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BERKE DOĞANOĞLU

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Berke Doğanoğlu's paintings deliberate on the material existence and vulnerability of the human body, while keeping the figures' anonymity through strategies of fragmentation and deconstruction. His textured, carefully and parsimoniously lit canvases operate through the physicality of painting, as metaphors for the human body and psyche, while his compositional choices set a parallel between portraiture and landscape painting. An empathetic and tactile relationship emerges from these paintings, activates the bodily unconscious and invites the viewer to identify, self-recognize and project their own narratives and associations onto them.

Berke Doğanoğlu's paintings belong to a private world, one that is slightly removed. In most cases, the eyes are obscured, the head is removed or the figure turns its back on the viewer. In cases where the figure's gaze is discernible, they remain introspective and mediated through an archival or photographic distance. The textured, disorderly brush marks match the animate quality of the flesh as well as its entropy, creating surfaces where the densities seem fleeting like a touch, in motion, always rearrangeable into another kind of order. The detachment thus obtained provides a fertile ground to host the viewers' projections but also minor histories and a world of references from literature, painting and printed media relating to the human body in its materiality as well

as it representational, affective and psychological layers. Deployed in shades of intimacy and conveying a generous offering of the self, Doğanoğlu's paintings simultaneously hold a radical vulnerability and a withdrawal from meaning.

Berke Doğanoğlu (b. 1990, Tekirdağ) lives and works in Istanbul. Doğanoğlu holds a BA (2012) and a MA (2018) in Visual Arts and Visual Communication Design from Sabancı University. He completed the Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Studio Art (Painting and Drawing) programme at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2015.

His first solo exhibition *As Adam, Early In The Morning* was held at THE PILL, Istanbul in 2020. He has participated in group shows including *As If It Couldn't*, THE PILL, (Istanbul, 2022), Mamut Art Project (Istanbul, 2016) and 135 Square Meter, 8 Persona, Sabancı University (Istanbul, 2012). In 2020 he was selected to participate at the Istanbul Biennial Work & Research Program held by Istanbul Foundation for Arts and Culture.

BERKE DOĞANOĞLU

1990, Tekirdağ.

Lives and works in Istanbul.

Education

2018 MA in Visual Arts, Sabanci University

2015 Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Studio: Painting and Drawing,
School of the Art Institute of Chicago

2012 BA in Visual Arts and Visual Communication Design, Sabanci
University

Solo Exhibitions

2024 *Longing, Sweat, Roses*, THE PILL, Istanbul, TR

2020 *As Adam, Early in the Morning*, THE PILL, Istanbul, TR

Group Exhibitions

2022 *AS IF IT COULDN'T*, THE PILL, Istanbul, TR

2016 *Mamut Art Project*, Küçükçiftlik Park, Istanbul, TR

2015 *Young, Fresh, Different VI*, Zilberman Gallery, Istanbul, TR

2015 *Post-Baccalaureate Salon*, School of the Art Institute of Chicago,
Chicago, IL, USA

Awards & Grants

2016 Sabanci University Full Merit Scholarship

2014 School of the Art Institute of Chicago Recognition Scholarship

Residencies

2020 Istanbul Biennial Work & Research Program, Istanbul, TR

THE PILL®

WORKS AND EXHIBITIONS



Exhibition view, *longing, sweat, roses*, THE PILL, Istanbul, 2024.

THE PILL® is pleased to announce Berke Doĝanoĝlu's second solo exhibition at the gallery between the dates 26 January - 3 March 2024. Titled *longing, sweat, roses* after a fragment by the archaic Greek lyrical poet Sappho, the exhibition brings together a selection of new paintings exploring themes of absence and desire.

The greek word "eros" expresses the desire for that which is missing and sets the fundamental paradox of erotic desire between presence and absence as an underlying thread for the exhibition. Organized around a series of triangulations between small-sized paintings, the exhibition is composed of close-up views of the male body seen through fragments, framed in interior settings and focusing on the skin as revealed through strategies of concealment and the desire to grasp.

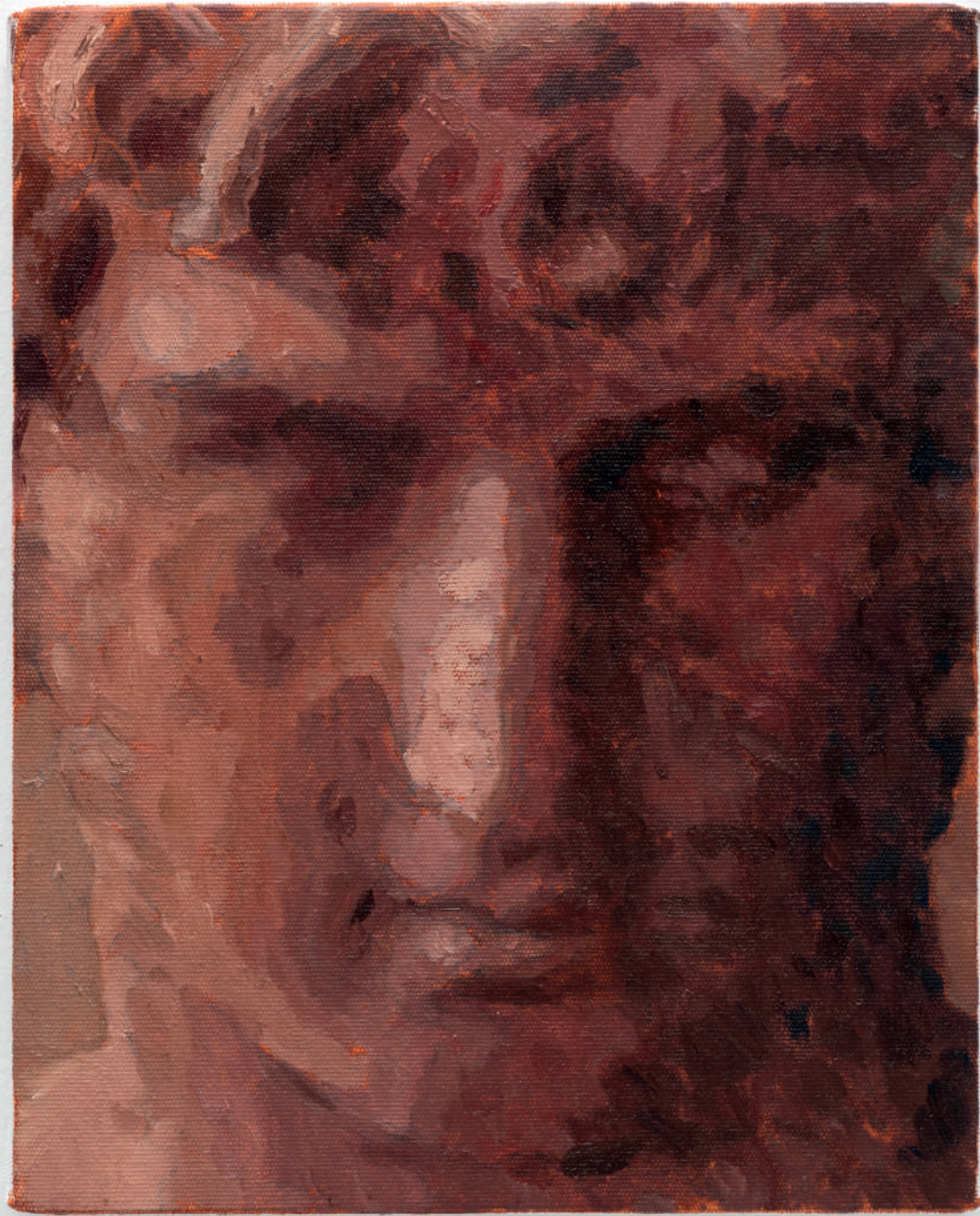
Each painting draws us into a material world made of earthy tones, subtle variations of light and fleshy textures, into the mysteries of the depicted sitter. In continuity with Doĝanoĝlu's earlier work, these paintings belong to a private world, one that is slightly removed. In most cases, the figure's eyes are obscured, their head is removed or the figure turns its back on the viewer, making them impossible to identify. The textured, disorderly brush marks match the animate quality of the flesh as well as its entropy, creating surfaces where the densities seem fleeting like a touch, in motion, always rearrangeable into another kind of order. The *imprimatura* technique, used by the artist for the first time in this series, replaces the conventional primer with burnt sienna – one of the first pigments to be used by humans, an anthropological constant - to unify the backgrounds of these paintings in shades of faded, dark orange. If we choose to see the background as the "main event" in these paintings, we can begin to understand the juxtaposition of genres within this exhibition as the artist's attempt to arrive at a fusion between portrait, landscape and still life painting.

In "Touch", the painting frames a torso half-covered by a garment while a hand reaches out to touch the skin. We do not know whether this hand belongs to the owner of the torso or to someone else, but what matters, what the painting actually depicts, is the gap between the two. Between the skin covering the flesh, and the fabric covering the skin, between the torso and the outstretched hand, everything seems to be at a standstill, suspended in dim shadows and muted sparks of ardent desire as hunger, as yet unquenched. "Antinous", which greets the viewer, is an exception within this ensemble as it depicts the only identifiable figure here: Emperor Hadrian's favorite lover, deified post-mortem and immortalized through countless sculptures, cities and temples in his name, turned into a symbol of homosexual love, reaching us across the centuries. Through Doĝanoĝlu's depiction of his petrified face, Antinous becomes an ode to the erotic pendulum swinging

between the sweetness of desire and the bitterness of absence. It also represents the triangulation of mimetic desire between a desiring subject, a desired object and the symbol, or model, that teaches us what and how to desire. In this sense, the head of Antinous, as an erotic symbol, also serves as a metaphor for painting, and especially for Doĝanoĝlu's painting as it relates to desire. The textured materiality, the sensual roughness of his ambiguous surfaces on the verge of dissolution call for an empathetic and tactile relationship that invites the viewer to identify, self-recognize and project their own desires.

In her translation of Sappho's fragments, "If Not Winter", Anne Carson uses square brackets to give the impression of missing material whenever papyri are missing or rendered illegible. Borrowed from one such fragment, each word composing the title of this exhibition is marked with a single square bracket as "an aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it", as she notes. Brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure, just as the space between each painting does in this ensemble brought together by Berke Doĝanoĝlu. In the end, these paintings convey nothing about any of the figures depicted, and everything about the nature of human desire. They are entirely captivating through the elements of concealment and fragmentation they harbor.

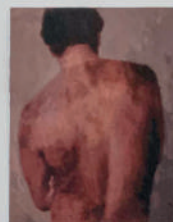
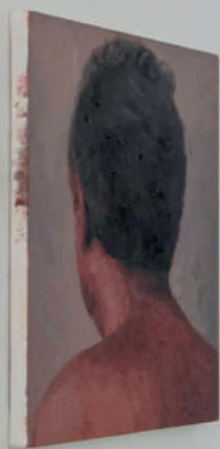
Berke Doĝanoĝlu's paintings reflect on the material expressions and vulnerability of human desire and the human body through the intimate relationships he has formed with a world of references from literature, painting, photography and printed media. His textured, carefully and sparingly lit canvases operate through the physicality of painting, as metaphors for the human body, affect and psyche, while his compositional choices set a parallel between portraiture, still life and landscape genres. Deployed in shades of intimacy and conveying a generous offering of the self, Doĝanoĝlu's paintings simultaneously hold a radical vulnerability and a withdrawal from meaning.

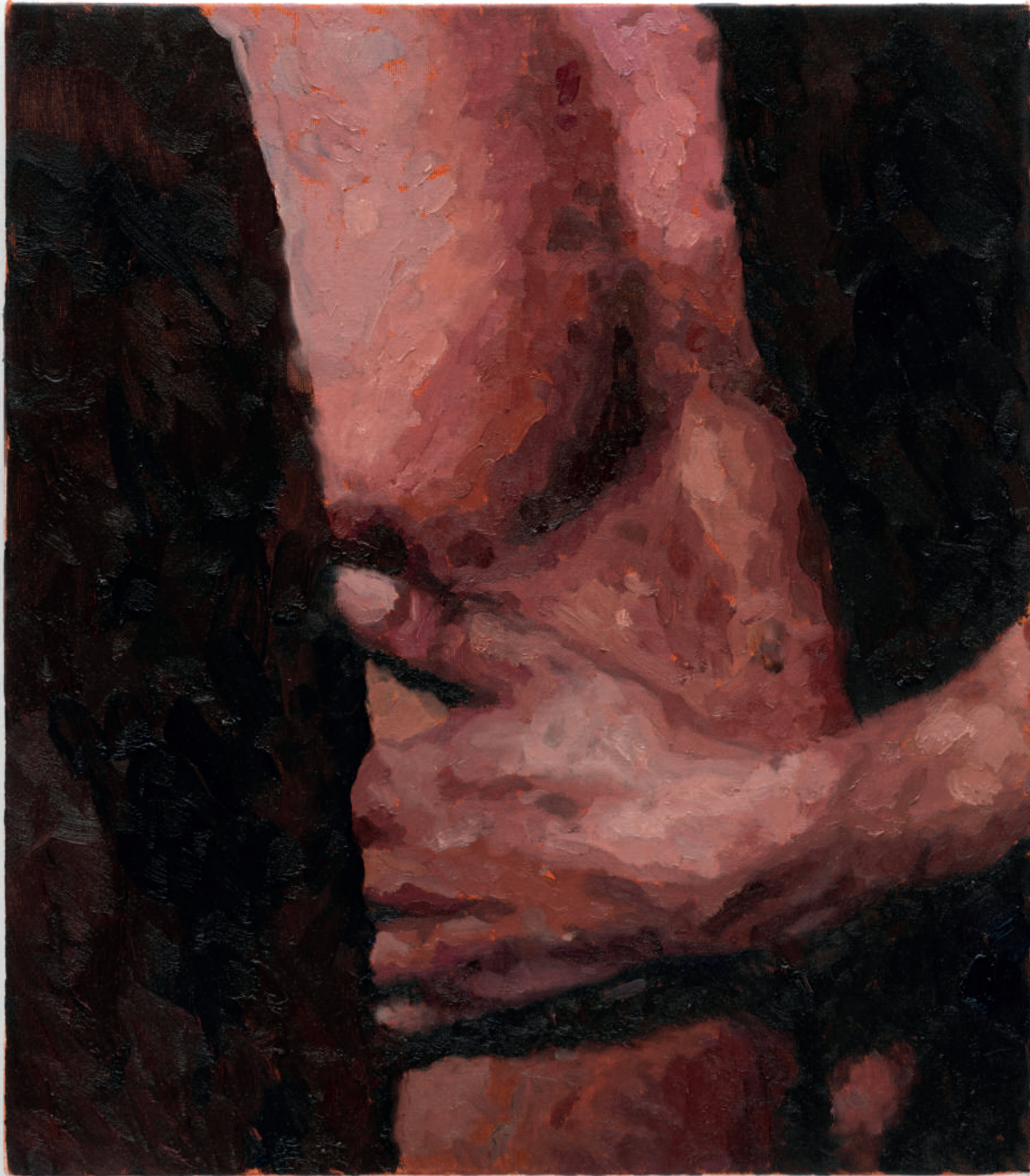


Berke Doğanoglu
Antinous II, 2023
Oil on canvas
30 x 24 cm

“Antinous” depicts one of the only identifiable figures in Doganoglu’s painting: this is Emperor Hadrian’s favorite lover, deified post-mortem and immortalized through countless sculptures, cities and temples in his name, turned into a symbol of homosexual love, reaching us across the centuries. Through Doganoglu’s depiction of his petrified face, Antinous becomes an ode to the erotic pendulum swinging between the sweetness of desire and the bitterness of absence.

It also represents the triangulation of mimetic desire between a desiring subject, a desired object and the symbol, or model, that teaches us what and how to desire. In this sense, the head of Antinous, as an erotic symbol, also serves as a metaphor for painting, and especially for Doganoglu’s painting as it relates to desire. The textured materiality, the sensual roughness of his ambiguous surfaces on the verge of dissolution call for an empathetic and tactile relationship that invites the viewer to identify, self-recognize and project their own desires.

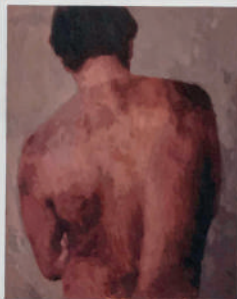




Berke Doğanoglu
Touch, 2023
Oil on canvas
50 x 44 cm

The painting “Touch” frames a torso half-covered by a garment while a hand reaches out to touch the skin. We do not know whether this hand belongs to the owner of the torso or to someone else, but what matters, what the painting actually depicts, is the gap between the two. Between the skin covering the flesh, and the fabric covering the skin, between the torso and the outstretched hand, everything seems to be at a standstill, suspended in dim shadows and muted sparks of ardent desire as hunger, as yet unquenched.

The textured, disorderly brush marks match the animate quality of the flesh as well as its entropy, creating surfaces where the densities seem fleeting like a touch, in motion, always re-arrangeable into another kind of order. Spilling beyond the confines of the canvas, endowed with an erotic power that lingers, the movement between fragments depicted here partakes in an undeniable expression of desire to touch and be touched.





Berke Doğanoglu
Flesh, 2023
Oil on canvas
75 x 60 cm

Doganoglu's paintings draw us into a material world made of earthy tones, subtle variations of light and fleshy textures, into the mysteries of the depicted sitter, in this case, the figure turns its back on the viewer, making them impossible to identify. This loss of specificity makes these paintings all the more compelling to the viewer. In continuity with Doganoglu's other works, "Flesh" belongs to a private world, one that is slightly removed.

The male body is seen through a fragment, framed in an interior setting and focusing on the skin as revealed through strategies of concealment and the desire to grasp. The textured, disorderly brush marks match the animate quality of the flesh as well as its entropy and imperfections, creating surfaces where the densities seem fleeting like a touch, in motion, always re-arrangeable into another kind of order.



Berke Dođanođlu
Red Gerbera II, 2023
Oil on canvas
50 x 44 cm

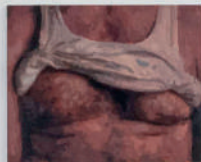
Doganoglu uses the imprimatura technique and replaces the conventional primer with burnt sienna to unify the backgrounds of these paintings in shades of faded, dark orange. If we choose to see the background as the “main event” in these paintings, we can begin to understand the juxtaposition of genres within this exhibition as the artist’s attempt to arrive at a fusion between portrait, landscape and still life painting.

As John Brooks notes in the essay he penned for Doganoglu’s exhibition, “whether desire and love lifts us up or weighs us down, our lives are adorned and colored by their residue. Canonizing the memory of such feelings, Doganoglu juxtaposes floral still lifes and landscapes as a means to remind us that we are part of the tumult and ephemerality of the natural world. Everything we have ever known .is impossibly fragile. Our lives are finite; nothing—not even Sappho’s blushing apple—really lasts”.



Berke Dođanođlu
Rest, 2023
Oil on canvas
50 x 44 cm







As part of his painting process, Doganoglu often conducts photo sessions with live models, recreating poses and compositions inspired by vintage gay pornographic magazines from the 1970s.

“Undershirt”, with the oddly shaped, lifted white t-shirt exposing a male torso, replicates the specific aesthetics found in the poses of such magazines, signaling an erotic exposure of flesh in tension with a stretched piece of fabric, itself echoing the partial view the canvas allows. Spilling beyond the confines of the canvas, endowed with an erotic power that lingers, the movement between fragments depicted here partakes in an undeniable expression of desire. In the essay he penned for Doganoglu’s exhibition, John Brooks notes that the muscular, hirsute chest in Doganoglu’s ‘Undershirt’, along with the use of pink, peach, white and mauve undertones, is reminiscent of American modernist painter Marsden Hartley’s (1877-1943) shirtless male figures, while his depiction more closely resembles reality.

Previous image:

Berke Doğanoğlu
Undershirt, 2023
Oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm



Berke Dođanođlu
Sheets, 2023
Oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm



Bringing together multiple and seemingly contradictory art historical references, "Sheets" is a painting that revels in the inherent ambiguity of the mutually dependent relationship between desire and death. This fragment of a reclining body is half-covered in white sheets as a hand reaches out to touch the chest, and as such it is at once reminiscent of scenes depicting Christ's lamentation as a Western painterly motif, Muslim burial rituals' covering of the body in white cotton cloth, and the recurring art historical motif of the reclining nude. Typically reserved to depictions of the female body in its associations with eroticism and fertility, male reclining nudes in the classical sense rather emphasize the athleticism of the masculine ideal.

Doganoglu reverses these terms by depicting a male nude imbued with sensuality. Spilling beyond the confines of the canvas, endowed with an erotic power that lingers, the movement between fragments depicted here partakes in an undeniable expression of desire to touch and be touched. While we can not be certain whether the hand belongs to the owner of the body or to someone else, and even through the auto-erotic connotations of touching oneself, the yearning for another's skin, to experience one's own flesh through another's desire and touch is present here, along with the bittersweet pain of absence and the tragedy of mourning a loved one.

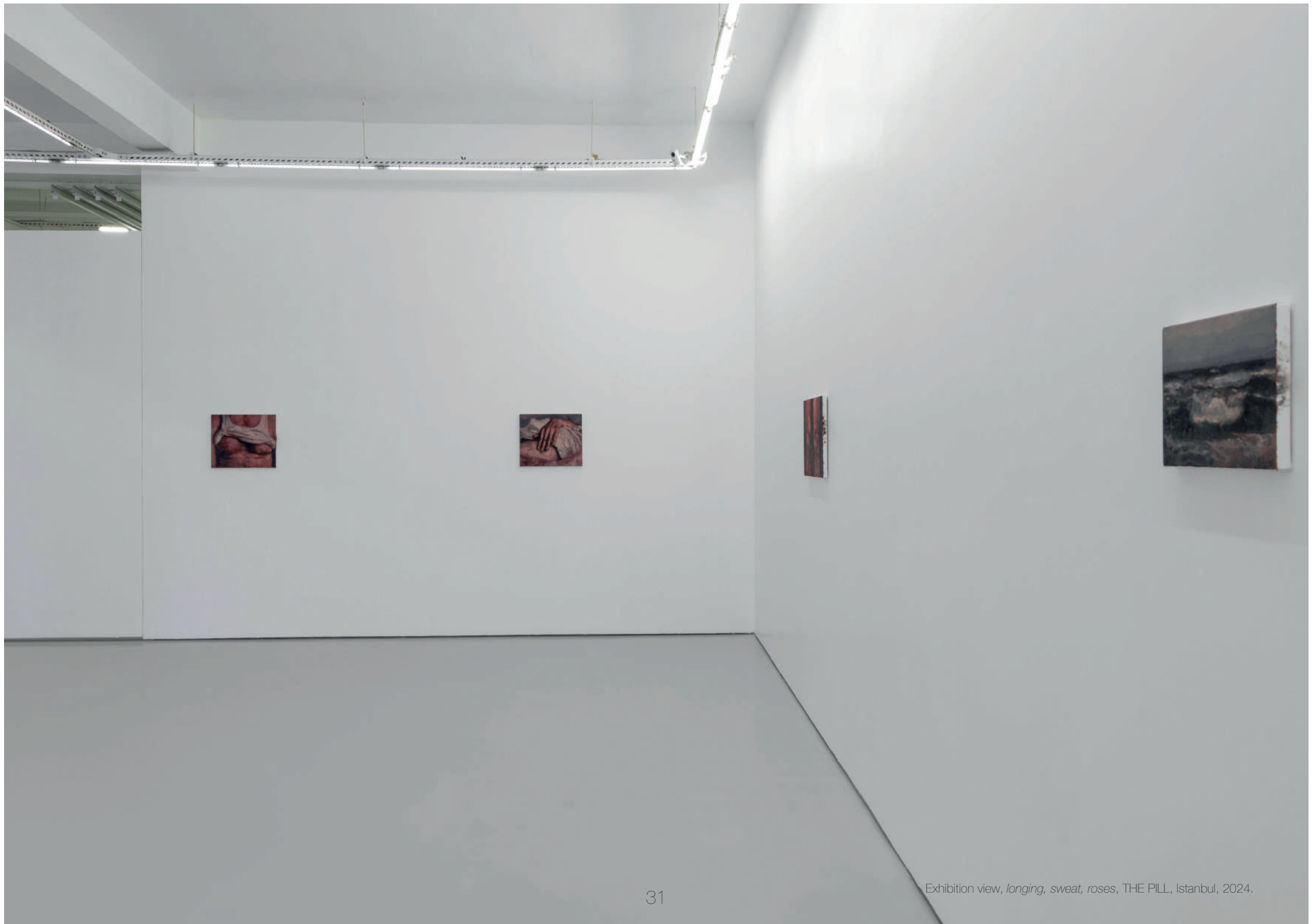




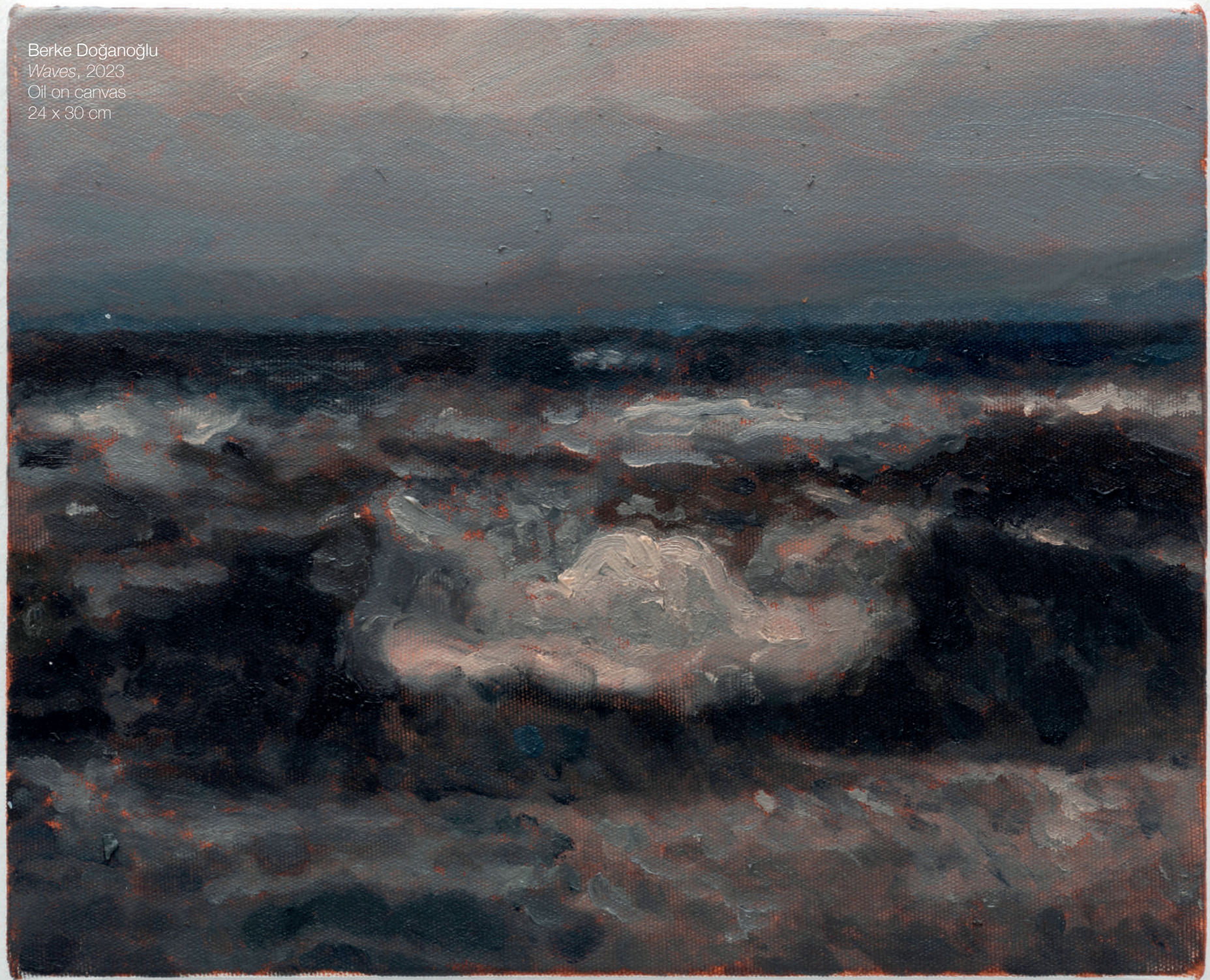
Berke Doğanoğlu
Knees, 2023
Oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm





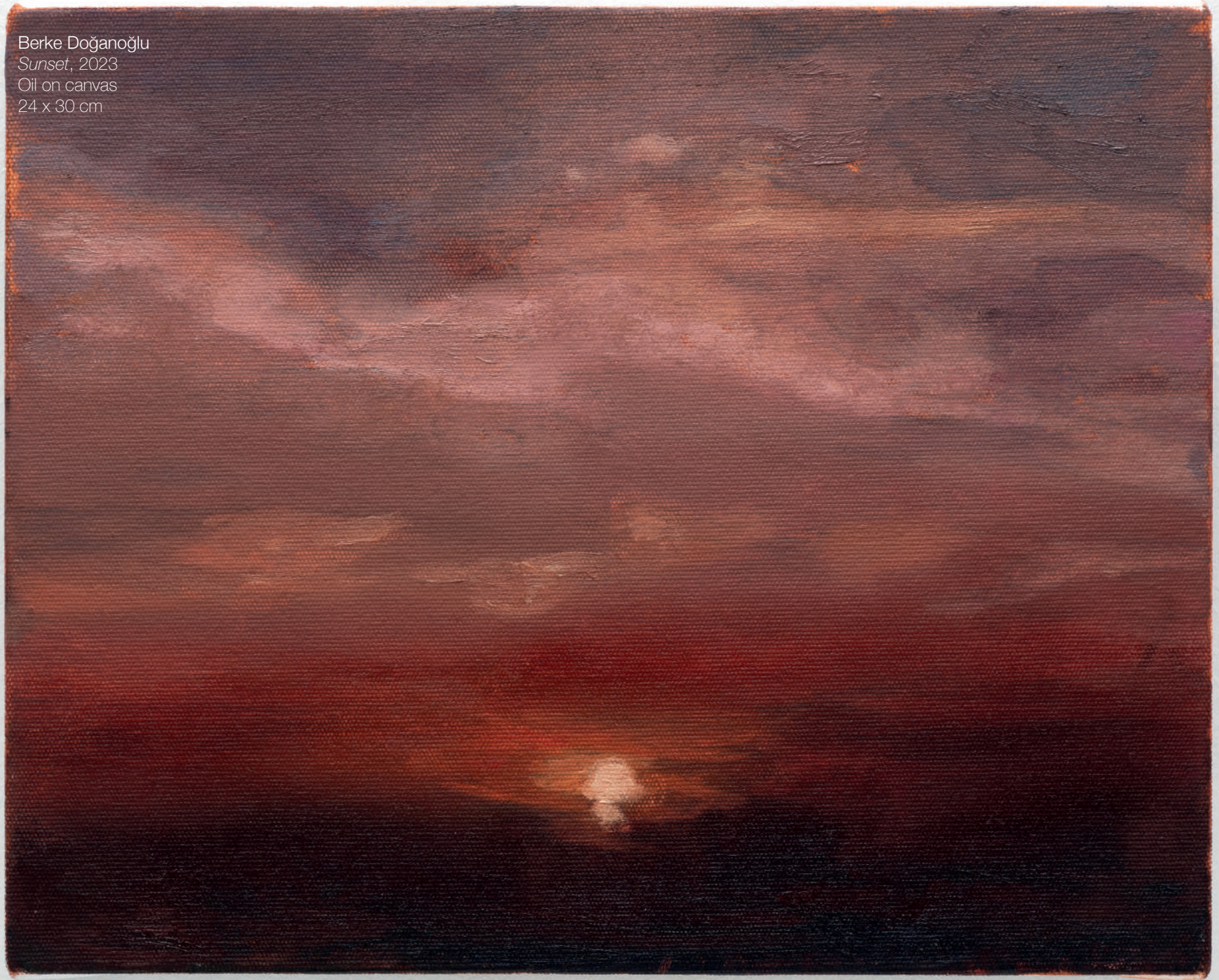


Berke Doğanoglu
Waves, 2023
Oil on canvas
24 x 30 cm





Berke Dođanođlu
Sunset, 2023
Oil on canvas
24 x 30 cm

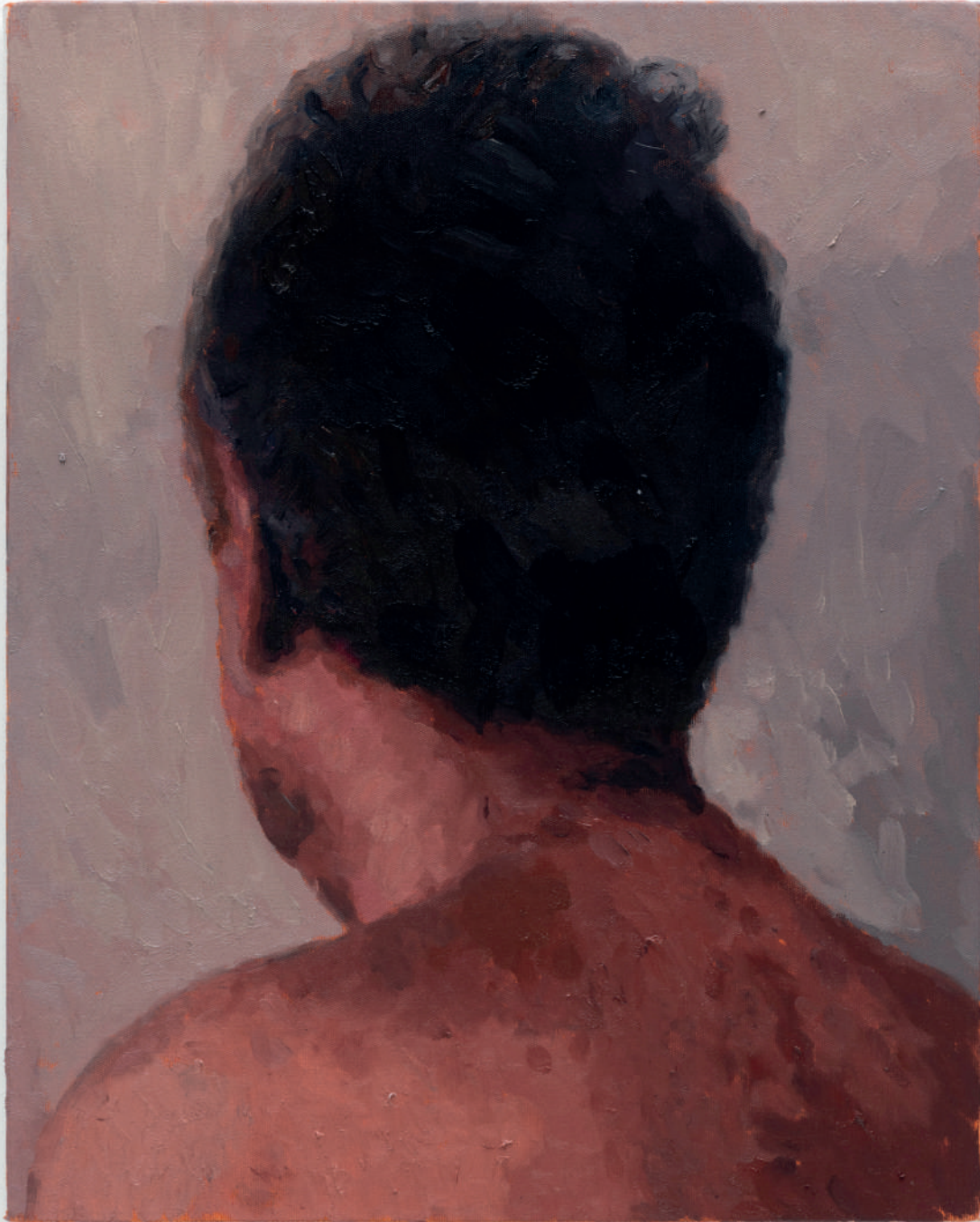




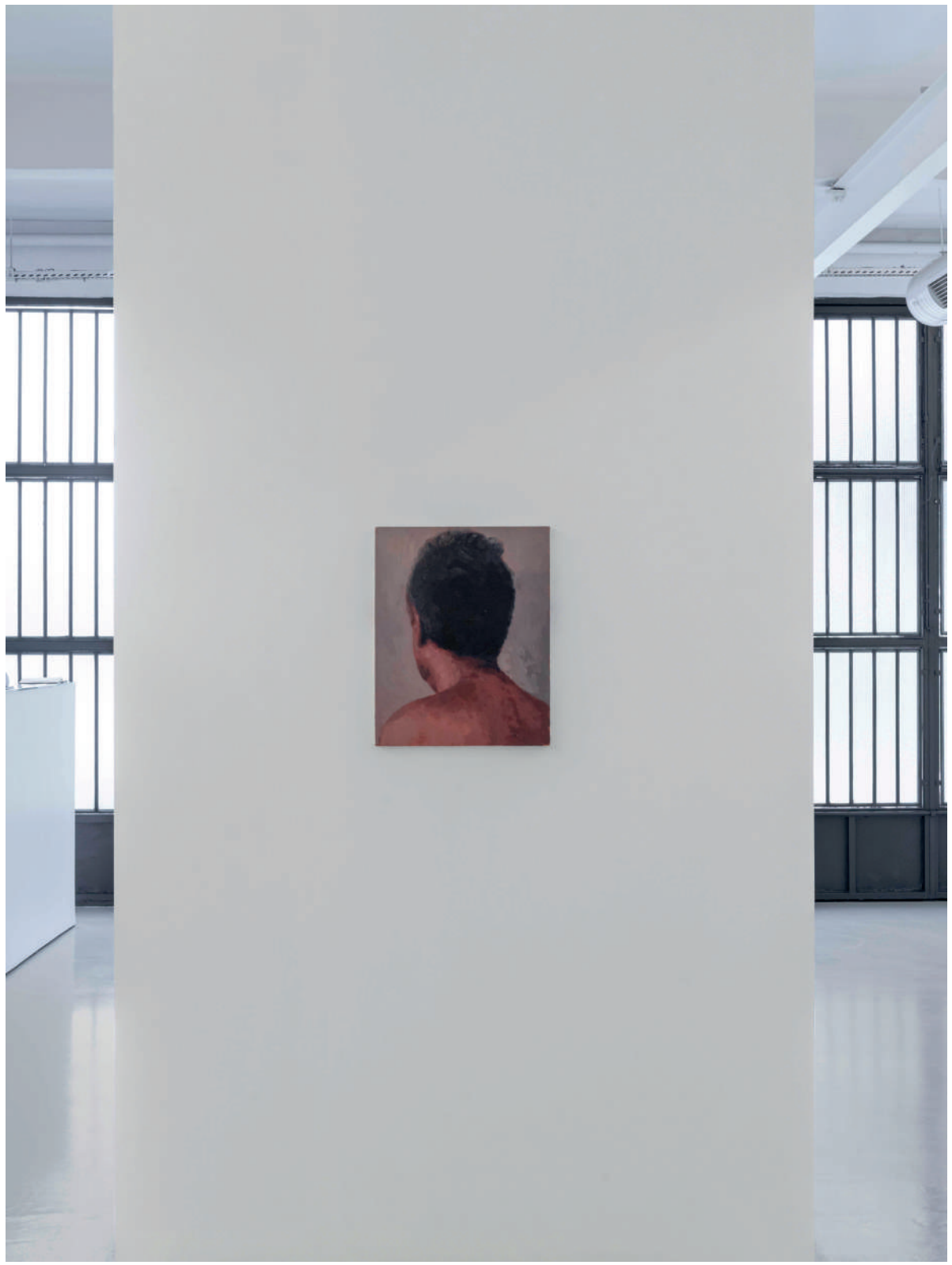
Berke Doğanoğlu
Pillow, 2023
Oil on canvas
60 x 75 cm







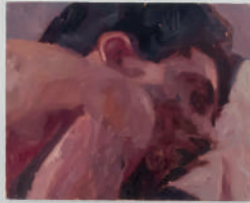
Berke Doğanoglu
Hair, 2023
Oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm











As one of Doğanoglu's most emblematic paintings from the series *As Adam, Early In The Morning, Sleep* is a study of physical and psychological surrender to the temporal and material experience of having and being a body.

Gently resting on a pillow, the figure's head and face intermittently disappear out of visibility into areas of shade and darkness, echoing a sense of intimacy and vulnerability. As in most of the paintings from the series, this figure is immersed in the inward movement and introspective nature of sleep, while the viewer is caught in a moment of voyeurism, between a desire to see more and a withdrawal of the figure that refuses any complete exposure or transparency.



Berke Dođanođlu
Sleep, 2019
Oil on canvas
40 x 50 cm



Exhibition view, *As Adam, Early in the Morning, THE PILL*, Istanbul, 2020.

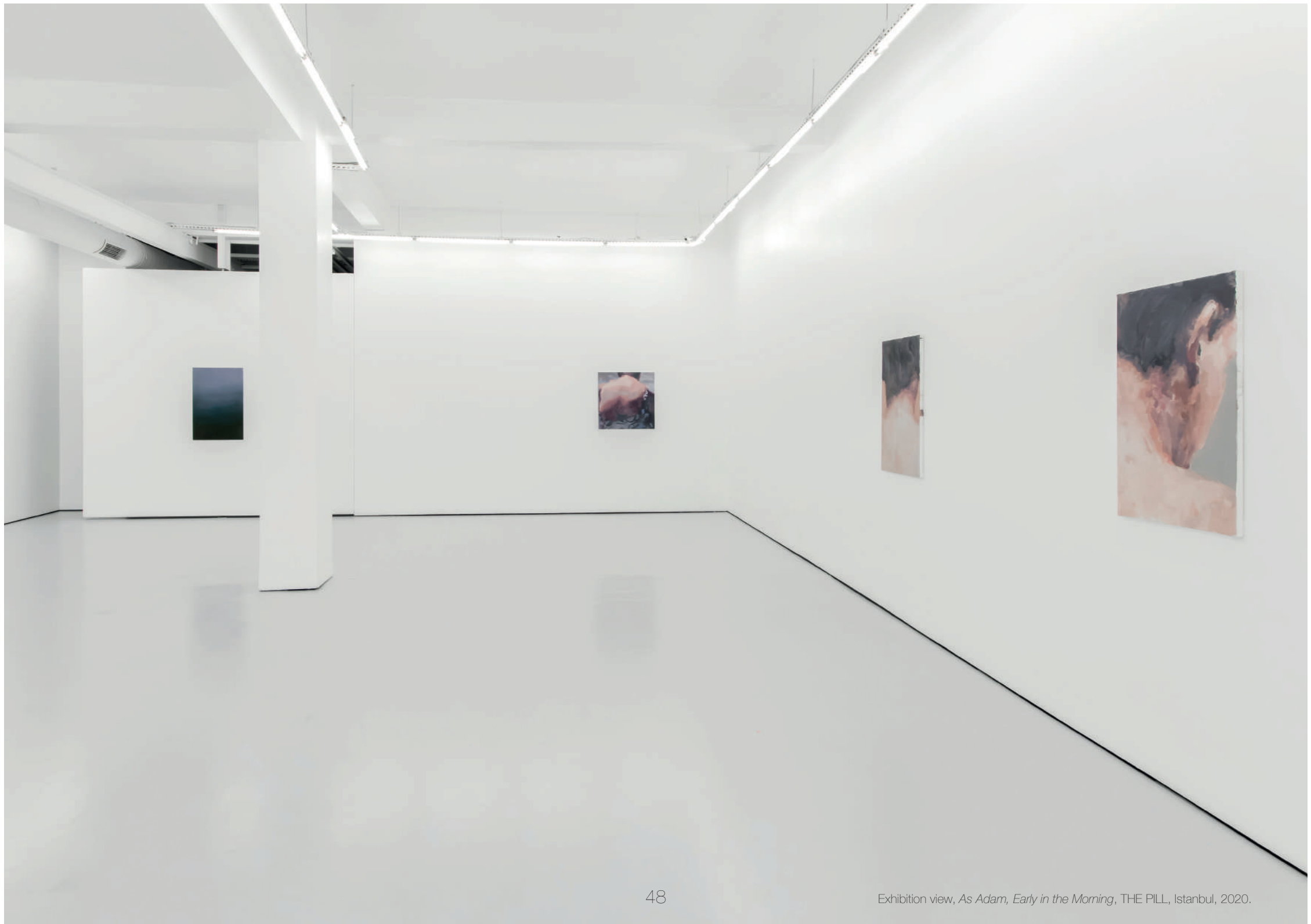


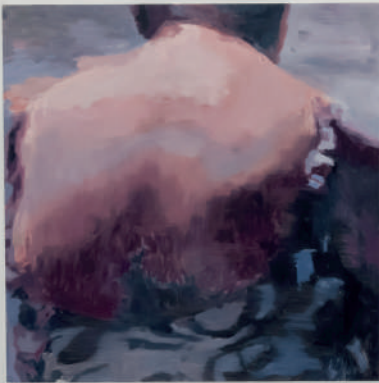
With its ambiguous background, inconsistent perspective and disproportion, Doğan Özlü's *Bather* reflects the anonymity and ambiguity of modern life experience, in a nod to Cézanne's iconic *Bather* (1885).

The impurity of the surface, achieved through the use of color and the blatancy of brushstrokes, points at once to the materiality of the body depicted, and that of the painting itself. Atmospheric shifts occur on this dual dermis, as the torso – a body fragment, framed as to lose all specific identity - becomes a landscape unevenly reflecting rays of light and shade, pointing to a decentered motion occurring outside of the frame, while the color palette points to a transient time such as twilight or dawn.



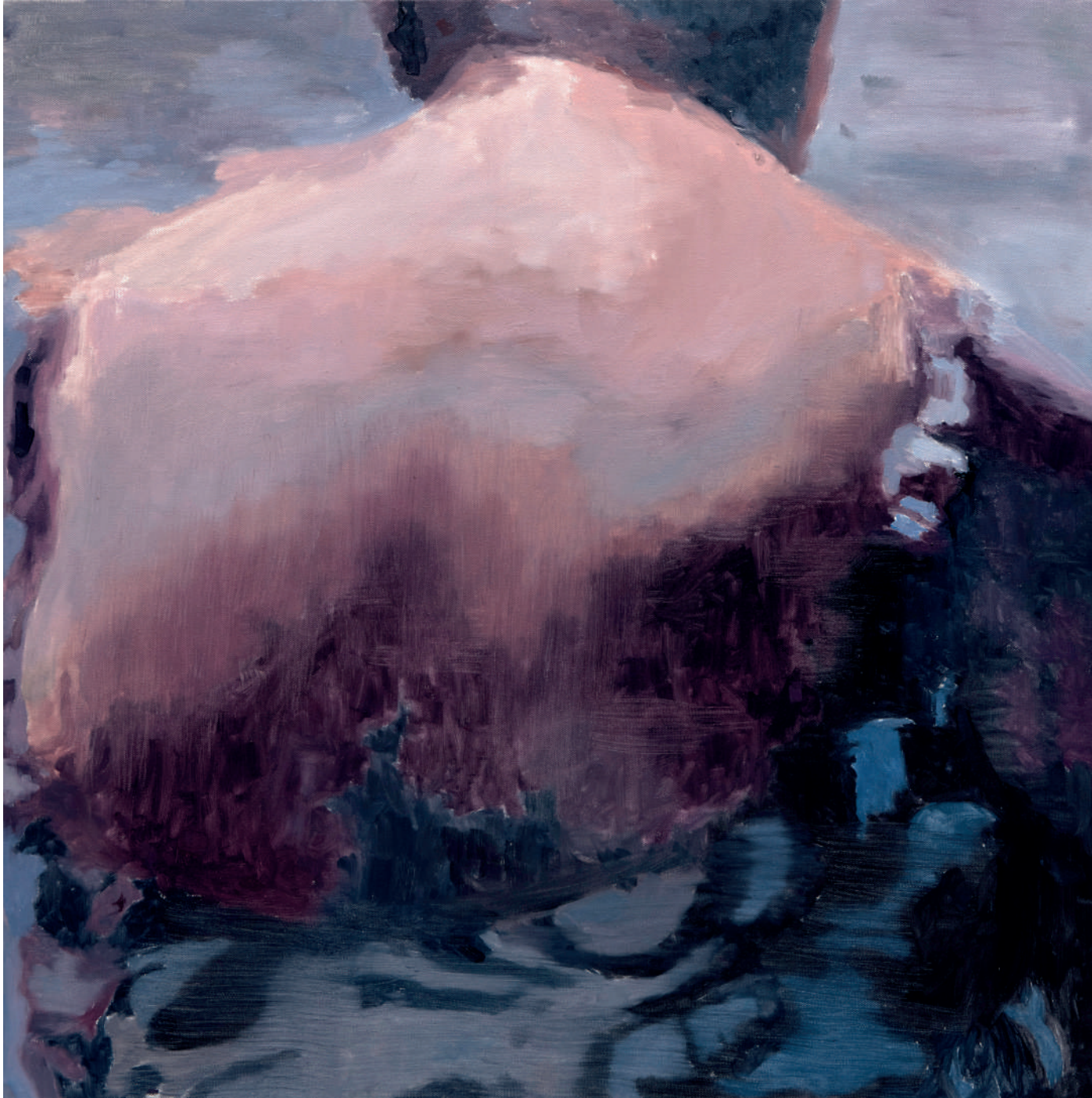
Berke Dođanođlu
Bather, 2019
Oil on canvas
100 x 75 cm





Beach carries an unspecified quality found in other paintings from the same series: the body and the landscape depicted here could be anyone and anywhere. While the lack of contextual specificity enhances the painting's abstract quality, a temporal experience emerges from the movement of brush marks, shades and partially lit fragments of skin.

The painting is really about the moment of emergence, of surfacing of one body out from another, a human torso emerging out from a body of water. The focus is on the mass of the body and clay-like quality of flesh; moldable by time and gravity. The tones - muted grays, transient blues, dirty pinks and fleshy beiges - shift in a fine balance, expressing a state of transition between skin and water, textile and body, environment and atmosphere. A dorsal landscape appears with its stratum and folds, resembling a topography rendered fluid through light and water.



Berke Doġanoġlu
Beach, 2015
Oil on canvas
75 x 75 cm



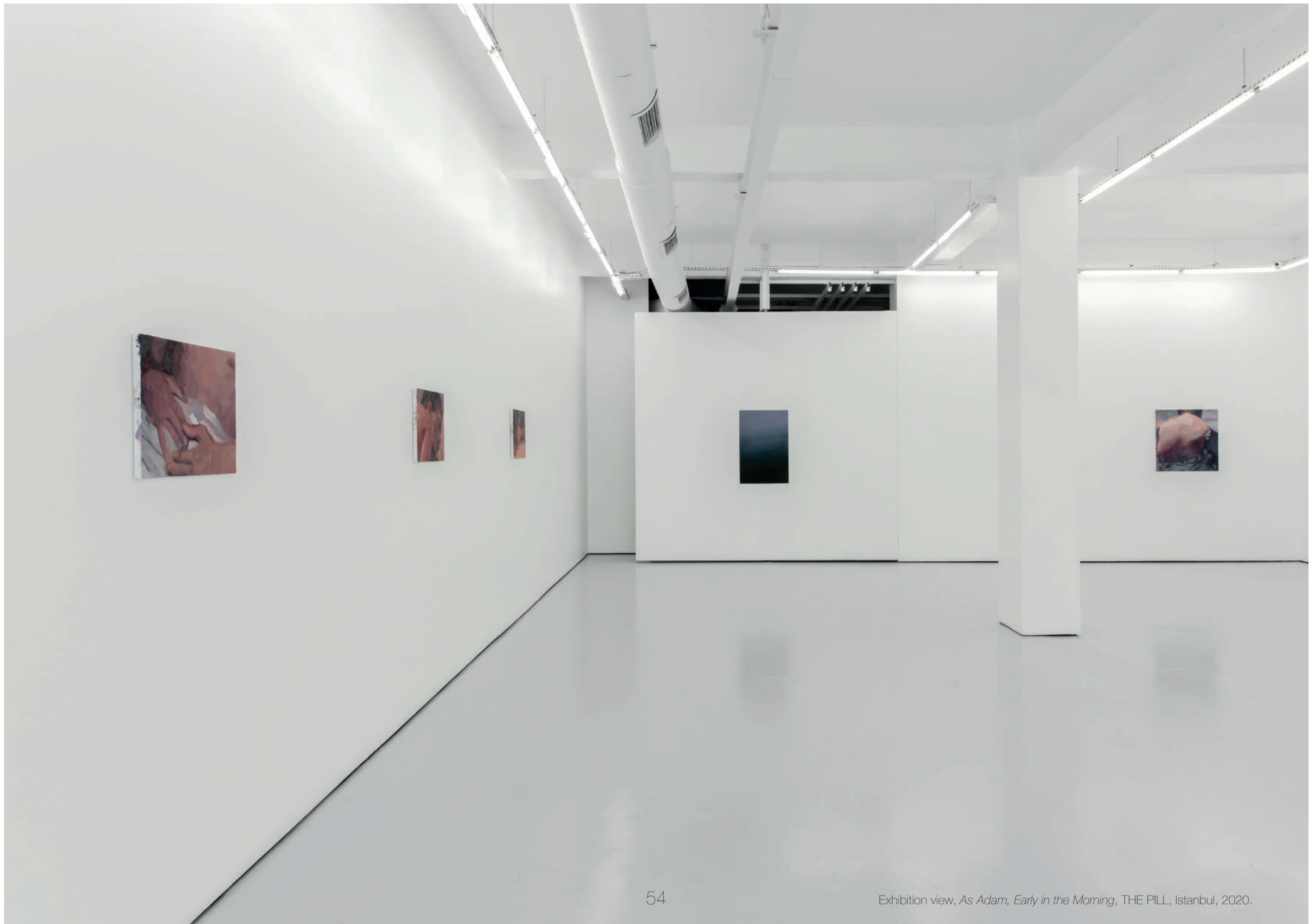


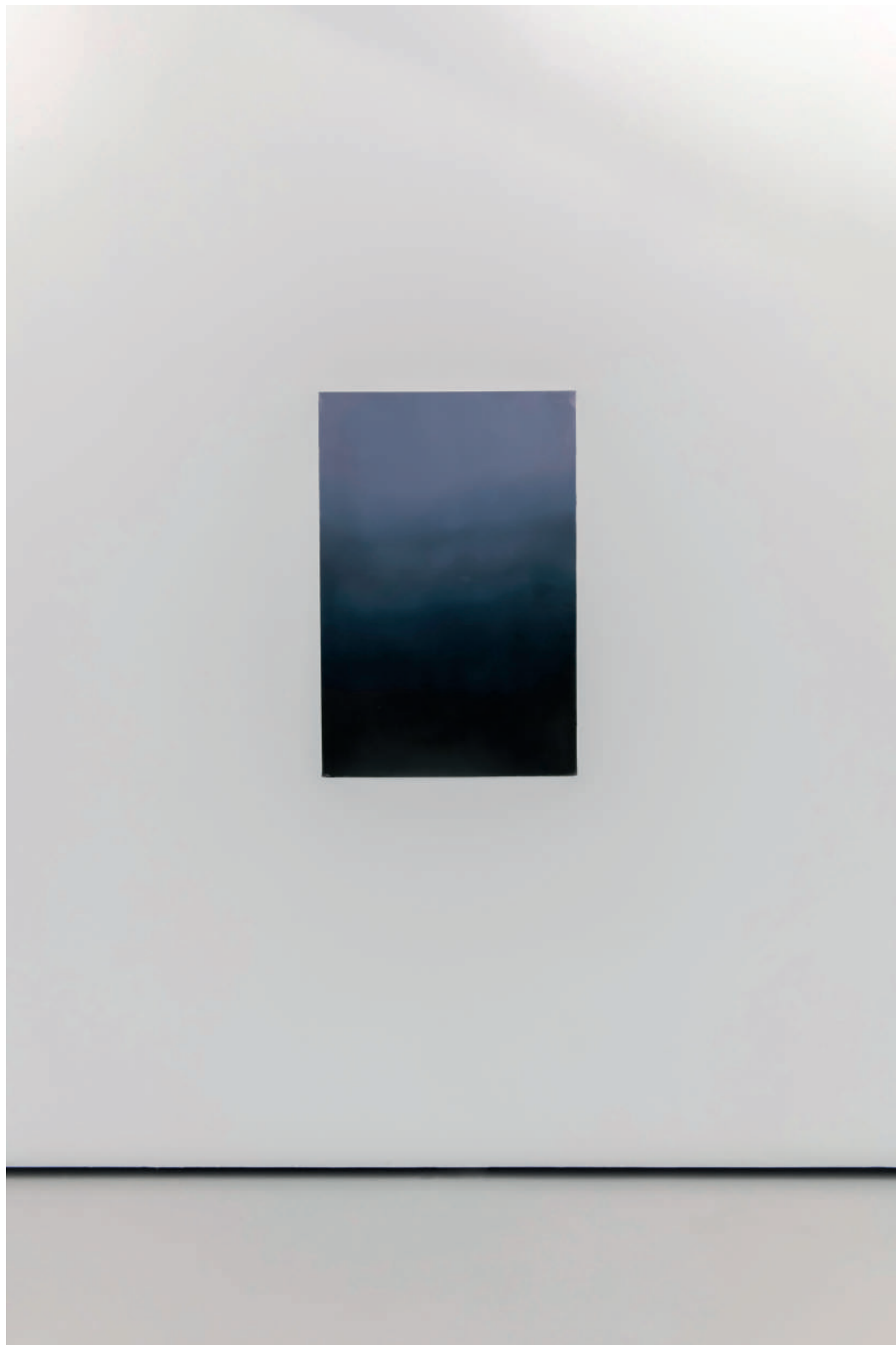
An exemplary instance of Doğan Özlü's framing of parts of the body, *Head* blends figurative and impressionistic techniques towards a representation of the flesh as palpable abstraction.

The impurity of the surface, achieved through the use of color and the blatancy of brushstrokes, focuses our perception on the materiality of the body and the entropic quality of flesh, hinting at a surface where the densities are always rearrangeable and ready to move into another kind of order. The skin appears as a dense yet fragile surface that bridges inside and outside, expressing temporality and a sense of intimacy stretched between a call to touch and be touched, and an introversion, a withdrawal that imposes a boundary at the same time.



Berke Doğanoğlu
Head II, 2016
Oil on canvas
90 x 60 cm



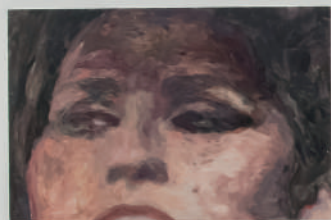


A study of the transient nature of the first rays of morning light, *Dusk* can be seen at once as the embodiment of an atmosphere and an abstract landscape setting the tone for the series *As Adam, Early in the Morning*.

In complete opposition to Doğanoglu's other paintings from the series, there is no emerging figure here. Instead, it is the emergence of light itself which is the focus of the painting, revealing color in minimal shifts out from darkness, in fleeting tones of blue, green and violet as conditions of visibility are about to change.



Berke Doĝanoĝlu
Dusk, 2018
Oil on canvas
90 x 60 cm



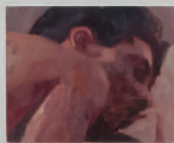
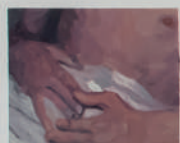


The painting *Singer* is one of the rare instances in Berke Doğanoglu's work where a face is depicted, although this figure is set in tension against the materiality of paint and the texture of the canvas.

While this fragment of a face emphasizes the eyes and the make up, the figure is looking away from the viewer. The expression is ambiguous and difficult to decipher. The psychological relationship is introverted, as the gaze eschews a direct encounter in what could be interpreted as a gesture of disengagement. The painting's atmosphere creates a dynamic tension between exposure and introversion, the public, performative and recorded nature of the act of "singing" and the internal, bodily resounding of one's own voice.



Berke Dođanođlu
Singer, 2020
Oil on canvas
60 x 90 cm



Exhibition view, *As Adam, Early in the Morning*, THE PILL, Istanbul, 2020.



The painting *Mouth* is one of the rare instances in Berke Doġanoġlu's work where a facial feature is depicted, although this figure is set in tension against the materiality of paint, visible in the blatancy of brush strokes that blur the boundaries between paint and lipstick, achieving an imperfectly contoured mouth as a moving organ.

An uncanny feeling emerges as the vibrant red draws the gaze towards this dark orifice into the entrails of the body and as this open cavity supposed to release a cry, a sound, a voice, is muted. This is a depiction of the mouth as a silent black hole that governs and sustains the surrounding face, the tension of the skin, the outward movement of the lips. Similar to the painting titled *Singer*, *Mouth* carries at once exposure and introversion, the public, performative nature of the act of projecting sound and the internal, bodily resounding of one's own voice.



Berke Dođanođlu
Mouth, 2018
Oil on canvas
90 x 60 cm

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TEXTS AND CATALOGUES

longing, sweat, roses
John Brooks

"The world is little, people are little, human life is little. There is only one big thing — desire," wrote American author Willa Cather in her 1915 novel *The Song of the Lark*. Desire, in all of its complexities and diverse forms, profoundly shapes the course of human lives, human history, and even the very world itself. Although it can be shared collectively, the primary essence of desire is highly individual; it can neither be fully explained nor compelled to exist where it does not do so naturally. Desire is a force, all its own. Some desires, such as those having to do with conquest, dominion, and power, can have dire and destructive consequences, but following the paths kindled by our appetites doesn't necessarily have to ruin or diminish us. On the contrary, such pursuits can broaden our experiences and connect us to some of the deepest mysteries of what it means to be alive. It is exactly this kind of expansive, experiential desire with which the paintings in Berke Doganoglu's *Longing, Sweat, Roses* are concerned.

The impetus for beginning these works occurred approximately two years ago when Doganoglu was reading Anne Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet* and *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, her translations of surviving work by the Archaic Greek poet born on Lesbos in 620 BCE. In the former book, Carson analyzes the relationship of eros and the concept of *glukupikron*, a word of Sappho's own creation that means "bittersweet." Carson also writes of eros being "organized around a radiant absence," or as a "lack." If asked, most people probably would not define eros in this way, yet so much of what constitutes eros and desire is born from hunger and stems from a deep sense of longing. Longing,

inherently, is precisely that: a lack. This lack, this absence, is even more pronounced for Queer people, most of whom come of age and live in cultures that are, in ways large and small, riddled with obstacles and impediments hindering accessibility to the fulfillment of our desires. Everyone has to fight for love, of course, but members of the LGBTQ+ community have to fight harder for it, because our desire — even our very existence — is seen by so many others as fundamentally transgressive. To live and love as a Queer person is an act of bravery, and to make art centered around such subjects is an extension of that courage. No matter whether that courage comes easily or is hard-won, many artists feel compelled to make work that reflects their own reality. Doganoglu's series *Longing, sweat, roses* started to take shape when he realized, with the help of Carson's scholarship, how Sappho's understanding of desire — and specifically Queer desire — mirrored his own. Touched by the distance, in terms of time, between himself and Sappho, as well as the wistful disunion between the poet and her lovers, the artist describes reading her surviving fragmented poems as "an almost bodily experience."

This palpable, poignant bond that spans centuries is reflected in Doganoglu's compositions; so, too, are the formal qualities of Sappho's poems, only one of which survives entirely intact. Like her verses, the bodies depicted in Doganoglu's paintings are incomplete, broken in pieces, with their heads or other limbs and appendages missing. The artist presents us only with partial views. This loss of specificity lends the works an air of anonymity; paradoxically, this anonymity has the potential to make them all the more compelling because we, as the viewer, are keenly aware that something is missing, but we don't know what it is. We know not who was desired or how, only that they were. That tension — the

gap between what is depicted, what is said, and what is held back — is one of the most powerful ways works of art can continually hold our interest. Doesn't desire function in the same way? Nietzsche famously said "Ultimately, it is the desire, not the desired, that we love." While that contention is debatable, both desire and love are unquestionably incomprehensible. They cannot be wholly dissected or diagrammed. Their workings are as mysterious as the life-force itself, and no matter how much we love and are loved in return, we cannot ever fully possess another person. There is always a fundamental separation between ourselves and our beloved; a profound, existential sadness is wrapped up in this fact, but is also a simple reality we must all learn to accept. The pull of desiring, possessing, is perhaps, as Nietzsche suggests, part of what keeps us coming back. As evident in fragment 105 (a), translated by Anita George and published in the June 1994 issue of Poetry, Sappho herself knew this:

You: an Achilles' apple
Blushing sweet on a high branch
At the tip of the tallest tree.
You escaped those who would pluck
 your fruit.
Not that they didn't try. No,
They could not forget you
Poised beyond their reach.

The apple is the object of desire, but its ultimate inaccessibility makes the object impossible to forget. Likewise, Doganoglu's paintings urge us to return to them time and time again. Despite the fact that we do not see the faces of his subjects, we still long to know who they are; they have names, we just don't know what they

are. It is with the next look, we hope, that we will be brought closer to an understanding that satisfies our curiosity. The spectrum of Queerness contains multitudes, but Doganoglu's figures read as traditionally masculine; they are robust, taking up so much space that they spill beyond the confines of the canvas. Endowed with an erotic power that lingers, like an old flame, their presence, their existence, is undeniable.

Doganoglu counts the American painter Marsden Hartley (1877-1943) among his strongest influences. Hartley had a long and varied career but is probably best known for works steeped in homoerotic eros and loss, particularly a series of paintings such as 'Portrait of a German Officer' (1914) which memorialize the death of his lover Karl von Freyberg, who was killed in battle at the beginning of World War One. While not adorned with the gilded laurels of a fallen lover, Doganoglu's atmospheric, elegiac paintings nonetheless feel as if they are commemorations of meaningful connections. The two artists also share some aesthetic similarities. Hartley's 'Madawaska Acadia Light Heavy' (1939-1940) is called to mind by the muscular, hirsute chest in Doganoglu's 'Blue Jeans', and the colors of the bodies populating these paintings — pinks, peaches, whites, and mauves, with vermillion underpainting — are reminiscent of the shirtless male figures in Hartley's 'Christ Held by Half Naked Men' (1940). But whereas Hartley's figures are stylized and expressionist, the shape and form of Doganoglu's men more closely resemble reality. The degree of tenderness with which he has approached his subjects — a methodology having to do with brush technique, conceptual intention, and a disposition of the psyche — makes them seem as if they are impressions of specific men, despite their namelessness.

Paintings exist as singular physical objects, but the act of painting can be seen as a means of intimately familiarizing, even communing, one's self with a subject. At its best, the endeavor also connects the painter to the lineage of the discipline. Doganoglu's work quietly and respectfully builds upon his influences, including Paul Cezanne, Philip Guston, and Walter Sickert. Even where there may be clear aesthetic and material differences, Doganoglu's paintings align thematically and conceptually with the work of so many artists who have contributed to the rich history of 20th Century Queer figuration, including such luminaries as Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz, and the aforementioned Hartley. But the work is, of course, being made now, in the 21st Century, and thus reflects both contemporary Queer life and a shared Queer history. As part of his painting process, Doganoglu often conducts photo sessions with live models, recreating poses and compositions inspired by vintage gay pornographic magazines like *Honcho*, *Mandate*, and *Drummer*. In the 1970s, these nude and semi-nude men were virile, masculine paragons of erotic freedom; fifty years later, if they are indeed still alive, it isn't only the passage of time that has changed them. The men in the original photographs were living in an era before the AIDS epidemic; in subsequent years, if these men weren't directly affected by the virus themselves, they no doubt witnessed the decimation of great swathes of their community. It is impossible to look at and think of these men without imagining the pain they endured watching their friends and lovers suffer immensely. When we consider that their anguish was born from pleasure, from desire, their plight is even more heartbreaking. It wasn't divine retribution that saw some men afflicted while others continued to live unscathed — because this simply isn't how diseases work — rather it was chance, bad luck, or even what can be loosely defined as fate. It is only by chance and fate —

and modern medical science — that Queer men like Doganoglu (and myself) are living in a time in which an AIDS diagnosis is not a death sentence. Reckoning with the loss not only of youth, beauty, and strength, but also the loss of individual lovers, brothers, sons, and friends, Doganoglu treats his source material and his subjects with poignancy and tenderness despite the fact that their origins are pornographic, because he knows that any one of us could be any one of these men.

Whether desire and love lifts us up or weighs us down, our lives are adorned and colored by their residue. Canonizing the memory of such feelings, Doganoglu juxtaposes floral still lifes and landscapes as a means to remind us that we are part of the tumult and ephemerality of the natural world. Everything we have ever known is impossibly fragile. Our lives are finite; nothing — not even Sappho's blushing apple — really lasts. Through art, however, we can reach into the past and into the future, learning from those we never knew and hopefully touching those we never will know, ensuring that the sweetness and bittersweetness of desire, which is far bigger than we are, remains fragrant and evident beyond the length of our little lives.



Elif Erkan: To Look is to Answer and to Feel is to Ask

← EXHIBITION VIEW FROM
WHERE YOU THEY FORM,
ELIF ERKAN, THE PILL
21.02.2020 – 28.03.2020

To deal seriously with materials is a political approach in itself. It is not only about humility or care, but, more fundamentally, about letting go of a human-centered approach to the world. Philosophers speak of this task as a decentering of the ontological lens. For artists, it is a more well-known practice, that could simply seem to designate a process-based approach. However, it is more precisely attuned to a paradigm shift that can be dated and situated, and which similarly attempts to replace the artist in dialogue with the world rather than abstracting from it. In Elif Erkan's practice, it is a recurrent feature that materials be expressive. To take a few examples: plaster or tin possess an immediate archival quality, while felt protects and shields against a hostile outside. Sometimes, the artist will also directly use signifiers of neoliberal life and privatized healthcare, such as kale, omega-3 pills or batteries (in her 2015 show *Standards For Living* in Brussels). In a way, Erkan could be seen as critically expanding on what appeared during the early 2010s: a concern, in art, for "anonymous materials" (*Speculations on Anonymous Materials*, Kassel, 2013) or, in philosophy, for "vibrant matter" (Jane Bennett's eponymous essay, 2010). However, the artist's own approach uses materiality as a way of foregrounding social, economic and affective structures, a scale of analysis often lacking in most neo-materialist approaches. The final works, of which she thinks of as "active bodies," bear the mark of her transformative action on material: a performative gesture, an act of labor or, more directly, a cast of her hands. Thus, Elif Erkan does not so much let materials speak for themselves as she opens up a dialogue with them, which turns into a polyphonic conversation when the works encounter a viewer—and reciprocally. While relating to the changing environment of contemporary life, her works more specifically make us feel how subjectivity is similarly shifting inside and through it.

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The sleeper asleep: Berke Doğanoglu's first solo show

BY MATT HANSON | ISTANBUL | JUN 29, 2020 - 12:54 PM GMT+3 |



The paintings depicting merging parts of the body by Berke Doğanoglu.

The first of the two-part exhibition, "As Adam, Early in the Morning," features eight paintings by Berke Doğanoglu at The Pill – the best-kept secret in Istanbul's art landscape on the shores of the Golden Horn

Book four of "Leaves of Grass" by the 19th-century American poet Walt Whitman is titled, "Children of Adam" and contains some of the most brilliant, blazing lines of poetry ever written in the English language. "Was it doubted that those who corrupt their bodies conceal themselves?" Whitman poeticized in his nonpareil canto, "I Sing the Body Electric," like the bearded sage he was under his wide-brimmed hat, inking the literary ecology of the mind when the United States was riven by the twin evils of war and slavery.

Through that darkness which in many ways still casts its long, cold shadow, Whitman wrote verse empowered by the triumph of democracy as a liberation of the body. Adam, a metaphor for all of humankind as bound by kindred blood and monolithic ancestry, is just getting up as the earliest rays of sun peek over the mythical horizon of Eden. The final canto of book four in "Leaves of Grass" gleams with passages of the first-person narrative that approximate prose in their simple directness. Whitman's voice is like Adam, audible, approaching.

He implores, "Touch me, touch the palm of your hand to my body as I pass, / Be not afraid of my body." These evocations are rapturous embraces of body-positive, early modern humanism, faithful to the principles of naturalness as good when the world around the poet and his people, which included everybody, were struck with violent terms and acts of separation, of disembodiment. But the classic poem, epic and sprawling, the result of a lifetime of meditation and craft, is gently pressing its ultimate point, that like a touch, by a hand, conveys the feeling of physical abstraction.

It is a sensation executed by the purity of visual experience, yet no less visceral, in the paintings of Berke Doğanoglu. For the last five years, he has begun a promising oeuvre, culminating in 16 paintings that reflect the curious phenomena of that known when the sight becomes felt, and losing its form to the eye assumes novel qualities under a hand. With close, intimate perspective, Doğanoglu frames parts of the body, blending figurative and impressionistic techniques, towards a representation of the body as a palpable abstraction.



A general view from the exhibit.

The image at his fingertips

There is a rainbow at the door and a young man is slowly, lazily waking up. A passerby stops at his window, fingering his prayer beads, glancing in before moving on. A pink bus rushes through the traffic outside under waving magnolias along the ancient inlet by the shorefront. It is hushed indoors, and heavenly cloud-hued, like the interior of a dream. Sparsely curated, The Pill is

presenting Doğanoglu's paintings in the span of two exhibitions, so as to emphasize the space within the space, not only of the white cube gallery but of the painter's aesthetic approach.

The shoulder is a round place, and never resolves to a point. By the neck its sensitive zones are run through with a kind of vulnerability that triggers softness, give and trust. Under the cleft of its pit is a forbidden territory wherein the scent of the individual is stored and emits involuntary reactions of attraction and repulsion. Entering the cool, blank ether of The Pill for "As Adam, Early in the Morning," a pair of paintings hang from a wall, alone together. One pictures those merging parts of the body where the shoulder and back become the neck, hair and face.

Not quite a profile, as the side of the face is left to a grayish monochrome background where the eye socket dips, before revealing the windows to the anonymous soul. What follows is more of an enigma, as the person is about-face, their back to the portraitist. In both works, Doğanoglu darkens patches of skin toward the upper neck. The color scheme is pale, visible strokes of light purple commingle with beige and yellow before a neat head of bluish-black hair. It is a traditional craft with a contemporary twist for its evasion of facial identity, eyeless and decentered.

And coming to the second of three walls on which Doğanoglu's paintings hang at The Pill is a feminine figure, adorned in what might appear to be swimwear. In a clever technical play of form, Doğanoglu demonstrates his skill for that surrealistic approach to artistic precision, particularly found in painting, when the figurative is concretely in its imagery, yet is subject to interpretation, something akin to op-art, to the extent where multiple visions of the same work are equally visible. Whether painted from the back or front becomes less important than the essence of their flesh.

Named, nonexistent

With the spectrum of an aurora borealis, Doğanoglu sets off into complete abstraction in a painting curated near the middle of the semicircular arrangement of canvases. A slow decrescendo of light purples blends like fog into a wash of warm blues and dark greens that are at once translucent and opaque. The effect is that of setting the time to predawn, when the sky is ripe for changes that appear supernatural, as from the visions of a dreamer on the verge of waking. And out of that haze of atmospheric blur, morning rests on the skin of the sleeper.



Berke Doğanoglu uses pale colors with visible paint strokes.

A person looking at and into the paintings of Doğanoglu may notice a parallel narrative at play between that portrayed, and the seer behind the scenes, what might be called the artist's gaze. Opposite the wall from the dedicated pair of paintings, a specific trio of works is conceivably the snapshots of an onlooker, a fellow sleeper whose still-tired eyes open to the sight of a body so intimate that at first, its parts blur into sketches of color and form, not unlike rough strokes of paint. Doğanoglu's paintings suggest that sensual perception is confined to subjective interpretation.

In a 2019 essay for *The Paris Review*, authors James Schuyler, Helen Frankenthaler and Douglas Dreishpoon discussed the mutual relationship between art and poetry. "Paintings, like poems, thrive on subjective associations," they wrote, in reference to a midcentury, international correspondence between practitioners of these kindred creative disciplines. Their common sources of inspiration and appreciation arguably derive from an experiential skepticism regarding the nature of objectivity, of materiality as an absolute.

Nearly two centuries apart since the first edition of "Leaves of Grass" went to press in 1855, Istanbul-based Doğanoglu, born in 1990, has adapted the ekphrastic lines of Whitman into a series of paintings that, through sight, prompt multiple meanings out of what it means to feel, both as a metaphor for emotional response and as a synonym for the sense of touch. Doğanoglu asks seers passing through *The Pill*, how might a feeling be seen? In line with such gallery artists as Leyla Gediz and Mireille Blanc, his first solo show is a welcome answer to one of art's perennial questions.

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*For more information
contact@thepill.co*

+90 212 533 1000 | thepill.co

Mürselpaşa Caddesi No:181 34087 Balat-İstanbul