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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

JULY 2025

Figure as Flow: Erin Anderson and Aleah Chapin

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"Karen Looking," oil on copper, 21.5" x 18"

The Human System

Dacia Gallery

53 Stanton St, New York, NY 10002

April 6 - 30, 2016

Body/Being

Flowers Gallery

529 West 20th Street New York NY 10011

May 12 – June 11, 2016

By DANIEL MAIDMAN, JUNE 2016

All too many years ago, I took gross anatomy. I spent four semesters cutting up and drawing human bodies. This was a good fraction of my education in becoming a figurative painter. Before I explored the interior of the body for myself, my idea of it came from well-labeled illustrations. Direct experience put the lie to these right away. The body is a mess. Most of its structures are not distinct. It takes training and a subtle eye to distinguish the tissues and organs.

On the other hand, the body is full of immediate and obvious evidence of motion. It is not clear where muscles and fascia start and end, but they are striated in their axes of flex and stretch. Skin, bones, organs, all show traces of persistent folding, pulling, and pressing — wrinkles, sags, depressions, bruises and rubbed-off bits.

It might be said that an intuitive impression of the body is defined more by its flow than its form. The form is indecipherably intricate, but the flow is simple, clear, and direct.

Memories of this startling early encounter came to mind when considering work in two new shows of figurative paintings, by Erin Anderson and Aleah Chapin. In their own ways, each of these young artists depicts human nature in terms of flow rather than form.

Anderson's show, *The Human System* (<http://daciagallery.com/exhibitions/2016-07-erin-anderson-solo-exhibition.php>), which has unfortunately already closed at Dacia Gallery, consists of a group of figurative oil paintings on copper.



"Heather," oil on copper, 36"x30"

Those warm streaks in the background are scratches, where the paint has been incised and the copper shows through.

Let me give you my response to this purely as a painter first. Anderson's technique is mind-bogglingly strong. She builds up her images gradually, in delicate layers, so that the final depiction has a mottled smoothness far removed from the coarse

real^{ity} of the brush. It is not Vermeer-smooth, but the general technique and final effect (and lighting) are not dissimilar. There is a photographic quality to the rigor of her image, but one would never take it for a photograph. There is a sense of falling *into*, of things inside and things behind, which distinguishes it from the flattened hierarchy of surfaces in a photograph. I like my own set of tools and techniques as a painter, but I feel a sense of limitless envy in confrontation with the lucid clarity of Anderson's figures.



"Heather," oil on copper, 36"x30" (detail)

But, further, to look at her work is to experience a sense that this is what skill is for. Skill is not for itself; skill is the servant of vision, and must be tailored to the vision it serves. The enormous vocabulary of Anderson's skill demands a vision to match it, and Anderson does not fail in meeting this challenge.



"Mark Weathers the Storm," oil on copper, 48" x 36"

Her people are not necessarily formally beautiful, but their depiction is so loving that one is able to detach the eye from that semi-pornographized estimate of sexual utility with which our image-culture contaminates sensibility. Her people read as

intensely beautiful simply because they are human beings. This is what we call
MENU humanity. Anderson's skills give humanity not to her subjects, who already possess it, but to her viewers. She restores our ability to see, and with it, feeds our souls, which are starved from having lost their ability to love the real.



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"Kim With Turbulence No.2," oil on copper, 36" x 30"

Now, what is the deal with the copper streaks? They represent Anderson's solution to a problem which bedevils every really focused figurative painter: what to do with the background. Because, really, who cares. Some solution must be found though, because the background goes stubbornly on existing. Anderson has been working toward this solution for several years now.

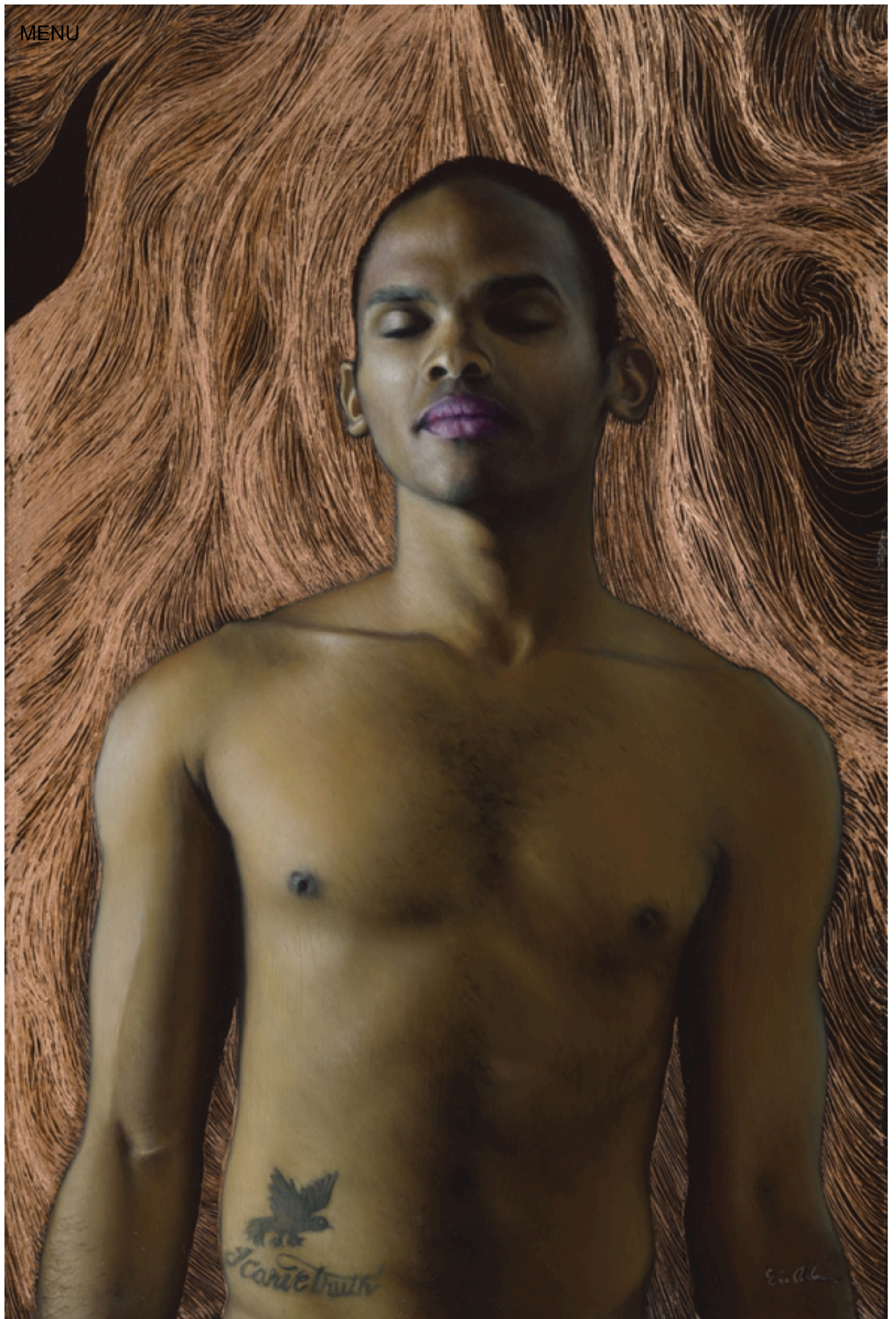


"Emanation No. 2" (2013), oil on copper, 36" x 30"

As you can see, she was already scratching down to the copper in 2013. But to my eye, her earlier idiom is less successful. Because it is simple and diagrammatic, it lends itself to literary reading, to running out and looking up hermetic symbolism so that the “meaning” of the painting can be decoded. That is, it leads one to look for the meaning of the painting outside the painting, and therefore to not really see the painting at all.

Contrast that with the current work, in which the scratches are so dense as to resemble hair or the sea, but clearly do not have a specific semiotic intent.

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In her solution to the background problem, Anderson's work touches on that flow which I saw in the orientation of striated muscle fibers in my cadavers. She depicts human beings as solid and distinct objects, and yet they are immersed in an oceanic flow, an unceasing movement of energy, which binds them to their worlds and to one another. In fact, she makes her scratches across multiple paintings at once, so that groups of paintings hold supercompositions which are invisible in individual pieces.



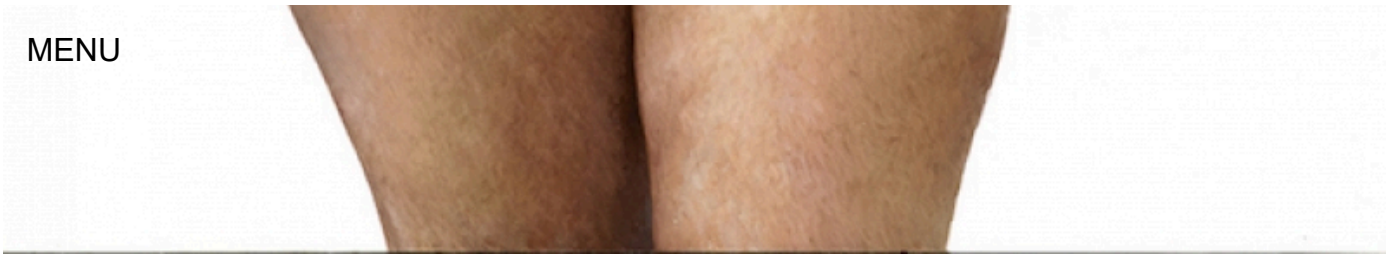
Left to right: "Karen's Story," "Felix Looking Backward," "Heather," "Kim with Turbulence"

It would be easy to think of these as paintings from the past, from a period before television and internet, before whitened teeth and spin classes and hair conditioner and touch-up cosmetic surgery. People, after all, took delight in the sight of one another in the age on age of bad hair, stained teeth, and pocked skin which preceded our own. But this is not how the paintings read. They read as paintings of the future, when we have lost or let go the vanities of our foolish present. They are hopeful paintings, hopeful that we will learn to abandon the luxuries that have made us so lonely and sad and inconsequential.

In an embarrassment of riches, we also have *Body/Being*

(<http://www.flowersgallery.com/exhibitions/view/aleah-chapin-1>), a show with broadly similar themes at Flowers Gallery, of the latest body of work by Aleah Chapin. I have written about her before (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-maidman/daughter-of-the-wild-wome_b_2471473.html), and the esteem in which I hold her art only goes on increasing. There is a solar radiance to Chapin's paintings which one will not encounter anywhere else. In the new pieces, enormous naked figures (they would be 9 or 10 feet tall if she painted to their feet) stand isolated against featureless white backgrounds.





"Kara" (2015), oil on canvas, 84" x 50"

As with Anderson, Chapin has little interest in the criteria of formal beauty bestowed on us by our degenerate popular culture. As with Anderson's people, there may be some overlap between their beauty and the popular caricature of beauty, but where there is, it's accidental, and irrelevant. Consider her Kara, with her bulging thighs and not especially narrow waist, her lovingly observed armpit hair and soft belly and the irregular spread of pigmentation from her areolae. Has a painting ever come closer to jiggling? Could its fleshy presence, could the confidence and humor and invitation in Kara's expression be any sexier?

Chapin applies her overwhelming tools of sight and depiction to several phases of the human experience. In "Rachel and Wes," a mother holds her baby.





"Rachel and Wes" (2015), oil on canvas, 84" x 50"

Consider first the details which Chapin's command of anatomy allows her to catch. The tensor fasciae latae and IT band bulge subtly in Rachel's hip where she supports her off-balance weight. They rise into an iliac crest half-hidden by subcutaneous fat. Her belly is still distended from her pregnancy. Wes is newborn-pink, with silky newborn hair and the skinny limbs of infants who have not had much time nursing yet. These details, so rewarding in themselves, are exemplars of skill, and in Chapin's case as well, skill is the servant of vision. Chapin's vision is of a mother cradling her son to her breast, supporting his head, warming his chill, protecting his helplessness; she looks down at him, entirely absorbed. This is a painting so thoroughly about this one kind of love, that there is nothing else in it. Contrarily, consider "Qwill."

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"Qwill" (2015), oil on canvas, 84" x 50"

I am, in general, not a fan of the political in art. I tend to advocate for a cooling off period to boil away those partisan passions that commandeer art-making, which is supposed to liberate us, for mere point-scoring, which seeks to capture us. All proposed rules in art, however, prove ineffective against sufficiently good artists. In this painting, and others in the show, Chapin tackles a topic of current political contest, the transgendered individual. Qwill follows a path opposite to that of Rachel. Their breasts will never enfold or sustain an infant, because they have had them removed. They do not stand in easy contrapposto like Rachel, but rather take a symmetrical, straight-backed martial posture. The light-source in their world is not Rachel's chest-level warm glow, but a cold light from above, casting their eyes into shade. Chapin observes Qwill's scars and unease, and pride and bravery. She sidesteps the hectoring quality of political art, and the use of the transgendered as pawns, as objects of utility, by both sides of the current debate about their role in society; she does it by maintaining in her approach to Qwill the same broad human love she brings to all her subjects. She allows Qwill to be simply human, an individual first and a representation of a group or idea later, if at all.

A further note on this broad human love in Chapin's work. Consider her painting "Roger," depicting a slender old man, his eye sharp, chin lifted, and body collapsing on itself only as much as it must.

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"Roger" (2015), oil on canvas, 84" x 50"

Chapin here depicts many of those elements which socialization and innate fear of mortality most teach us to recoil from. Roger's forehead is spotted, his eyes part-hidden under hardened, sagging lids. His neck is densely folded, his breast sinks, his rib cage resting on his belly has produced a permanent webbing of the skin. His belly button droops into a massively wrinkled lower belly. His testicles are thickly furred.

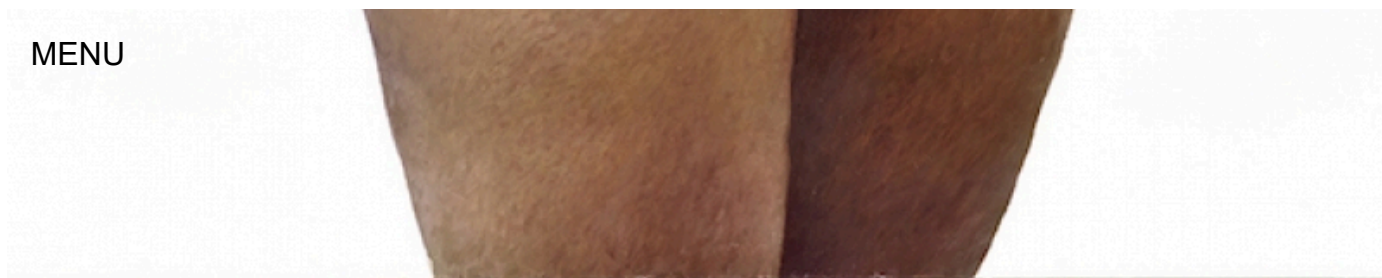
Bring to mind, if you will, Lucien Freud. Freud too was a close observer of those details of the body which repel us. And yet Freud was a pervert, which is to say, he was repelled by what he sought to see, and fed on his repulsion. He was obsessed with his own disgust. There is an ever-present quality of hate and of horror in his paintings of heavy flesh. Chapin, by contrast, teaches us not to fear and despise the corruption of the body. Her unflinching gaze, her Kubrickian centered figures and flat light, are the tools of a majestic and unfailing love.

What is the difference between Freud and Chapin? I believe it is this: that Freud is a materialist. He believes that the human being begins in the body and is limited to the body — that when we speak of humanity, we are ultimately speaking of meat. He is a materialist, but he cannot bear his own materialism. It torments him. He craves escape from it, but he cannot see any exit from the prison of meat save destruction, a destruction he depicts in its step-by-step progress over the days and years of long life. Chapin is not a materialist. She depicts human nature as a thing which begins before the body and survives it. The body for her is a station on a tremendous journey, an imperfect station to be celebrated in its strengths, and treated tenderly in its weaknesses, but either way, a single part of a much larger whole. If she endlessly depicts the nude body, it is only because this is the one part of the human journey which is immediately visible and comprehensible. Chapin the artist is a teacher.

Returning to the model of the body, not as object, but as flow, we see Chapin's application of the principle in her work. While Anderson invokes flow in the ground, Chapin moves it into the figure. Her gargantuan paintings only look photorealistic on a computer. In person, the roles of marks and paint are foregrounded. Chapin makes marks consistent with the direction of flow of the body. You can get a sense of it here, in "Cece."

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"Cece" (2015), oil on canvas, 84" x 50"

The marks from which her Cece is built are consistent with the tensions and textures of her flesh. They elongate into punctuated arabesques when they follow the stretch-marks on her thighs. They turn short and horizontal where her belly stretches her skin. They curve over her arms, following the direction of her muscles. They become little rounds where they lie over the distinct nodes of fat and glands in her breasts. They stretch out, small and smooth, over the tight skin and prominent bone of her chin, cheeks, and forehead. From a distance, "Cece" appears to be a depiction of structure, but standing before it, there is almost nothing but flow.

Chapin and Anderson both draw on the physiological flow of the human body to evoke the metaphysical flow of human identity in a vast and active universe. They invest life on Earth with dignity, without privileging it beyond what it can support. In identifying its role as sacred but subordinate, they remind the viewer of the real stakes of being.

I am going through a happy season of art-viewing. As with the work of so many painters lately — Jenny Morgan and Andrew Sendor, Inka Essenhigh and Odd Nerdrum — I am renewed in my sense of the scope of the possible, when I look at Anderson's and Chapin's paintings. Anderson and Chapin have pushed the depiction of the figure so far, with such ambition and discipline, that they broke new ground in their treatment of the oldest subject. Each, in her own way, teaches how to reclaim the eye and heart from the vagaries of the age. Their work begins in this, but the value of the work is not contingent on a contemporary context.

Imagine a viewer who approaches the work already in full possession of his or her faculties. This viewer too has much to learn: a deeper perspective, a greater forbearance, a humbler self-evaluation — more of the elements required by the ancient and uncompletable demand that we learn to see and love one another. **WM**

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Aleah Chapin 'Body/Being' at Flowers Gallery, New York

Aleah Chapin 'Body/Being' at Flowers Gallery, New York

By John Seed, Contributor
Professor of Art History

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Aleah Chapin, *Qwill*, 2015,
Oil on canvas, 84 x 50 in.

© Aleah Chapin, Courtesy of Flowers, London/New York

In her solo exhibition at Flowers Gallery--*Body/Being*-- artist Aleah Chapin is showing a series of monumentally-scaled nudes that navigate the boundaries of gender specificity, exploring both the male and female experience of the body. The series was partly inspired by the gender transformation experiences of Chapin's cousin Qwill, who recently came out as gender neutral. Chapin's frank, lovingly crafted nudes are powerfully human and uncannily present: painter Eric Fischl calls Chapin "the best and most disturbing painter of flesh alive today."

I recently interviewed Aleah Chapin to ask her about her background and her current work.

John Seed Interviews Aleah Chapin



Aleah Chapin: Photo by Hannah Wahl

I understand that you grew up on an island north of Seattle: tell me a bit about that....

Well it was a really wonderful place to grow up for many reasons, one being the community. My best friends now I've known since we were babies, they are probably more like siblings (many of their mothers are the "Aunties"). Another wonderful thing was the freedom to explore the natural environment and the connection with nature. Most of my time was spent in the woods making elaborate fairy houses or following deer through their narrow paths along steep hillsides. I think this feeling of safety with the natural world gave me a strong foundation of "home."

[illegible]

Oil on canvas, 84 x 50 in.

© Aleah Chapin, Courtesy of Flowers, London/New York

During your studies (both art Cornish and the New York Academy) what were you painting and how did you develop?

I came to Cornish with a very slim idea of what kind of art I wanted to make. I just wanted to paint and draw people (which is essentially what I do now) but from my first day there, my horizons exploded. I became interested in video art, installation, sculpture, performance and combining them all. It was an incredible time. But by the end of those 4 years, I came back to painting. This led me to apply to the New York Academy of Art where I was able to dive into my love of the figure and realism, but in a much more conscious way.

Moving across the country to this big city gave me the space to explore and I ended up looking right back at the world I came from. I had felt a lot of pressure (from myself) to make "big important paintings about big important things" which never worked. It wasn't until I realized - through being very overwhelmed and confused - that I needed to start at the beginning and just paint what I know. That's how the "Aunties Project" began, which was the base for so much and was the first work that really felt like I was being honest with myself.



Aleah Chapin, *Kara*, 2015,
Oil on canvas, 84 x 50 in.
© Aleah Chapin, Courtesy of Flowers, London/New York

Being a realist, representational artist is still seen by many as outside of the "mainstream" but you have received tremendous attention and recognition in a short time. Are you surprised, and how have you handled it all?

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Yes, I'm really surprised. Getting recognition for paintings of my naked friends and family was the last thing I thought would happen! I

made that work because I knew I had to make it, and because I had promised myself that during my time in graduate school, I would forget about "fitting in and making a living" and just focus on painting what I wanted to paint. It was such a surprise when people responded to those paintings. I wasn't expecting it at all, so at the beginning, I don't think I handled it very well, (although it may have seemed so on the outside.) Inside, I was really overwhelmed at the attention I was receiving.

I got solace out of the fact that I felt good about the work I was making, and I felt safe as long as I was in the studio being true to my own vision. I don't want to complain, since seriously I feel like the luckiest person in the world, but through the difficulties of being in the spotlight, I was able to develop some thick skin and realize that the only way through was to continue to create work I felt good about, no matter what anyone else said. And then of course there's the incredible feeling of knowing that by doing this work that is so very personal, I was affecting other people in a positive way as well. Knowing this gives me courage to continue every day.



Aleah Chapin, *Paula*, 2015,
Oil on canvas, 84 x 50 in.

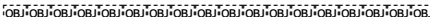
© Aleah Chapin, Courtesy of Flowers, London/New York

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The idea of the nude is often associated with perfection and/or heroism. Do you work in that tradition or against it?

Probably against it, but I also find perfection in imperfection and its incredibly important to me to paint people how they are. There is too much glossing over of reality and I know as a woman growing up in this world and struggling with my own body, that we need to see more images of real people. There is so much bravery in inhabiting your body fully, that standing strong in your imperfection is the definition of heroism to me.



 Aleah Chapin, *Roger*, 2015,
Oil on canvas, 84 x 50 in.
© Aleah Chapin, Courtesy of Flowers, London/New York

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Tell me about one of the paintings in your current show, and what you hope it captures.

One of the men I was lucky enough to work with was named Roger. He was an 84 year old man and when I first met with him, he told me he had cancer. He wasn't torn up about it, it just seemed like it was a fact of life. During our photo shoot, something was different about

him. It was an interesting contradiction between being comfortable and grounded in his body, and also not completely being there. He wasn't attached or self conscious. He just was who he was.

Not long after our initial meeting and photography session, he told me that something had changed and he didn't have much longer to live. I started the painting immediately and worked on it for about a month intensively. One night, when I was getting close to the final brush marks, the painting was giving off a feeling that usually alerts me that it's finished. But this feeling was stronger than it normally is. It was as if he was there in the studio with me, like the painting was more than what I had put into it. The next day, I found out he has passed away that previous evening.

This experience of creating a body through paint while being so aware that this man, Roger, was leaving his body was the most powerful painting experience I have ever had. I realized then that this show was about much more than gender. It was about what it really means to be in a body.

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What I hope this painting captures is that sense of life's delicacy and that intense relationship we have with the bodies through which we experience this world.



Aleah Chapin, *Rachel and Wes*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 84 x 50 in.
© Aleah Chapin, Courtesy of Flowers, London/New York

Given that you deal with deeply personal things -- including aging and gender -- do you ever find that viewers are embarrassed or confused by what you present? How about your subjects?

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Yes, I think people can be uncomfortable about the work I do, but less often than I would expect. The reactions I get mostly are incredibly humbling. People seem to see themselves in the work which is something I'm so grateful for. By creating such personal work, I hope to reach people on that universal level. My models themselves are the bravest people I know. They are exposing the raw and honest truth about themselves, giving up control to my vision as an artist, and letting what happens happen.



Aleah Chapin, *Emmett*,
2016, Oil on canvas, 84 x 50 in.
© Aleah Chapin, Courtesy of Flowers, London/New York

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Is there anything else about you or your art that needs to be mentioned?

Perhaps just a note about pronouns since much of this show is about gender. If you refer to Qwill, or Paula, both of them prefer to use gender neutral pronouns. This means "They, Them, etc" instead of "She or He". For Example "I'm so thankful to them for posing for the painting". I know it is grammatically incorrect when speaking about one person, and that's something that poses some very difficult challenges, but there seems to be no alternative right now. For Emmett, "He" is good. I know all of this can be pretty confusing, but I want to make sure that I show respect to my models. They give me so much of themselves, that this is really important to me.

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The Space Between Us: Aleah Chapin at Flowers Gallery



Biosphere, Aleah Chapin, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in, 2023

By DANIEL MAIDMAN October 10, 2023

As much as art is about expressing a vision, it is also about mastering the means of expression. Each artist compiles his or her own unique means of expression. The vision and the means are related to each other. The vision summons the means, and the means specifies and modifies the vision.

A serious, practicing artist will eventually master his or her means of expression, and the hour of mastery ends with a moment of decision: continue to do the same, or move on?

One artist may find that he has much of his vision left to say. He will delight in having achieved, at long last, the means of saying exactly what he means.

Another artist may find that with mastery of the means, she has completed the expression of her vision. She will feel driven to find not only new means, but a new vision.

I see Aleah Chapin as a hybrid of these types. I first encountered her work in 2012, when she was still in graduate school. She was refining her already-accomplished technique, painting large, extremely fleshly nudes. Her small, active brush marks and clean, distinct color mixes gave her figures a sense of animation at the most shockingly corpuscular level. Their flesh seemed to seethe with motion and life.

As she practiced, she built upward from this cellular vision to depictions of psychology, mood – personality. Her Auntie paintings consisted of oversized nudes of women of her mother's generation. These were portraits of the women who helped raise her in a radical, intentional community which has ebbed and flowed in semi-seclusion on Whidbey Island for decades now.



I've been writing about Chapin almost as long as she's been showing work. I wrote about the Auntie paintings and had the privilege of spending some time with the aunties. One can interpret life in all sorts of ways. The aunties seemed to me to see life as a form of energy. They share a vibrant quality. One catches, in their sparkling company, some hint of the land and air and sea of their home, and of their participation in it as in a single field of living energy.

It is a short leap from this attitude toward life, to Chapin's vision of the body, of consciousness emerging from the active flesh.

When the first round of Auntie paintings was complete, Chapin began to expand her compositional ambitions, working with environments and multiple figures. This allowed her to express interaction, community, and the relationship of her people and their landscape.



There Were Whispers Among The Branches, Aleah Chapin, oil on canvas, 88 x 70 in, 2017

During this period, her color became less clinical and more expressionistic. The full spectrum of her depiction of flesh gave way to cold overcast washes, or hot flashes of sunset.

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She had mastered her means of expression and was approaching the outer limits of her vision. At the same time, she was very successful. Her work was recognizable, appreciated, expensive, and sought-after. This can create a real bind for an artist. After all, you already took the insane risk of becoming an artist and... *it worked out*. Are you going to throw it all away and roll the dice on your hard labor finding an audience a second time? Don't forget that you're definitely going to have to eat and pay the phone bill.

Chapin threw it all away.

Compelled by an inner restlessness, she began seeking a means of expressing living energy not as an echo in finely-rendered flesh, but directly, in itself. In an act of pure faith in the guidance of her muse, Chapin abandoned a decade or more of study and refinement. Chrysalis-like, she dissolved her high technique in a bath of paint, producing a series of beautifully improvisational studies, small and large, in which fragments of rendered figures emerged from flowing color fields and abstract gestural brushwork.



The Waking, Aleah Chapin, oil on canvas, 48 x 40 in, 2021

In these works, all of the elements of a new system were present but their butterfly order was not yet apparent. With the work in her new show, *The Space Between Us*, Chapin has made another leap. This leap has formal and thematic components, and I'd like to discuss each in detail.

At the formal level, she has achieved the seamless synthesis she was seeking of representational and abstract elements.

The problem of synthesizing representation and abstraction has haunted art for a while now. We are all familiar with the isolated representational element floating in a field of brushmarks or of colors. One can also analyze the maturation of Rothko and Mondrian especially as a progression from representation to abstraction. In their intermediate paintings, representational and abstract elements are both present. However, the abstraction is chasing away the representation. Because abstraction is the younger mode and has more to prove, this chasing-away is the most common dynamic when both representation and abstraction are self-consciously included in the work. The full embrace of both modes has rarely, if ever, occurred.

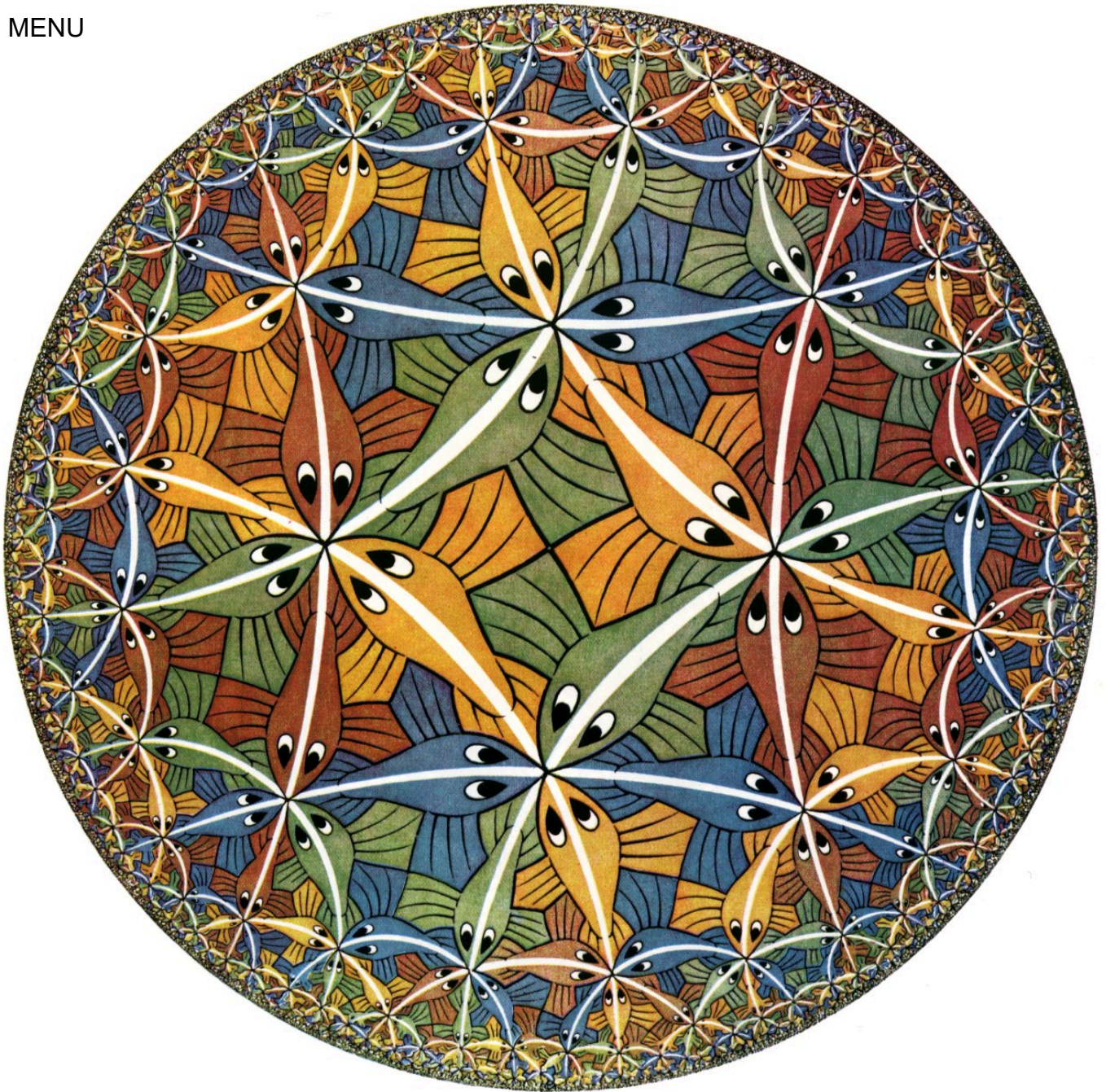
Even if one could find an artist who did love both modes, the problem of exactly *how* to do it is formidable. It is possible that there are many solutions. Chapin, at least, has found one.

Consider her painting *Collapsing Out* from *The Space Between Us*:



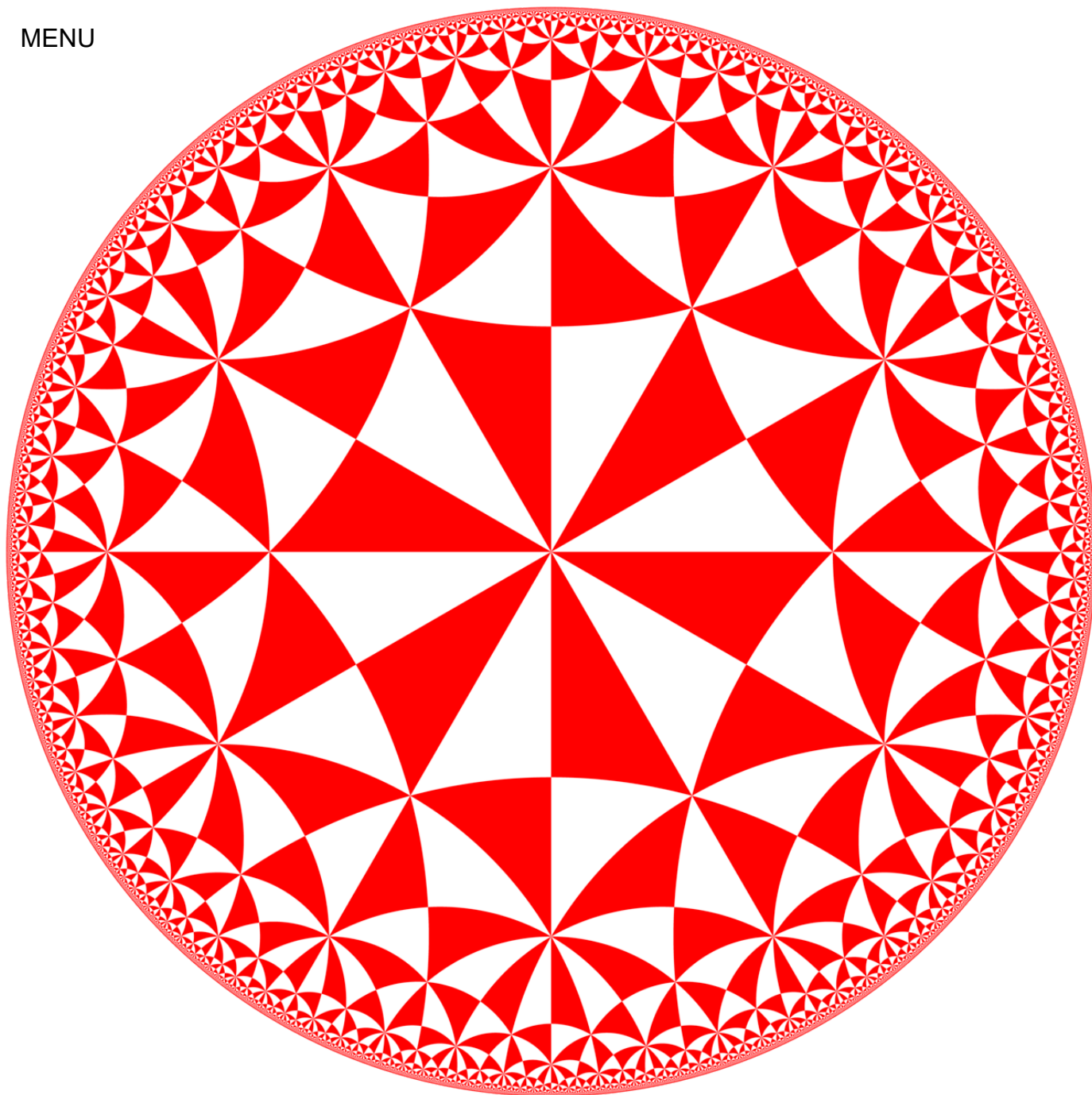
Collapsing Out, Aleah Chapin, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in, 2023

Chapin's solution is fundamentally mathematical. Compare her division of the plane with Escher's *Circle Limit III*:



Circle Limit III, M.C. Escher, woodcut, 1959

Escher's image is itself a whimsical interpretation of the Poincaré disk model, a projection of two-dimensional hyperbolic geometry into a circle. This is not an intuitive link on his part or mine – Escher was specifically aware of the Poincaré disk model, and this particular one inspired his *Circle Limit* series:



*(6,4,2) triangular hyperbolic tiling [courtesy of Wikipedia
(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poincar%C3%A9_disk_model)]*

So Poincaré and Escher got there first for this general compositional idea. But I am awarding Chapin the prize for seeing how it could unite representational and abstract painting. She was the first who found her way to the potential of this geometry.

In many ways, this parallels how we award the relativistic model of spacetime to Einstein. Did he come up with the math? No. That was Bernhard Riemann. Einstein simply saw its potential to describe the actual universe.

(Amusingly, Riemann also came up with the Poincaré disk model – Poincaré popularized it.)

As I was saying, like Einstein, Chapin saw the potential hidden in a division of space which diminishes in area as it recedes toward its boundary. Look again at *Collapsing Out*. Large open areas occur at its center, and Chapin fills these with her rigorous, tight representation. Her only non-representational element here is her heavy outlining of forms.

But as the eye moves out toward the edge of the composition, the open areas become ever narrower. And with each decrease, they shed representation. From complete torsos, they recede to fragmentary views of limbs, and then to tonal gradients, and finally to purely textural abstract brushstrokes. The cloisonné-like outlines remain throughout, asserting a flat hierarchy, an equality of importance for each area from the most representational to the most abstract.

This is an astonishing synthesis, a presentation of representation and abstraction as organically and necessarily related poles of a seamless continuum. I have never in my life seen anything like it.

But Chapin is a humanist in a way that Escher is not. The formal breakthrough is only part of what she is seeking in her work. Her earlier paintings drew from and referred to her mother and her mother's friends. She was seeking to locate and identify herself within a community and a place. She has not abandoned this impulse. Chapin's mother, Deborah Koff-Chapin, is also an artist, and raised her daughter not only in the wilderness, but at the drawing table. Koff-Chapin's "touch drawing" expresses, and has always expressed, a transcendental vision of the human individual as a barely-discernable node in a sea of moving energy.



Untitled (SC070), Deborah Koff-Chapin, etching ink on paper, 18 x 24 in, 1999

There are surprisingly few fundamentally distinct ways to conceptualize the human experience and the universe in relation to it. (For instance, I myself subscribe to the energy model, with the twist that I see the entire energy field as an idea in the mind

of God. This has no implications for free will; my own ideas surprise me all the time, including this one, which I did not know I held until I asked myself about it just now.) Regardless of Aleah Chapin's background, the narrow range of models of humanity-and-the-cosmos means she could well have stumbled on the "sea of energy" metaphysic and found that it resonated with her. But her background is that it was offered to her by her mother as an inheritance, and in her new work, Chapin directly explores this metaphysic and the imagery which naturally arises from it. She has completed her portraits of her extended family, but has found a new path to work at defining herself and her outlook in the context of her ancestors.

All of this lays the groundwork, as it were, for what exactly these paintings are about. I think they are about this set of propositions and questions:

Let us suppose that the universe is indeed characterized by a vast and moving energy field, a life force. Then in this context –

What is my nature as an individual?

What is the nature of my encounter with other individuals? Is it possible to be together, and if so, in what does that togetherness consist? In an all-contacting energy field, is it even theoretically possible to be apart?

These are profound questions. More than that, they may be real. So what does Chapin find?



First Light, Aleah Chapin, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in, 2023

To me, this self-portrait addresses the first question:

What is my nature as an individual?

In my mind, it tells a story. The story starts as follows:

~~Menu~~
In the beginning was the womb, and the womb was light, and the womb was full of light.

From this primordial glare of brilliance, a world unfolds like a flower. The solipsistic composition yields a canvas which is entirely the self. An abstract core expands and refines into representation, until we come to two figurative elements which particularly repeat in Chapin's work: feet, which seem always to represent grounding and connection to the Earth – and the face, which conveys emotion and thought. In *First Light*, the feet touch only each other because there is not yet an Earth for them to rest upon. And the eyes are squeezed shut – she is not sleeping or relaxing, but rather picturing something. I think she is picturing the world. Her face completes the circuit of the painting: the light created her and she in turn creates the light.

So in Chapin's interpretation of the metaphysic, the individual has two natures – one nature is generalized and abstract and participates in the universal, and the other nature separates from the universal to form a unique personality which can be conveyed only through the tightest of representation.

Now what about the second question?

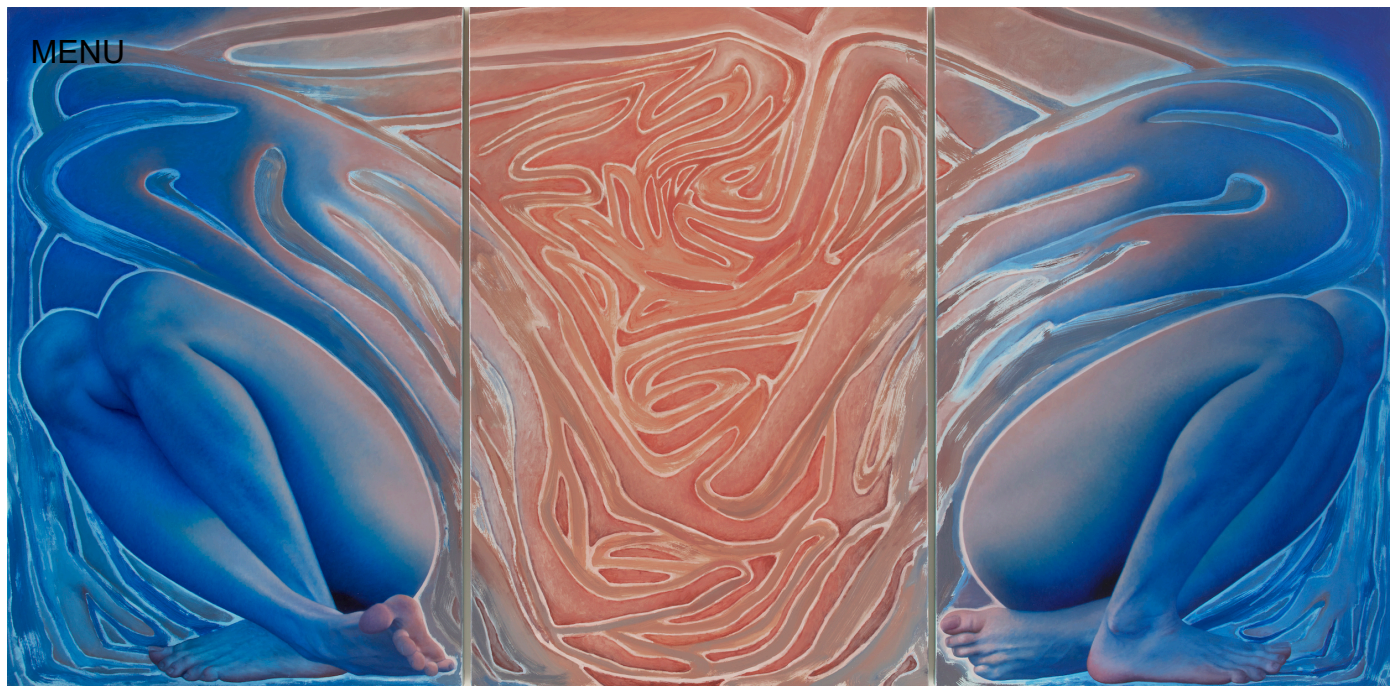
What is the nature of my encounter with other individuals? Is it possible to be together, and if so, in what does that togetherness consist? In an all-contacting energy field, is it even theoretically possible to be apart?

Two paintings in this body of work give us her proposal on this subject. Consider *Held/Holding*:



Held/Holding, Aleah Chapin, oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in, 2023

In this composition, we see two figures joined in two ways: they are embracing, which speaks to individuality and choice. And their energetic selves, the ripples that expand out to the edge of the universe, are mixed. The painting suggests that togetherness is both a matter of choice and an essential quality of mere being. A second painting tends to reinforce this doctrine:



The Space Between Our Separateness, Aleah Chapin, oil on canvas (triptych,, 60 x 120 in, 2022

Here we see two figures who have decided to be separate from one another. In the cold and distinct light of the physical world, they appear to be apart. Each has one foot planted on that physical ground. But each also has one foot turned toward the warm, abstract, inward light at the center of the composition. Here at the center we see their energetic selves. Hints of hands reach toward one another. The lines are tangled, but they all connect. At the conscious level, a choice has been made, and at the inherent and universal level, the opposite choice is compelled.

In an all-contacting energy field, is it even theoretically possible to be apart?

No, it isn't.

This feels like a lot of ideas and references to lay on the shoulders of some paintings. But, for me at least, one huge purpose of art is to stimulate ideas. I have been writing about Chapin's work for over a decade now because I never stop having new and interesting ideas when I contemplate her art. What I'm writing here may not be what she intended, or even anything she would agree with, but I have no doubt it is a burden her tremendous paintings can bear.

Aleah Chapin: <http://www.aleahchapin.com> (<http://www.aleahchapin.com/about>)

Interview with Aleah Chapin

Aleah Chapin is renowned for her unflinching nude portraits of older women, relatives, and friends. Described by painter Eric Fischl as “*the best and most disturbing painter of flesh alive today*,” Chapin’s bold and intimate portrayals of the human figure have broadened the debate around the visibility of aging in representations of the body.

Over the past year, Chapin has taken an increasingly intuitive approach to painting, resulting in a radical shift in style and process.

In anticipation of her upcoming solo exhibition at the Flowers Gallery in Hong Kong, we sat down with the artist to talk about her creative evolution.

Your latest body of work is quite different compared with your work in the past. What are some of the key characteristics differentiating these recent paintings from your prior ones?

The short answer is that I used to paint what I could see in the world outside, and now my work is coming from the inside. I know that is pretty vague, so the longer answer is that I have been a realist figurative painter my whole life and my subject has mainly been other people. I would do photoshoots and then use these photos as references for paintings. This new work starts out in an entirely different way. I meditate in my studio and then do multiple quick, automatic drawings with paint on

paper, often with my non-dominant hand. My subject is my imagination and what I feel in my body. Then I take these drawings and photograph my own body (which I never used to do) in the postures discovered through the drawings. Using these images, plus photographs of my garden or other wild places, I construct compositions that merge realism and abstract expression into a cohesive image. In the end, they are still entirely oil paintings, but instead of pure realism, this new work uses whatever visual language feels like it can say what I need it to say.

Aleah Chapin, *The Unearthing*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 48 x 40".

What has been the turning point for you that stirred you in this new direction of painting?

There have been many small turning points I think. I've spent my life training my eyes and hands to work together to express what I see in the external world in a highly realistic and controlled way. It used to be so much fun, but it started to be less fun, less magical, more of a feeling of painting myself into a corner. I still love realism, but there is just so much more inside of me that can't be expressed in that language anymore.

How has the pandemic affected your creative process?

In all honesty, I'm not sure if my work would have changed if not for the pandemic. I was feeling the pull before Covid hit, but the space and time that lockdown gave me, plus the feeling that the world was turning inside out, just allowed it all to happen.

These new paintings are all self portraits in a way, and I think the isolation of the pandemic gave me a clearer view of myself (which was not always a comfortable thing). The world just got quiet enough for me to hear and see what was inside.

What are some of the emotions or stories you wish to convey through your work?

I don't have specific emotions or stories in mind, that's really up to the viewer and what they bring to the work. But I think I just want people to come away feeling a little less alone in this "being human" thing. It's f*cking hard, and beautiful, and everything in between and that's all okay.

Aleah Chapin, *The Melting*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 48 x 40".

Who are some of your favorite fellow artists?

Oh so many! Here are just a few: Jenny Saville, Maja Ruznic, Inka Essenhigh, Jenny Morgan, Emily Adams, Jo Hay, Lily Koto Olive, Dorielle Caimi, Loie Hollowell, Ken Currie, Ishbel Myerscough and Nicola Hicks. Unintentionally mostly women!

Could you tell us what a day in the life of Aleah Chapin looks like?

Well, first there's coffee and meditation and taking my dog Juniper out. Then on an ideal day, I spend the rest of my time in the studio listening to good music or an audiobook and painting. I might have an afternoon walk or do some gardening. Then my evening is spent having dinner with my husband and reading or watching a

good movie or show. On less ideal days, I have to be on my computer doing the "business" side of things, but all in all, I'm still grateful this is my full time job!

What are some things that you are looking forward to next year?

Good question. Since Covid, I don't plan so far ahead anymore, but I'm looking forward to a year of painting. Since changing my work, I just feel like there's so much that needs to come out and I'm excited (and a bit nervous) about what that will look like. I'm also looking forward to watching my garden grow. It's fall now, and the plants are sinking into winter, but I know that Spring will come and seeing those first green shoots in January, followed by a slow, long spring and an explosion of color in May, just fills my whole body with light.

Aleah Chapin's solo exhibition titled *Walking Backwards* will be on view at the Flowers Gallery Hong Kong from November 20, 2021 - January 15, 2022.

Aleah Chapin, *The Opening*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 48 x 40".

News

News 2024

UA Little Rock ArtWORKs Lecture Series to Host Aleah Chapin

UA Little Rock ArtWORKs Lecture Series to Host Aleah Chapin

Angelita Faller | February 16, 2024



Aleah Chapin

UA Little Rock will host painter Aleah Chapin for a lecture as part of the artWORKS series, made possible through the Windgate Foundation.

The lecture will take place on Friday, Feb. 23, at 6 p.m. in room 101 of the Windgate Center for Art and Design.

Chapin's art investigates the way the human body is typically expressed in contemporary Western art and seeks to expand beyond that. Her work explores what it means to exist in a body, and includes topics such as aging, gender, and beauty.

Chapin holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from the New York Academy of Art and has received many accolades for her work as a painter, including winning the Promising Young Painters Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery. Her art is featured in several publications, such as New American Paintings, ArtMaze Magazine, and 50 Contemporary Women Artists.

For more information about Chapin, visit [her website](#).

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News

Contact Information

Aleah Chapin

4 Oct — 4 Nov 2017 at the Flowers Gallery in London, United Kingdom

18 OCTOBER 2017



Aleah Chapin. Courtesy of Flowers

Intimate, revealing and personal, the latest paintings by American artist Aleah Chapin explore the passage of time as seen through the body; depicting friends and relations, all of whom she has known throughout her life growing up in a unique island community on the US Pacific Northwest Coast.

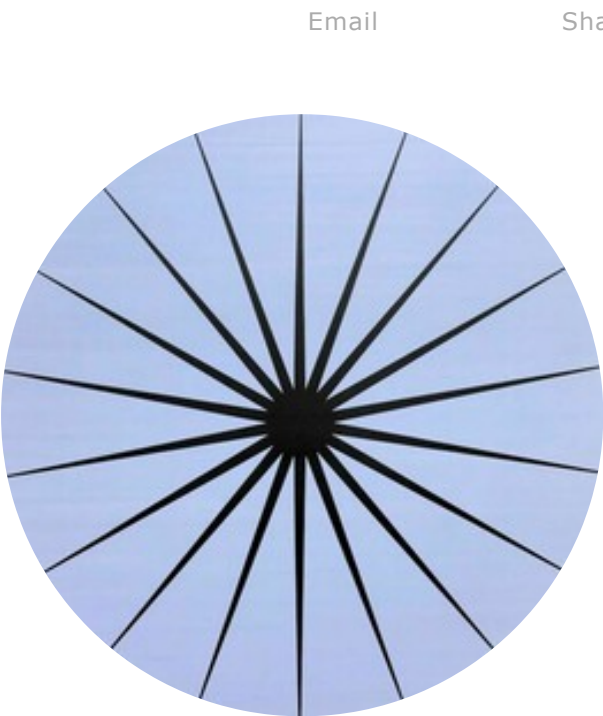
Following on from her internationally renowned Aunties series, Chapin's latest monumental canvases continue to open up a lesser-represented view of the female form, expanded to include the aging figures of women in the later stages of life. Set within a wild Pacific landscape, Chapin portrays the physical journey of the body in poetic terms, imbuing the forms of the older women with natural, sensuous vitality. The paintings in the exhibition Within Wilds portray mysterious scenes where elderly women perform joyful nymph-like dances against the backdrop of moonlit mountains and forests. Groups of intertwined figures jostle and cling to one another, and in the case of the painting *There Were Whispers Among the Branches*, they huddle together, apparently sharing secrets.

In a painting titled *Under the Curve of Time*, Chapin traces the effects of childbirth on the body, evoking not only the closeness of mother and child, but also a sensory connection to place and time through the soft carpet of forest grasses and fir trees stirring around the figures. Similarly, the warm bodily glow of the dancing trio of figures in *Our Shouts Were Drowned in the Stars*, (striking a pose reminiscent of Rubens' *The Three Graces*,) brings to attention the cold, dark stone of the mountain range in the distance, smoothed and worn over millennia by the extreme coastal weather.

Following a recent return to live in the Pacific Northwest, Chapin has focused on the detail of her natural surroundings. Wildflowers found underfoot in this environment, such as *Muscari* and *Taraxacum*, are portrayed on smaller canvases. Painted in dark tones and covered in dew, the paintings summon memories of the fresh earth scent of the dawn forest; connecting the wildness and timelessness of the natural world with the lived experience of the physical human body.

Of Chapin’s work, artist Eric Fischl has said: “Aleah Chapin is the best and most disturbing painter of flesh alive today. The precision of her details, her insistence that no blemish, wrinkle, mole or lump be glossed over or hidden, she fearlessly observes aging and the reality of our physicality without any sense of regret or disappointment. In these times where plastic surgery, breast enhancement, anti-aging creams, and Spanx are the preferred solutions to dealing with the complex feelings and fears that come with diminishing power and the inevitability of death, Chapin’s paintings have to be seen as heroic and radical.”

Born in 1986, Aleah Chapin grew up on an island north of Seattle, WA. She received her BFA from Cornish College of the Arts in 2009 and her MFA from the New York Academy of Art in 2012. Chapin attended a residency at the Leipzig International Art Programme in Germany and has exhibited her work in the US, the Netherlands, Germany and the UK. Recent exhibitions have included the 2016 Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York; and The Ingram Collection: Bodies, Woking, UK. Aleah has recently won the Willard L. Metcalf Award in Art from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She has been a recipient of the Posey Foundation Scholarship, Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant and a Postgraduate Fellowship from the New York Academy of Art; Chapin won the BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2012. She lives and works in Seattle.



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Flowers Gallery

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Gallery profile

Location	Founded in
London, United Kingdom	1970







1. Aleah Chapin. Courtesy of Flowers
2. Aleah Chapin. Courtesy of Flowers
3. Aleah Chapin. Courtesy of Flowers

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A New Nude: Aleah Chapin's Aunties

While the paintings resist an antiquated tone, the imagery brings to mind an ancient earth-mother archetype, within whom authority and flesh are intrinsically bound.

By Julia Clift, Contributor
artist

Feb 26, 2013, 11:20 AM EST
Updated Apr 28, 2013

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Editor's note: The photographs below contain nudity.

I discovered the work of Aleah Chapin while perusing the New York Academy of Art's MFA show in 2012, and I was instantly moved by her painterly skill and subject matter. Throughout her recent "Aunties" series, Chapin wields nudity in a novel way to honor and empower her subjects.

While paintings like "Auntie" and "Momo" are more or less straightforward, richly detailed nudes, they hardly come across as stiff or academic. The cool, overall lighting and minimal white backgrounds, accented with abstract, expressive marks, place the aunties squarely in a modern perspective. The context saves the nudity from coming across as an unintentional consequence of painting in a traditional paradigm, i.e., it keeps the painstakingly rendered bodies fresh. Yet while the paintings resist an antiquated tone, the imagery brings to mind an ancient earth-mother archetype, within whom authority and flesh are intrinsically bound. Even more so in group portraits like "Step" and "Twoness," the women take on an unearthly, goddess-like status, and the nudity begins to feel like simply their most natural state of being. The women press and lean against each other, creating a communal embrace and the impression of mutual acceptance. Their un-self-conscious, ungraceful gestures express total ease, reinforcing a sense of every day normalcy within these worlds.

Collectively, the paintings suggest a non-literal, transcendental place that can be reached through family, or simply community. Teetering on the edge of geometric, abstract shapes, the bare-bones landscape featured in several paintings conjures an idea of place more than it describes a physical location. By abstracting the landscape, Chapin encourages a non-literal interpretation of the "place" where the aunties are unified and grounded.

Mostly, the paintings represent a personal project. The aunties are a group of women who've been part of Chapin's life since birth, and, in the artist's own words, the series "examines [her] personal history through the people who have shaped it." But there is also a social commentary embedded in the work. As Daniel Maidman brought up in his Huff Post review this January:

"... Chapin won the BP Portrait Award last year, an important British award...and you should have seen the vitriol in the comment threads of online articles about the painting, the whining and bitching about "why do I have to look at this woman?" So -- yes, it's an issue."

Aleah Chapin must have anticipated these reactions to the series. In fact, I can't help but read this entire body of work as, in part, a tremendous response to our culture's unbalanced valuation of women. The Aunties series celebrates the wisdom and authority that comes with age and experience and denies our cultural impulse to "cover up" the older, venerable body. Moreover, throughout the Aunties series, a woman's nakedness indicates self-possession and truth, a rare and powerful sight in contemporary painting. Yet the beauty of Chapin's work is that it remains uncluttered with agenda. The cultural reflection is more like the back side of the coin, or an afterthought yoked to a poignant interpretation of family.

Aleah Chapin's Aunties Project is currently on view at Flowers Gallery in New York through February 23, 2013, 529 West 20th St., New York, NY 10011.

All images courtesy of the artist.

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