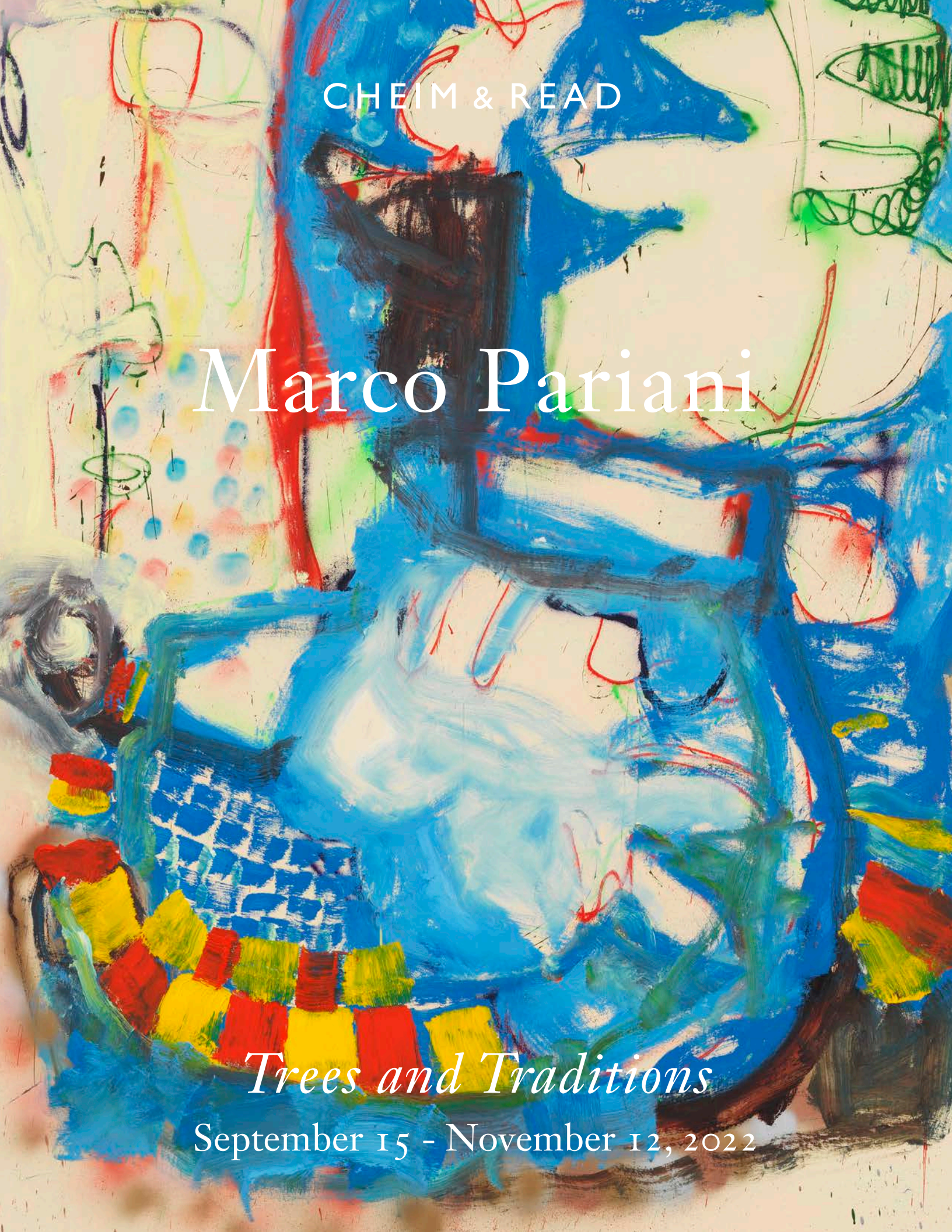


CHEIM & READ

Marco Pariani

Trees and Traditions

September 15 - November 12, 2022

Marco Pariani: Painting Against the Image
Barry Schwabsky

During a recent studio visit, I asked Marco Pariani about the fact that in all his paintings, the forms are well contained by the rectangle—that they never intersect with the edges of the canvas. He explained it as a matter of feeling, not of a rule, but then went on to point out that if the canvas been cropped at the point where it met a certain gesture, that mark might have begun to look like the work of an Abstract Expressionist—and that, he said, he wants to avoid at all cost. He wants his paintings to convey the feeling of now, and not that of a historical moment that's passed.

This focus on the now is a mantra with Pariani. It's also how he explains his decision to move from his home country of Italy to Brooklyn. Of course Italy is beautiful and he loves it, but he found it hard to practice a contemporary form of painting there; at the Brera Academy where he studied, for instance, his fellow students were so attached to tradition that they castigated his efforts to make his own way into painting as rule-breaking.

In art, of course, there are no rules beyond the ones that artists give themselves, and which they can rescind, revise, or breach at will. Sometimes the violation of a rule becomes the new rule, at least for a while. Pariani is one of those artists—and they are not rare—who had to uproot himself to live this freedom as he wants to, though it surely would have been more comfortable for him not to do so.

In any case, as I observed Pariani's paintings, I had to wonder just why it was that the containment of his forms gave him (and me too) a feeling of greater immediacy, greater presentness, than they might have had if they impinged on the edges of the canvas. It's paradoxical. After all, if you look back to the Abstract Expressionists whose work he does not want his own to evoke too strongly, you'll see how often they used that device to heighten the painting's energetic charge; one feel that the vital force of the work is overcoming all boundaries —this is most obvious in the art of Franz Kline, but Willem de Kooning and Lee Krasner and others, too, often did something similar, albeit in a subtler and more complex way. Pariani's forms, by contrast, subsist within a space and against a ground. And likewise, the energy with which he engages the act of painting is one that occurs within and against the form, within and against the image.

Whereas the Abstract Expressionists wanted to minimize the figure/ground duality in their work, Pariani emphasizes it. The preparation of the ground is a step-by-step, painstaking process of layering acrylic and gesso that, the artist emphasizes, takes about a week. (Incidentally, he works alone in the studio—this is not a job he consigns to an assistant.) He's described his modus operandi as "like a chemical process," going on to admit, "I almost hate preparing canvases. Meanwhile, I need it, I need time to just process work and not use

my fantasy, my brain, you know what I mean?"[1] It's a process that sounds a bit Zen, except for the part about hating to do it: this ostensibly preparatory work functions a sort of meditation that clears away the strictures of rationalistic judgment, but in doing so, he prepares himself not for calmness and equanimity, not for a gentle acceptance of what is, but rather for doing battle with his imagery. And that, contrary to the slowness of preparation lavished on the grounds, happens quickly and decisively, despite the complexity of the results.

And at this point I should say a word about that imagery. It's not necessarily easy to make out at first glance. Well, actually, you just can't, though titles such as Candy Roof Tree, Duck Float Tree, or Christmas Blue and Green—all of works from 2022—just might begin to clue you in: These paintings are based on screen shots of online images of Christmas trees and decorations. The imagery of this holiday has been a primary source for Pariani for some time—and I should say, specifically, it's the American imagery of the holiday that has drawn his attention. Having lived in Italy myself, I don't remember ever noticing the same fervor for outsized ornamentation there as we go in for in this country. I imagine it must make quite an impression on an expat. In any case, Pariani has let it be known that for a while now the forms in his paintings have typically been inspired by found photographs of inflatable Christmas decorations—a strange category of objects for anyone to become engaged with, and one whose existence I'd never particularly thought about until speaking with Pariani about his work. Not that I think this choice of subject matter is so important in itself; what I want to call attention to is the fact that the inflatables from which Pariani draws his imagery are self-contained objects, but ones whose scale can be overwhelming —I note that many of those shown on the Home Depot website, for instance, are of more than human size, up to twelve feet; they are really something like temporary architectural features. That is, they are objects that are also, in a way, portable places—environments. And by focusing, in these most recent paintings, on trees, Pariani might be said to have ventured into the realm of landscape painting.

A landscape, however, is in principle something encompassing; and even in a painting of small scale, an artist will usually try to convey a sense of the vastness of the natural world around us. In Pariani's paintings, on the other hand, and despite their fairly large dimensions—those in this show are 72 or 80 inches high—his rather unnatural (or rather, denatured) images of nature, framed by their more or less monochromatic fields, remain quite contained, or one might even say: encapsulated. This is nature, not as context, but as a sort of object.

Apparently it is just this framing and encapsulation of the motif—the fact that the painting and the image it bears do not coincide—that makes possible the work's sense of contemporaneity. Why should that be? My suggestion is that it underlines that the painting is pictorial, that it is a picture of something, and not primarily self-referential or autonomous. Even though we can experience the painting as in many ways abstract, and even though we may not be able to get from it much of an idea of what the photograph on which Pariani

based it really showed or looked like. And of course that's no accident. Remember what I said before: Pariani is painting against the image. But he is doing so without denying its status as an image. The painting batters the image, you might almost say brutalizes it, and leaves it almost unrecognizable. Such a procedure may not be unprecedented in modernist abstraction—think of de Kooning's Woman I, 1950-52—but it has been the exception that proves the rule. Contemporary abstraction does not have to negate the image, as modernist abstraction so often did.

If Pariani's imagism separates his work from its roots in abstraction, it is his violently energetic painterliness that differentiates it from another artistic tradition with which it would seem to have some connection, the one that leads from the Pop art of the 1960s to the commodity fetish art of the 1980s. Pariani's subject matter could easily have been material for Jeff Koons-style aggrandizement. But Pariani's intention is quite different. Koons, of course, goes all in on banality and, having described his project as being "to educate people about materialism through my work. I try to show them real visual luxury," sees it as an unequivocally positive force.[2] I doubt Pariani would agree. I suspect that the banality of mass culture as embodied in Christmas decorations is—as he said about the surfaces he conscientiously prepares—something he both hates and needs. Surely for him, as for most of us, this banal culture of ours is something impossible to avoid participating in, a sort of monster that swallows everything with its smile—but it can't be assimilated in any direct way with the culture of art, as Koons imagines.

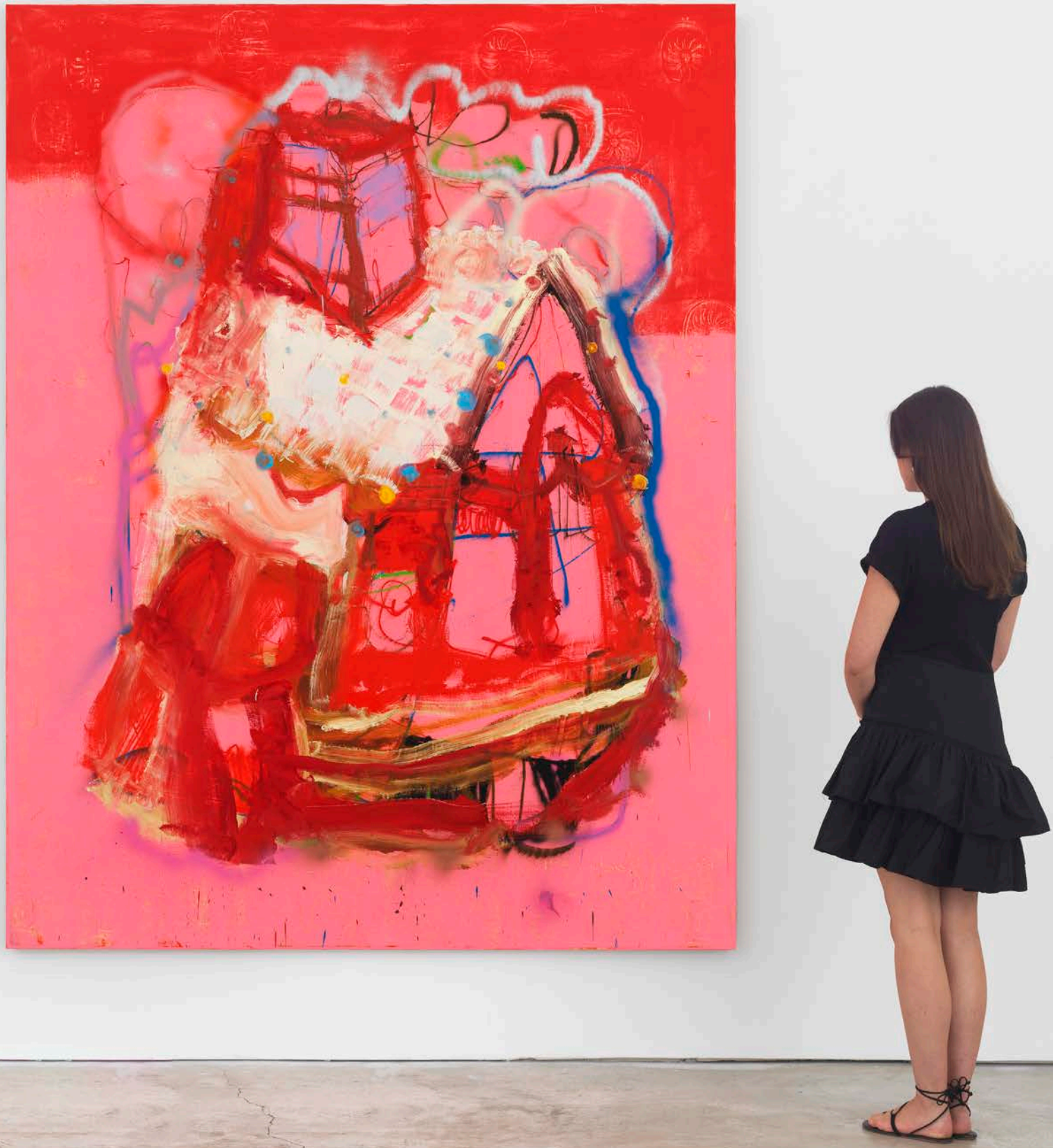
Painting is something distinct from the culture that surrounds it. Pariani's art simultaneously acknowledges that surround and maintains its autonomy through a kind of fascinated struggle. The banal image has to be transmuted into something that is unequivocally and emphatically painting and not merely a picture of something, even though it is also that. One can sometimes specify the painting's imagistic content, but usually only with some degree of doubt; to take an example, I can't help seeing the upper left portion of the figure in Santa Claus Tree Ornament, 2021, as a human head (two green eyes, a green ear) but I wouldn't lay money on anyone else seeing it the same way, at least not until after I've planted that idea in their mind; but then how, for instance, does the golden spray-painted branching form that rises above this "head"—a single reindeer antler, maybe?—relate to it? Probably such asking questions is the wrong way to engage with a painting like this. Better to pay closer attention to color, line, facture as semi-autonomous elements, ones that have at best an asymptotic relation to any descriptive function. The artist says that he's unconcerned with whether viewers recognize the objects he's painted—that it's more rewarding to him "when people tell me that my work is recognizable as mine, that they can say it's a Pariani without seeing my name below."[3] I suspect that's a satisfaction he will be getting more and more often. For the viewer, too, to see a Pariani gives greater pleasure than making out a coherent image.

[1] "A Romantic Abstraction: Interview with Marco Pariani," https://v1gallery.com/newspost/a-romantic-abstraction-artist-interview-with-marco-pariani/.

[2] Emma Brockes, "Interview: Jeff Koons: 'People respond to banal things – they don't accept their own history,'" *The Guardian*, July 5, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jul/05/jeff-koons-people-respond-to-banal-things-they-dont-accept-their-own-history.

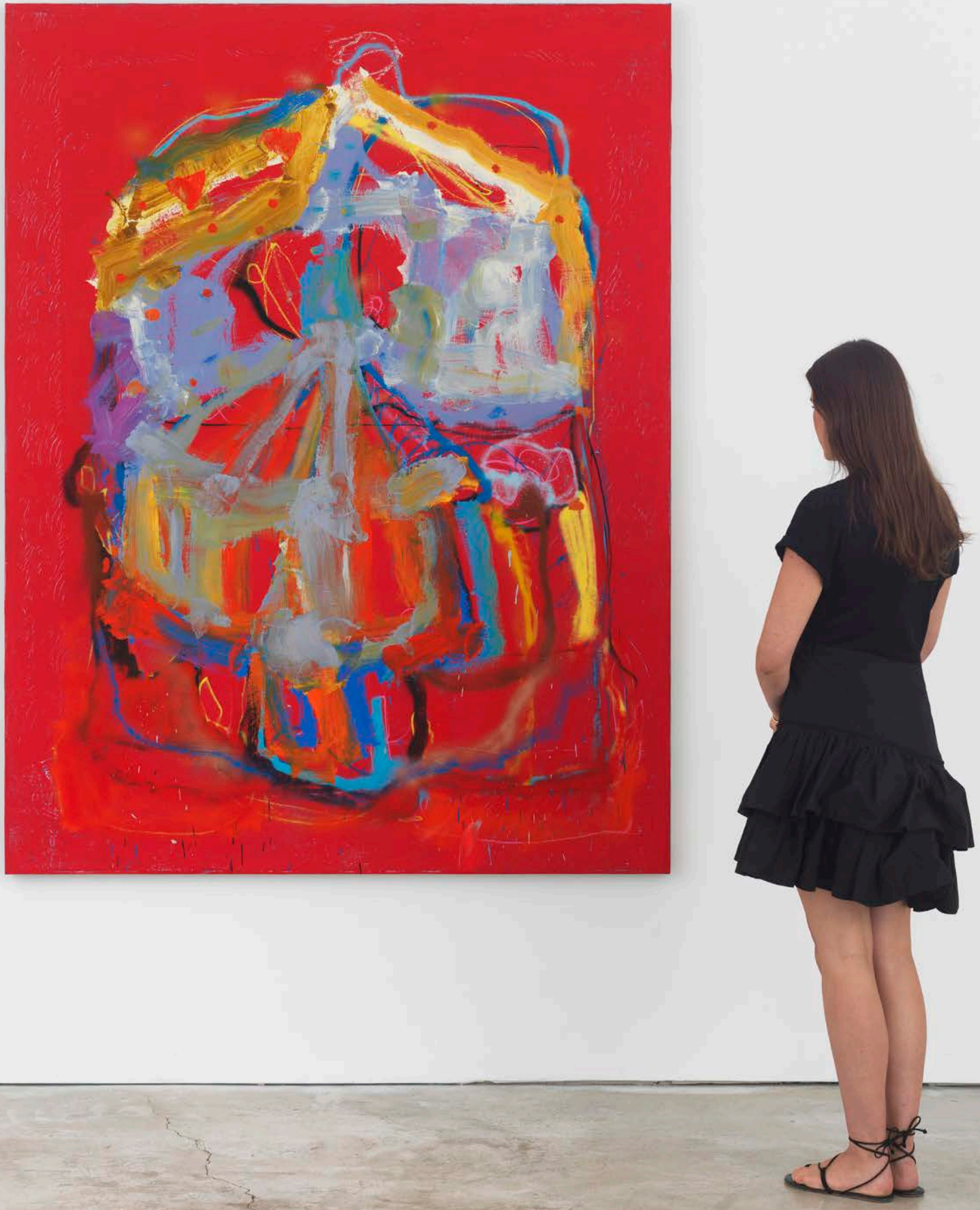
[3] "A Romantic Abstraction."

Trees and Lights, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
96 x 72 in. / 243.8 x 182.9 cm.



A Tree on the Sidewalk, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
96 x 72 in. / 243.8 x 182.9 cm.

Tree, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
80 x 61 in. / 203.2 x 154.9 cm.



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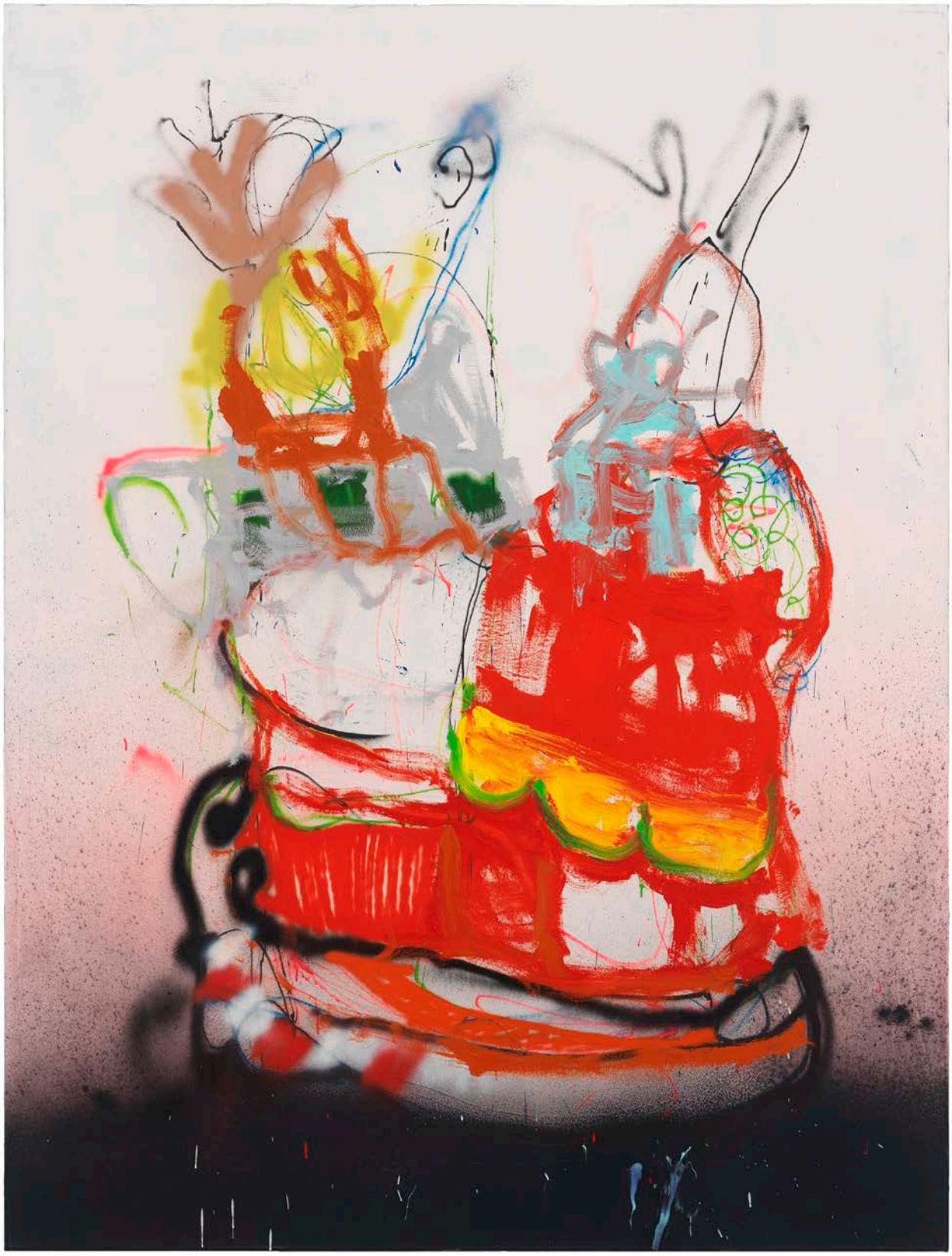
Untitled Tree, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
80 x 61 in. / 203.2 x 154.9 cm.

A Tree Framed by Pigeons, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas.
80 x 61 in. / 203.2 x 154.9 cm.

Abandoned Tree, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
80 x 61 in. / 203.2 x 154.9 cm.



Santa Claus Tree Ornament, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
80 x 61 in. / 203.2 x 154.9 cm.

Candy Roof Tree, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
73 x 53 in. / 185.4 x 134.6 cm.

Christmas Blue and Green, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas.
78 x 59 in. / 198.1 x 149.9 cm.

Guinness World Record Tree, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
80 x 61 in. / 203.2 x 154.9 cm.

Duck Float Tree, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
72 x 53 in. / 182.9 x 134.6 cm.

Garbage Tree, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
80 x 61 in. / 203.2 x 154.9 cm.

Violet Bluish Tree, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on linen.
80 x 61 in. / 203.2 x 154.9 cm.

Italian Tree, 2022. Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas.
72 x 53 in. / 182.9 x 134.6 cm.