

Alchemical Portraits: Tony Scherman's Widening Gyre

Suzanne Zelazo

Artist as Citizen (detail)
2017-2018
Encaustic on Canvas
64" x 64"

There is something primordial in the portraits of Tony Scherman. They gaze back at the viewer. The faces, eyes, mouths, close-ups, and fragments push through the canvas, writhe against the encaustic surface in a dance all their own, and the viewer, transfixed, is confronted by a hint of recognition, a sameness with difference, arising perpetually anew. Surface tension that titillates. Space that ex-folds and in-folds, "[t]urning and turning in a widening gyre," as W.B. Yeats writes in "The Second Coming". He continues "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." There isn't a hierarchy or centre that holds in Scherman's paintings, but instead, an intersection of axes. Similarly, Yeats's poem articulates the echoes of history as a series of intersecting gyres winnowing inward and outward in an ongoing metamorphosis dictated by, and predicated on, the needs of a given age. Like Yeats, Scherman explores the various guises of history, looking backwards in time and toward a reinvented future. Despite their technical mastery, Scherman's portraits don't seek to represent truth. In fact, in them, the representational idiom fades, but the portraits don't abstract either, hinging instead on a space between—one in which the painter establishes the conditions for the emergence of metaphor—the possibility for recognition. The works narrate their own making and unmaking in what Scherman calls an "aggregate of mistakes"

and to be sure, these layers of melted wax accumulate and the secrets, hidden in full view, spring forth. The portraits pulsate with an erotics that insists on relationality, the context of an embodied syntax.

Scherman's use of popular culture blends, as does Yeats's vortex, one order of history into the next, and foregrounds the transmutation of his artistic alchemy (as the heated wax becomes a new substance—a face, lips, a plate of oysters), but this transformation occurs at the level of the subject as well. Marlon Brando becomes *Pompey the Great*. Kim Basinger becomes Kirsten Dunst as Marie Antoinette becomes *Agrippina the Younger*. Through the heating of wax and pigment, the encaustic painting inheres the surface tension of paradox—the image appearing and receding, revealing both its process and the viewer's own psychically driven confrontations.

Scherman's use of images from popular culture also highlights the Baudrillardian simulacra¹ he is working with and through, painting portraits based on layers of images and imaging (not to mention through the aura of stardom), rather than on an actual person. (In fact, even when Scherman represents himself, it is, necessarily, through mirrored

Pompey the Great
2016-2018
Encaustic on Canvas
36" x 36"



simulation). To be sure, this gap is central to Scherman's project and effects a kind of Derridean "différance,"ⁱⁱ which implies both deferral (in time) and the creation of meaning through difference, through that which it is not. Indeed, before the work I am spellbound. Upon first glance, I think I have ascertained the relation of object to space, only to realize that space is actually a juxtaposition of planes, and the story consists in contrast as much as context. For a moment, I have lost the thread. My eyes slide over the ridges of wax that my fingers yearn to touch—richly textured as they are and then the story breaks through and finds me. I feel the interspersed spaces of calm, of smooth dominion where the "aggregate of mistakes" hesitate, and the artist has outrun the hardening of wax, a fluted vanishing.

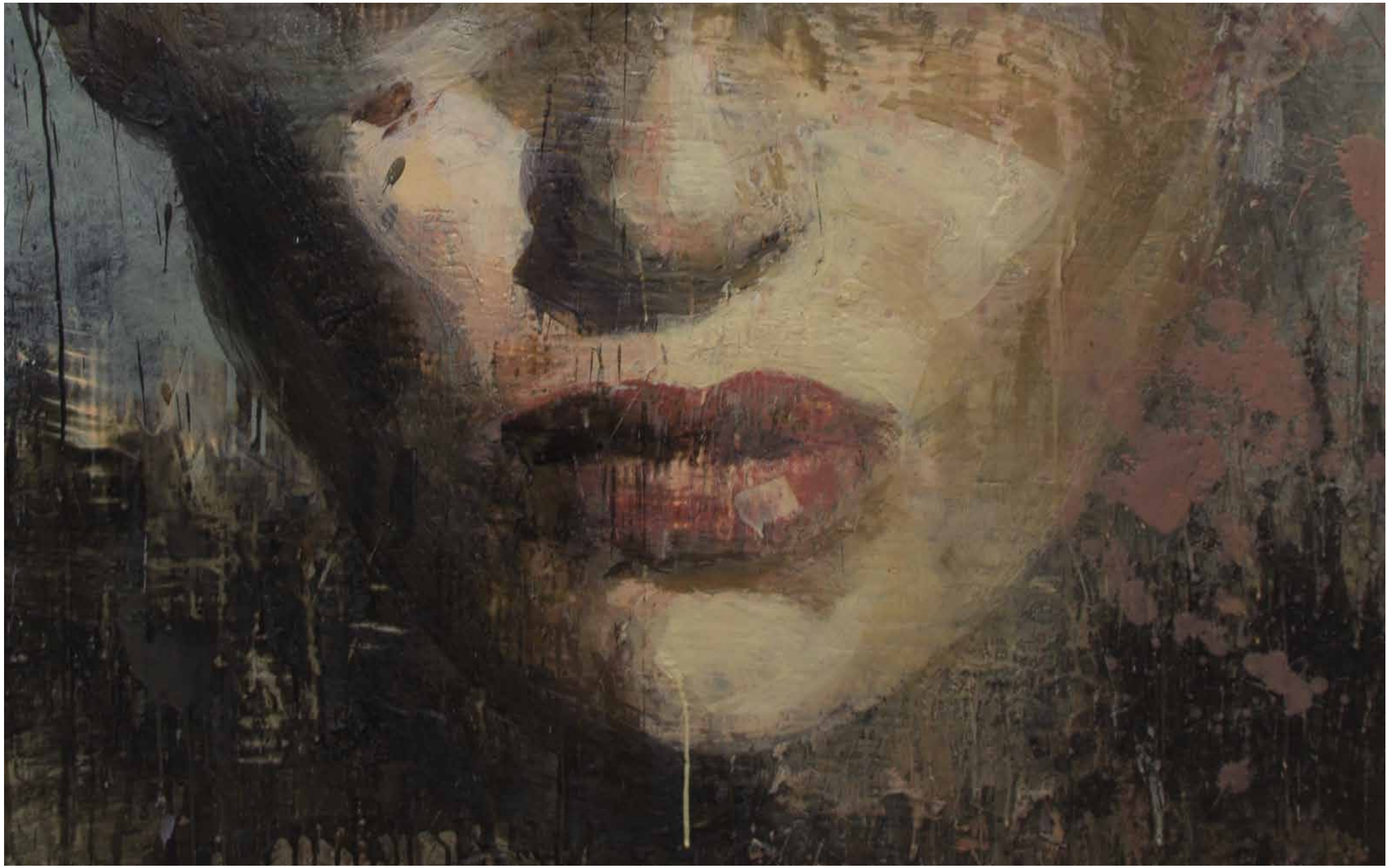
Scherman's paintings echo. In the manner of Walt Whitman, they sound their "barbaric yawp" over the rooftops of our own prejudice, calling us to confront, each of us, what it is we fix as paradox. Perception constantly reconfigures in Scherman's work. It's not simply a question of perspective, but one of scale. The artist's creative drive, it seems, is to melt down the narrative, burn through the becoming, set the stage for an apparition. There is the trace here of a portal to another dimension, a wormhole of

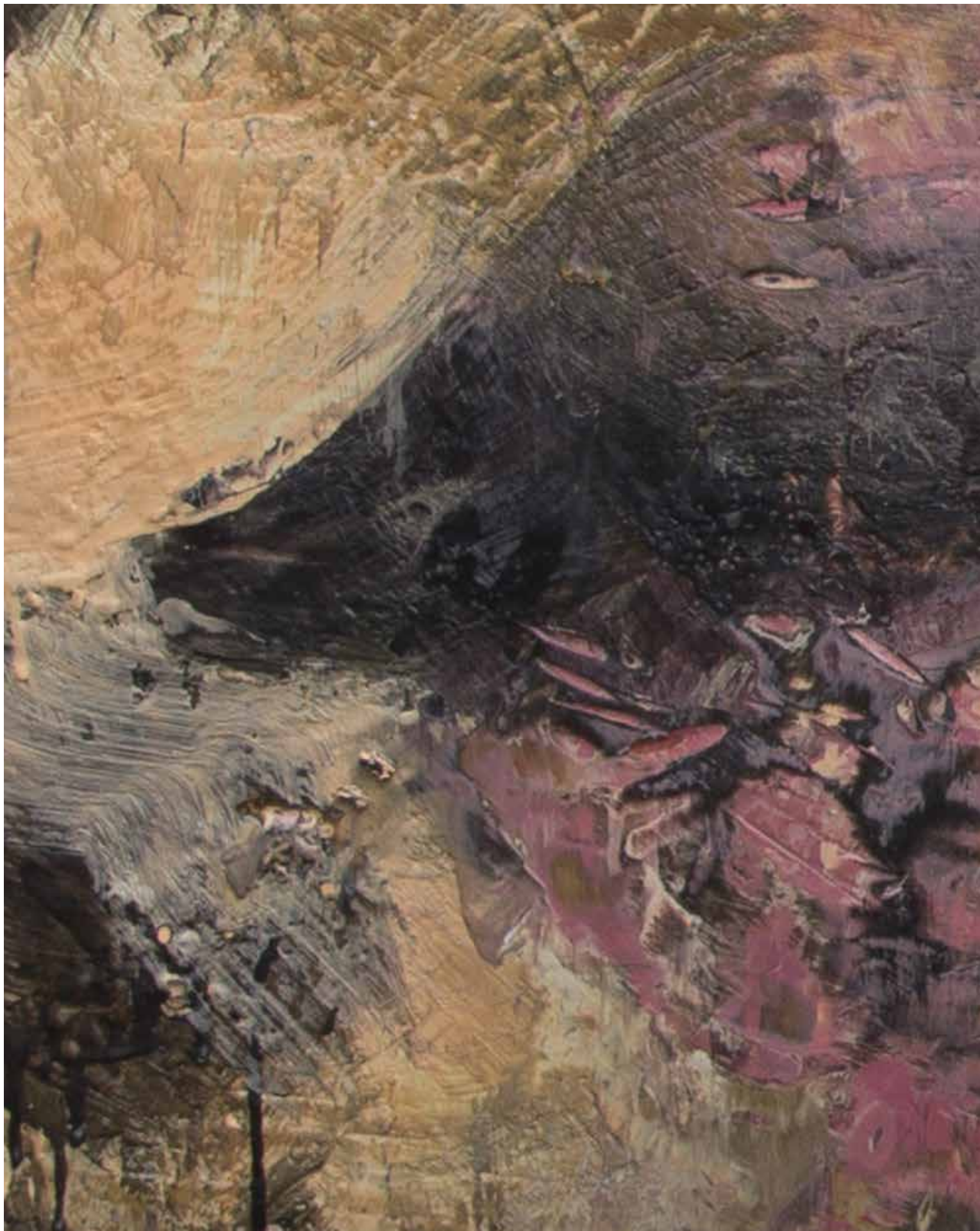
Agripinna the Younger
2013-2018
Encaustic on Canvas
48" x 48"

▽

Agripinna the Younger (detail)







Arcana Mundi (detail)
2018
Encaustic on Canvas
45" x 48"

zeros and ones, creating an axis into the notational space that gestures toward sculpture. Encaustic both affirms and denies the surface and in this antagonism, the paintings blossom.

Scherman's paintings effect an archeology of meaning, a language of unfolding. Consider, for example, the pair of paintings entitled *Arcana Mundi*, two sets of delicious lips. Standing before them, one hears the sussuration of secrets (and I recall André Breton's "inexhaustible murmur"ⁱⁱⁱ) delivering the discursive points of entry into Scherman's oeuvre at large, which, as intimated above, is fundamentally about syntax—about dynamic relations from which meaning emerges. Scherman's work is always in relation to—it is a narrative of arrival—of the self as it appears in the face of the other. In the lighter of the pair, the upper lip presses down in the hint of a suggestive pout, withholding that which it reveals—the shadowed space between the lips where I as viewer might disappear, where I enter and which enters me. This is the convergence, magnified in parallax by the companion painting and I find myself luxuriating in their soft wet fold.

As fragmented close-ups, the lips quivering, enchanting, and seductive, are fundamentally androgynous, and standing before them I realize that fact is part of their power to arouse. Whether one's sexual orientation is singular or not, a paradox occurs at the level of recognition. In this case, the recognition is both the question: "Does it matter if they are male or female?" and the subsequent yielding to the corporeal, letting the body think for itself.

The melted fissures and encaustic layering on those lips, as on all of Scherman's work, enact the scars of history. They reveal the fossilized absences of our own associations (the loss of an intimate connection, or the way both longing and fulfillment have the power to eviscerate us),



Arcana Mundi
2018
Encaustic on Canvas
45" x 48"



Arcana Mundi
2018
Encaustic on Canvas
42" x 48"

and with that the oracle speaks. The *Arcana Mundi*, offer instructions on navigating the past without repeating it, however destined we are to do so. These lips suck you in as much as they penetrate and pulverize, as Scherman does to the surface of the canvas in bas relief. The lips, detached from a face, articulate the eye/I through which the portrait speaks. We wear our transformations like the many versions of looking out, and in, and through. In seeing, we mouth our own meaning.

This powerful synaesthesia also impels the star of Scherman's show, *Messalina*. At 84" x 96", the portrait is larger in scale than the other works, but the magnitude comes more precisely from Scherman's synaesthetic engagement with sound in the ensorcelling portrait. The viewer's eye falls through Messalina's left ear, entering her ecstasy. The flush of her cheek alights my own. Her abandon is not at all passive. She directs the power of her own sensual insistence, and orgasm becomes the swell of her breath and the fall of her hair. Through variations in scale, Scherman enables a kind of Bergsonian entering into^{iv}, drawing the viewer, into that left ear—whispering at its edges while also listening for and through the artist's invitation to the planes and paradoxes of simultaneity. This is also Derrida's "ear of the other,"^v where the self divides. In his contemplation

Messalina
2014-2016
Encaustic on Canvas
84" x 96"





Pictures from Rome
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through Nietzsche of the autobiographical (otobiographical) subject, Derrida articulates that in telling one's own story, at the moment of utterance, the speaking self must become the listener, and the ear of the other, in turn, comes to authorize the text. The paradox, as highlighted throughout Scherman's work, can only be resolved in transmutation. Messalina's ear exists on a different plane than, for example, her gorgeous, about-to-be-parted-lips. The historical perception of Empress Messalina as a manipulative, power hungry, insatiable nymphomaniac is but one iteration of the beauty depicted here. As if to insist on the verisimilitude of history, memory, and consciousness as dependent on variations of perspective, Scherman renders Messalina's hair as the most ardently sensual of her depicted attributes. Her hair is itself orgasmic. It invites and surrenders. It rises and falls, entangling the viewer, however momentarily, in the flesh. In this way Messalina's hair suggests Medusa's snakes. Yet, in the context of such a sensually generative image, the association of those ensnaring snakes (turning viewers to stone), also evokes the paradoxical ouroboros—the serpent eating its own tail in the eternal cycle of renewal. It is hard, in viewing *Messalina* in this light, not to want to fulfill her, give in, enter that ear, and that moment of becoming. Indeed, there is something immersive about Scherman's work. It is as

though we sense the images before we see them and in front of them, we dissolve, however momentarily, into them. "I don't paint analytically," Scherman tells me, "I just try to get it right." The textured surface and the apparent representational medium abstracts fixity, such that the real is revealed as fundamentally processual and relational.

The question of relationality and syntax also undergirds *Artist as Citizen*^{vi}, Scherman's ambiguously titled self-portrait. "How does subjectivity locate?" the painting asks. What does it mean to be a citizen in a demarcated "I" when the borders of consciousness constantly erode and expand? Given Scherman's use of popular culture and his obvious reverence for art as metaphor, it is hard not to think also of *Citizen Kane* and specifically of "rosebud," the enigmatic sled of Charles Foster Kane's childhood. As the last word uttered by Kane, recalling the loss of innocence and the ultimate void of material consumption, "rosebud" as a metaphor depends on the filmic close-up of Orson Welles's lips mouthing the word, without affect. In fact, the words seem to appear on, rather than form out of the line of Welles's lips. Similarly, Scherman depicts his own lips as both enigmatic and barely there—they are thin, but they also seem to recede under a blurring that makes it hard to tell if they are

smiling or not. Evoking the shifting smile of the *Mona Lisa*—Scherman's own metaphor registers, whether it's understood by the viewer or not. Standing before the painting, the viewer senses the layers, associations, connotations even when she doesn't know what they are. As nebulous as the notion of citizenship, the blurring/fading of the artist's lips in the self-portrait is replicated in the borderlessness of the canvas, in the decision not to frame the close-up. The viewer is confronted with the question of what it means to be a citizen in the borderless country of the imagination.

But what is it exactly about the face in these portraits and these close-ups that loom and transfix? To be sure, the techniques of montage and close-up inform Scherman's practice. "I have used the conventions of cinema," Scherman has said, "and fused them with painting." Yet the close-ups of faces here evoke more than filmic tropes. It is the mirror as the mirror isn't, a kind of recursive mise en abyme, an irreconcilable paradox that, recognized as such, actually liberates. Significantly, however, Scherman's faces also invoke the notion of faciality as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari for whom the face is also a landscape. For them, faces and the filmic close-up are spaces in which subjectification and signification correspond:

Artist as Citizen
2017-2018
Encaustic on Canvas
64" x 64"



Faces are not basically individual; they define zones of frequency and probability, delimit a field that neutralizes in advance any expressions or connections unamenable to the appropriate signification ... The face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through; it constitutes the black hole of subjectivity as consciousness or passion, the camera, the third eye. (168)

More generally, novelist and essayist Siri Hustvedt insists: “[W]e human beings love to look at faces because we find ourselves there. When you smile at me, I feel a smile form on my own face before I am aware it is happening, and I smile because I am seeing me in your eyes and that you like what you see” (228). In *Artist as Citizen*, it is the ferocity of concentration, the furrowed brow, directing us to the artist’s inner eye (Deleuze and Guattari’s “third eye”) through which signs from another order leak through. Scherman as painter and painted here, merges sensual specificity with theory in an archeology of the mind.

In *Nero’s Birthday*, a not so still, still life with oysters, Scherman secularizes the Holy Trinity, overturning its gendered hegemony, where the Father,

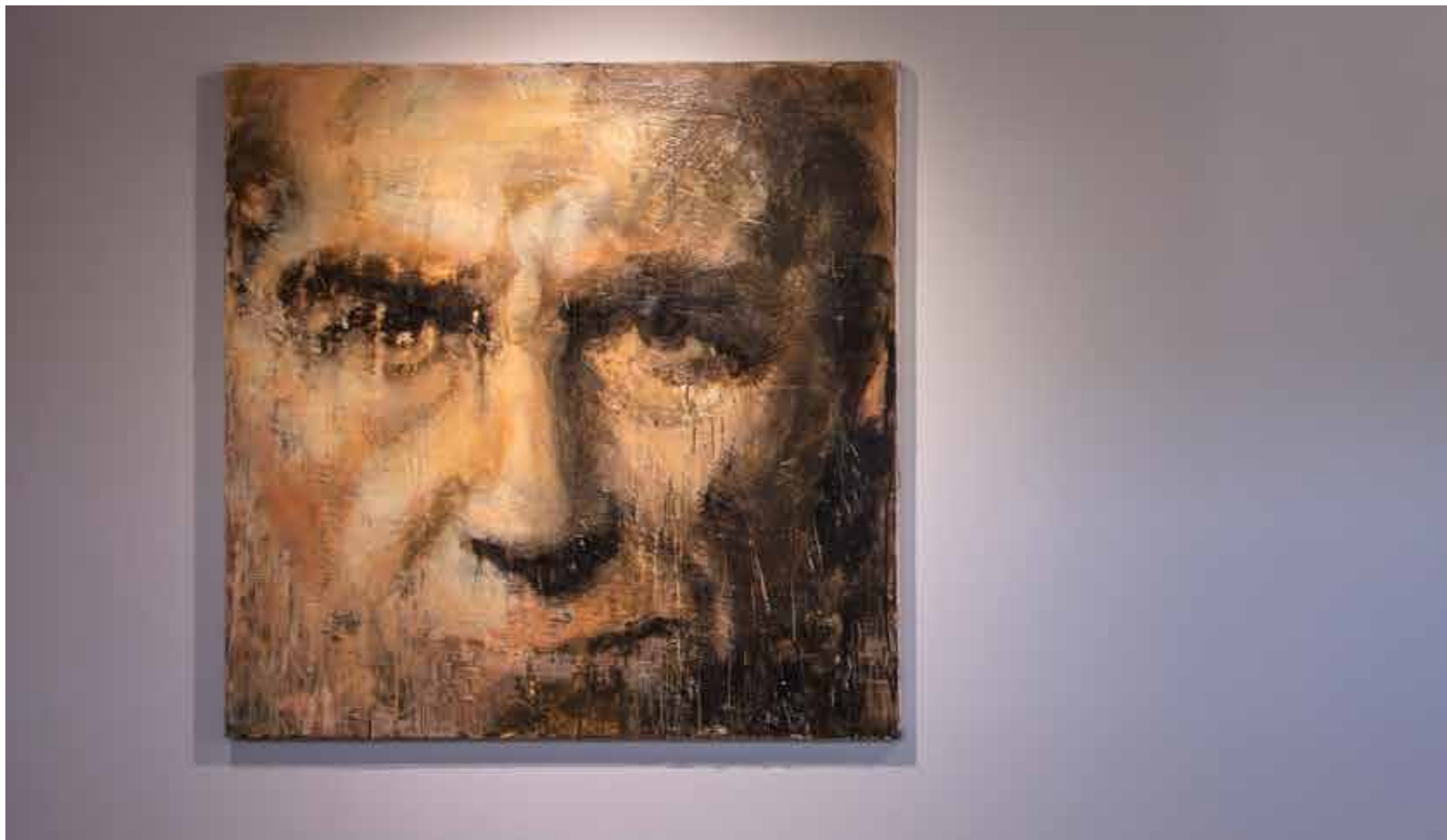
Nero
2015-2018
Encaustic on Canvas
60” x 54”





the Son, and the Holy Spirit become vaginal-looking, succulent oysters. This is not the body of Christ as wafer, but dripping, aphrodisiacal extravagance. In another order of signification, Emperor Nero, who had his own mother (Agrippina the Younger) killed during his reign, suggests the destructive aspects of the creative force. Nero's matricide is highlighted by the painting's title whereby his birth becomes his mother's death, the splattering of paint, the messy oysters, the psychic, physical, and spiritual stain of the painting is more war zone than birthday celebration. The only way to resolve the paradox of matricide, the painting implies, is to move beyond the order of the filial into the sexual where appetites, nourishment, and satiation often exist as competing registers.

Scherman offers us a kind of syncretism, semiotic figurations in an "aggregate of mistakes," which reveals the interconnectedness of all things, affirming that we are citizens of nowhere and everywhere in so far as space, even pictorial space, is necessarily relative and is, therefore, fundamentally illusory. In this work, the act of seeing itself becomes hieroglyphic, layered, and multiple in its synaesthetic access to other sensory perceptions and consciousness. Like Yeats's widening gyre, Scherman gives us the means by which oysters become lips mouthing universal secrets, become Messalina mid-orgasm, become the artist himself as unbounded citizen, the Tiresian figure, seer, prophet, concocting encaustic portals to the new.



Notes

ⁱ In "Simulacra and Simulation," Jean Baudrillard examines the ways postmodern culture has lost touch with the real, such that reality now imitates a model of the real world. "Simulacra" in this formulation are copies of copies without an original. Accordingly, "simulation" imitates processes of the real over time. Baudrillard writes: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. . . It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself." (166)

ⁱⁱ In his essay "Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book," Jacques Derrida writes: "Life negates itself in literature only so that it may survive better. So that it may be better. It does not negate itself any more than it affirms itself: it differs from itself, defers itself, and writes itself as *différance*." (95)

ⁱⁱⁱ In his *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Andre Breton urges the writers to "Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur." (30)

^{iv} In his "Introduction to Metaphysics," Henri Bergson describes the two ways of perceiving an object as it moves in space: relative and absolute. In the former, the self is outside of the object and in the absolute, he explains, "I attribute to the mobile an inner being, and, as it were, states of soul, it also means that I am in harmony with these states and enter into them by an effort of imagination." (187)

^v Derrida also invokes the dizzying maze of the inner ear as vortex. "As you know, everything gets wound up in Nietzsche's ear, in the motifs of his labyrinth." (20)

^{vi} It is worth noting that Scherman's characteristic use of simile in the titles of his paintings (ie: Nero as Woman, Artist as Citizen, Welcome to Thebes—Jagger as Apollo) operate metaphorically. By calling a metaphor a simile, Scherman metonymically adjoins the semiotics of consciousness as the fundamental subject of the work.

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