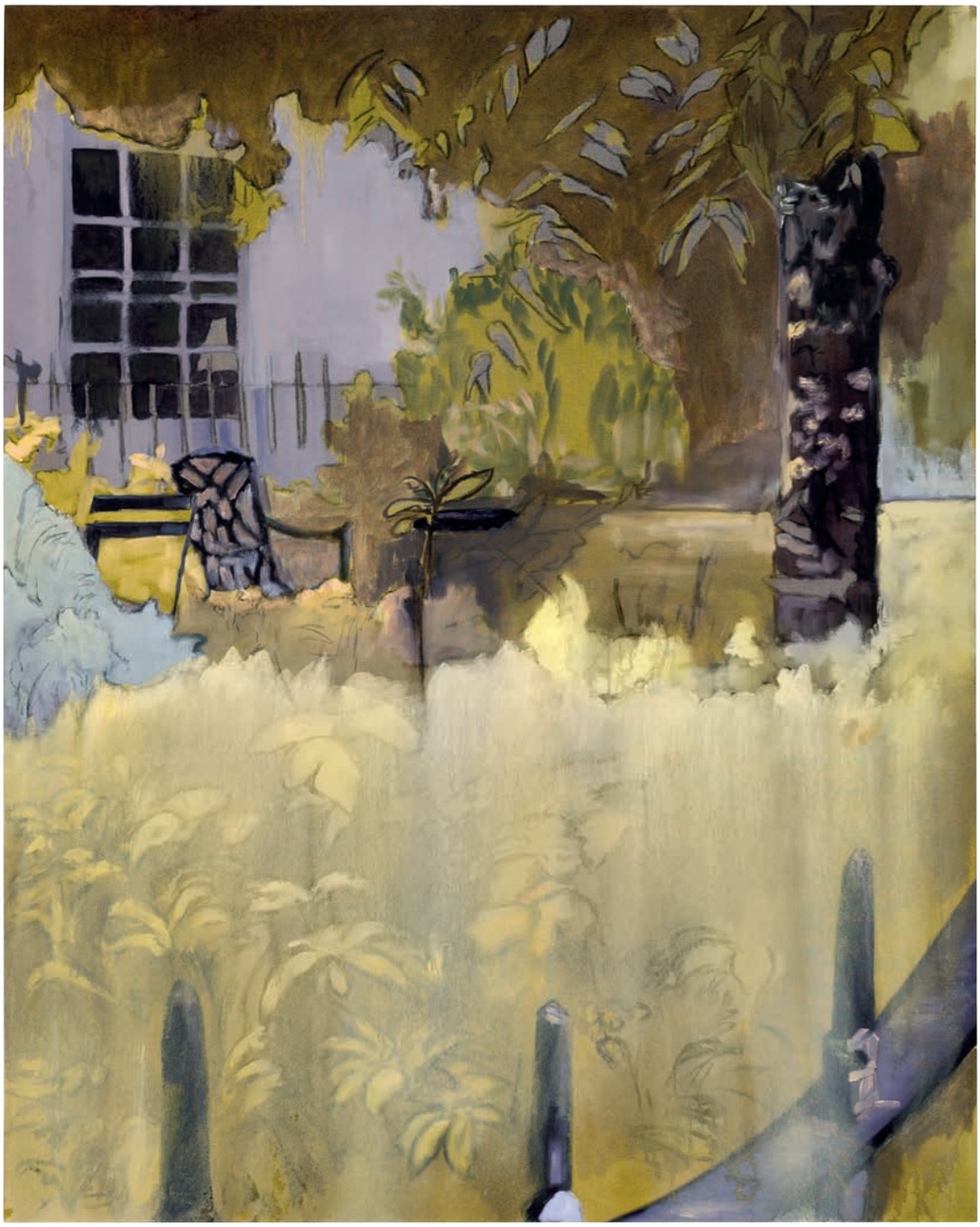


Bright Darknesses

An Interview with Emmanuel Osahor

by Robert Enright

In 2010 when he was 17, Emmanuel Osahor moved from living in a large, interconnected family in Lagos, Nigeria, to becoming an international student living in residence at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. The transition was dramatic, and as a way of countering his loneliness he would go for long walks on a path that led from his studio to the banks of the North Saskatchewan, the river that ran through the centre of the city. His river walks did two things: they were a way of feeling grounded because he was reminded of the treed areas of Lagos, and they drew his attention to the presence of the homeless who were living in makeshift shelters along the river. What he saw there, and the conversations he had with the river community, had a significant impact on the photographs he was taking as an undergraduate, and that influence stayed with him when he entered the graduate program in the School of Fine Art and Music at the University of Guelph. The Edmonton photographs became a point of departure for his move into painting. The intersecting relationship between photography and painting is one that he has consistently explored, and the subject on which he has focused his attention is the garden, the cultivated version of the wild territory he first encountered on the riverbanks in Edmonton. The garden, for him, is a space of generative repetition, and he has used it as a way of measuring his capacity to be engaged with the beautiful. That engagement has become a survival strategy.

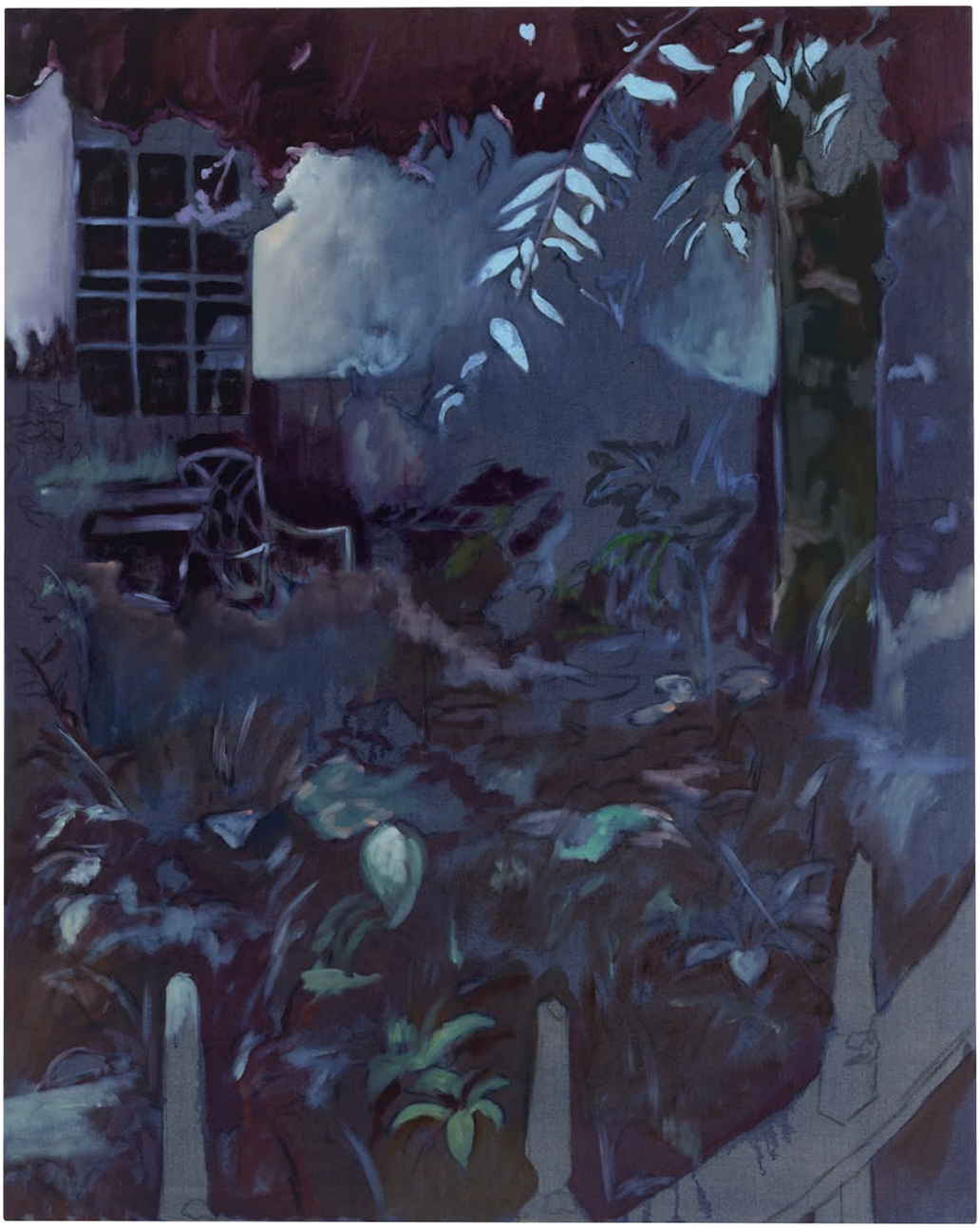
Emmanuel Osahor had a one-person exhibition called "To dream of other places" at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto, which ran from April 11 to September 21, 2025; "I made this place for you" at the Art Gallery of Alberta in 2024; "These days" at MOCA Toronto in 2023; and "For a Moment" at the Art Gallery of Guelph in 2021. He also won the Joseph Plaskett Foundation Award in painting in that year. He is one of five artists in "Other Territories/Autres Territoires," currently on exhibition at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris. He is an assistant professor of Studio Art at the University of Toronto.

The following interview was conducted by phone to Toronto on July 2, 2025.

BORDER CROSSINGS: You've chosen the garden as your principal subject. You couldn't have chosen a more loaded and fraught subject. Did you know when you took it on how vast was the space you were entering?

EMMANUEL OSAHOR: No, I didn't. I had been taking snapshots of other people's gardens and I didn't know why until two years later, during a conversation with a good friend. She said, "I wonder if you started photographing these pretty gardens as a way of surviving the experience of talking to people about their homelessness. You were turning your attention towards something that could take care of that heaviness in your heart." Then during the pandemic, I had a lot of anxiety around what it

Emmanuel Osahor, *Garden in Bath (Yellow)*, 2024, oil on linen, 121.92 × 152.4 centimetres. Photo: Joseph Hartman. All images courtesy the artist.



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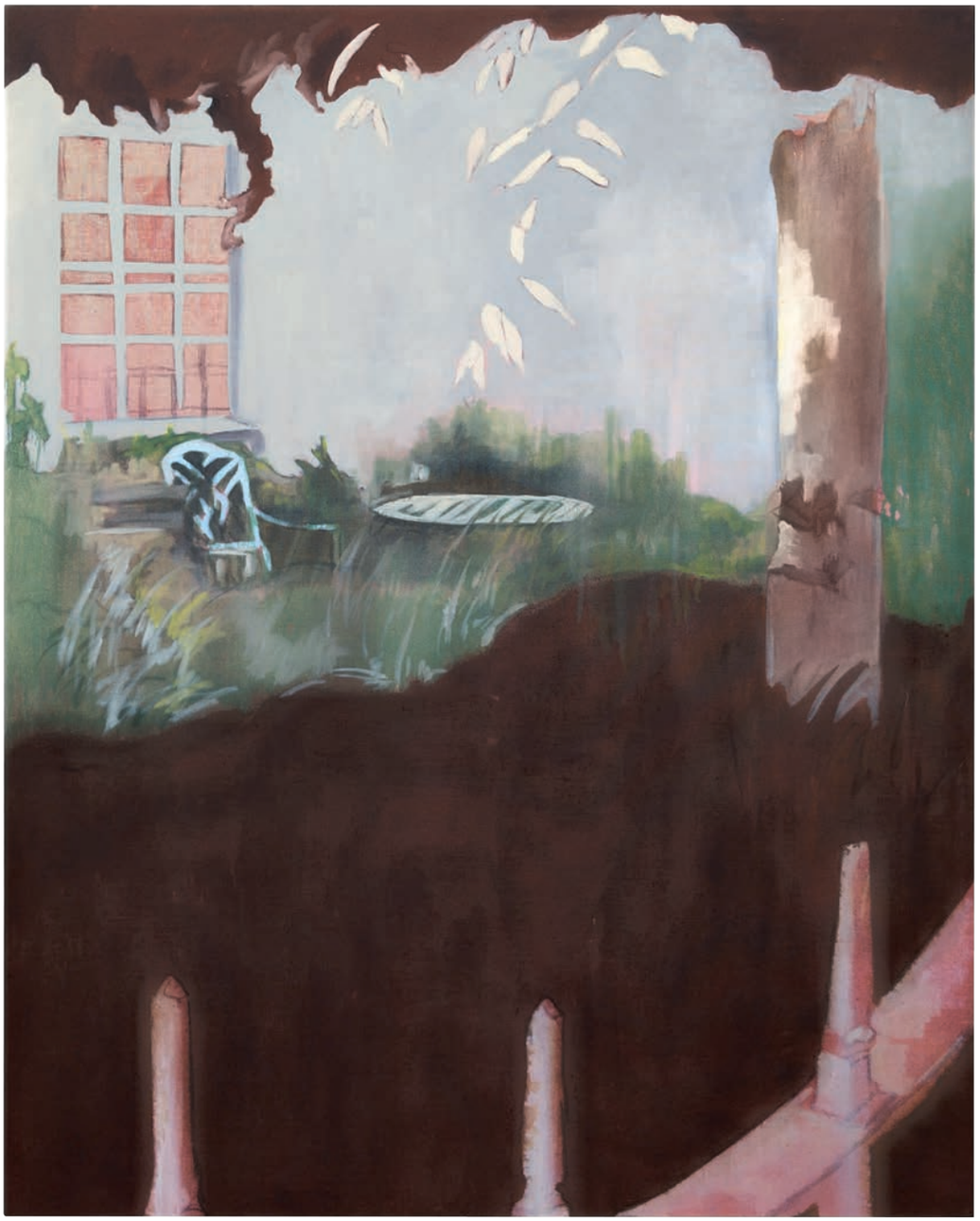
meant to exist in this world. The garden became a useful metaphor because it's a place that is fraught with so much tension. It doesn't pass any judgment; it doesn't try to offer up any solutions. It just presents the reality of life as we are experiencing it. There's an amazing book by Robert Pogue Harrison called *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (2008) where he basically flushes out our understandings of gardens and the tensions that have been inherent in them for millennia. Why have humans chosen to cultivate spaces that we call gardens? Knowing everything that's happened in human existence, why do we invest in this space? That book and the questions it was asking became an entry point for me to start investigating the site of the garden.

This sense of tension is consistent when you talk about your work. But it does seem to me—and this ties in with Harrison's book, as well as the way you read Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999)—that for the most part you've left the darker and more violent side of the garden out of your painted experience. It's there as a trace, but it's not the focus or substance of your garden world.

It's exactly that. It's a decision not to focus on the darker or more violent sides of the garden, on the garden as a colonial space, as an elitist space, as a private space. It's the desire to focus on the capacity to be engaged with the beautiful. What does it look like for me to train my attention on things that I would categorize as beautiful, as delightful,



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1. *Garden in Bath (Deep Blue)*, 2024, oil on linen, 121.92 × 152.4 centimetres. Photo: Joseph Hartman.

2. *Garden in Bath (Deep Red)*, 2024, oil on linen, 121.92 × 152.4 centimetres. Photo: Joseph Hartman.

or as joyful? What does it mean to think about the experience of being an immigrant, of being a migrant, to think about the experience of being in a Black body, to think about the experience of living in a formerly colonized country like Nigeria and currently in a colonizing country like Canada? Then what does it mean to say, "I would like to focus on things that bring life"? So thinking about an engagement with the beautiful and that engagement with beauty as a strategy to ensure my survival, and potentially bring about my thriving in the world as it currently exists, becomes an imperative for my work.

In the talk you gave at the Art Gallery of Alberta at the opening of "I made this place for you" in 2024, you reiterate your recognition that "beauty is a strategy for survival and a precursor to thriving," and then you repeat the observation Hilton Als makes about the ubiquity of flowers in even the darkest places of our inhabitation. Your process of making art seems to be the creation of places where people can—and this is also your phrase—"be held in a space of care."

Yes, it's understanding that most of us wake up in the morning and read the news, and the heaviness makes you not want to get out of bed and the stuff that makes us not look eye to eye is pervasive. But what happens if we broaden the conversation by talking about other things? I'm interested in this notion of holding people in the space of care, because how do we survive the stuff that we're

dealing with if we don't figure out how to care for each other? Elaine Scarry is interesting because the call to action in her book *On Beauty and Being Just* is a call towards being attentive to beauty. Her premise is, how are we supposed to even think we know what justice looks like if we can't recognize the beauty in ourselves, each other and the natural world? How are we supposed to think about climate justice when we're not in agreement that a bird is beautiful and we should think about creating structures that help it thrive instead of becoming extinct?

I was interested to hear you say that your earlier work never contains the whole story. In 2019 you name an exhibition "No Place." You're clearly playing off the idea of utopia. Is that because any garden, no matter how rich, can never be the ideal place we desire? To borrow a title from your 2018 project, we're always "in search of Eden." We're always looking for it, but we never get there.

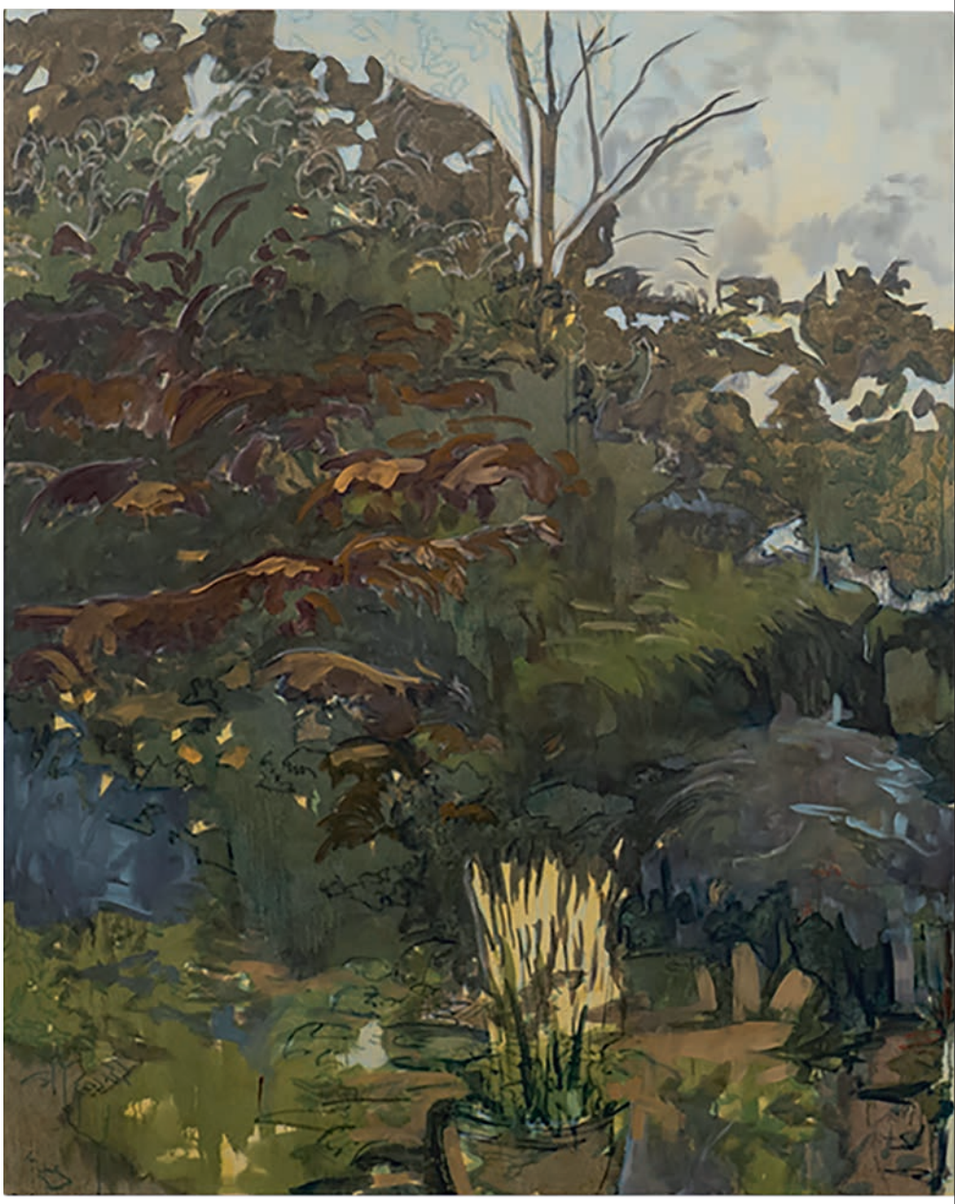
I was faced with real depression when I realized it doesn't exist and that every attempt at establishing a utopia has led to indescribable acts of violence. It feels like I'm longing for something to exist that I know cannot exist, but it still feels right to give space to the articulation of that longing.

You've referred to your paintings as being a visual version of speculative fiction, and a commentator on your work talks about your "constructed Edens." Are your gardens more constructed than observed?

I would say they are. They're gardens that have elements of the real and they're inspired by elements of the real, but they go their own way. I understand that any physical garden is a construction, but then I play that further in thinking of the paintings, drawings and collages as being even more fraught constructions. To observe a painting is to fundamentally observe a fiction. It's an illusion, but paintings also feel like they're able to capture this idea of an impossible longing.

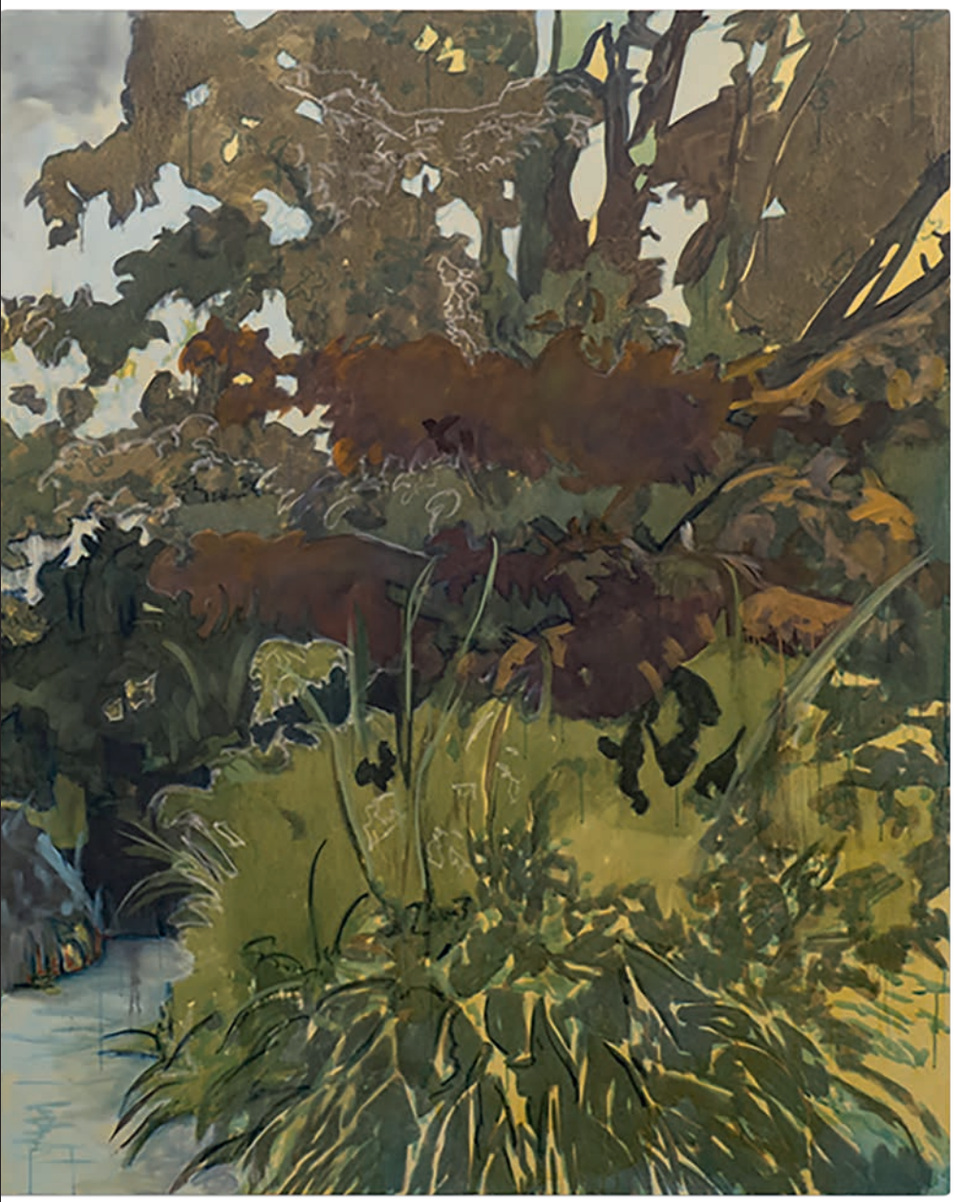
When the word *Eden* comes up and I see a painting of yours like *Burning bush* (2021) with its explosion of yellow, your naming takes me to the Old Testament.

I grew up in a Christian home, and the ethos and narrative of the Fall were definitely Old Testament. What is Eden if not a big allegory for a desire to return to a place that is impossible to return to, and the beginning of a great diaspora that removes us from a place that we can only long for?



In your work there is a nuanced play between representation and abstraction. You're constantly aware that you're rendering some subject, but you also realize you're rendering a painting, so abstraction engages with representation at every moment?

Definitely. The longer I paint, the more I fall in love with the painting as its own phenomenological object. Representation can only go so far because capturing what it feels like to exist in a garden is not a representational pursuit. It becomes more a phenomenological pursuit to make an object that has a certain level of resonance. A lot of that relies on allowing the material to flex its own capacity. It also relies on the experience of looking. So the work is the negotiation of how much representation is actually enough, and when does representation actually get in the way of creating a visual experience for myself and the viewer? I don't want



Sylvia's Garden, 2021, diptych, oil on canvas, overall dimension 228.6 × 365.76 centimetres. Photo: LF Documentation.

to look at my painting because it looks like a garden; I want to be able to look at my paintings as if I were in a garden.

Voltaire's injunction to cultivate your own garden makes us wonder how much to cultivate and what not to cultivate in that garden. It is a question of what to leave out, not just what to include.
Yes. My engagement or my experience of the painting or the viewer's experience of the painting is entirely its own experience. It's not one that's trying to simulate an external experience.

There are devices that support that way of looking at a painting. *Sylvia's Garden* (2021) is a painting in two parts, where the seam falls just where the water comes into view at the bottom of the composition. The effect draws our attention to the fabrication of the garden and to its painterly rather than its descriptive reality.
Yes. I'm fascinated by the constructedness of the painting, and even when the works become more installation-based, there are always things that make the constructed fiction very obvious.

You've said you like spaces "where the borders slip away." What's the attraction that elusive space has for you?
The attraction is the ability to project myself into the space. Borders often delineate who's in and who's not. But what happens when there are no clear borders and you can wander and move from one space to the next? When the images feel dense and when it's hard to tell where some place ends and another place begins, it's because of my interest in not trying to delineate who's in and who's out and in seeking ways to continuously extend out this invitation.

I look at a painting like *Garden in Bath (Deep Red)* (2024) and I see the incomplete curl of the wrought iron fence in the foreground, the dead tree stump, the earth, and then, strangest of all, the window on the house in the background doesn't seem to be connected to anything. In a lot of ways, it is a set of stage props for a perplexing drama.
Isn't that where gardens end up? You visit a friend's backyard garden and it's staged. It's staged, but we still buy into the production. The *Garden in Bath* paintings are based on a photograph I took of a private garden that was on my walk to a print studio where I was doing a residency. I walked by that place every day for two months. I didn't know who the gardener was; I didn't know why they had made any of the decisions they had made, but I still found that space compelling. Coming back to the studio to make this painting over and over and over again became a way of trying to understand what I was drawn to in the first place, while accepting that I'll never fully grasp it. So the painting is always being made; it's remaking itself in perpetuity. As I think about the space and as I encounter the painting, the impulse keeps shifting. It goes back to this sense of a longing to understand and to finally situate myself somewhere.

Collage has played a major role in your work. Give me a sense of how your use of collage has evolved.
In 2020 I felt like my ideas were moving faster than my ability to capture them, and I spent a whole semester where I just made these collages. That concentration helped me articulate what I was

fundamentally interested in; I wasn't interested in making paintings of the gardens I had been in but in making art that extended the experience of the garden by looking into the realm of the studio. As I walked around, I'd take photographs of other people's gardens and of things that, while not necessarily gardenesque, were aspects of the natural world. I started thinking of the collages and of the elements of the photograph as seedlings in a way. If you were going to plant a garden, you would get seedlings from a friend or from a greenhouse and you would literally collage this space in your backyard. These plants have come from different countries and from different ecological zones, so this physical collage ends up being a garden. I wasn't replicating gardens that exist, but my work was creating these new and fictional gardens that might exist in a possible future.

"Collaging was like transplanting" is a practical and a poetic observation. You bring these seedlings back, you plant them and they grow.
Yes. I take a photograph of your hostas, I come back into the studio, and I collage it onto a photograph. Or I transplant the form of that image into a painting. That's me taking a seedling from your garden and planting it in my own garden. It just so happens my garden is my studio, and the gallery exhibition becomes the furthering of the garden experience.

Collage reinforces the constructed nature of the work. It is resistant to literal representation because the torn or the cut edge is an interruption or rupture and not a continuation of a form, a line, or a colour. So collage is a perfect method for you because it reinforces your recognition that a garden is a made space and not a described space.
Yes. People oftentimes comment on the fact that the edges of the paper collages aren't cut out delicately with a knife, but they're ripped. You see the edge or the fray of the paper and it's a violent gesture. This echoes my sense that cultivation involves not only careful attention but also a degree of violence and removal. So the rips in the paper collages allude to their constructiveness and to the darker side that I'm not trying to foreground but that is present if you're willing to go there.

Robert Motherwell had a beautiful phrase for it. He called it "the tearingness of the collage." The word *tearingness* carries the sense of loss and violence involved in the action itself.
And there's a piece missing that you can't reconcile, another piece somewhere in the world that you actually can't butt up against.

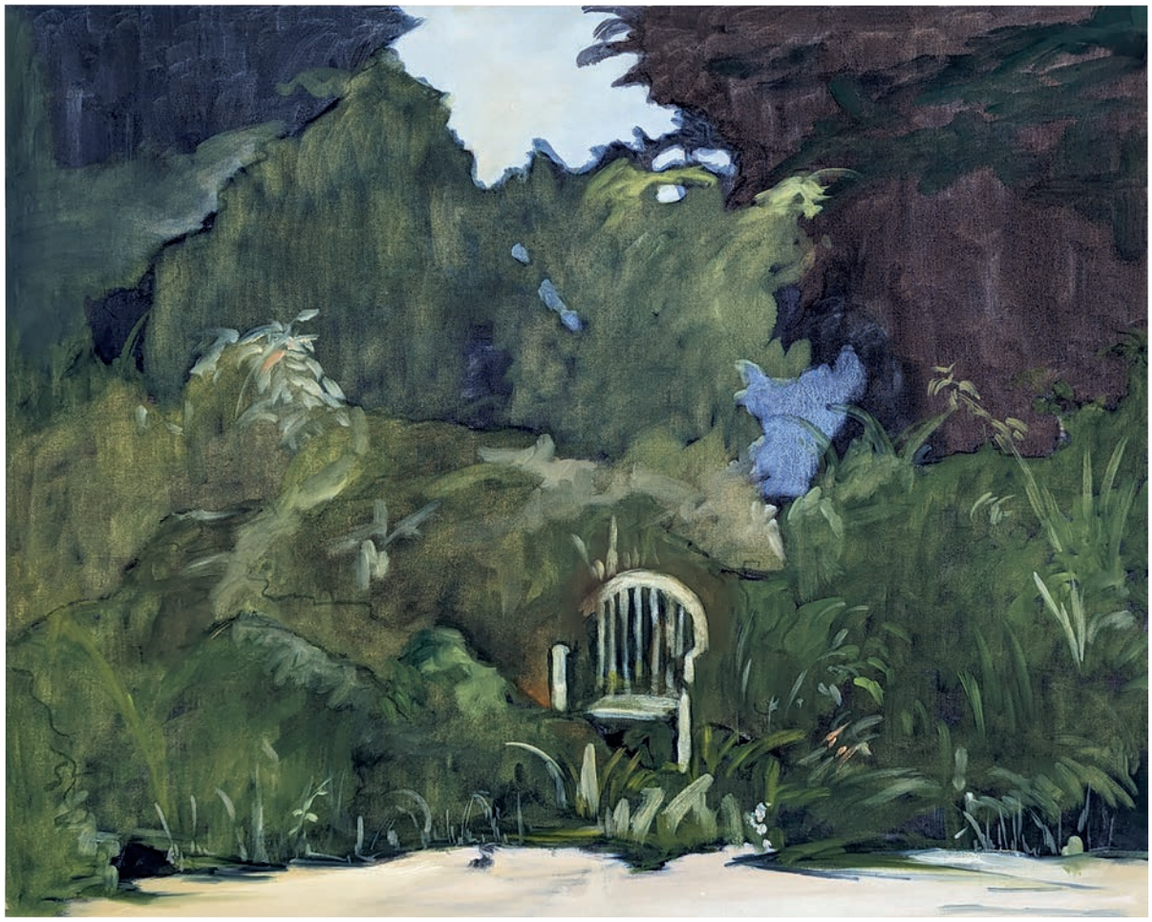
As you say, nothing ever contains the whole story, so here we are, back where we began. But there are changes. You shift from seeing Bonnard as a kind of saccharine escapist to a celebrant of what you call the "elixir of happiness." And you describe seeing his *Paysage du Midi et deux enfants* (1916–1918) in the Art Gallery of Ontario as literally life changing. What was it about that painting that made such a radical impression on you?
Bonnard was the painter who really made me think about the tension between representation and abstraction, where looking at the painting becomes its own experience. Bonnard is trying to make you feel as if you are in that garden. You just came from indoors where the light was dim and now you're in the bright sun and your eyes are adjusting. Bonnard also makes me think a lot about what image makers do to help people cultivate their capacity for attention. You cannot look at a Bonnard painting in five seconds; before you can fully comprehend it, you have to look at his painting slowly, so slowly. His use of value is so close that it almost feels like things are emerging from within the painting. So Bonnard has been—and still is—a revelation for me.

When I look at the painting where you exactly centre a bird bath in "These days" at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) Toronto in 2023, what I notice about the composition are soft green forms, the pathway and the flattened area just below the bird bath. They're shapes as much as areas, or they're abstractions as much as descriptions. Is making the space read both as real and as an abstraction something you pick up from Bonnard, Hurvin Anderson and, to some extent, Peter Doig?
I started noticing Doig's interplay with abstraction and representation very early in my painting journey, and he is still a major influence for me in the studio. There is a way of looking, especially at Hurvin Anderson's paintings, where you know there is representation going on, but in many ways they're like colour field paintings, and you're just drawn into the visual experience of looking at colour, shape and form. That may be the lineage of landscape painting. When I look at Caspar David Friedrich, I can read his skies as a sky, but up close there is this phenomenal material exploration. You zoom in and there's this field of colour.

Anderson has a painting called *Constructed View* (2010), where he uses a decorative screen to both obscure and focus our attention. You do the same thing in *Offering* (2023).
In a lot of dialogues around Anderson's work, there's a sense that these devices are the things

1. *Another Moment*, 2023, oil on linen, 91.44 × 114.3 centimetres. Photo: Emmanuel Osahor.

2. *Room for two*, 2023, oil on canvas, 228.6 × 274.32 centimetres. Photo: Emmanuel Osahor.



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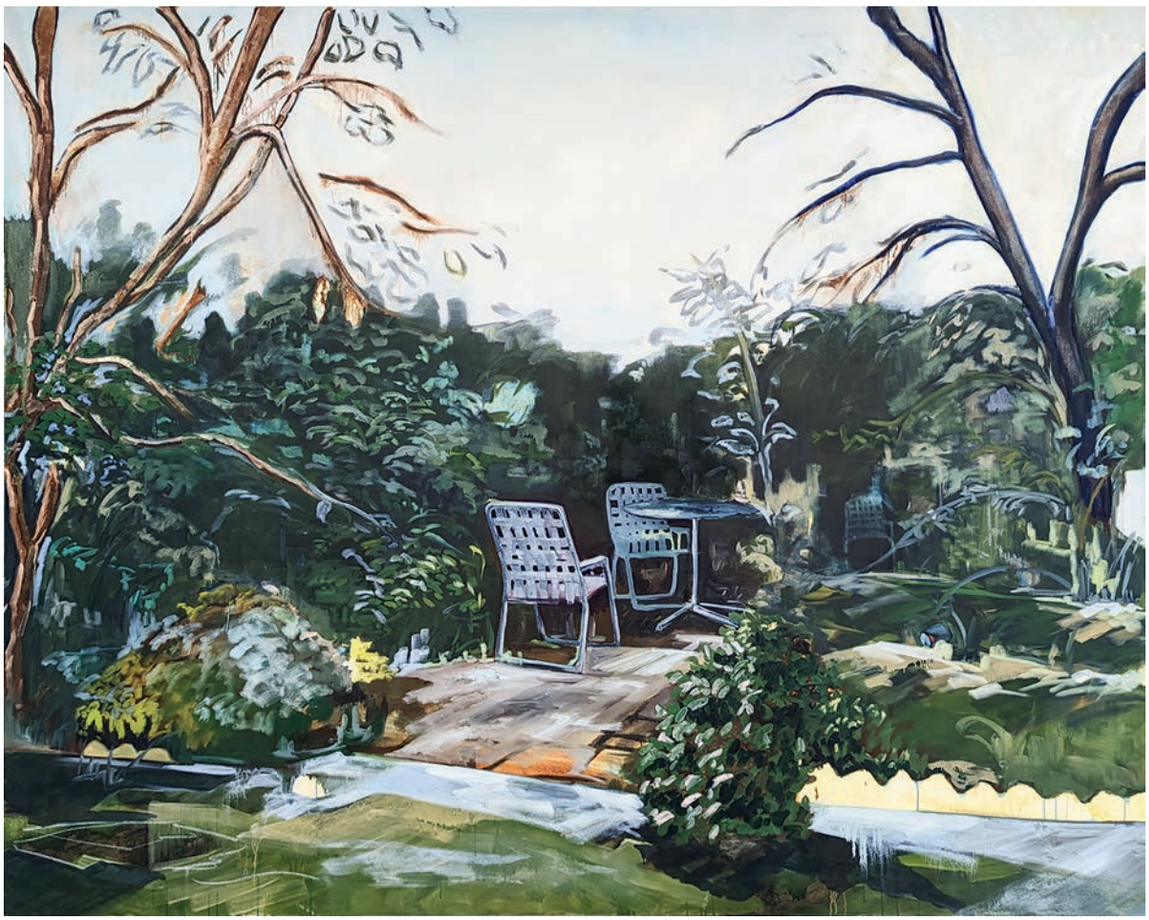

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that push you away from the painting and make you feel excluded. But I had the opposite reaction; all of a sudden, I felt like I was back home because there we have similar screen devices. One of the beautiful things about being an artist is that you're engaged in these cross-generational conversations and you get to deploy, in your own way, the devices that other painters are using.

So for you it's not the anxiety of influence but the pervasiveness of influence. Are there times when you want to escape these painters?
I think the only time it's difficult is when you are standing in front of their work and you feel wholly incompetent. But in the studio, their work makes you feel less alone. You feel like you're in a conversation especially when you're confronted with problems that you don't know how to solve. I don't know either Anderson or Doig personally, but I can look at their work and be like, "How did they solve this?" That might be a solution, or it puts me on a path where I eventually find the solution. I think it's a gift to be in dialogue with many painters.

It seems like you're shifting your painting practice from one in which the garden can be described to an installation practice that creates an immersive space where the space itself is the garden. You've done that so effectively in "To dream of other places" at The Power Plant in 2025. Are we going to see more of that?
I wouldn't be surprised if that continues, but the honest answer is I don't know. It's something I've been interested in for a while. As a painter, I used to think this was a challenge, but now I actually see it as something that's productive. I'm constantly frustrated by what a painting can or cannot do. So there are these moments where I try to expand the context, offering the viewer another way of getting into the painting, or maybe by bypassing the painting altogether. I love painting, but I primarily call myself an image maker who also uses photography and installation. Printmaking is a huge part of my practice, too. But I think questioning the limits of painting is going to be a career-long endeavour. I'll probably oscillate back and forth between showing paintings in an expanded context and showing paintings in a more expected context. I think both offer different things. The Power Plant is such a grand space that it would have been a missed opportunity not to challenge the work in a way that I haven't had a chance to. In that show I was also thinking about Chris Ofili's "Night and Day" at the New Museum, 2015. That exhibition really influenced the way I was thinking about this work. In his pavilion at the Venice Biennale, he basically designed a room in which you could view the paintings (where the walls were painted and the glass was tinted). It felt almost like a chapel.

You go from the scale of the wall in the clerestory space at The Power Plant to the delicate tracings of birds in your landscapes. And now you're making these rather elaborate ceramic bird baths. In your painted world, the thing that is obviously not there is us; the closest thing are garden chairs that become our surrogates. But there are birds. Are birds emblems of something for you?
The birds are often sparrows. It started because there was a particular hedge where I was living in Toronto and a lot of sparrows would stay underneath it. Every time I left the house to go to the studio, all these birds would shoot out of the hedge. It was a magical flurry. You're going to work, you're thinking about the bus schedule and you're feeling like you're late, and then this happens. It's something that returned me to my body every time. Once you start paying attention to it, you start seeing it happen everywhere. The first time I really showed the ceramic birds was in the exhibition at MOCA; I was thinking about the possibility of flight and of being able to move from one space to another. And then you extrapolate that idea of freedom and it returns to the notion of impossible longing—longing for a capacity to be able to move from one state to another, to move from anxiety into a place of rest, or a place of peace, to not feel hindered or encumbered by a boundary. The birds stuck around in the work as elements that invited this kind of thinking about an unlimited range of motion.

By the way, have you actually become a gardener?
I have. I'm now renting a place that has a backyard so I've started cultivating my own garden, which means I started cultivating a lot of my own disappointments. It's hard work.

So the garden is simply pointing out how inadequate we are as human beings?
Painting in the studio already reminds me of my shortcomings, and now I'm doing another thing that shows me how little control I actually do have. But I'm grateful to have this opportunity because for most of my career, the garden has been this space over there. Now it's interesting to have this space right here and to be able to see what that proximity does. ▮