

ARTHUR COHEN

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Ripped Terre Verte

Exhibition at the
Scully Tomasko Foundation
2023



Family Portrait
2022, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Dutch Brown Rip
2023, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Three Graces
2022, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Memories of Cobalt Green Deep
2022, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Dark August Painting
2022, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



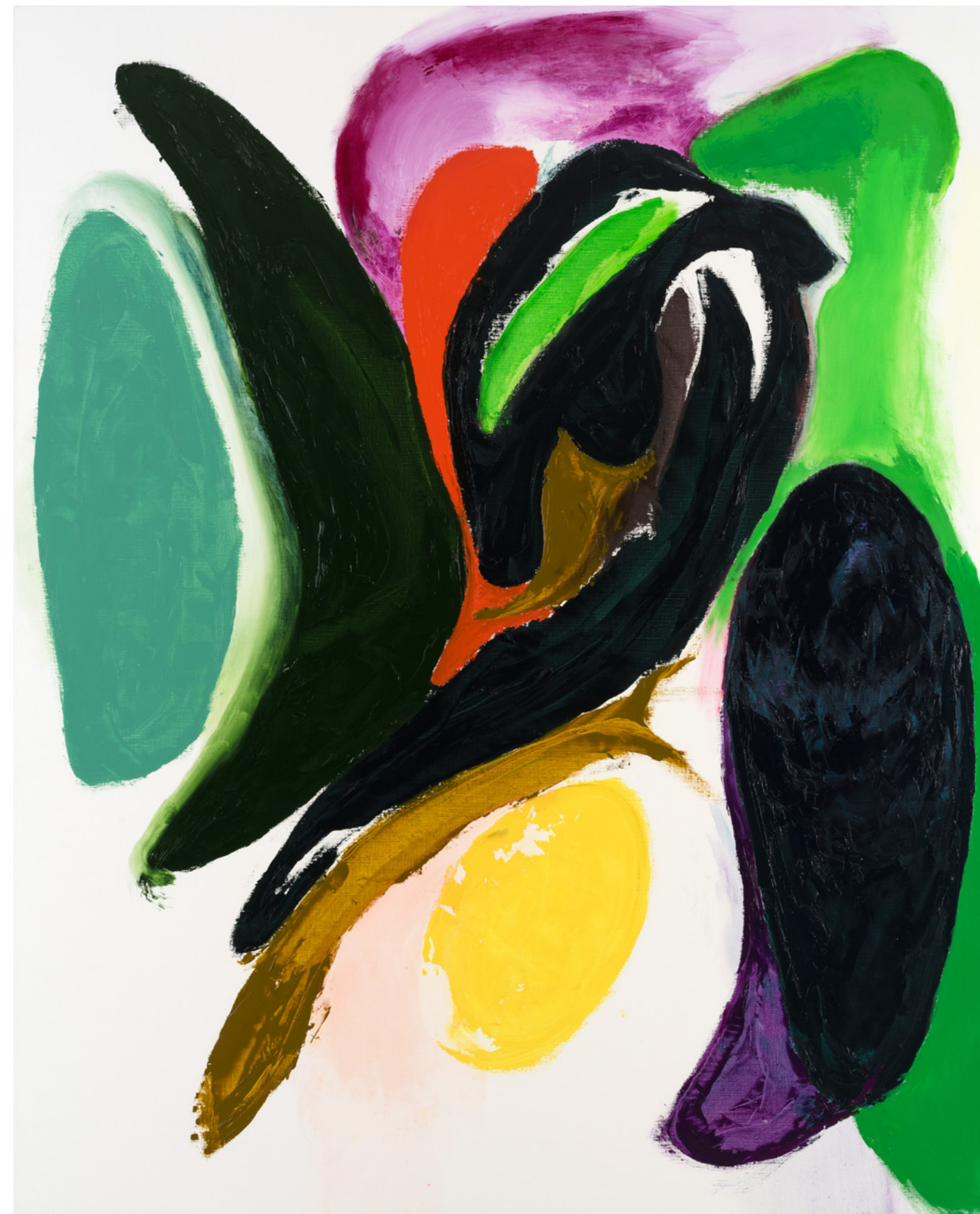
Cobalt Green Deep, Viridian and Violet
2021, oil on linen
72 × 59 inches (183 × 150 cm)



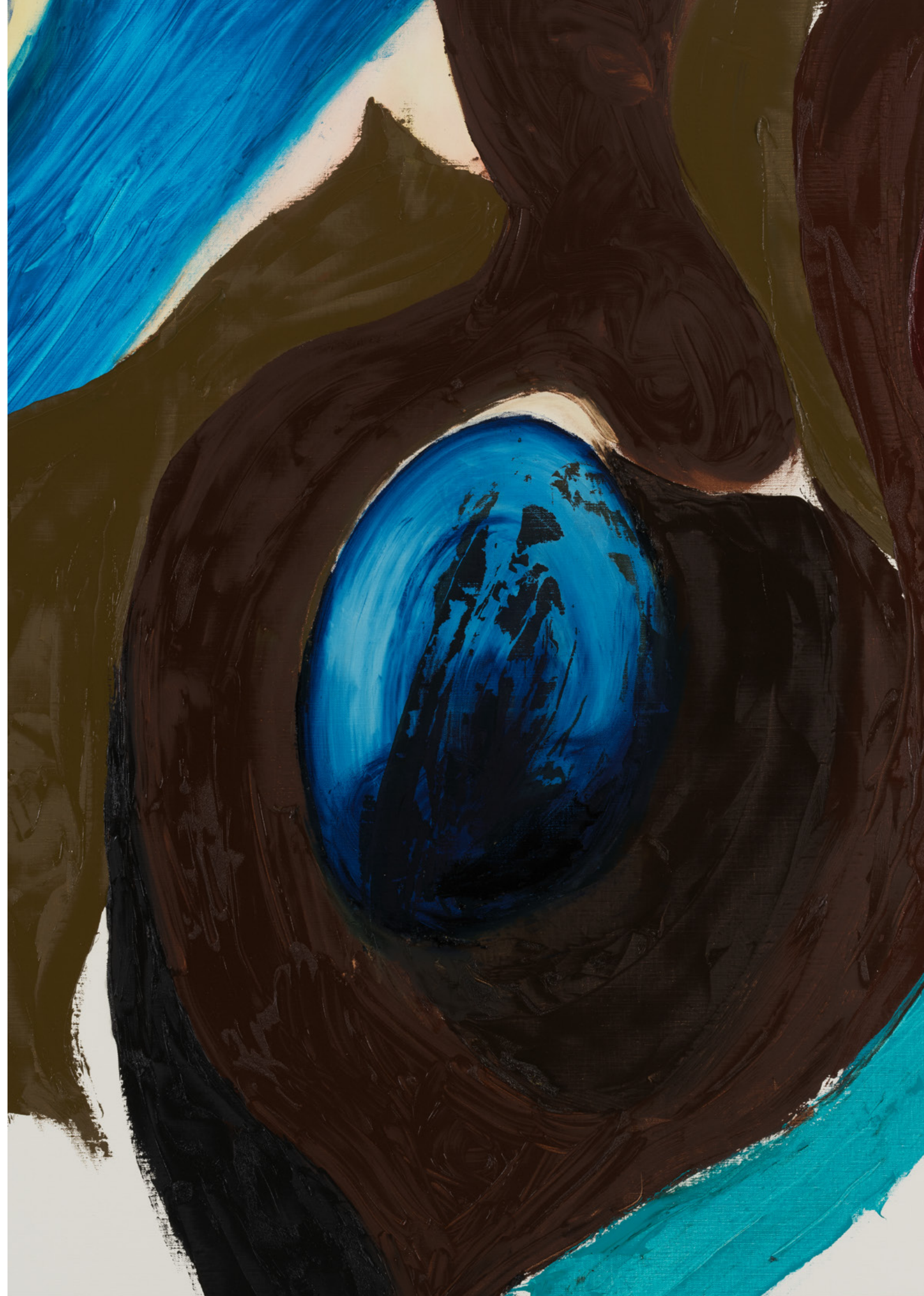
Spring Painting with Single Red Shape
2022, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Scheveningen Violet Wipe Down
2021, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Sunny Side Up
2022, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



New Blue
2021, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Bull and Friend Lost in the Woods
2019, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Untitled
2019, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Sunlight in a Tube
2019, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Grey and Yellow
2019, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Hatchet
2021, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



In the Deep Water Now N°2
2020, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



In the Deep Water Now N°1
2020, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Rusty Orange Piled Up on Left, with Zygotes
2019, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Violet on Green
2019, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Ripped Terre Verte
2020, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Viridian Shapes
2022, oil on linen
81.75 × 66 inches (208 × 168 cm)



Parable
2022, oil on linen
66 × 54 inches (168 × 137 cm)



Sap Green, Grey and Ultramarine Yellow
2021, oil on linen
72 × 59 inches (183 × 150 cm)



Untitled
2021, oil on linen
72 × 59 inches (183 × 150 cm)



Ghost of Cobalt Green Deep and Other Colors
2020, oil on linen
66 × 54 inches (168 × 137 cm)



Blue Quarantine N°2
2021, oil on linen
72 × 59 inches (183 × 150 cm)



Blue Quarantine N°1
2020, oil on linen
72 × 59 inches (183 × 150 cm)



Untitled Quarantine Painting with Manganese Blue
2020, oil on linen
66 × 54 inches (168 × 137 cm)



Boomerang
2020, oil on linen
66 × 54 inches (168 × 137 cm)



Untitled Quarantine Painting with Big Grey Shape
2020, oil on linen
66 × 54 inches (168 × 137 cm)



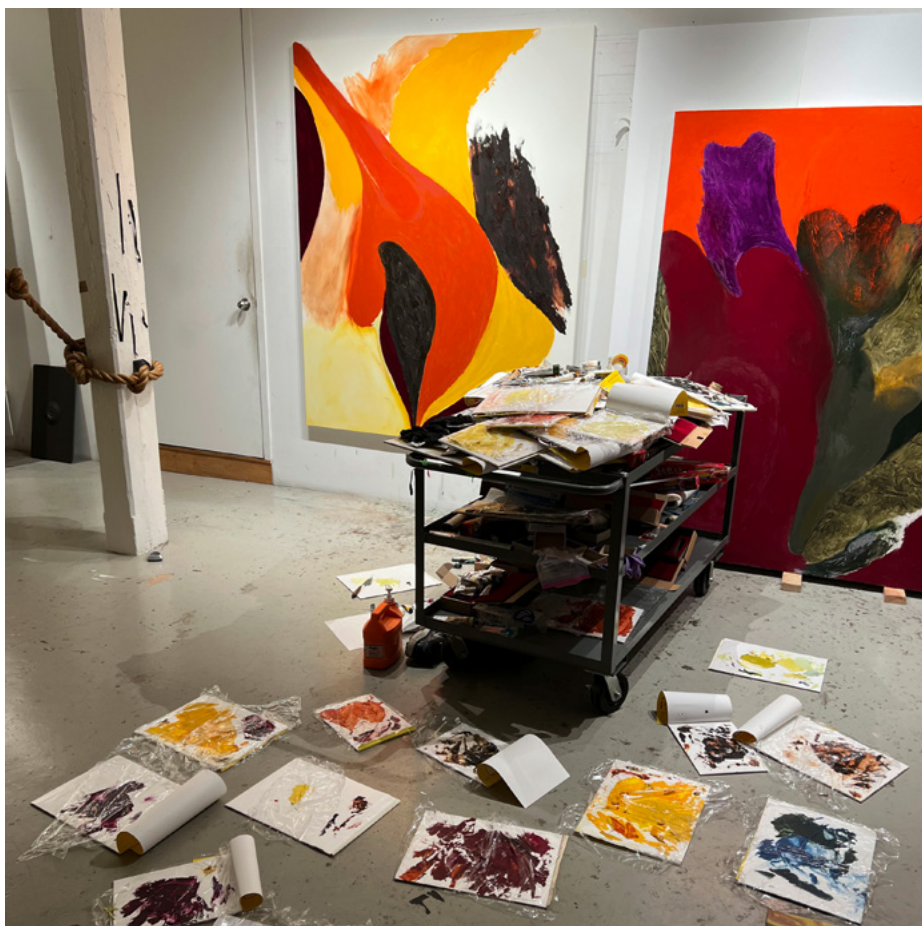
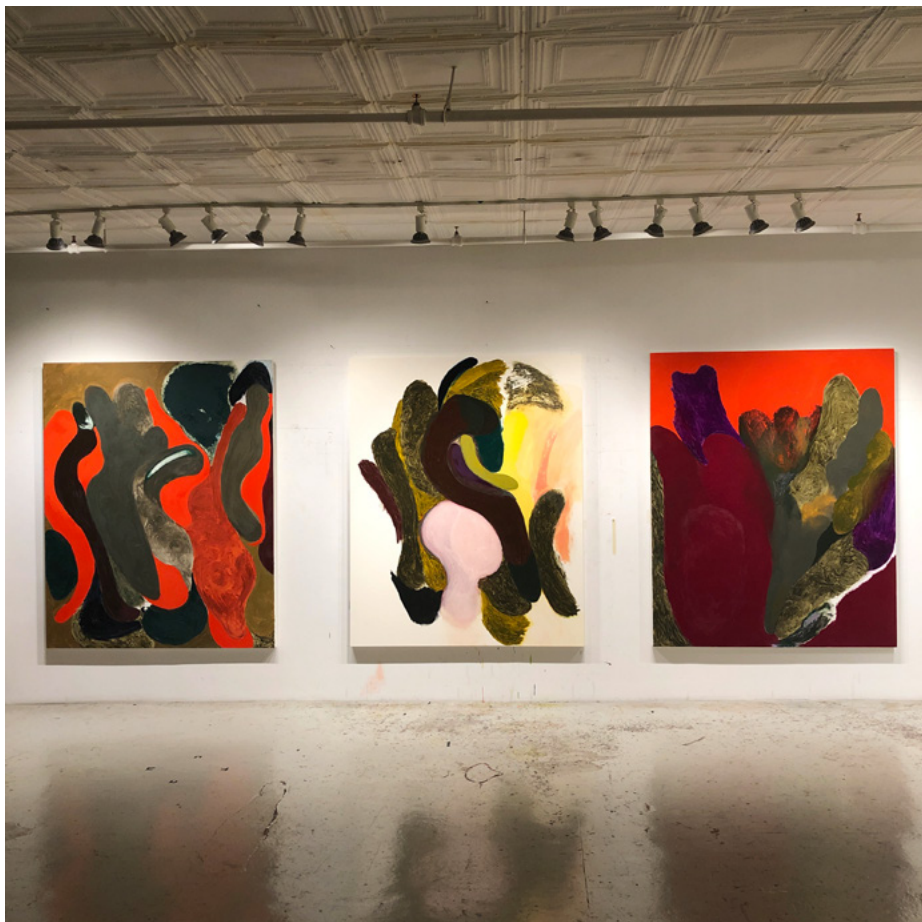
Garden Brawl
2020, oil on linen
66 × 54 inches (168 × 137 cm)



Untitled Quarantine Painting with Crimson and Blue
2021, oil on linen
72 x 59 inches (183 x 150 cm)



Untitled
2021, oil on linen
72 x 59 inches (183 x 150 cm)



Arthur Cohen's New Paintings

"Have you seen Arthur's new paintings?"
"No, what about them?"
"They're . . . so weird!"

That was the start of a conversation two decades ago, with an artist friend. She's a fan of Arthur Cohen's work, but during a 1990s studio visit, she was confounded by canvases spelling out phrases such as "disgusting treif." "Why?" she asked.

During five decades, in disparate bodies of powerful work, Arthur hasn't shied away from the ridiculous and the outrageous. He doesn't mind yanking someone's chain. Though at least once he was complimented "for making work that says 'fuck you'" when he didn't mean to be provocative. (Or maybe he, kind of, did.)

He says, "I've gone back and forth between what I would describe as serious, and what I would call absurd, with no sense of hierarchy. It's like a pendulum swinging back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. Funny, serious, funny, serious." I'd add that when he's serious, there's absurdity. At his most absurd, he is, on some level, in total earnest. ("Disgusting treif"? Yes, he was serious. He can explain.)

Now Arthur is making "new abstract paintings," as distinct from his taut abstractions of the 1970s and 1980s. The new ones, more painterly, have a similar energy. They evolved from a series of increasingly interpretative paintings of bulls. The paintings no longer allude to bulls, or to any one thing, condition, or state of mind.

They are large oils. (A six-foot-high canvas is "one of the small ones.") Shapes are ovoid, arched, arabesque. Some hug, nestle, or spar, like family. Some loom imposingly. Some shapes leap upward like genies from a bottle.

The shapes occasionally suggest referents. One painting holds "the three graces . . . maybe." A number of works contain "beans." The elastic biomorphism recalls Arshile Gorky, a nearly life-long inspiration.

But colors, more than shapes, are identifiers. Arthur will mention "the painting with the Swamp Green." Or "the one with all the Naples Yellow." Or "the one with the pinkish thing." The names of his pigments are an exotic

rush: Egyptian violet, Prussian blue, German earth, cobalt turquoise, orange molybdate, terre verte naturelle, terre verte brûlé, Naples Yellow Paris, lapis lazuli. He has paint he bought 50 years ago in France. He admits to once buying a tube of paint before even knowing its contents, because he loved the name. (Dutch brown. To commune with Rembrandt.) He knows the provenance of every tube. The paintings' titles often indicate color. Colors are the heart, veins, and arteries of the work.

On a warm white oil ground, Arthur applies pigment with a palette knife, or uses gloved fingers and palms to make streaky, scribbled passages. He trowels dense cadmium reds into large ellipsoids. He scrapes blobs of umber into rough scales. He smears tarry earth colors in "thick nasty patches" that could suggest organs or entrails. He calls the facture "truculent."

The paintings are also luminous. Alongside the dark oily forms are swoops and stains of lustrous, brilliant hues. Pink, violet, pale mint, pearly gray, blazing red, clear opaque green. Cool blues that are digitally unreproducible. "I scraped the cobalt turquoise to make it more translucent and brighter. The orb in the center is Prussian blue. I wiped it down, and that mystery color showed up."

"That mystery color." His process is improvisatory and intuitive. When asked about a shape that looks pointedly unfinished, Arthur says, "that painting needed a torn edge." Another one "just happened." He has let go of a lot of parameters. He's watching out for something he hasn't seen.

Back to the work that was the subject of the exchange I recounted initially. In the early 1990s, Arthur painted phrases like "disgusting treif" and "schmaltz kills" in warped 3D letterforms. In bright colors: not understated monochrome, like, say, Jenny Holzer or Ed Ruscha. Not silkscreened in black Helvetica, like the punchline paintings by Richard Prince. Also, Arthur's words were embellished with huge chickens, challahs, and pigs.

The word series and the new abstractions would seem to have little in common. But the word forms arch and twist dynamically, like those in the new work. And all Arthur's work, "absurd" or "serious," is about his life: what

he loves, what entertains him, his ideals, his nagging worries, his mortal fears. He says, “I never learn not to be the way I am.”

When Arthur painted the words, he was an overwhelmed, self-questioning new parent, feeling that “everything I was doing was wrong and inadequate—'not kosher,' so to speak.” Next, he painted himself and his sons in imagined scenarios that reflect anxious parental protectiveness—depicting himself as a doctor, because doctors were “good providers.” By the early aughts, he was making 8 ½ foot-square hyper-realist self-portraits, as a mock-heroic “avenger,” in spandex suits (custom-made for the paintings.) In the last self-portraits, he clutches a knotted rope, swinging precariously, struggling but trying to look cool, hope against hope.

The self-portraits led to paintings of cowboys riding—or being thrown from—bulls. Arthur began to add disjunctive flat shapes and floating textured patches. Then the riders departed, leaving only the bulls: confrontational, foreshortened, hurling through space, often giving viewers a closeup of their hind quarters. The colors were at first naturalistic. Then one bull acquired a green leg. Before long they were technicolor. Finally the bulls evaporated. They devolved into gestural swirls of paint. In the new paintings, the swirls have unwound and expanded to become bigger shapes and rougher slashes.

The progress from bulls to abstraction parallels an earlier shift in Arthur’s work. His first exhibited paintings, one of which was included in the 1973 Whitney Biennial, were dramatic perspectival interiors of Baroque churches. As with the bulls, their palettes grew increasingly vivid. Lines indicating moldings became prominent and graphic. In a few years, Arthur moved to tense, spare abstractions. He pared the architectural paintings to their bones.

Arthur has now pared away the bulls that stamped through his preceding paintings, leaving—not their bones. Not their skin. Not their gesture, despite the new work’s immense energy. What’s left is something not physically graspable. It’s as if the bulls diagrammed a way to look at these new paintings, then made an exit.

For a while there were lingering hints of hooves and action. Now he’s down to the basic element: paint. In his self-portraits, Arthur had made himself vulnerable: an older guy clinging tenuously to a rope. In these new paintings, Arthur Cohen is still out there: with no rope, no bull, no clothes, no skin: just paint. With an in-your-face power that’s always been in his work, he moves visceral, jewel-like pigments across huge canvases, to court the unknowable. As a child, Arthur once taped dozens of sheets of typing paper together, to make a giant drawing of something he’d never seen. He wanted to make his own world. He’s still working on that.

Leslie Roberts

Leslie Roberts is a Brooklyn-based artist and is Professor Emerita at Pratt Institute.

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arthurcohenstudio.com
[@arthur_cohen_artist](https://www.instagram.com/arthur_cohen_artist)

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