



**ELIZE VOSSGATTER**

**In the end, we're all to blame**

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This catalogue is published on occasion of the exhibition at Commune.1

**In the end, we're all to blame**  
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# COMMUNE.1

64 Wale Street, Cape Town, 8001  
t: 021 423 5600  
e: info@commune1.com  
w: www.commune1.com

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*“If life excites you, its opposite, like a shadow, death, must excite you. Perhaps not excite you, but you are aware of it in the same way that you are aware of life... One’s basic nature is totally without hope, and yet one’s nervous system is made out of optimistic stuff.”*

Francis Bacon.<sup>1</sup>

“In the end, we’re all to blame” is the intriguing title for a corpus of paintings that follow on from a previous series that investigate the notion of self and its relation to body politics. Here, Vossgetter turns from the somewhat fraught tensions between the culturally constructed self and our disjunctive, if not utterly confused, relations to the natural, to mine instances of collectives, groups, gatherings or crowds, through images of the stage and the staged. These include theatre performances, family portraits, school ceremonial photographs and other kinds of gatherings, sourced from social media and from the artists’ personal archive.

Having set the boundaries for a body of work thematically, the dominant register in Vossgetter’s work is somewhat Deleuzian, in that it performs as a “combative extraction under the name of ‘counter-actualization’”.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while vestigial remnants of

representational images are present in the works, the relentless pressure of the material aspects of her painterly processes throw the authority of their narratives into question, if not negating them entirely. The chaos of unformed substances are urged into rhythmic codes of colour and mark that have a distinctly sensorial, haptic intelligence which rather than simply obliterating the representational elements in the work, allow ‘counter actualization’ to become possible – a particular tension in relation to the figures and the ground that open the works to meanings grounded in this dialogue.

This development in Vossgetter’s painterly approach is already suggested in earlier works such as *The Precarious Summer* (2013), where the figure is subjected to an oozing, fleshy corruptibility that, rather than issuing from the body itself, engulfs and overwhelms the body it covers. This painting is at once seductive and repulsive as the codes of beauty, (which in essence, constitute a smoothing, normative force that places cultures under the constraints of consensus that in turn become self-regulating) are strained by Vossgetter’s irreverent handling of her medium that includes amongst other things, human hair. The dense covering of hairy mass and the bewildered sideways glance of the figure registers on a number of levels, from religious associations with Mary Magdalene who covered her shame with her hair, to the search for





^ *The Precarious Summer*, 2013  
Oil paint, hair, varnish, thinners, industrial paint, neon  
120 x 120cm

an authentic or foundational sense of self beneath the accumulations of enculturation. That the face is only sketchily realized in relation to the rest of the surface is suggestive of how fragile a notion identity is. Ironically, this reveals the anxiety of being nothing but natural - if the natural is considered as something outside culture and therefore outside any frame of reference. Thus it is by entering into the symbolic order, that the (pre-cultural), innocent body is all but erased. The notion here is that the very cultural accumulations that are used to define ourselves as subjects cover over what psychoanalyst and philosopher Jacques Lacan termed, *the objet petit*, the lost object, lack or void that haunts the core of our being.<sup>3</sup>



^ *Snow*, 2013  
Oil paint, glitter, sequence, shellac  
90m x 90cm

This tone of estrangement permeates all of Voss Gatter's works. In the earlier paintings, such as *Snow* (2012) and *Flesh of my flesh* (2013), it is evoked by the isolation of uneasy figures in exaggerated encasements that clothe their bodies or encrust their faces. It is these accumulations that have a forceful presence; the figures themselves are generally insubstantial, nothing but cyphers of humanity - fragile frameworks on which these over-substantial personas are built. In the recent works, as I will demonstrate, the painterly encrustations break free from the form of the figures to be defined as a separate element altogether. What follows here is an attempt to decipher the implications of this shift.



^ *Flesh of my flesh*, 2013  
Oil paint, black oxide, glitter, varnish  
900mm x 900mm

Using *The Creators* (2014) and the series of three paintings titled *The Drifters* (2014) as an entry into the new body of work overall, an opportunity arises to contemplate the title of the show, "In the end, we're all to blame". In these works the aggressively abstract painterly interventions that soon follow are still held at bay. In *The Creators* it is only the decorative borders that frame the stage that irrationally escape their constraints in order to float meaninglessly on the surface. The creators themselves, presumably the assembled cast on the stage, are passive - their exhausted colour draining away into vertical washes that dissolve the stable plane of the surface on which they stand. In *The*

*Drifters I*, a tide of white canvas rises, truncating an odd assemblage of figures, possibly an extended family, while they gaze passively out at the viewer. In *The Drifters II* the indicators of physical form becomes corrupted and seems to begin dissolving. Finally, in *The Drifters III*, the figures are all but washed away. If one accepts that those assembled on the stage of *The Creators* are/were actors, the active, the determinants of meaning or truth as evinced by their context, the pairing of *The Creators* and *The Drifters* suggests something of the complicity between takers and givers, masters and slaves, power and powerlessness. What I mean by this is that without an audience, there is no staging. Without the returned gaze there is no meaning. There is a sense here that the figures, at the end of the event, when presumably their audience is leaving, are draining back into the ground from which they were ushered; that they are no more or less real than the staging of the event. Concomitantly, the audience themselves cease to exist and disappear from whence they came, no longer having any substantive meaning for the assembled actors, whether they be a family grouping or players on a stage. This is a daunting notion – that when we are not held within a gaze, the gaze – we cease to exist – or rather, that it is within being comprehended that we gain an outline that assures us of our meaningful place in the world. Little wonder then, that it is in a world where notions of family, nation, community and the suchlike are so unstable, that these paintings uncomfortably reverberate.

*No man's land* (2014) and *Adaptation* (2014) are oddly placed to the rest of the body of recent work, in that they are the two works on this show that depict single figures, their backs turned to us, and who are intently engaged with unidentifiable doings. In both of these works the figures are defiant in the rejection of our gaze. They are not simply passive figures to be consumed, inviting our gaze – rather, one feels shut out and that they fiercely protect their privacy. This is somewhat different in register to the other works in that here, the gaze is refused – the viewer is rejected and the returned gaze is engaged elsewhere, in a private and exclusive realm.

The paintings that follow embrace the haptic in the particularly Deleuzian sense of the term as the flux of the materials, juddering flashes of glitter or sharp colour do not simply inflect the subject matter at hand, but are the very means by which the meaning is produced. In this sense the figurative elements in the work are almost entirely subordinate to the material matters of the painting process. This foregrounds a sensorial reception of the work – a place of sensate rather than cerebral intelligence found in the failure of the images to comfortably cohere and the persistent flurry of brush marks, dribbles, washes and flat blocks of colour that sometimes aggressively urge the works toward pure abstraction. Concurrently and contradictorily, the sudden alerting of our attention with the returned gaze of a figure, perilously close to disappearing, that the purely material, abstract sensorial flow is snagged for a moment, allowing the viewer to consider the possible narratives staged in the works.

Increasingly Vossgetter's restless and demanding relationship to her medium, that intuitively uses any fluid material to hand in combination with traditional oil paints, to render surfaces that thin or congeal, glimmer or become unexpectedly and disturbingly dull, suggests a hidden rhythmic code that is at once seductive and repellant. This is used to play between the surface, pattern, shallow depth and representation, resonating with the complexity of the relations between the individual and the collective, the self and the other, the viewer and the viewed. In *The Ones with the golden gaze* (2014), figures are on the point of complete dissolution. Their ghastly blackened heads with their silly, golden blob-eyes hover somewhere between the living and the dead in this darkly humorous work while their bodies simply wither and float away in gentle flurries of disorderly paint. These drained and insubstantial figures compel us with their eyes, which are distant, glowing headlamps, pinpoints of light - to return the gaze – as if it is only by our looking they will be saved from the inevitable dissolution that is washing them away.

In *Bewildered Beast* (2014), an eyeless mass of swirling, interlocked and frantic human cyphers are fused into a blinded union as they tumble, sightlessly, into the red void in the centre of the work. It was Walter Benjamin, as early as 1936, that warned of the dangers of sensorial overload and the concomitant loss of discernment that comes from the lack of individuation.<sup>4</sup> He, and many others after him have warned that the overheated sensorium of modernity creates a headless beast from the masses

that can then be exhorted to enact or accept the diabolical in the name of the group. Fascism is most often cited in these instances. Here, perhaps in more than any of the other works, the dangers of phantasmagoria are immanent, as the heaving mass seems to be drawn, inexorably, into the red void central to the composition. In *Celebration of the act of remaining: whatever* (2014) is equally eerie, as the figures seem, despite the idea that they may be 'doing' something, are oddly passive – it is the engulfing, turbulent painterly flurries that surround them that enjoy their freedom and threaten the fragile sense of order that is tunneled, off-centre, into the shallow illusion of space in the painting. Here, the sense of order or control to be attained by spatial distance is lost – the focus that distance affords crumbles into a haptic nearness that almost obliterates any rational, clear distinction necessary to formulate the world in a controllable, accessible manner. It is worth pointing out here that what is central to all of these works is their verticality, where shallow spaces are nothing more than sliding screens of activity that glide over each other. In equal measure to the flurries of abstract mark making, this denies the figures any securing spatial coordinates, taking them to something more like no place. In *Companies' Garden*, for instance, what once may have been a stage is reduced to nothing more than a flat section of gold paint while the figures disfigure and reconfigure as pattern, in *The Drifters I*, the white lower half of the compositions glides upward, threatening the complete erasure of the assembled figures.

Thus the use of shallow, sliding panels of vertically orientated space, combined with abstract patterned surfaces and very particular invocations of the gaze that our understanding of individuality, group cohesion and identity are challenged in a number of ways. It is when the gaze becomes diffused that identity is compromised, both as individual and as collectives and it is within this that chaos threatens, having within its grasp both positive and negative, death and renewal.

The voluptuous, sensual hysteria of these paintings, the use of glitter, baby oil, gold dust, and neon paint, undermine the gravitas of the overall message through their sheer overabundance, their excess, by forcefully declaring themselves free of meaning except in the most sensual manner. It is as if the distinct sense of melancholia that pervades the vestigial figures is ushered forth from their receding importance within the overwhelmingly sensate and ultimately, joyous mess that playfully invites us on another journey.

This returns us, finally, to *The Creators*, situated as they are, at the end of their performance, their enactment upon the world, in a context that is presumably European. This work insinuates that the world, which for long has laboured largely under a Eurocentric conception of its being, is, if not dying, receding into the past. Whilst this world, once understood as such, sinks beneath a multitude of possibilities of what it is, the conflicts and diversity of modernity, we as individuals, as communities, families and actors, have no certainty of how to

‘perform’ within this world-in-flux. This can seem, by turn, abysmal, catastrophic, chaotic, exhilarating, and full of possibility. Vossgetter’s paintings by turn, provoke reflection on all of these possibilities.

Endnotes

- 1 Francis Bacon in David Sylvester: “Interviews with Francis Bacon”. Thames and Hudson, London, 1988, p. 104.
- 2 Crowley, M. “*Deleuze on Painting.*” in French Studies: A Quarterly Review, Volume 67, Number 3, July 2013, pp. 371 385. P.372.
- 3 For an interesting interpretation of this see, Kirschner, L. “Rethinking Desire: The Objet Petit a in Lacanian theory.” in [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu), 1 January, 2005.
- 4 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” 1936. In Arendt, Hannah, “Illuminations”, London, Fontana,1968.





**The Creators** (2014)

Oil paint, charcoal, shellac, gold dust on canvas

115 x 155cm





Top Left: **The Drifters I** (2014)

Oil paint, gold dust on canvas

95.2 x 137cm

Bottom Left: **The Drifters II** (2014)

Oil paint, gold dust, shellac on Belgian linen

87 x 135cm

Top: **The Drifters III** (2014)

Oil paint, gold dust on Belgian linen

64 x 99.5cm



**No man's land** (2014)

Oil paint, neon, pencil crayon on canvas

43 x 53cm



**Adaptation** (2014)

Oil paint, neon on canvas

90 x 120cm

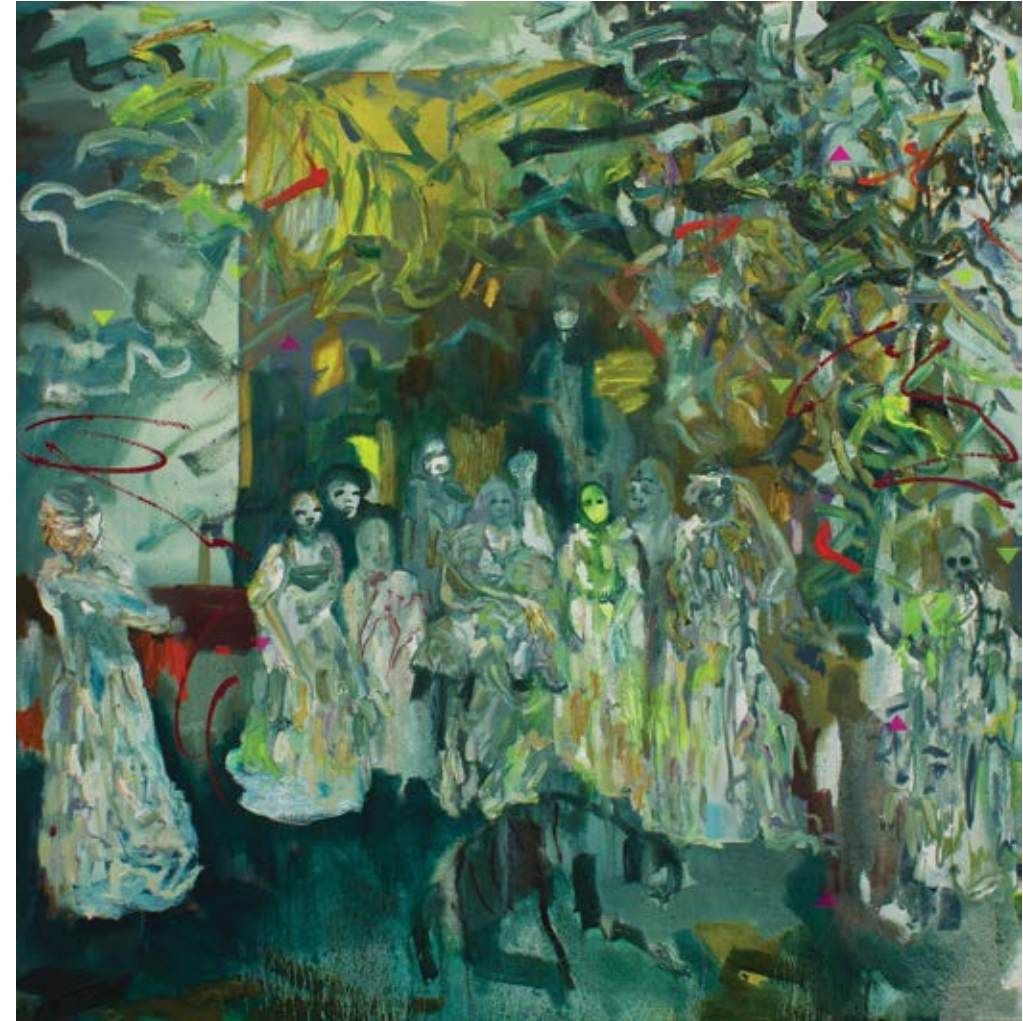




**Bewildered Beast** (2014)

Oil paint, charcoal, gold dust, neon on canvas

79.5 x 105cm



**In the end we're all to blame** (2014)

Oil paint, neon, post-its, glitter on canvas

115 x 115cm





**The Ones with the golden gaze** (2014)

Oil paint, gold dust on canvas

115 x 115cm



**Companies' garden** (2015)

Oil paint, neon on canvas

98 x 115cm





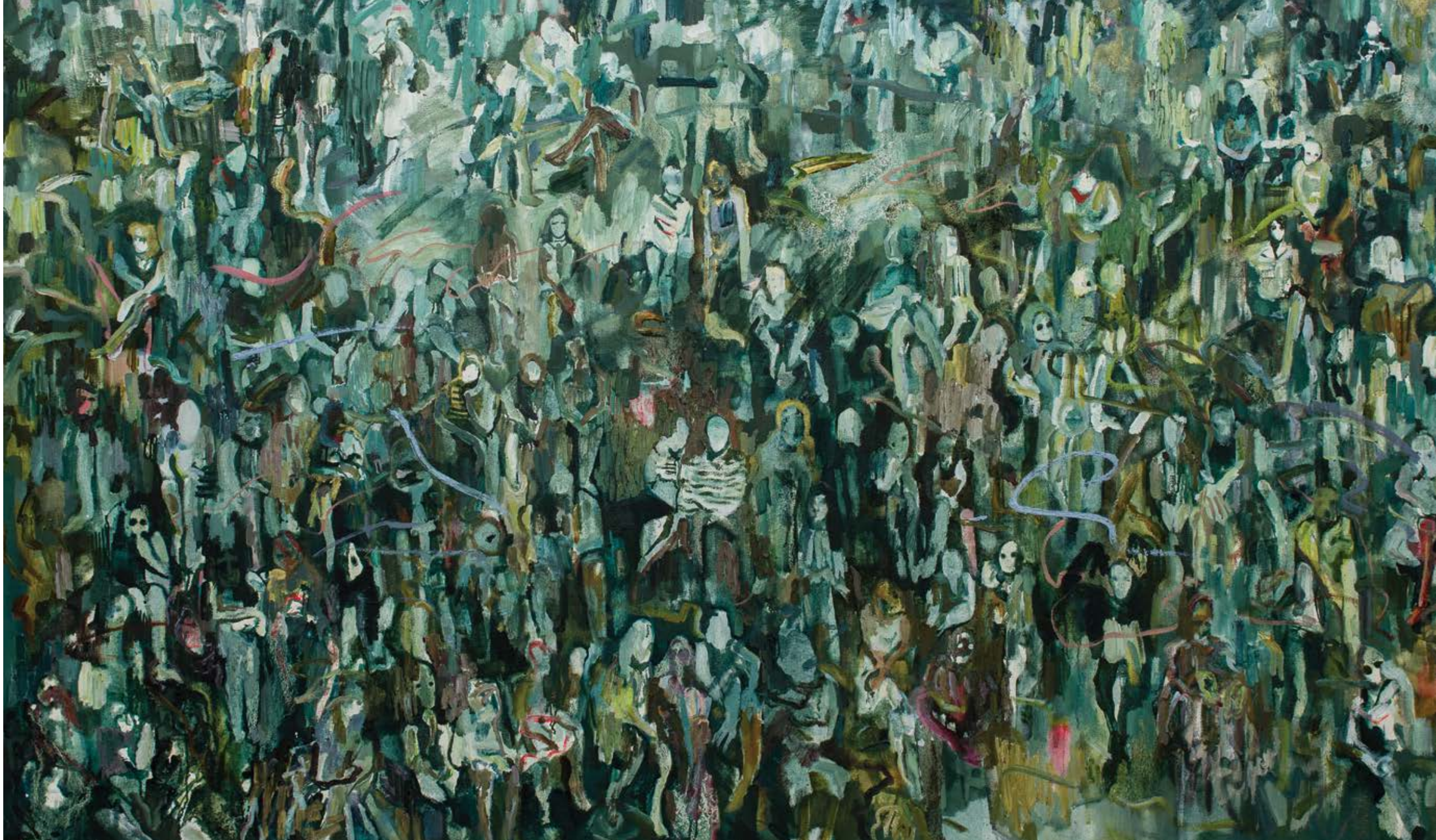
**Phantasmagorium** (2014)  
Oil paint, neon on canvas  
115 x 155cm



**In celebration of the act of remaining: whatever** (2014)  
Oil paint, neon on canvas  
115 x 155cm



**No one is watching you** (2014)  
Oil paint, neon, gold dust on canvas  
120 x 200cm



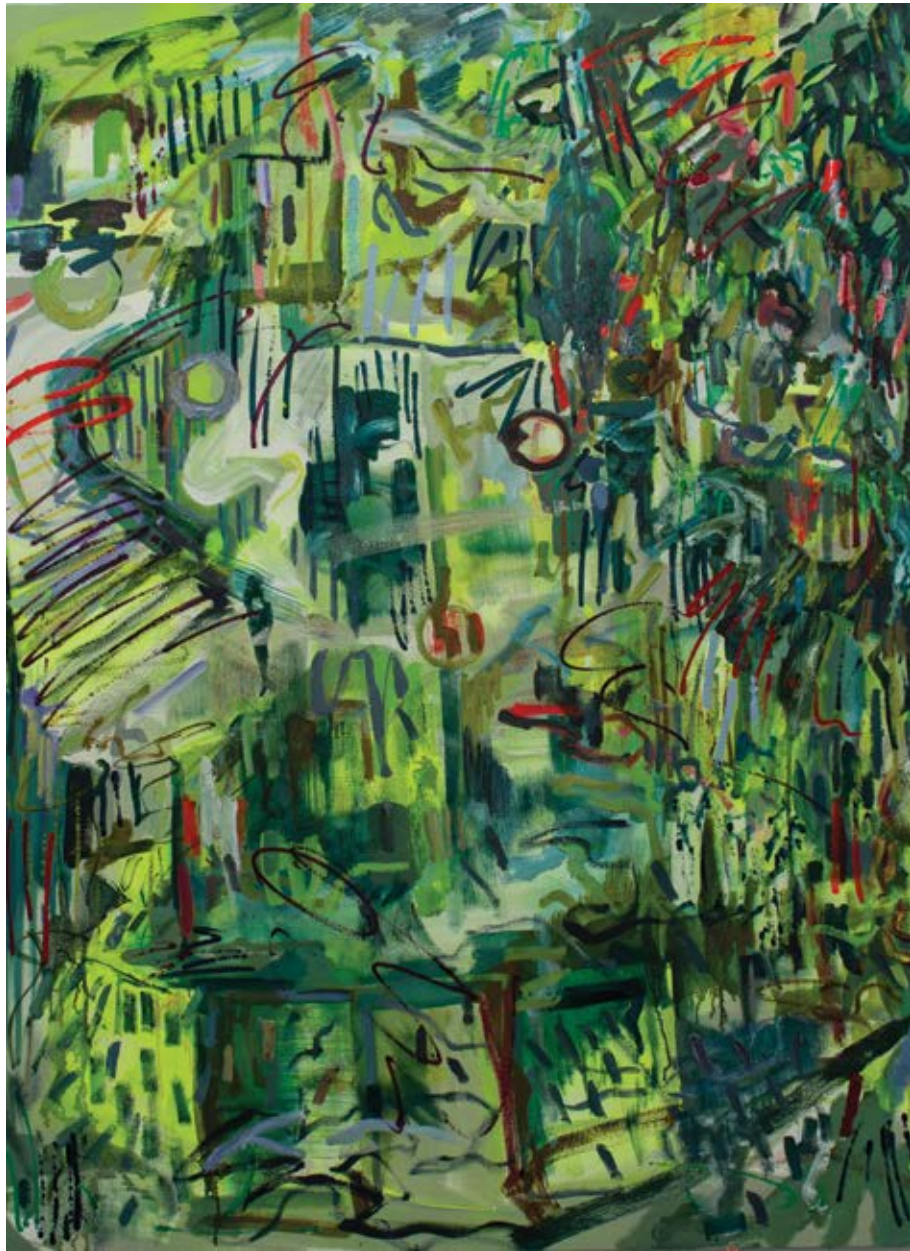


LEFT:

**Red Tape** (2015)

Oil paint, neon on canvas

155 x 115cm



RIGHT:

**The Pretenders pretending**

2014

Charcoal, black oxide, oil paint and  
glitter glue on used canvas

172cm x 158cm





**Elize Vossgetter** (b.1981, Johannesburg) is a Cape Town based artist and lecturer in painting at the Ruth Prowse School of Art. Vossgetter obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Michaelis Art School, University of Cape Town in 2002. She held her first solo show, 'Sterntaler', at the Association of Visual Arts (AVA) in Cape Town in 2012 and another in 2013 at the AVA titled 'Once there was, and Once there was not'. Vossgetter has participated in numerous group exhibitions, including 'Impressions and Responses' at Galerie Miz in Istanbul (2011), 'Our Fathers' at the AVA in 2012 in Cape Town and a two-part group exhibition at Heidi Erdman Contemporary (Cape Town) called 'Conceptual Matters and Matters Conceptual' in 2010.

Following a 2-month residency in Berlin in 2014, Vossgetter has turned her focus to collaborative processes and performance art as complements and extensions of her painted visions. 'In the end, we're all to blame' at Commune.1 represents the first showing of this approach.

**Julia Teale** is an artist, teacher and writer. She established Spencer Street Studio, a teaching and working studio in Salt River in 2006. She is currently in Auckland, New Zealand, where she is researching a PhD in Fine Arts.





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