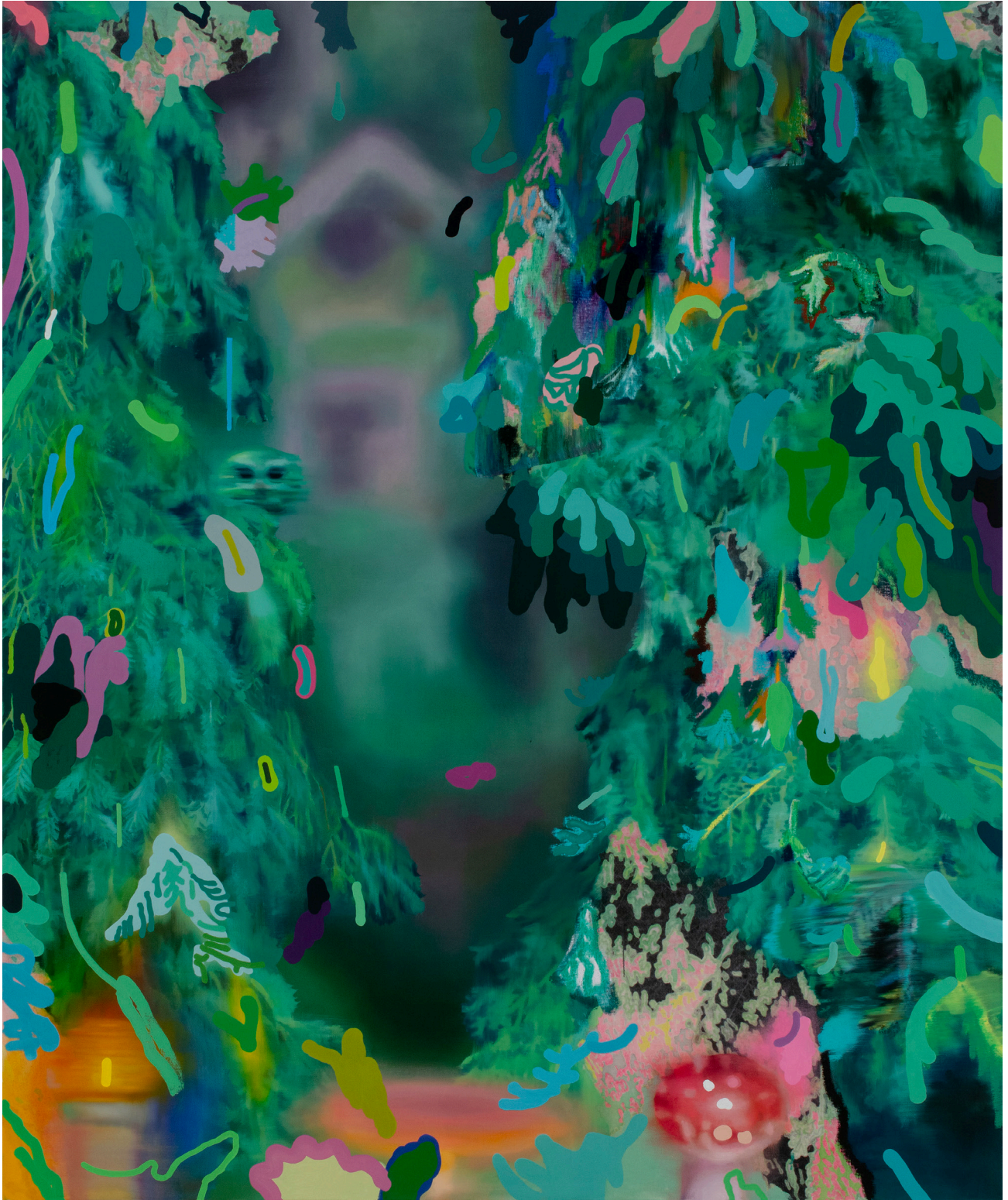


Dead Leaves

Process and Origins of the Paintings by Leon Benn



2023

The title of the show, *Dead Leaves*, is based on a poem by Jacques Prévert—a 20th century French surrealist poet—from which I snipped lines to create titles for the paintings that looked uncannily agreeable. In the end I guess I might have found some cosmic connection between my work and this poem perhaps.

The Dead Leaves

Oh I wish so much you would remember
those happy days when we were friends.
Life in those times was so much brighter
and the sun was hotter than today.
Dead leaves picked up by the shovelful.
You see, I have not forgotten.
Dead leaves picked up by the shovelful,
memories and regrets also,
and the North wind carries them away
into the cold night of oblivion.
You see, I have not forgotten
the song that you sang for me:
It is a song resembling us.
We lived together, the both of us,
you who loved me
and I who loved you.
But life drives apart those who love
ever so softly
without a noise
and the sea erases from the sand
the steps of lovers gone their ways.

— Jacques Prévert, 1945



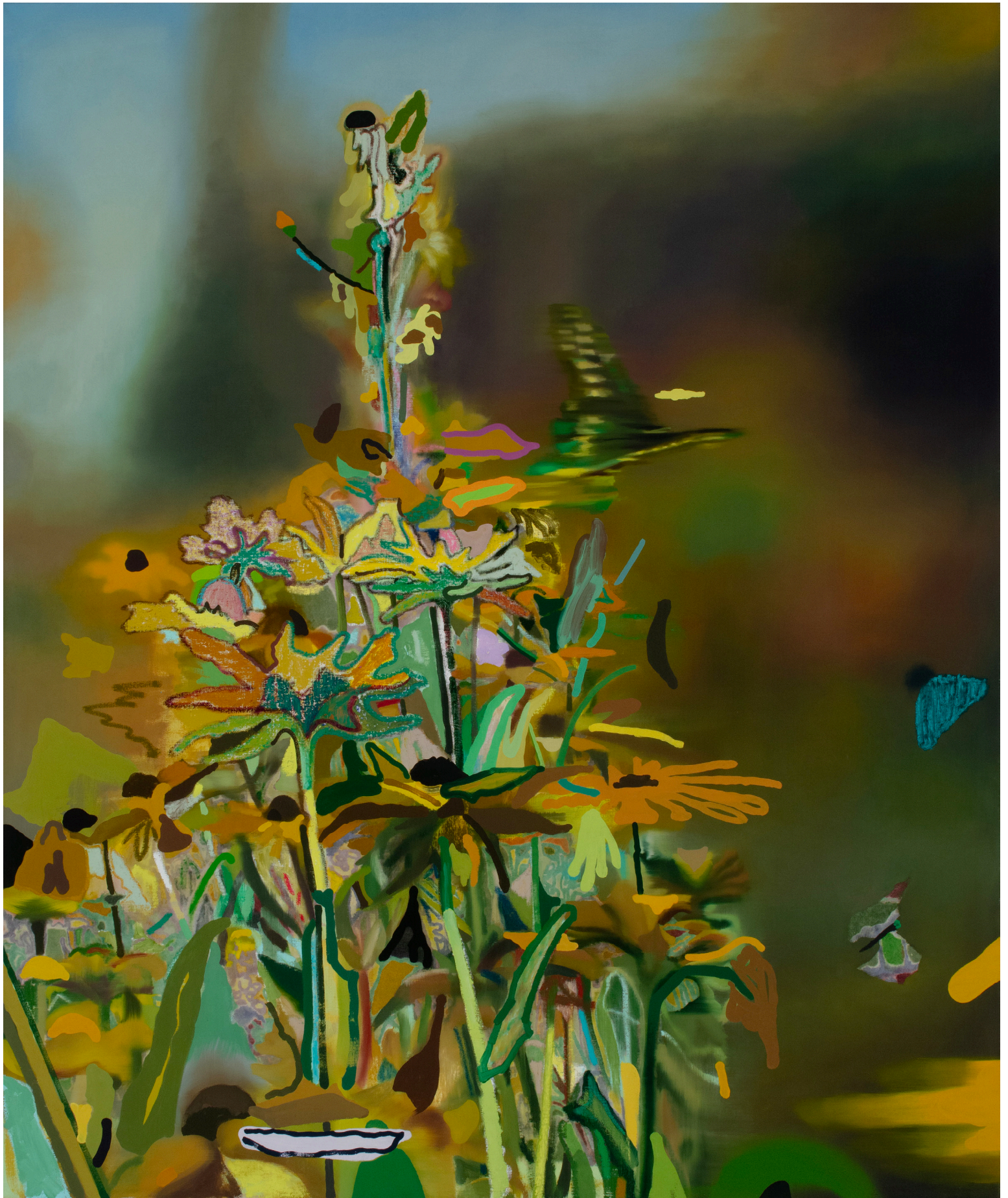
Leon Benn, *Dead Leaves*, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic, and fabric dyes on linen, 63 x 52.5 in. (160 x 133.4 cm)

Dead Leaves

The plant in the initial photo I took for this painting is a silver maple sapling located a block around the corner from where I live.

My painting practice stems from a tradition in art history called the picturesque—a choice made by the artist finding a scene in nature suitable for a painting. Sottobosco—a small overlooked tradition of still life painting that arose in Holland in the 17th century—found the forest floor suitable for paintings which were deemed unworthy in the aristocratic patronage. A small handful of painters rebelled by painting the dark recesses of earth (snakes, mushrooms, moss, moths, insects, etc.) in the style of highly refined Dutch still lifes.

As an extension of these past practices I am looking at the ecotones (the spaces where two different ecosystems meet) in my urban surroundings—the shady corners of turf alongside apartment buildings where weeds and saplings grow on their own accord until a landscaper intervenes creating dead leaves and grass. In the American aesthetic “plants gone wild” are deemed unworthy of the manicured home and garden. Thankfully, environmentalists are giving more visibility to the importance of pollinators that need flowering plants from clover, dandelions, among other weeds that are easily blasted away by lawnmowers in the fertile springtime growing season.



Leon Benn, *Picked Up by the Shovelful*, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic, and fabric dyes on linen, 63 x 52.5 in. (160 x 133.4 cm)

Picked Up by the Shoveful

In this painting, I came across a a robust field of yellow coneflowers lying between a thoroughfare in Portland, Maine. Franklin Avenue slices Portland North/ South directly in the middle of the town, and in the background sits a large historic Roman Catholic church, The Cathedral of Immaculate Conception. It's the tallest building in the city, with the tallest of its three steeples reaching 204 feet—easily spotted from Interstate 295. However, a luxury apartment building will soon supercede this.

My aesthetic response to form in the image led me to create an architectural synchronicity between the church spire and the flowers, converging into a steeple-like form. The history of the church, alongside the vast evolutionary history of nature, became an allusion to the erasure and gentrification of indigenous societies in the americas. Awareness of environmental degradation as created by cultural genocide and the technological speed of industry in the early 20th century resides quietly in my painting practice. The blurriness of the church is a form of optics and erasure to bring nature to the fore.



Leon Benn, *The Sun Was Hotter Than Today*, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic, and spray paint on linen, 63 x 52.5 in. (160 x 133.4 cm)

The Sun Was Hotter Than Today

Walking around my neighborhood I noticed a stocky looking clover growing in a small sidewalk garden. I couldn't help but think how anthropomorphic it seemed. There were a few things in my deeper consciousness that I realized would activate this anthropomorphic essence.

One was the employment of tenebristic and /or chiaroscuro light found in Renaissance and Romantic paintings of mythological subjects and my own astrological sign of the libra. Chiaroscuro and tenebrism both focus on the high contrast between brightly lit subjects and darkly lit backgrounds. But the key difference between the two is found in the shadows. Where chiaroscuro uses its light and shadow to create depth behind the subject, tenebrism goes full black.

Another tool I employ is *mise-en-scène*, a French term meaning "putting on stage." In cinema, *mise-en-scène* refers to everything that appears before the camera and its arrangement—composition, sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting. The various elements of design help to express a film's vision by generating a sense of time and space, as well as setting a mood, and sometimes suggesting a character's state of mind, whether that be happy with bright colors or sad with gloom and darker colors.

In painting, it directly refers to the organization of the picture plane and the subsequent arrangement of objects, light, and color within those planes to create a picture. When I'm composing the picture on Photoshop, I'm attentive to the relationship of the marks appearing on the foregrounds against the dimmer, out-of-focus backgrounds. Many of these foreground abstract shapes refer to ephemeral particles of dust, debris, and other floating entities that may enter one's field of vision in the outdoors. I'm also thinking back to mowing and string-trimming when all the shrapnel of leaves and grass are expelled into the air but wanting to give them a stillness and place in the picture.

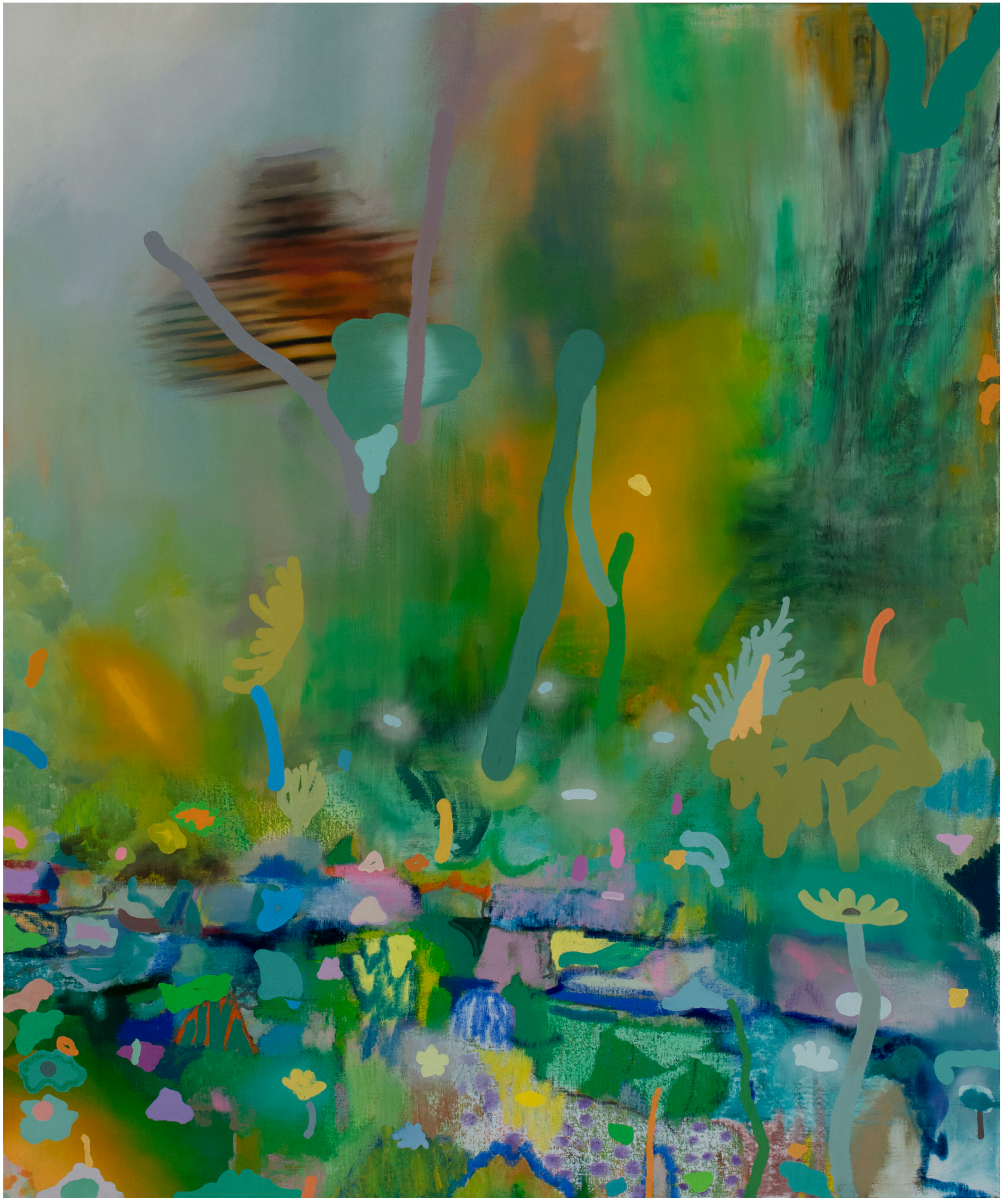


Leon Benn, *Happy Days*, 2023, oil, oil stick, and acrylic on linen, 63 x 52.5 in.
(160 x 133.4 cm)

Happy Days

I went for a bike ride to a local brewery on a random sunny day, i.e. a “happy day.” As I was riding over a small bridge near the Fore River and Mercy Hospital where Anouk, my daughter was born, I noticed a strange vine growing exuberantly up from the recesses of the stones on the outer section supporting the bridge. The inherent tensile force of this upward momentum towards the sun was a picturesque moment.

I began work on separating the vine in the foreground from background, granting it the status of portraiture.



Leon Benn, *The Steps of Lovers*, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic, and fabric dyes on linen, 45 x 37.5 in. (114.3 x 95.25 cm)

The Steps of Lovers

This painting is inspired by a long bike ride around Portland. Near the waterfront on commercial street away from the tourist district out near the boat repair marinas, I came across a random old stone wall bathed in shafts of ethereal magic light.

People who know me, will know I have a love of the woodland fantastical. The movie *Legend* is a great example of this fantasy genre complete with a glittery and dewey atmosphere. And I guess “the lovers” from my childhood idealistic visions would have had to be Jack and Lili played by Tom Cruise and Mia Sara.

Temporality has been playing a major role in my work through the use of motion blur on Photoshop. Reflecting back on our field of vision, if we stand in one spot in stillness, we tend to notice the subtleties of things moving around us, either slow or quick fleeting instances. The flotsam and jetsam of our everyday lived experiences.

I’ve always pondered the notion of scale in relationship to organisms much smaller than us and how they perceive the world around them—the flow of time much stranger and like the consistency of molasses. Photography has gifted us the ability to capture a hummingbird in movement, or in this case a butterfly, that our human brains and eyes cannot process clearly in that scale relationship. Placing characters in my paintings—often animals that can fly—that are treated with the motion blur filter gives the viewer another dimension to the picture plane that is not just spatial, but of time. It warps the lived experience and augments the reality of the landscape—like the bliss felt of newly kindled love.



Leon Benn, *A Song Resembling Us*, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic, spray paint, and fabric dyes on linen, 45 x 37.5 in. (114.3 x 95.25 cm)

A Song Resembling Us

Plants that I often gravitate to are small conifers like spruce or pine shrubs. They're like cuddly bonsai companions and I can see why people like to plant them in their gardens, and they're very slow growers. I happen to walk by this little guy on my frequent pathway to either pick up or drop off my kids from school or if I'm going to the closest watering hole for a beer snack.

Somehow on my Spotify account, the algorithm for "Discover Weekly" chose this exact photo and put a cool gradient filter over it. Intrigued by the artificial intelligence that randomly selected the shrub that I was going to paint I uploaded the picture onto Photoshop and adjusted the color setting via curves, which allows you to have minute control over pixel brightness and colour in one powerhouse of a panel.



Leon Benn, *You See I Have Not Forgotten*, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic, and fabric dyes on linen, 63 x 52.5 in. (160 x 133.4 cm)

You See I Have Not Forgotten

After a trip to the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens in Boothbay I had some nice images that stuck with me as prime candidates for paintings.

In the children's garden section was a particular garden shed that I photographed between some pine trees. A funny looking shrub in the entrance area that would later be staged in *Oblivion*.

After the first pass of painting the scene, I decided to add some characters and lighting flourishes. Thinking of one of my favorite paintings, *Bar at The Folies Bergere* by Édouard Manet, I wanted to confront the viewer in a similar manner using a native owl species here in Maine, and by suggestion within the title address a missing connection between nature and human, home, and habitat loss.

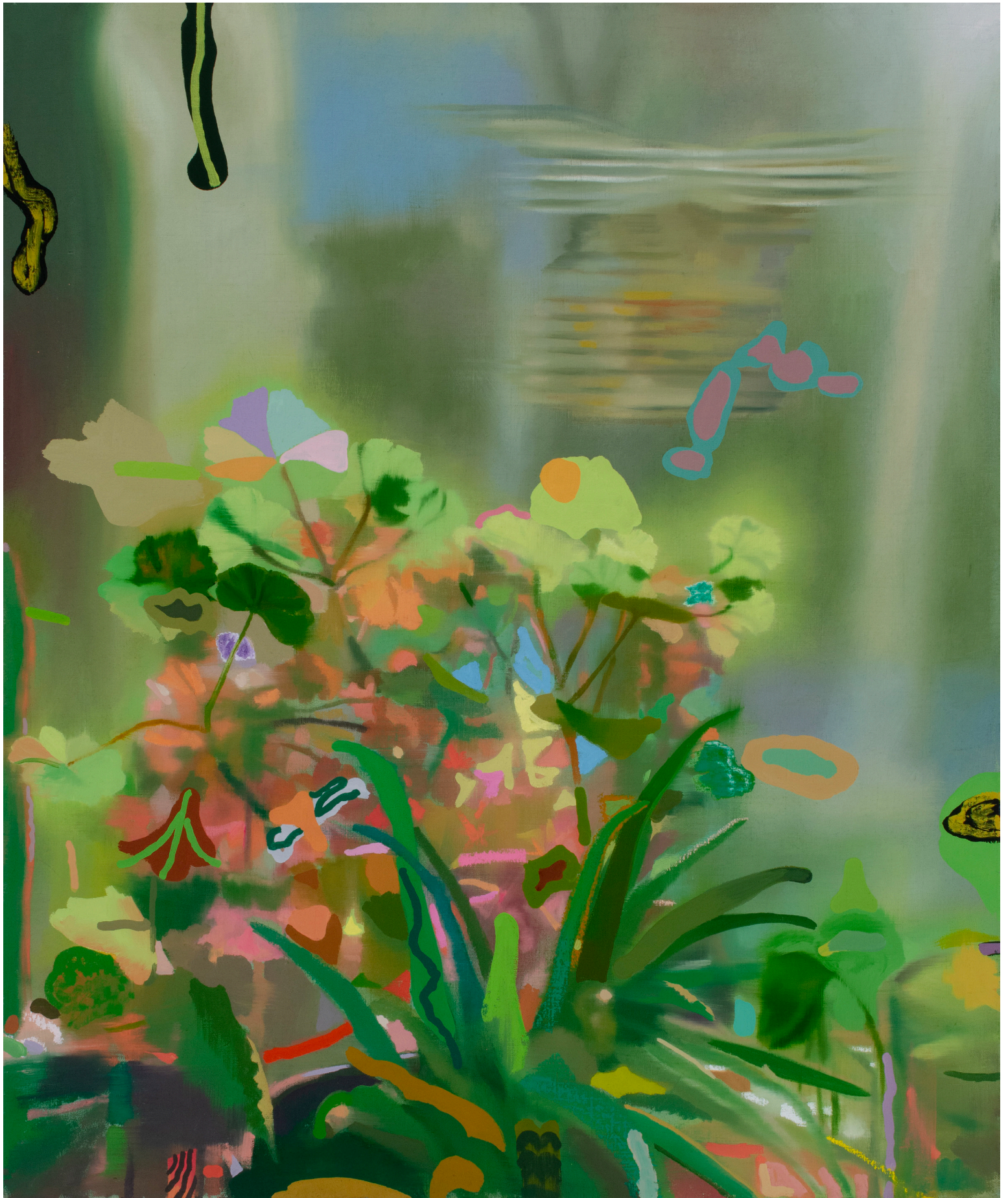


Leon Benn, *Oblivion*, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic, and fabric dyes on linen, 63 x 52.5 in. (160 x 133.4 cm)

Oblivion

This painting was the last of the larger pieces in *Dead Leaves* and one of the strangest in my opinion. I took a photo of this floppy, mopy looking tree outside the entrance to the Boothbay Botanical Gardens where cars were either exiting or arriving.

I imagined a nocturnal scene in which a storm brews and lightning calmly illuminates the ground and tree with prismatic electric light. Static electricity is often something we directly experience with our fingertips on rugs or our socks, and the color palette was directly inspired by a pair of “darn-tough” trail running socks I have.



Leon Benn, *Ever So Softly*, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic, and fabric dyes on linen, 36 x 30 in. (91.4 x 76.2 cm)

Ever So Softly

I listen to calming ambient music quite often in my studio and household to get through some of the calamitous moments brought on by kids, work stress, life, etc. A good track to check out is “Fractal” by Ian Hawgood.

This painting sought to capture a moment of tranquility in my kitchen window, above the sink. I have a bird feeder in sight outside that our two cats love to watch, climbing up the screen with their too sharp claws, breaking the peace. Morning doves frequent that feeder and I placed one in motion blur in the top right of the painting, alluding to what could be window blinds. Light emanates through the geranium plant in the center, creating a soft glow.



Leon Benn, *Without a Noise*, 2023, oil, oil stick, acrylic, and fabric dyes on linen, 36 x 30 in. (91.4 x 76.2 cm)

Without a Noise

Arriving at the end here, I am back in the wilderness, somewhere on the trail in the White Mountains. A shaft of light not unlike that of the painting *The Sleep of Endymion* by Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson punctures the scene in front of me. I used this image to create a quiet forest scene in which my owl friend from *You See I Have Not Forgotten* flies without a noise—a special ability owls can do.