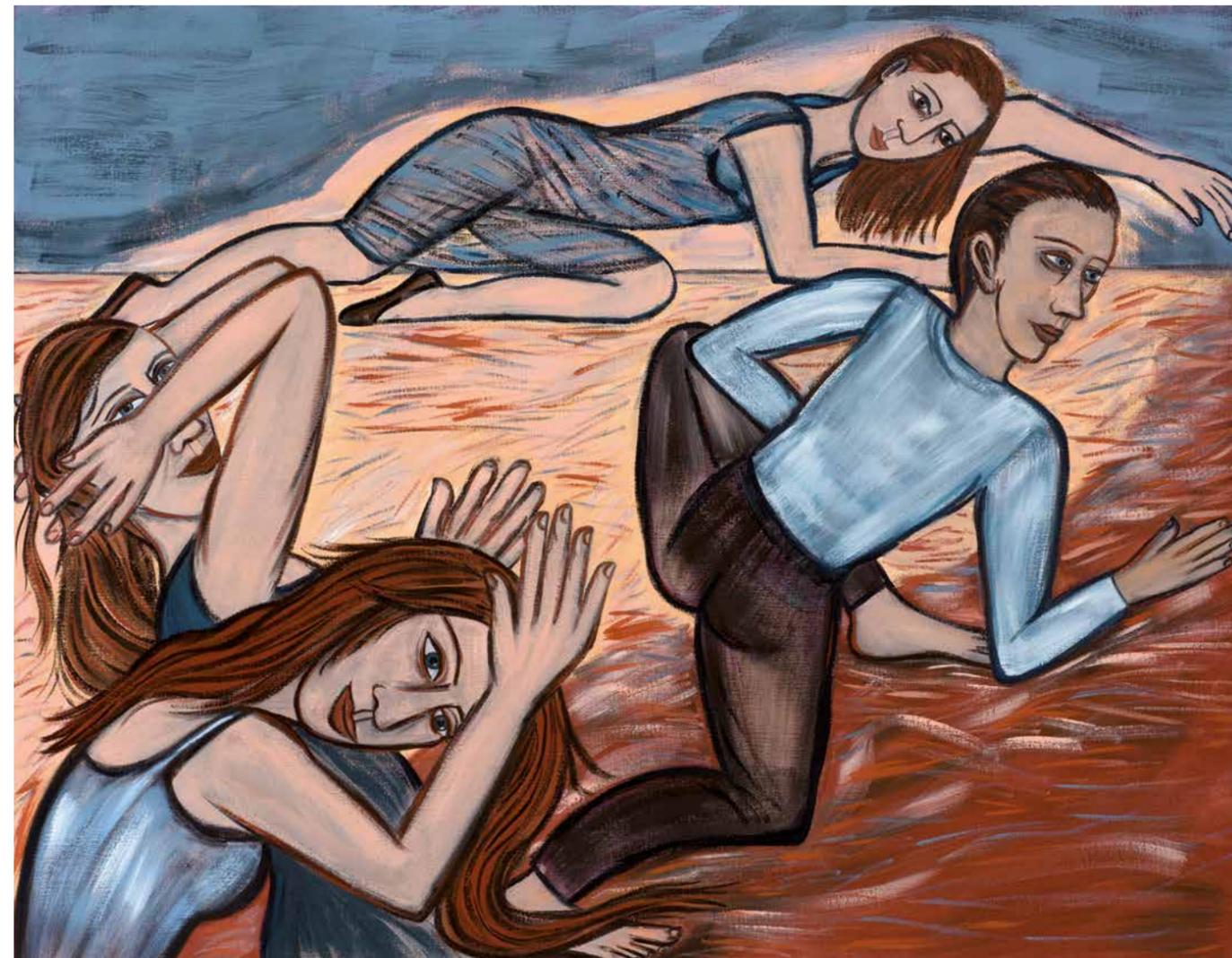


Pause, 2017
Oil on canvas
30 x 42 in (76 x 107 cm)

Pussy Willow, 2017
Oil on canvas
48 x 36 in (122 x 91 cm)

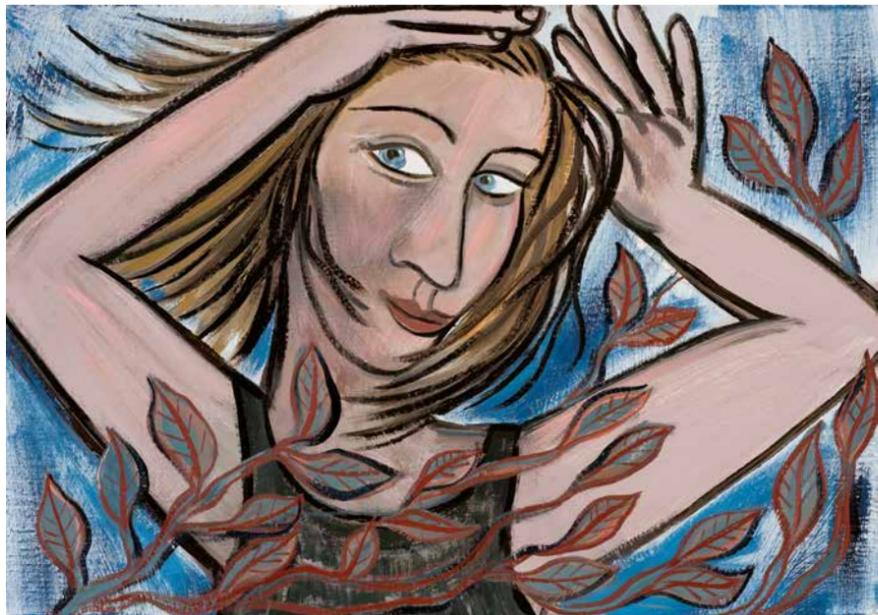


Darkness and Light, 2017
Oil on canvas
42 x 54 in (107 x 137 cm)

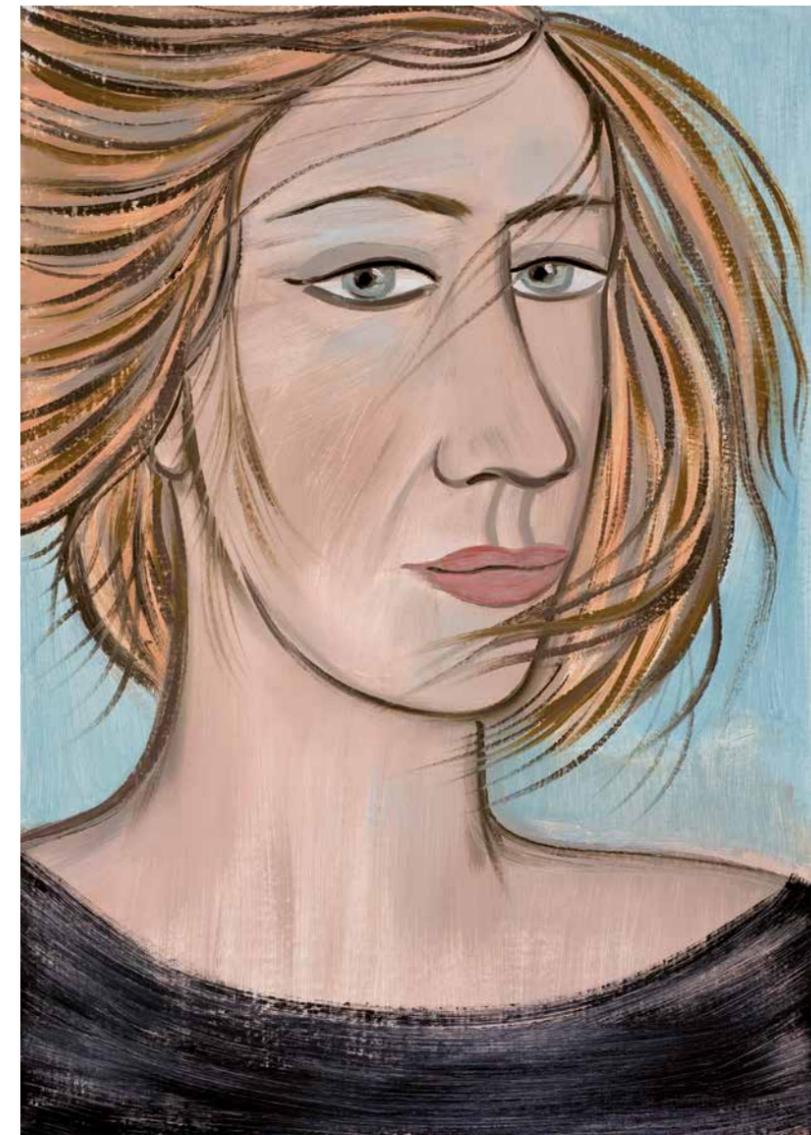




Precious, 2017
Oil on canvas
24 x 30 in (60 x 76 cm)



Hear the Wind Cry 1, 2017
Oil on canvas
14 x 20 in (35.5 x 50 cm)



Salt Wind 2, 2017
Oil on canvas
20 x 14 in (50 x 35.5 cm)

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