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Of *Being*

The artistic process is not just an exploration of creativity and technique; it is also an avenue towards self-awareness and personal understanding. This body of work, *Of Being,* is the culmination of years of failure, success, pain, joy and growth throughout that process. I have found it to be a very difficult, if not impossible, task to fully commit to an ideology and accept it as an ultimate truth. Whether it is a theology or a philosophy, at any given moment what has been solidified as truth and reason can be contradicted and reneged. Because of my own subjectivity I failed to find something to believe in faithfully. However, it is that exact subjectivity that I learned to embrace and accept as the answer. The world is an individual experience. Finding influence from writers such as J.P. Sartre, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, *Of Being* embraces the subjective nature of the individual and is a visualization of concealed emotions and attributes that reside within the psyche. The images that are formed become a step towards an intrinsic representation of the self, showing the tension and anguish associated with achieving balance and clarity in 'being'.

In Flux *Early Work*

The execution and conceptual approaches to my work have changed greatly since the start of my graduate program. For years, I looked to metaphysical philosophy as a source of guidance and inspiration. I was seduced by the answer as to why all things exist the way they do. Coming from a Catholic upbringing, I initially believed strongly in a

Christian God and had faith in theological origins. As I was exposed to more and more elements of logic and reasoning, that faith diminished. At that time I found the strongest connection with Rene Descartes. He was considered a rationalist which is defined as a "type of rationalism in which the only certainties are discovered by the mind, through self-evident insight and reasoning" (Pojman, 73). In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes pursued a method of doubt in which he throws away everything that can be doubted and begins with what are certain truths (Pojman, 73). This process led him to the conclusion that *thought* was the proof of existence: "I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it" (Pojman, 78).

The Doorways is a series of my work that inherited direction from another Cartesian concept, his idea of having a separate mind and a body or dualism. The theory of dualism accepts the premise that we have both a physical body as well as a mind that is a separate entity (Pojman, 347). Descartes describes the body as a machine that is moved and controlled by the mind or soul (Ross). This shift in my work, as well as his influence, came at a time when I wanted to explore the so-called machine and, through exploration, link it to the soul by which it was controlled.

I believed that Descartes' rebuilding of truth from doubt played a principal role in the development of both my life as a whole and my art specifically. I wanted to know what I was and how I fit in the grand scheme of things. So to do this I tried to work with what I knew. Drawings about myself and my body were of what I knew. Even then I was finding a disconnect between myself and what I was producing, feeling like an outsider to my own work.

Into Existentialism *The Individual*

While I was trying to find some grand Hegelian blueprint to fit into, I was blind to the fact that everything I was doing was based on an individualistic premise. The logical component of my psyche prevented me from accepting any truth and instead I saw validity and flaws on all sides. Maybe there isn't a grand objective way of being. Thinking in a more individualistic manner was a path I began to explore working on a paper based on an artist that I was introduced to early in my college education. This assignment reintroduced me to Alberto Giacometti and led me to the Existentialist train of thought that focuses on the experience of the individual.

When I started my education as an artist, I was shown a drawing by Alberto Giacometti. It was one of his studies of *Annette Seated* (*fig.1*) and at the time I thought it was amazing. I could not clearly explain why I liked it but I knew it was special. I have spent the past ten years trying to figure out what my work has been about. In those years I have been exposed to a wealth of information and knowledge with the memory of Giacometti's work fading into the background. Battling the walls of what kind of artist and person that I wanted to be, compared to what I was, I fought with meaning and purpose within my work. It was a struggle to bridge the gap between my technical ability and the conceptual components of drawing.

Rediscovering Alberto Giacometti over the past two years ignited immense inspiration and influence from his artwork as well as his existentialist ties. He was one of the masters in representing form and emotion. Whether it was in sculpture, painting or drawing, he could represent his subjects with the most minimal detail yet portray a wide range of emotion and information. His violent contour lines and evident reworking shows

the link between the artist and the surface of the image. For me he was not only the creator but also a part of the image. These were all traits that I wanted to be associated with myself and my work.

Through Giacometti I discovered Existentialism. Existentialism provides me with a solution to all of the issues I was having with my work as well as my struggles with personal philosophies. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard is credited as being one of the first existentialists and this early existentialism started out as a counterargument to Hegelian notions of truth being in the "whole" (Akhilanda, 236). Instead of believing existence has one grand answer to everything, maybe there are multiple answers. That is exactly what existentialism is about. The world is based on individualistic experiences and the collective whole is replaced with the mentality of being "myself with others in the world" (Tulloch, 32). This leaves a world of subjective individual experiences.

The Portrait *Anguish*

A constant component in my work is that each piece is based off of the portrait, more specifically my own. Working from my own portraiture forces me to literally look at myself while also trying to see represent myself emotionally on paper. By looking in the mirror I confront myself with everything that I have done, everything that I believe I am, and everything that I could be. My reflection shows the heavy burden associated with life and the choices I make throughout it.

The Paradox (*fig. 2*) is a drawing that specifically deals with the burden of choice and was heavily inspired by the concept of anguish. Kierkegaard as well as J.P Sartre believed we lived with anguish. Anguish manifests based on the fact that we are thrown into this world against our will, without explanation (Coates, 231). By being individuals living in a

subjective world we are ultimately responsible for giving our lives meaning (231). In this scenario there is no blueprint by which to model our lives. Our fate is in our own hands and we have the freedom to make the world what we want it whether we want to or not. Sartre further discusses anguish with notion that there are no guidelines for right or wrong, therefore we lack the confidence to make correct choices –"I am condemned to be free" (Rice, 315). I represent these ideas in *The Paradox*.

The figure is depicted with two main attributes, appearing both solid and ethereal. The solid represents being an individual and being the center of my own existence. Where the figure dissipates becoming one with the background, I represent the idea of being a part of the outside world. Each attribute, like the individual and the world, works independently and together at the same time. This relationship provides the background with purpose and meaning while the background, in turn, completes the figure. This balance is found in many of my pieces.

With *The Paradox*, I'm also showing the tension of life and its choices. Every choice ultimately comes with a consequence. By looking at my reflection I am either seeing the regrets or merits of past decisions or worrying about the results of future ones. The figure appears wrapped because of the grip of the past and the struggle of choice, such as my dealings with faith and philosophy. It is an overwhelming practice to evaluate past choices and future ones. I think Sartre was right in that it is impossible to know what a correct choice is. Like most people, there are things in my past that I have wished I had done differently. At the same time I do not know where I would be now had I made those choices another way.

The Wall *Growth*

Challenges are faced on a continuous basis that leave us with a choice of either accepting the outcomes they present or defying them. The resulting truths can be faced and conquered while other times it may be physically or mentally impossible to accept. Dostoevsky describes these encounters as walls. Walls are any facts or laws that are accepted as truth; such as two plus two equals four (Kaufman, 61). Everyone's life is filled with walls. When a wall is reached it signifies impossibility. It is an event, trait or challenge that cannot be overcome or changed stemming from race, history, physical capacity or natural laws. When we reach these walls we may try to knock them down but no matter what we do they will not break. Through no fault of our own, we cannot conquer them. The two options are either to accept or to resist this truth. Torment manifests because there is no one to blame so the blame is directed towards the self (Kaufman, 62). We beat ourselves up over things that we cannot change and no matter how much we may resent it, sometimes things are just the way they are. Growth comes from understanding that the walls are in place. When we accept what "is," then we can change course and focus on what could be, instead of dwelling on what will never be.

The Journey (fig. 3), a piece that led to the series *Of Being*, is an image that addresses a confrontation with a wall. This drawing shows an infant and an adult at an impasse. One is looking back while the other is looking forward. I witnessed an interaction with a wall first hand with my father. He was a lifelong blue-collar worker in the electrical trade and would routinely work forty to fifty hour weeks. He labored hard for himself and his family because that was who he was and what he knew. Over time, he developed enough damage to his back that it forced him into an early medical retirement. He began to contest this wall

the two years following. The fact that he couldn't work anymore ate away at him and he became depressed and self-destructive. Eventually he realized that he couldn't be what he once was; he couldn't the blue collar laborer. Since that realization, he is now more at peace and has more joy than I have ever seen in him. He didn't break down the wall; he instead walked around it, down a different path.

The Shadow *Balance*

Finding balance through acceptance and identification is another component of my work. Jung believed that there is a shadow inherent within us all (NY Times). This shadow is necessary because this shadow creates a balance and equilibrium within our psyche and our world. In "The Shadow Effect", Deepak Chopra talks about this balance:

> Unseen and often ignored, the human soul is a place of ambiguity, of contradiction and paradox. And that's as it should be, because all experience in life, which is the manifestation of the soul, is the result of contrast. You have no experience in the absence of contrast: light and shadow; pleasure and pain; up and down; backward and forward; hot and cold. If you didn't have these divisions, there would be no manifestation. Consciousness would be one vast flat field, like a desert. You would be aware of everything, but nothing in particular. (27)

All around us opposing forces are in play; in most stories there is an antagonist to counter the protagonist. What to take from this is that in order for goodness, peace, and happiness to be realized or identified with, there must be an antithesis for comparison. More importantly, the idea of not only achieving these ideals but also of facing and not just avoiding the undesirable side of life results in a more fulfilling and stable existence. Fear, pain, evil and sorrow are all conditions that most people find unpleasant and consequently

try to avoid. It is a simple solution to repress or deny exposure to these emotions in order to preserve a more joyous or unaffected way of being. While it may be simple, it is only delaying the inevitability of confronting these conditions in the future.

A very specific and direct example of the relationship between the ideal and the shadow is depicted in the piece *The Tragedy (fig. 4). The Tragedy* shows an image of a man who has been ravaged and wounded. The figure appears to have been subjected to immense abuse and violation. Despite the physical trauma, the figure stands with a strong and proud posture that contradicts the beaten corpse-like qualities of the figure. This drawing references a man I knew who just recently died. I met him seven years ago through some mutual friends. He was one of those people that would give you the shirt off of his back if you needed it and he spent his career as an advisor and mentor who helped low income students get higher educations. We fell out of touch for the past two or three years until I heard of his death. He was robbed, stabbed and beaten to death in his home.

Subsequently, his death showcases the relevance of the balance between the light and the shadow. Death in general provokes feelings of loss, anger and remorse. The brutality in this specific situation amplifies these feelings, not only because of how a life was taken away, but also because there are specific people responsible. Because of the circumstances I feel immense pain and anger, as well as regret for falling out of touch with him. What balances these feelings out were all of the points of reference that the negatives came from. The negative impact of his death was only as strong as the positive impact of his life. Recalling all of the good qualities, traits, accomplishments and stories that were created during his life outshine the circumstances of his death. The drawing recognizes the

shadow of his death while at the same time it shows the perseverance and strength of his life.

A common reaction to my work is that it is very dark and terrifying. References are often made to me and what my personality may be or how I may see the world. Showing darker images is not a reflection of seeing the world in a negative light or being a brooding person. The work is not about glorifying darkness or the shadow as an ideal, nor is it a commentary on labeling others. What I put into the images and receive from them is the acknowledgement of the shadow. I know my potential for evil, just as I know everyone in this world carries that potential. By acknowledging the antithesis of good and the ideal, I can fully appreciate those positive things when I experience them.

Process & Materials *Harmony*

The process of how I draw is a direct link to what *Of Being* is about: showing a direct path from my psyche to a surface. I take whatever strife, conflict or emotion that may be affecting me and create an image to represent those forces. I find it paramount that the drawing process be allowed to work in conjunction with the subject matter, as well as balance abstraction with representation in creating the image.

Of Being pieces are like snapshots of my psyche. They depict the emotions, flow, angst, contempt and mood that I feel while completing each piece as well as facilitating experimentation and manipulation of materials and processes. By limiting how representative the images are, a broader spectrum of interpretations becomes available to the viewer opening up a nonlinear source for conversation. For years I was seduced by the idea of high representation only to find it a stagnant and unfulfilling venture. I have extreme admiration for those who exert such effort in a highly representative process and

many great pieces have been done with extreme detail. From the creator's vantage point however, I find the satisfaction to be focused on the ends and not during the means. It becomes about the mastery of the technique rather than the total experience of the image-making process. I feel the viewer should have to acknowledge the process as well as the subject matter in viewing an image. Sartre spoke of importance of this type of process. In *Situations II*, he stated that the only suitable art is art that shows the "brutal freshness, ambiguity, unpredictability and endowed time with its flow" (Ames, 256). I don't agree that those are the only true requirements for suitable art but they are all qualities that I expect to find in my work.

Using my whole body and motion in creating marks and eliminating them puts a physical element in the drawing as well as mimicking the idea of coming in and out of being. I choose very fluid and reworkable media. The combination of synthetic paper and oil-based paint sticks give me the best combination to add and subtract without destroying the surface. I am a firm believer that the drawing should be able to communicate to the artist. By using forgiving media I can adjust and recreate the images based on what the drawing is calling out for. More often than not the drawing moves in directions that were not intended.

Most of the time I approach the work only using black and white, if color is added it is minimal. Monochromatic drawing is the most fundamental and pure way to create. The white and the black are used in unison to create shapes, form, and movement. By contrasting the white and the black it goes back to the idea of "The Shadow". The positive and the negative must work together to create the balance and appreciation of the other. Without the two working together we are left with just a field of tone. One without the

other does not work. Giacometti once said "If I see everything in gray, and in gray all the colors which I experience and which I would like to reproduce, then why should I use any other color?" (Alberto Giacometti Quotes). An image can successfully describe form, space and emotion solely through the use of value. By primarily using value it creates a more pure and direct link between the subject, the artist and the image.

The Viewer *Subjectivity*

The *Of Being* series embraces and encourages a subjective and individualistic experience between the artwork and the viewer. The viewer is given much more control in what the drawings actually or potentially mean than what I have allowed in the past. I not only openly allow the viewer to freely interpret what they see; I also let them affect how I see the drawings.

In years past, I worked with the very specific intent of drawing images, determined to tell a specific story, and to satisfy myself artistically. Conversations with the viewer were limited to my personal narratives represented in the drawings. There was very little the viewers could give back to me. That is to say, I already knew what the drawings were exactly about because they were based on very specific and personal events and themes. Critiques were then limited to technical execution such as proportions, modeling, composition and so on. While some ambiguity may have existed for the viewer, there was none from my perspective because the work was created without the viewer being a factor.

The shift to open up to the viewer's perspective was directly inspired by how J.P. Sartre poignantly spoke of the interaction and relationship of the creator and observer. Sartre wrote, "there can be no art except for and through others" (Ames, 254). That passage resonated strongly within me. It highlighted a discrepancy between my personal thought

process and my intentions artistically. I believe the world is open to subjectivity and personal experience; however, I was making selfish art that didn't embrace others. Working still in a self-satisfying mode but leaving room for ambiguity, creates a mutually beneficial scenario in terms of consideration for me as the artist and others as the viewer. I am allowed to work from my emotions and psyche, creating work that is personal and accurate to me, while keeping the viewer's interpretations free from my personal narratives.

Conclusion *Of Being*

Of Being is the result of years of growing as a person and an artist. Existentialism has given me a framework to help shape my art and make better sense of life. These drawings represent the anguish, pain, regret and shadows that I have endured and will continue to live with. By confronting those dark places, I can better understand myself as a whole and fully appreciate the positive experiences as I go. My process is not only how I create the art, it is also an integral part of it. The abstract and ambiguous nature of this work allows each drawing to be unique to me as well as give the viewer the space to place themselves into it. While my work as an artist served a distinct purpose of personal growth and development, it also works to be just as personal to any viewer who desires the same growth and development. My personal artistic exploration, the exploration of great minds like Sarte, Dostoevsky, and Kierkegaard and my exposure to artists like Giacometti have changed both the process and the end result of my work.

Figure 1. Alberto Giacometti- *Annette Seated* 1962. Oil on Canvas 36 3/8 x 28 7/8

Figure 2. Phil Scally-*The Paradox* 2013. Oil on Yupo 41" x 59"

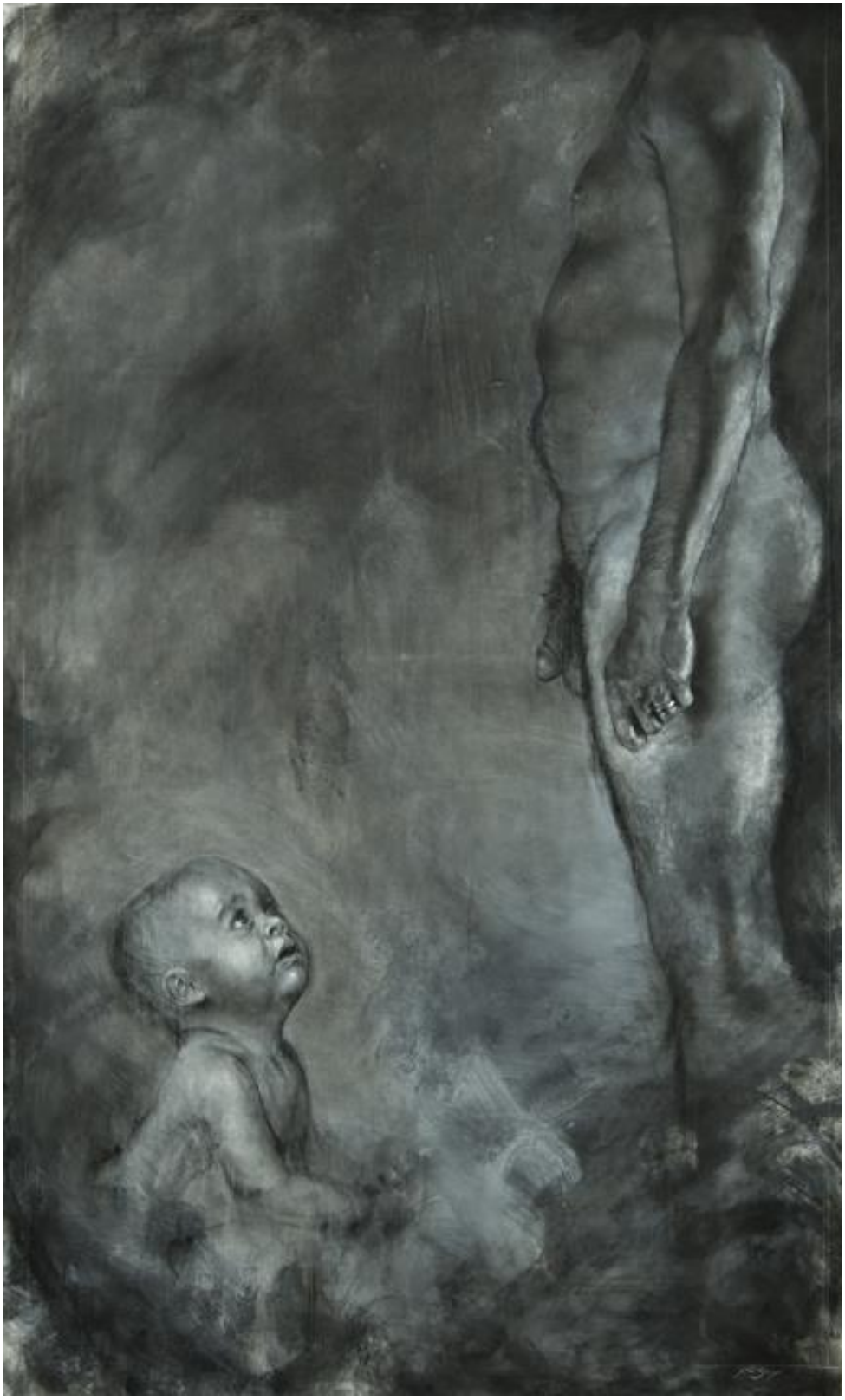

Figure 3. Phil Scally-*The Journey* 2009, Charcoal 40" x 72"

Figure 4. Phil Scally-*The Tragedy* 2013. Oil on Yupo 41" x 59"

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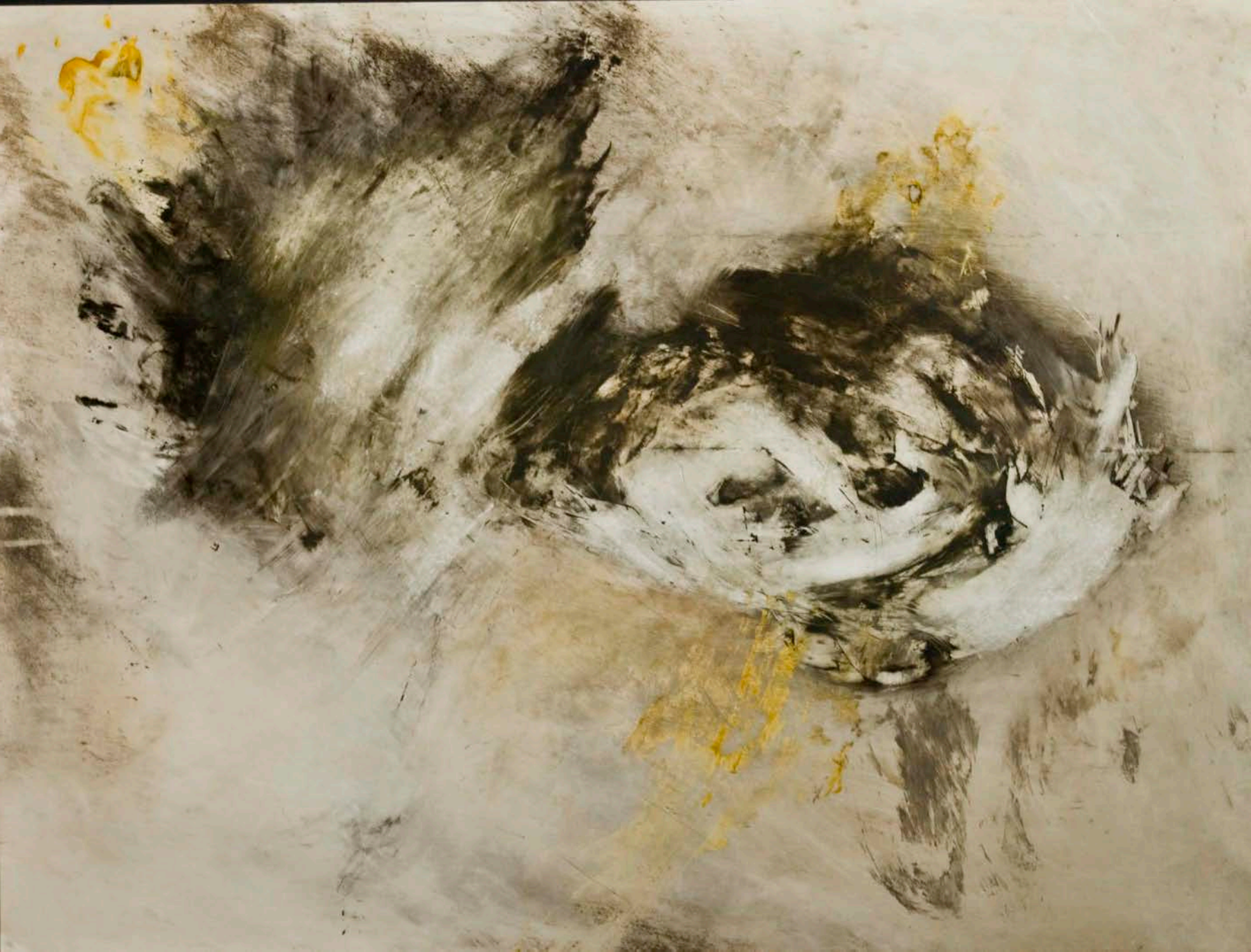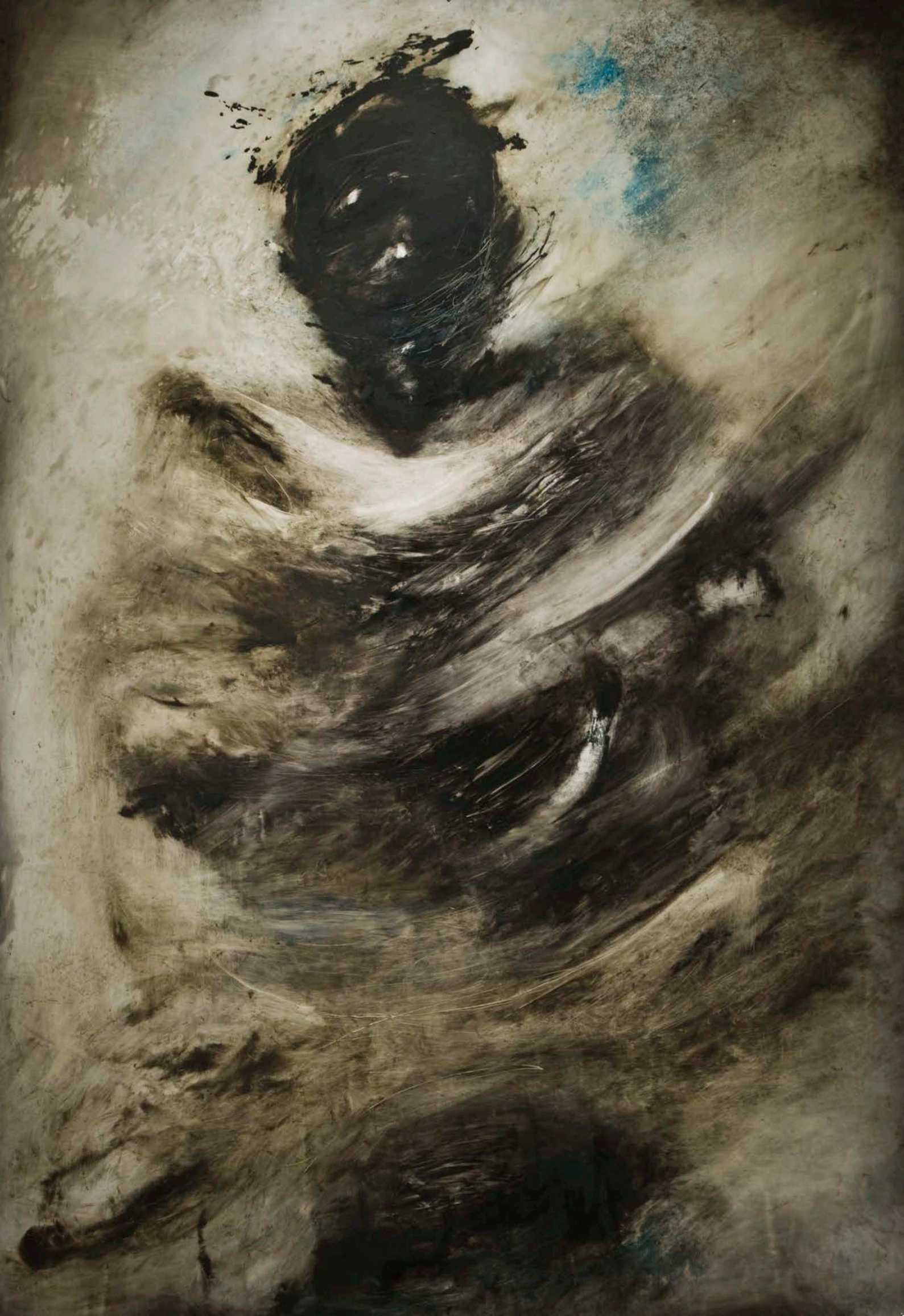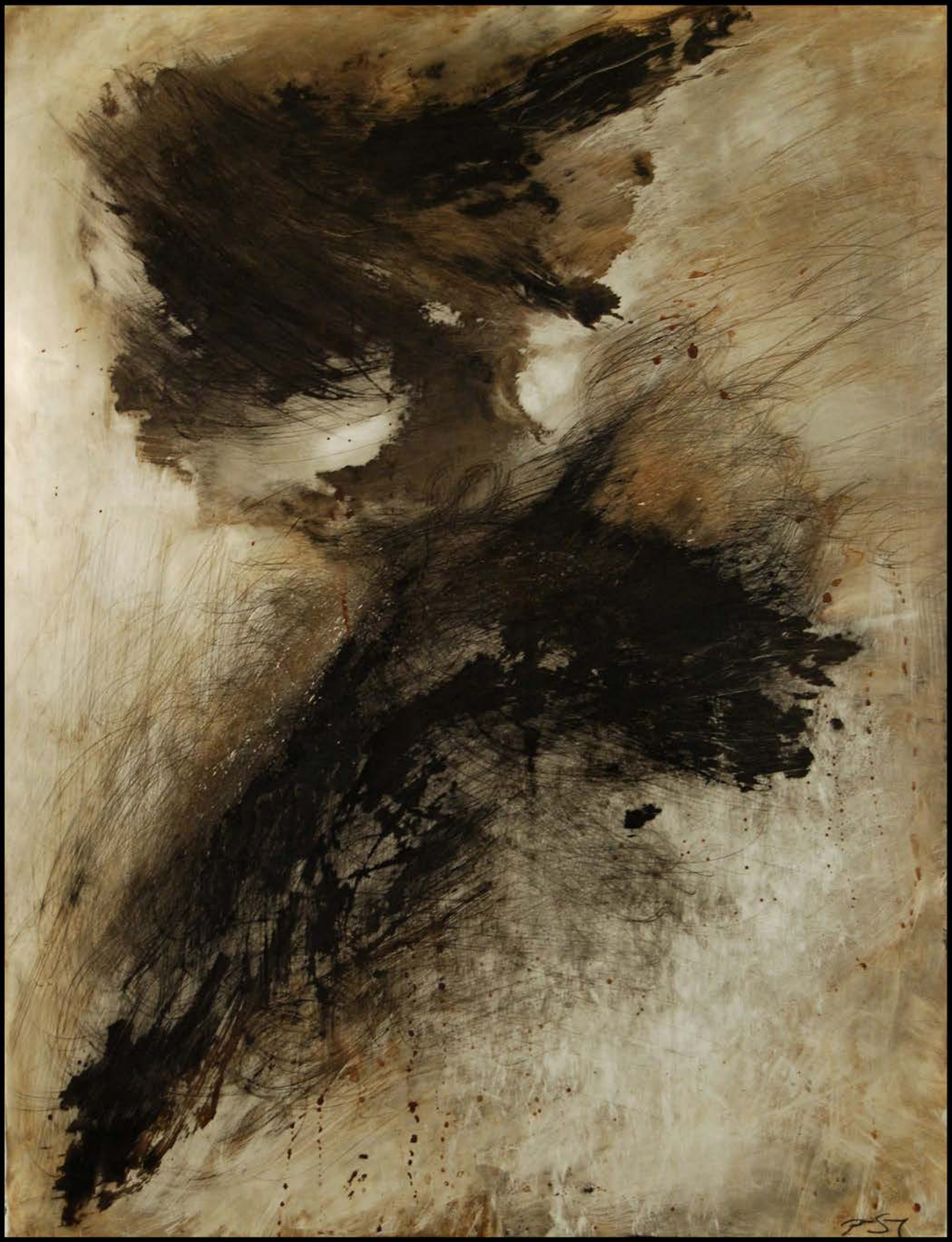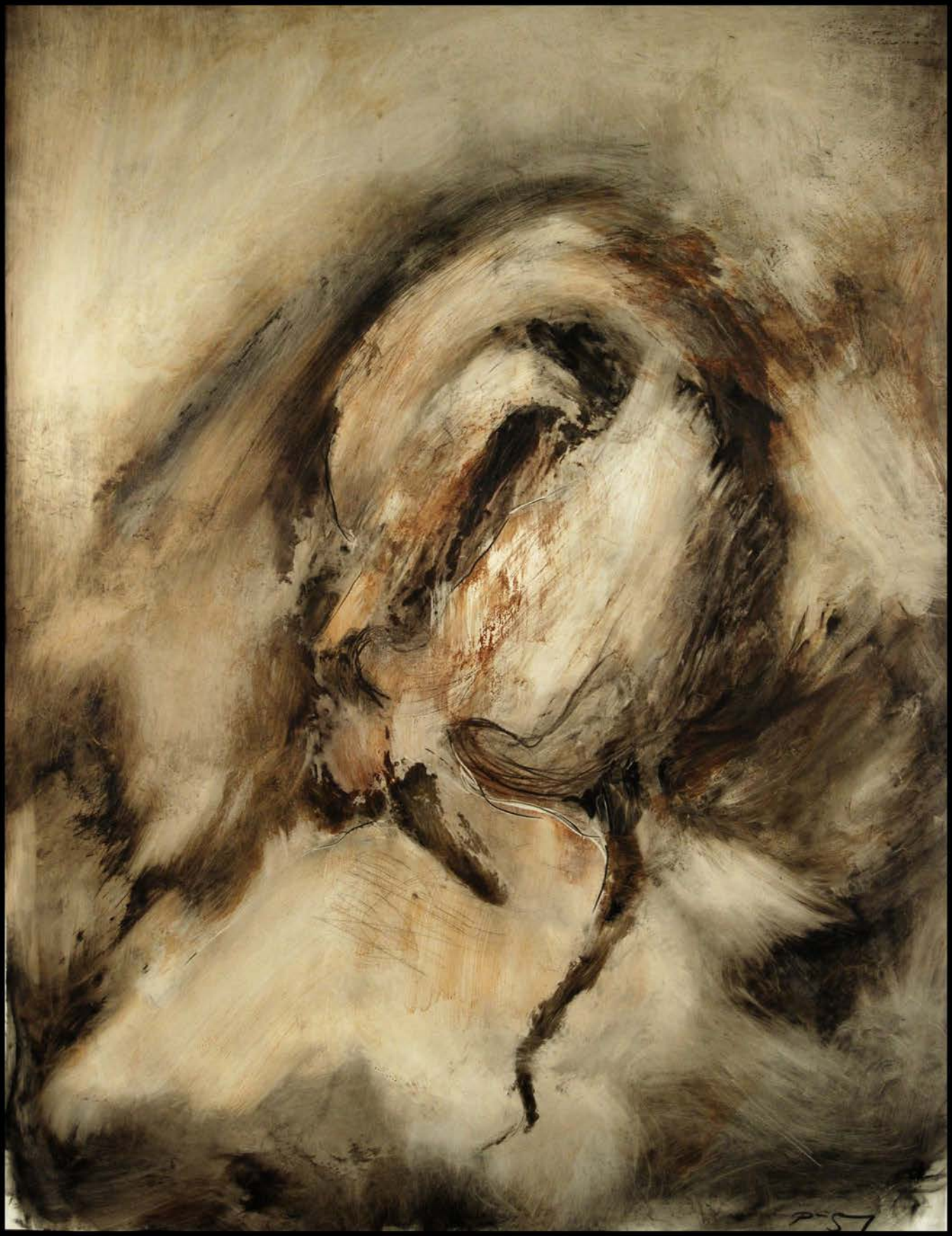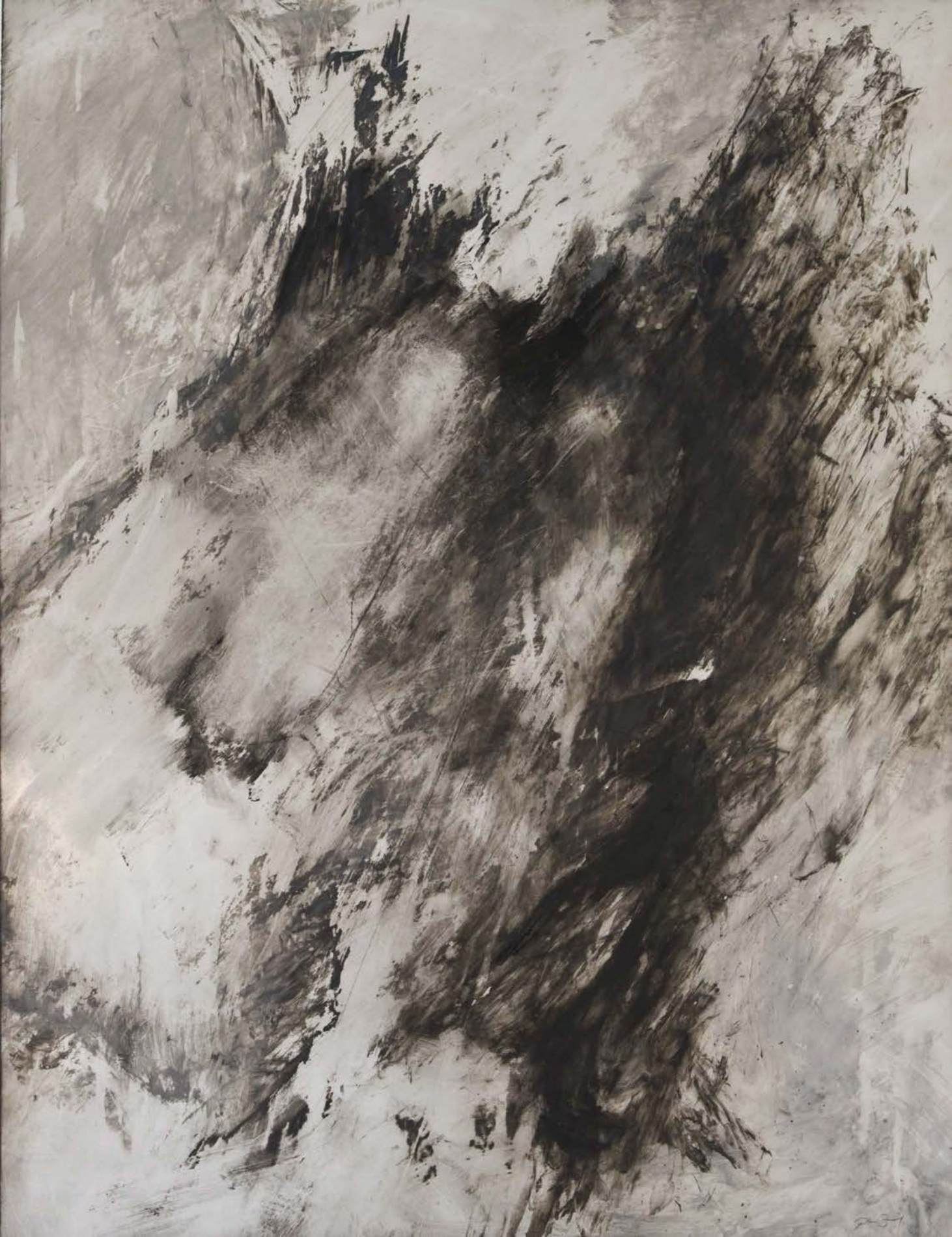
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