

PAINING AS TERRAIN

# Painting as Terrain

*Curated by*

Jyoti Bharwani

*Essay*

“Ground Graspings—Heideggerian Reflections on *Painting as Terrain*”

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*Artists*

Jyoti Bharwani

Claudia Boese

Jane Frederick

Alison Downer

Daphne Leighton

Ruth Philo

Mary Romer

Contemporary British Painting Exhibition 18 January – 26 April 2019

The Crypt, St Marylebone Parish Church, 17 Marylebone Road,  
London NW1 5LT

## *Curator's Introduction*

How can paint be terrain? Clearly it can be used to paint landscape as terrain and thus portray the artist's subjective view of the world. But it is also, as material in the process of its application, a space for the artist's mind to find itself. Paint as hard grounded texture, fine washes like a flowing river and layers of paint sprayed on to the canvas can speak, opening in the spectator a space to experience.

The seven painters in this exhibition seem to have in common a search for an imaginative primary creativity, a space for being. Heidegger defined this as 'the ground of existence prior to all knowledge'. The materiality and process of using paint is the ideal way to capture this intangible expanse of life. The painted surface creates a space for being for both artist and spectator.

The British psychoanalyst D W Winnicott's concept of 'potential space' posits just such an area of experience between reality and fantasy which functions as a container for being. The space of these paintings, then, becomes a place to find the self in our complicated, digital world.

Jyoti Bharwani



# Ground Graspings—Heideggerian Reflections on *Painting as Terrain*

by Dr. Matthew Bowman

## I

One of the most characteristic features of Martin Heidegger's philosophy is the extremely close attention and respect he pays to language, which is evidenced through his difficult but yet often fascinating efforts to dismantle or deconstruct words and phrases in order to reopen their semantic richness and philosophical significance. There are plentiful examples of just such an operation in Heidegger's voluminous writings—indeed, it is perhaps more difficult to find a text by him that is not doing this in some measure—but the one that I have in mind at present hails from a series of lectures delivered in 1941 under the title of *Grundbegriffe*, or, in English, *Basic Concepts*.<sup>1</sup> At the outset of the first lecture, Heidegger poses the decisive question (which is probably also the preliminary question that the listeners might have in mind): “Basic concepts—of what?” And yet, very rapidly, it becomes clear that it is less a matter of delineating *what* the basic concepts are *of* or *about*, the external object that the basic concepts refer to, than it is of training the listeners to hear the expression “basic concepts” itself. It is as if, we might say, that the long dash in the question “Basic concepts—of what?” too quickly and unreflectively slides from definition to thing, from language to referent.

So Heidegger invites his listeners to slow down, be less impatient, and attend to the work that language performs. After all, for Heidegger, language is less a communicative system for describing the world in a conventionalized manner than an essential comportment that shapes the world. Language is disclosive rather than referential. The word ‘grund’ points in different directions, equally meaning “foundation” and “ground”; within the context of philosophical discourse, to analyse foundations and grounds is to embark upon a largely epistemological investigation—what are the foundations, the criteria, for knowledge? Heidegger's preference in his fleshing out of “grund” is to opt for “ground” and exploit the homology for ground-as-criteria/foundation and ground-as-terrain/world. “Begriff” is initially more straightforward, translating easily enough as “concept.” But Heidegger wishes his listener to hear “Begriff” in its etymological proximity to “begreifen” (“grasping”). By the end of the first lecture, then, the

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts*, trans. by Gary E. Aylesworth (Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993 [1941 lectures/1981]).

<sup>2</sup> Hubert Damisch, “Dubuffet or the Reading of the World” (1962) trans Kent Minturn and Priya Wadhwa, with revisions by Richard G. Elliott in *Art in Translation*, volume 6, n. 3, 2014, p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 314.

<sup>4</sup> The classic text here, of course, is Rosalind Krauss, “Grids” republished in *The Originality of the*

“Basic Concepts” of the title have taken on a new accent and thus become “Ground Grasplings.”

The expression “ground grasplings” works nicely, especially insofar as it interlaces both conceptuality with tactility, the intelligible with the material, reflection with doing. The ground is something that can be grasped in ways akin to how the coffee cup can be grasped in the hand or ideas grasped by the mind. Although writing at a remove from Heidegger’s philosophy, it is conceivable to imagine the following description of Jean Dubuffet’s painting by the French art historian Hubert Damisch as testifying to an act of ground grasping:

Dubuffet likes working in the *thickness* of the ground—I mean of the painting—to reveal the underneath of it: to scratch the paper, to incise and to beat the impastoed material, to flay it, to whip it, to reveal its underlying layers.<sup>2</sup>

And slightly later, he adds:

Dubuffet stops at the epidermis of beings and the Earth in order to teach us to decipher their text, as far as the history that is retained in the network of its folds and wrinkles: hence his taste for grounds and faces marked by time, *historiated* with a “profusion of tracks, signs, and inscriptions.” If aerial photography reveals, under certain conditions, the inscription of traces of a human past in the geography, for which classic archaeology looked for in the depths of the ground, is it then possible that the consideration of *facies* is the point of departure for any geognosy—even for, if we may say so, any science of the “depths,” including psychology and sociology.<sup>3</sup>

It is notable that in the first passage Damisch quickly clarifies the “*thickness* of the ground” as pertaining to the painting. And the second quotation serves to extend the inherent ambiguity that necessitated the previous clarification by linking ground-as-painting/canvas and ground-as-terrain/place; from there it is only a short step to unite these grounds with the ground-as-epistemology referred to by Heidegger.

Understandably, the reader of this essay may be concerned that all this is mere preamble to the actual subject of this writing. But hopefully what has been written so far provides a framework for comprehending what conjoins the paintings of Jyoti Bharwani, Claudia Boese,

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<sup>2</sup> Hubert Damisch, “Dubuffet or the Reading of the World” (1962) trans Kent Minturn and Priya Wadhwa, with revisions by Richard G. Elliott in *Art in Translation*, volume 6, n. 3, 2014, p. 311.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 314.

Alison Downer, Jane Frederick, Daphne Leighton, Ruth Philo, Mary Romer. That is to propose, the paintings for this exhibition engage the tripartite interwoven senses of ground touched upon here: ground as criteria, epistemology, knowledge, justification, conceptuality, verifiability; ground as terrain, soil, place, world, materiality; and ground as canvas weave, painted surface, suspended pigment, physicality. The three grounds are the basis (indeed, the ground) for philosophy, archaeology, and art. Art history reveals different functional bipartite combinations of these varying grounds. For instance, the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich depicts landscapes as experienced by the subject, interrogating the limits of our capacity for experience, for subjectivity, thereby entangling the philosophical and locational notions of ground. And the doctrine of medium specificity within modernism—let’s say, Jackson Pollock or Agnes Martin—exemplifies the correlation of the philosophical and artistic grounds by seeking the conditions of possibility for painting. In that regard, combining all three grounds within mutually informative relationships is perhaps a rarer event in art history, but a large part of the continued relevance of Paul Cézanne’s landscapes follows from just such an operation and certain works by Jean Dubuffet—as Damisch suggests—such as his *Texturology* canvases certainly further Cézanne’s achievement despite its superficially very different means. The works in this exhibition likewise appear to track, or traverse, these three grounds.

## II

Rather than proceed alphabetically, let us work thematically, almost by moving near and far from the ground, taking different perspectives as we go.

*Waiting Room: Yellow* and *Waiting Room: Grey*, both by Ruth Philo, possibly constitutes an unusual place to begin insofar as their titles signal interior spaces rather than the outdoor locations suggested by the exhibition title. However, they thematize some of the complexities regarding terrain and ground in the exhibition. Her use of pigments that are then suspended and painted onto the surface resonates interestingly with the tactility and conceptuality of the notion of ground grasping. From the ground—quite literally—the material constituents of paint are taken and onto the canvas they are re-placed; applied to the surface, they are practically re-grounded. Once there, they contribute to the ambiguity of the works as they hover between abstract and referential. The grid forms coequally visualize room layouts and the history of modernist painting, particularly its fascination with the grid as rational compositional structure.<sup>4</sup> And yet, underlying the rigor of the grid utilized here is a sense that the paintings depict dreamworlds, places imagined rather known.

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<sup>4</sup> The classic text here, of course, is Rosalind Krauss, “Grids” republished in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 1986).

Particularly in his final writings produced while drafting *The Visible and the Invisible*, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasized moments of chiasmus and reversibility between “subject” and “object” as well as between other conceptual pairs. Resisting the dualisms weighing down the history of philosophy, Merleau-Ponty revealed the constitutive intertwining that made the “outer surface” of one concept into the “inner lining” of another. His extraordinary essay “Eye and Mind” is full of such moments; for instance, he quotes André Marchand’s remark that “In a forest, I have felt many times over it was not I who looked at the forest. . . .the trees were looking at me.”<sup>5</sup> We might propose, under this light, that Philo’s *Waiting Rooms* testify to a correspondingly similar intertwining between self and world. That is to say, they materialize the *terrain vagues* of the mind as well as space. Despite their very different means, Philo’s painterly thought comes close to the writings of W. G. Sebald and especially the haunting places, both real and psychological, present and past, recorded in *The Rings of Saturn*.<sup>6</sup>

Alison Downer’s paintings demonstrate a similar concern for physicality through their examination of the semiotic function of materials. As with Philo, there is the sense that materials taken from the ground beneath our feet are coextensive with the material ground of the paintings. Where we place our feet in front of Downer’s paintings also subtly alters what we experience in it by making elements underneath the surface come into presence. To that degree, while attention to surface as a necessary marker of depth is common to all the works displayed in the exhibition, it is especially a factor of Downer’s paintings. The distinction

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<sup>5</sup> Cited in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind” in Galen A. Johnson (ed.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p. 129. It is worth mentioning, if only in passing, that Hubert Damisch was Merleau-Ponty’s student during the time that Merleau-Ponty was reconsidering his understanding of phenomenology and ontology. Indeed, it is more than merely biographical trivia that Damisch’s essay on Dubuffet was published in the second issue of *Art en France* in January 1962. The premier issue of *Art en France* was published in January 1961, and that is where Merleau-Ponty’s “Eye and Mind” first appeared. It requires little stretch of the critical imagination to construe Damisch’s 1962 essay on Dubuffet as an extension of, or response to, “Eye and Mind.” For a little more on the relationship between Damisch and Merleau-Ponty in light of the writings of Yve-Alain Bois, see my forthcoming essay “The Intertwining—Damisch, Bois, and *October*’s Rethinking of Painting” to be published in *Journal of Contemporary Painting*’s special issue on Bois’ *Painting as Model* in early 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Another reference that might be put in tandem with Philo’s paintings is André Breton’s equally haunting “novel” *Nadja*, published in 1928, which serves in many respects as an important precursor to *The Rings of Saturn*.

between figure and ground is not only the condition of possibility for visual perception but has been the primary means by which painting organizes real or fictive depth. Abstraction in painting, though, has problematized or sought to abandon outright that distinction. One of the consequences of that shift has been to confuse figure/ground so that the spatial positioning between the two becomes unstable. It is with that in mind that Damisch writes that “Pictorial writing itself *produces*, either positively or negatively, its own substratum.”<sup>7</sup> Surface is what painting produces and articulates, and ground comes to the fore without becoming figure. Excavated from the ground of the earth are the raw materials that are cornerstones of consumerism. Practically filtering through *Arcadia Overturned VI* is fluorescent, unnatural orange and mica—the sheer physical stuff that mutates into disposable commodities. However, in the rapid turnover of fashion cycles and built-in technological obsolescence, this stuff, once grasped from the ground, is seldom ever capable of returning there. Instead, landfills become the new terrains of the twenty-first century and one suspects that sedimentation of soils that normally betoken geological history is reconfigured as the sedimentation of layers of commodities that construct a history of capitalism. If one were to dig through the landfill’s substratum, fossilized remnants of consumer items would surely be “unearthed.” The flickering surface of *Arcadia Overturned VI*, reminiscent of a faulty television screen, operates as a dark parable for the future.

As stated in the opening section of this essay, the concept of “ground” applies not only to the terrain beneath our feet but also to the preconditions, foundations, conventions, etc., that normatively underpin a variety of enterprises and beliefs. These grounds are the justifications and the history of justifications that grant any present conjuncture or truth claim its legitimacy, therefore combining together both historical and epistemological modes of discourse. Painting, not matter how individualistic some painters may claim to be, is not free of legitimating grounds, even if it is difficult to know or define what those grounds are. When Stanley Cavell writes “The essential fact of (what I refer to as) the modern lies in the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and the history of that enterprise, in the fact that this relation has become problematic” he points to the difficulty of identifying and explicating the relevant grounds for modernist art rather than the impossibility of doing so.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, he implies that the task of grounding or ground explication, of ground grasping, is the responsibility of painting and philosophy alike. It is according to this project that we can outline Claudia Boese’s contribution to *Painting as Terrain*.

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<sup>7</sup> Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of/Cloud/: Towards a History of Painting*, trans. by Janet Lloyd (Stanford, California: University of Stanford Press, 2002 [1972]), p. 104.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Cavell, “An Audience for Philosophy” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* Updated Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1969]). p. xxxiii.

Ground-as-precondition is an element that sometimes needs to be identified, sometimes discovered, and sometimes established. Indeed, ground does not always precede that which it supports; on the contrary, it may only come into being and accrue significance with the emergence of that which is (to be) grounded. Even when logically prior to an instance, there may sometimes be occasions where ground can only be constructed retroactively. Boese's *Culturism*, painted over the course of six years between 2012-2018, is comprehensible as engaging the synchronous mutual articulation of ground-as-precondition and painting. And, to be sure, the extended time spent working on the painting underscores the challenges and rigorous thought involved here. Although relatively earthy hues are in play here, they are arranged together discordantly to such an extent that the painting manifests its various attempts to ground itself. The earthiness of the overall palette, that is to say, does not rely on the norms of nature for compositional generation. Instead, it is as if the painting acknowledges culture as a necessary ground for painting, while also *not quite* trusting readymade pictorial cultures as the most viable models for producing *this* painting. The "not quite" spotlights the fragmentation of painterly elements here: a yellow square almost appears, but is broken by separate forces of brown and green brushstrokes. Below, bright green shards crack through and nearly supplant a brown surface. To a degree, *Culturism* is feasibly best understood as existing in a state of *incomplete arrest* rather than finished after six years of labour. Grounds are not necessarily static, timeless structures, but momentary conditions of possibility.<sup>9</sup>

Of all of the artists exhibiting, the work of Jane Frederick is possibly construable as the most overtly concerned with the figural representation of place. The canvases selected for the exhibition visually suggest formal gardens for stately homes. Her use of circular frames and depiction of a certain degree of optical distortion serves also to suggest those gardens as if viewed from a camera obscura. Indeed, whilst common experience is familiar with photographs being either framed within solid rectangular or square shapes, the photographic image, because of the lens, is actually bordered by a circular, fuzzy periphery. It is only centuries of pictorial convention originating from the history of painting, as well as the desire felt by early photographers for their medium to be accepted within the hallowed academic system of the arts, that led to the reconfiguring of the photographic frame as square or rectangular. Frederick, on this score, in effect reverses the historical development by making the photographic image the condition of painting rather than vice versa.

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<sup>9</sup> This intentionally resonates with Cavell's argument that modernist painters are faced with having to create new "automatisms" or mediums from scratch. See Stanley Cavell, "Excursus: Some Modernist Painting" in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1979 [1972], pp. 108-118.

While the comparison might appear an odd one, Frederick's paintings loosely recall the formal garden scenes in Alain Resnais' extraordinary film *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).<sup>10</sup> The link is not altogether eccentric as both exhibit a fascination with memory on the cusp of amnesia within a dreamlike context. Place in both cases is not so much remembered as borderline forgotten. Yet if Resnais' film arguably pivots upon a hidden, semi-unrecalled trauma, then it is not obvious that there is a comparative mnemonic darkness in Frederick's paintings. Instead, memory becomes all the more uncertain, as suggested by the quasi-optical distortions that blur garden, architecture, and sky together in such a manner that the careful rationalized arrangements typical of formal gardens are virtually lost. These blurrings, or mergings, offer various hermeneutic possibilities that bridge the lens-based circle of confusion with the fluidity of painting beholden to centrifugal force. They also implicitly evoke Siegfried Kracauer's 1927 essay "Photography" in which a tension emerges between the perfect visual creation but amnesiac qualities of the photographic image and the perceptually inexact but subjectively authentic "memory-image."<sup>11</sup> The camera obscura, however, is not (yet) the photograph-producing camera; the images produced by the camera obscura are fleeting, always indexed to a present that remains ever restless, gone when the moment has passed, and thus left as an imprecise vestige of a place within memory.

Seemingly casting are eyes upward from the ground, our gaze meets the sky above with its procession of clouds. At first glance, then, Mary Romer's paintings may strike the viewer as functioning in a manner askew to the undergirding concepts of *Painting as Terrain*. Terrain, after all, refers to the more or less solid surfaces we walk upon, or over, rather than the diaphanous formations above. Sky and ground serves as poles demarcated by the horizon line. And yet, all this being granted, this explanation does not manage to encapsulate the relevance of Romer's *Memory Clouds* in relation to the exhibition. Once again, the writings of Damisch provide an important resource on this matter (and we can allow "on this matter" to exploit its widest possible meanings and ambiguities: matter as subject and matter as material). Damisch's major book *A Theory of /Cloud/* deployed an extended structural analysis of cloud formations within paintings

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting, albeit in passing once again, that *Last Year at Marienbad* was written by Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose novels contained extraordinary detailed topographical descriptions that have relevance or resonance here. His major work *In the Labyrinth* (1959) is a good entry point.

<sup>11</sup> See Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography" in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans., ed., and introduction by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1995 [1963]).

stretching from the Renaissance to the modernism of Cézanne. Reflecting the years spent looking at modernist abstraction through the frameworks of semiotics and phenomenology, Damisch contends that those pictorial clouds deconstruct the Renaissance understanding of linear perspective as generating an Albertian “window” insofar as they remain essentially continuous with the surface of painting. No matter what, clouds do not recede into the distance but retain their position as painted surface.

Clouds, perhaps, can only be painted, never drawn. Thus there is a deep linkage between painting-as-material and clouds-depicted-in-painting; however, the depiction of clouds will never be entirely successful *qua* depictions insofar as they will intransigently evince their status as brushed paint or stained canvas. Romer’s paintings therefore betoken their materiality as painted objects and, like Damisch, they assert the ground of the painted surface as the condition of possibility for painting, as the place where “matter thinks.”<sup>12</sup> As their titles remark, the issue of memory is present here, too—*Memory Clouds*. It does not require much interpretative pushing to join the title to the semi-dematerialized universe of cloud computing, the digital realm where our memories are being stored. However, if cloud memory proposes that records can be indefinitely preserved in a space as immaterial and infinite as the clouds above, then it is worth returning our gaze to earth and observing the physical servers, made from elements pulled from the ground and powered by electricity plants that comprise the material substrate of cloud computing.<sup>13</sup> Just as Romer highlights the material within the immaterial by focusing on clouds, she also emphasizes the (sub)terranean within the sky.

Memory is deeply entwined with the notion of time, but there has long been uncertainty regarding how time should be imaged: as a series of points, “now-moments,” arraigned as a straight line? Spirals or cycles that turn in on themselves? Following a quasi-geological approach, the artist Robert Smithson envisioned temporality as mineral stratification, each new layer marking time’s passage by dint of covering over the preceding so that “back then” amounts to “down below.”<sup>14</sup> Jyoti Bharwani’s paintings likewise disclose time as layering, but here the relationship between layers takes on a vertically-orientated complexity. The paintings not only resemble geological formations

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<sup>12</sup> Damisch on this score is influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss’ discussion of “material thinking” in *The Savage Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 [1962]).

<sup>13</sup> For a pertinent and insightful discussion, see James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London and New York: Verso, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Robert Smithson, “A Sedimentation of Mind” in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1996).

but also constellations, thus creating an overlapping between above and below, but doing so in such a manner that there is no clear demarcation or even identification between ground and stars. Such a conjunction is especially evident in her *Black Stone* paintings that derive in part from the Black Stone at Mecca that is worshipped within Islam. According to legend, the Stone fell from the heavens during the time of Adam and Eve as a sign showing where the first temple was to be erected. Originally white in colour, this tale relates, the sins of all the generations that followed gradually turned the Stone black. Today, it is believed that touching the stone removes one's sins—it absorbs the sin and absolves the sinner.

“As above, so below” goes the Hermetic doctrine; we might add: as upon the surface, so underneath. The Black Stone's exteriority is but the outermost layer of an extended history of sin. Cutting through the sedimentation of layers is to travel back through time. Bharwani's reflections upon ground produce metaphysical parallels between painted canvas and symbolic religious object. Equally akin to images transmitted by the Hubble telescope and geological representations, her *Black Stone* paintings evoke both the Black Stone and its celestial origins; indeed, the constellation-resembling surfaces of her paintings encapsulates the Black Stone's distant heavenly past and present earthly condition. Time is written on the surface, as the surface, and the contemporary is the accretion of overlaid surfaces, the thickness of paint upon paint. Given all these interlocking parallels, it is hardly surprising that painters in the twentieth century sought for the purity of painting through the monochrome and blank, unpainted canvas, as if “purity” was both a materiological possibility and moral condition. Materiology and morality is probably a combination unrecognized amongst those painters, but Bharwani's “skygrounds” or “groundskys” conjoins and entwines the parallels.

There has been an interesting shift in Leighton's practice recently, though the notion of terrain continues to be of relevance. In her *Entangled* paintings, Daphne Leighton virtually proffered a different perspective of the ground, that is to say, as if topographies seen from above. To that extent, comprehended depictively, an imagined distance is imposed between viewpoint and landscape. But that fact is rendered more complicated insofar as painterly surface and depicted ground occupy such a seemingly perfect parallelism that any distance, even any logic of parallelism, is ultimately more evoked than actual. To that extent, they invite questions about the orientation of the painted surface to the beholder. Customarily placed upon the wall, one can imagine situations where it becomes feasible to wonder how our perception would change if we looked at particular paintings from above, thereby changing the standard coordinates between the vertical and horizontal. The perplexing effects are not altogether different from the confused experiences afforded air travel. Flight technology in any case amounts to the final transformation of

our understanding of landscape. That transformation partly begins with the emergence of modern cartography in which landscape becomes scientifically describable, measurable, politically colonisable, and hence contestable.

The reason that I mention this earlier body of work is to suggest that, in some respects, the aerial view lingers, albeit in a semi-displaced fashion in her current works titled *Two or Not?*. Seen from above, the landscape often exhibits adjacent domains that are largely only fully perceivable because of our elevated position. The new works present paired paintings that function in a relationship of juxtaposition to one another. Adjacency requires the viewer to be capable of identifying and differentiating two or more separate visual fields. When this is applied to landscape, that differentiation frequently operates to demarcate distinct territories or even nations. However, another result of this process is that one field comes to depend on the other for its self-definition. A similar co-dependency occurs with Leighton's paintings insofar as each work is dialectically entwined with the other, and therefore the identity of each rectangle is infiltrated by the identity of the second one, which is, in turn, itself determined by the existence of the first. The logic of identity and difference, determinate negation, or the notion that negation *is* determination, is the ground of these works. The paintings, though, are not intended to be hung so that they abut one another. Instead, the space between the two works, or rather the *spacing*, also plays a conceptual role here that permits the identity and difference to come into being. Spacing, whether visible or not, is indeed the structural ground for these paired works and the oppositions they generate through that pairing. Going further, spacing, is potentially the condition of possibility for the numerous versions of ground deployed in this essay.<sup>15</sup>

### III

What does it mean to think of painting “as terrain”? In the first place, it is to apprehend, as some of the works in this exhibition suggest, the layering of horizontal fields, from landscape as horizon space to painting as vertically-presented surface. It is also to detect the continuing presence of the horizontality within the painting, thereby disrupting our commonplace phenomenological relationship to painting. Moreover, it is to think, and

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<sup>15</sup> Spacing is an important concept in the early writings of Jacques Derrida. See *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976 [1967]); also see Jacques Derrida, “The Double Session” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981 [1972]).

rethink, landscape as a genre within the history of painting. As Joseph Leo Koerner brilliantly explores in his book on Friedrich, the significance of landscape in the early nineteenth century was interwoven with early German Romanticism's critical engagement with Kant's account of subjectivity, the dualism between world and self, or subject and object, the borderline inexperienceability of the sublime, and the possibility of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Landscape was a way of putting our experiential capabilities to the test, thereby discovering both the limits and potentialities of subjectivity. Hence the presence of the *Rückenfigur* in Friedrich's canvases that draws attention to the landscape-as-experienced rather than any imagination of the landscape-in-itself.<sup>17</sup> Although the paintings in *Painting as Terrain* reformat landscape genre by shifting away from figural depiction so that landscape becomes the presentation of materiality, the foregrounding of the ground, it might be contended that all the artworks exhibited here continue in some measure early German Romanticism's focus upon experience.

Romanticism can be apprehended as but one cognitive model amongst several in which the landscape was being newly construed. Indeed, it might be proposed that romanticism amounted to a particularly resistant practice, one that protested against and contested an increasingly rationalized worldview that perceived nature in terms of necessity and law-like processes that can be described by science. The problem was less that nature, and hence landscape, can be scientifically described and therefore understood, but that the knowledge of nature became tied to industrial developments that ordered nature as a resource that could be utilized for economic gain. Nature, in other words, was forcibly conjoined to a means-ends rationality; nature was deemed "useful." Writing over a century later, but certainly within a framework that certainly takes its bearings from early romanticism, Heidegger, in 1955, reinforced criticisms against assigning the means-ends rationality towards nature: "The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit. . . . Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium. . . . uranium is set upon

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<sup>16</sup> See Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, 2nd edition (London: Reaktion Books, 2009 [1990]).

<sup>17</sup> I have explored this issue in a little more depth in an essay on the relationship between Ori Gersht's *Evaders* in relation to Friedrich's paintings in an essay titled "Limit/Experience: On Romanticism and Ori Gersht's *Evaders*" in *Optika*, issue 1, June 2018. There the philosophical distinction between two German words, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*—both words translatable as "experience"—was paramount.

to yield atomic energy, which can be released for destruction or for peaceful use.”<sup>18</sup> Such yielding orchestrates nature into become “standing reserve.”<sup>19</sup>

In the days and weeks that have followed the 2018 IPCC report, it has become increasingly evident that any continuation of painterly modes emanating from the genre of landscape must do so under the burden of a potential future in which our environment is transformed—through both human action and inaction—into an inhospitable region. The landscapes that confront us in paintings risk becoming traces of a past that is becoming ever more removed from us, and thus they must decide whether that in-past-ness is presented nostalgically or as a thorough indictment of the present. Perhaps putting the matter in the strongest possible terms, there is a real question whether art examining terrain or landscape has any value unless it also takes upon itself and examines environmental catastrophe. Such a question is inevitable and irreducible; if landscape as a concept in art has a future, then we must surely bear the question’s unforgiving weight. But we must also acknowledge the interpenetration of humanity and landscape that renders terrains as homelands. After all, environmental destruction is relative to the notion of the possession of a homeland in its most universal sense. If humanity, through its own destructive tendencies, threatens to render itself extinct, then we might suspect that the world in some sense will continue its existence without us. In that regard, then, environmentalism is tied at least to self-preservation; yet it should aspire to be more than that: to perceive that world as a home is to try and discover non-economic value in environment and society alike.

Heidegger comprehended art not as an array of objects but as events. For him, the role of art was to “set up the world and set forth the earth,” doing so anew each time art comes into existence.<sup>20</sup> If “homelessness” defined the experiential impoverishment of industrial society, the idea that all of us have become fundamentally rootless and alienated, then art’s potential capability for setting up the world and setting forth the earth become vital for combatting that condition.<sup>21</sup> To speak of “painting as terrain” and to think

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. by William Lovitt (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), pp. 14-15.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of the Art” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1950]), pp. 1-56.

<sup>21</sup> On the motif of homelessness as defining twentieth century experience, see Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998 [1967]), pp. 239-276.

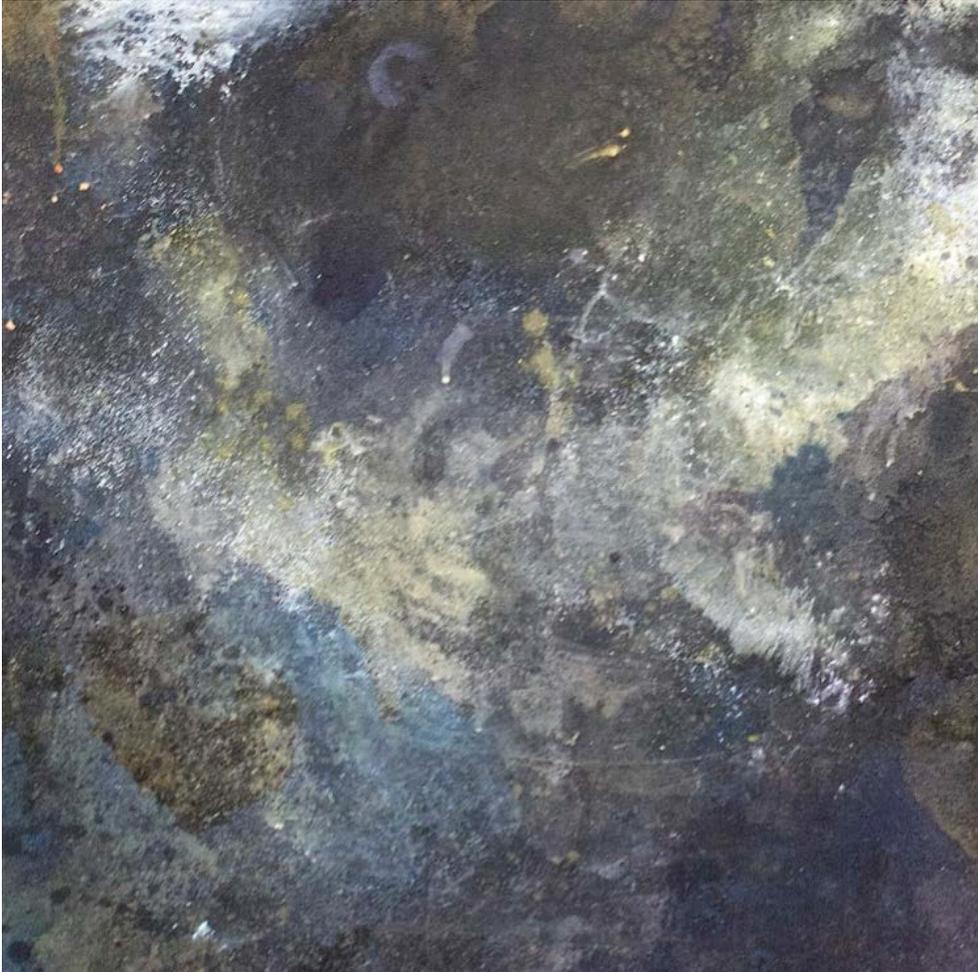
in relation to ground grasping is ultimately to enact a modest attempt from within the field of art to re-establish an understanding of environment as home. Along these lines, in a conjuncture largely typified by the digital image's immateriality and circulation, its routine untethering from its ground and re- or de-contextualization, it is evident in the long run that painting *matters*. By "matters" we should hear "is significant" as well as a more active sense of "matters"—that painting continues to produce significance through the setting forth of its own materiality.<sup>22</sup> It is through this operation that painting continues to grasp its own, ever shifting ground.

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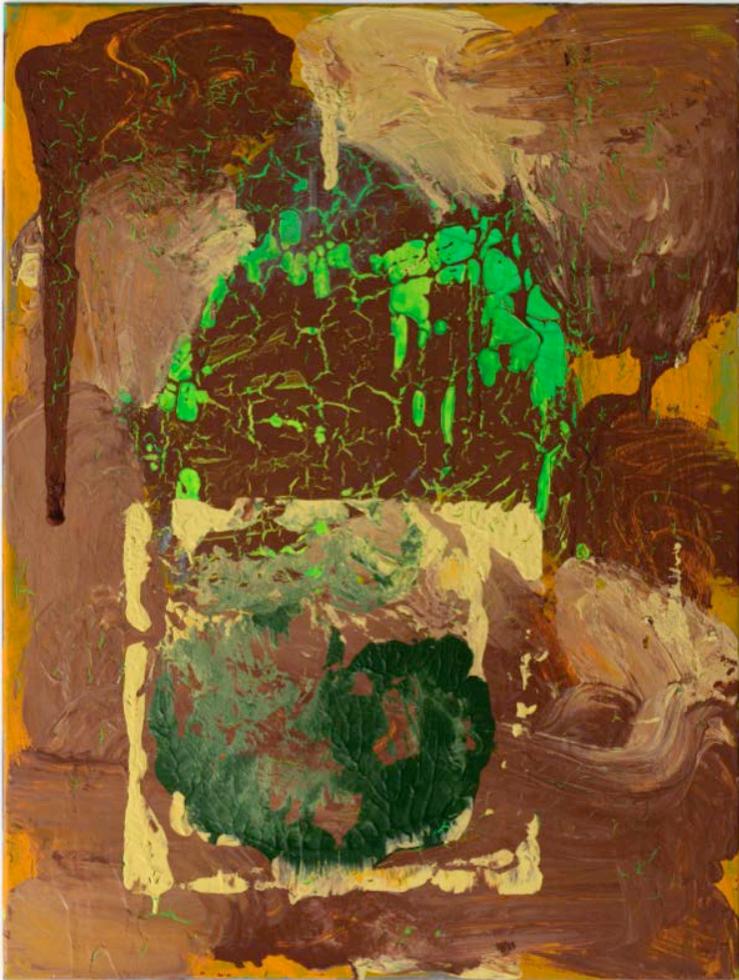
<sup>22</sup> The formulation "painting matters" is taken from Stephen Melville, Counting/ As/ Painting in Phillip Armstrong, Laura Lisbon and Stephen Melville (eds.), *As Painting: Division and Displacement* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: MIT Press, 2001). While I'm here, it is perhaps not excessive to claim that the group exhibition *As Painting* and its catalogue amounts to the most important examination so far during this century of painting.



**Jyoti Bharwani:** *Black Stone Space V* 2018  
Oil on canvas, 90 x 90cm



**Jyoti Bharwani:** *Black Stone Space VI* 2018  
Oil on canvas, 90 x 90cm



**Claudia Boese:** *Culturism* 2012-18  
Oil on canvas, 70 x 50cm



**Claudia Boese:** *Purpose and Shadow* 2018  
Oil on canvas, 28 x 28cm



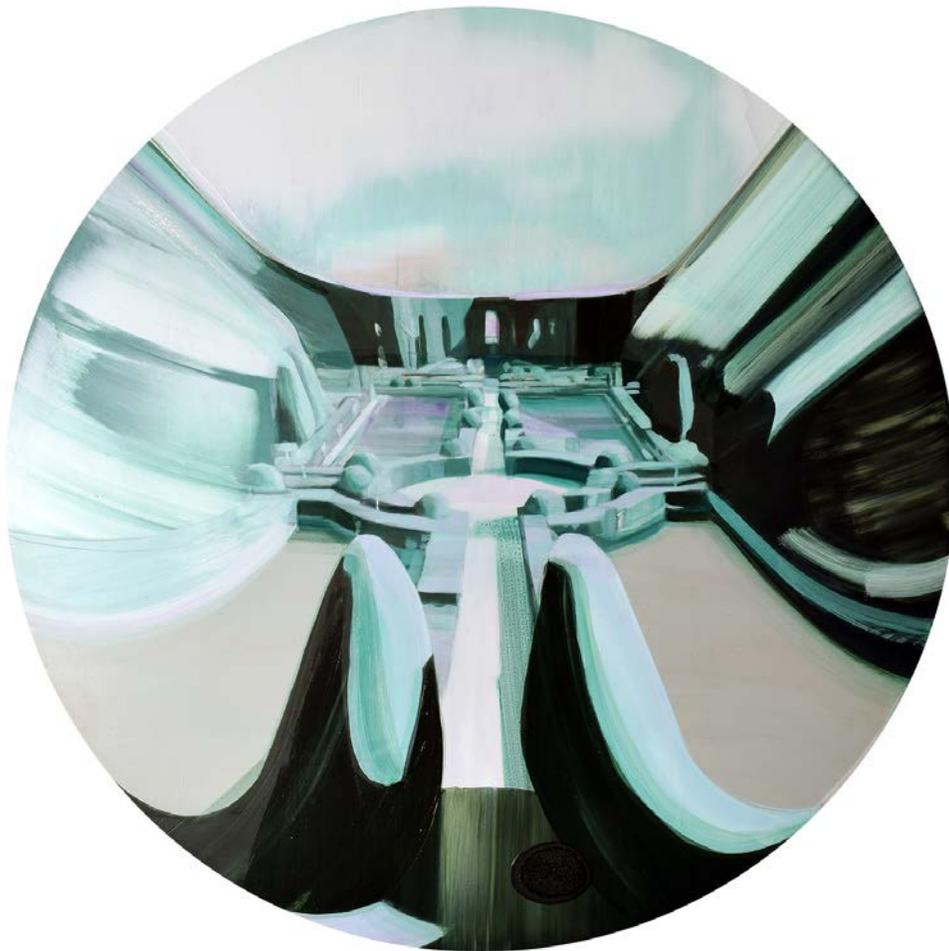
**Alison Downer: *Arcadia Overturned II* 2016**

Wood, canvas, metal, rabbit skin glue, water, oil paints (underpainting white, alizarin red, Paynes grey, burnt umber, gold, silver, pewter), thinners 102 x 168cm



**Alison Downer: *Arcadia Overturned VI* 2016**

Wood, metal, linen, rabbit skin glue, water, oil paints (cadmium yellow light, manganese blue hue, chromium green hue, copper chromite green, silver, pewter, alizarin red, ultramarine blue), pigments (fluo orange, synthetic malachite, lead tin yellow light), mica, various oils and thinners including alkali refined linseed oil and rectified spirit of turpentine 102 x 168cm



**Jane Frederick:** *Giardino dell'Acqua* 2018  
Acrylic on circular board, 60cm dia.



**Jane Frederick:** *Giardino Rustico* 2018  
Acrylic on circular board 60cm dia.



**Daphne Leighton:** *Two or not? IV* 2018  
Mixed media on canvas, 30 x 40cm



**Daphne Leighton:** *Two or not? V* 2018  
Mixed media on canvas, 30 x 40cm



**Ruth Philo:** *Waiting rooms: Yellow* 2018  
Oil, wax & graphite on canvas, 50 x 50cm



**Ruth Philo:** *Waiting rooms: Grey* 2018  
Oil, wax & graphite on canvas, 50 x 40cm



**Mary Romer:** *In Pursuit of Infinity* 2018  
Oil on canvas, 90 x 90cm



**Mary Romer:** *Tiepolo Re-visited* 2018  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 60cm

*Published on the occasion of the exhibition*

Painting as Terrain

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Emma Cameron

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Alison Downer      [www.alisondowner.com](http://www.alisondowner.com)

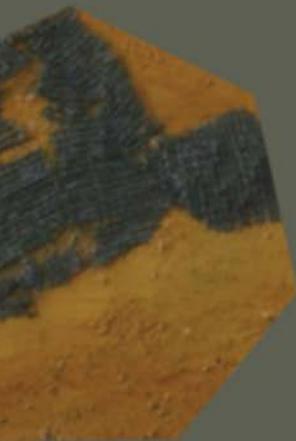
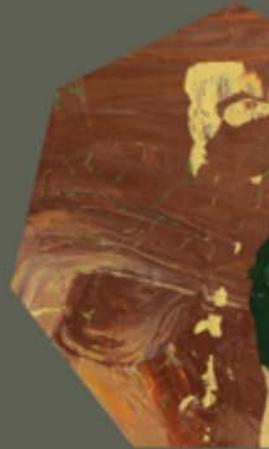
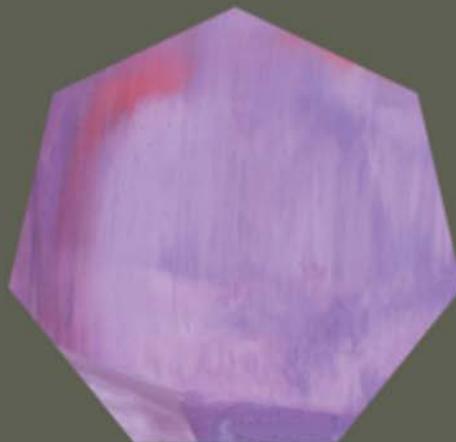
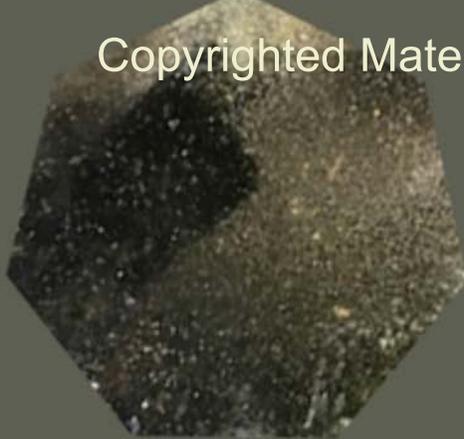
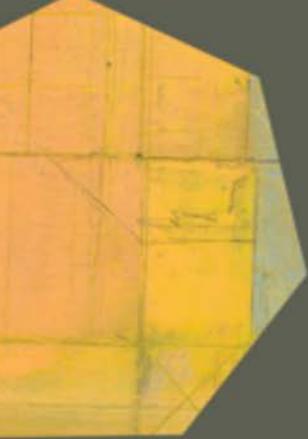
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