

Susie Hamilton Interviews Ruth Calland



Maddened, oil on canvas, 51 x 61 cm

Susie Hamilton: You do powerful paintings of single, persecuted figures in *Maddened*, *Actress Running* and *Actress*. How do these tormented figures relate to the balance of two people, the king and queen, in the alchemical drawings of the Rosarium?

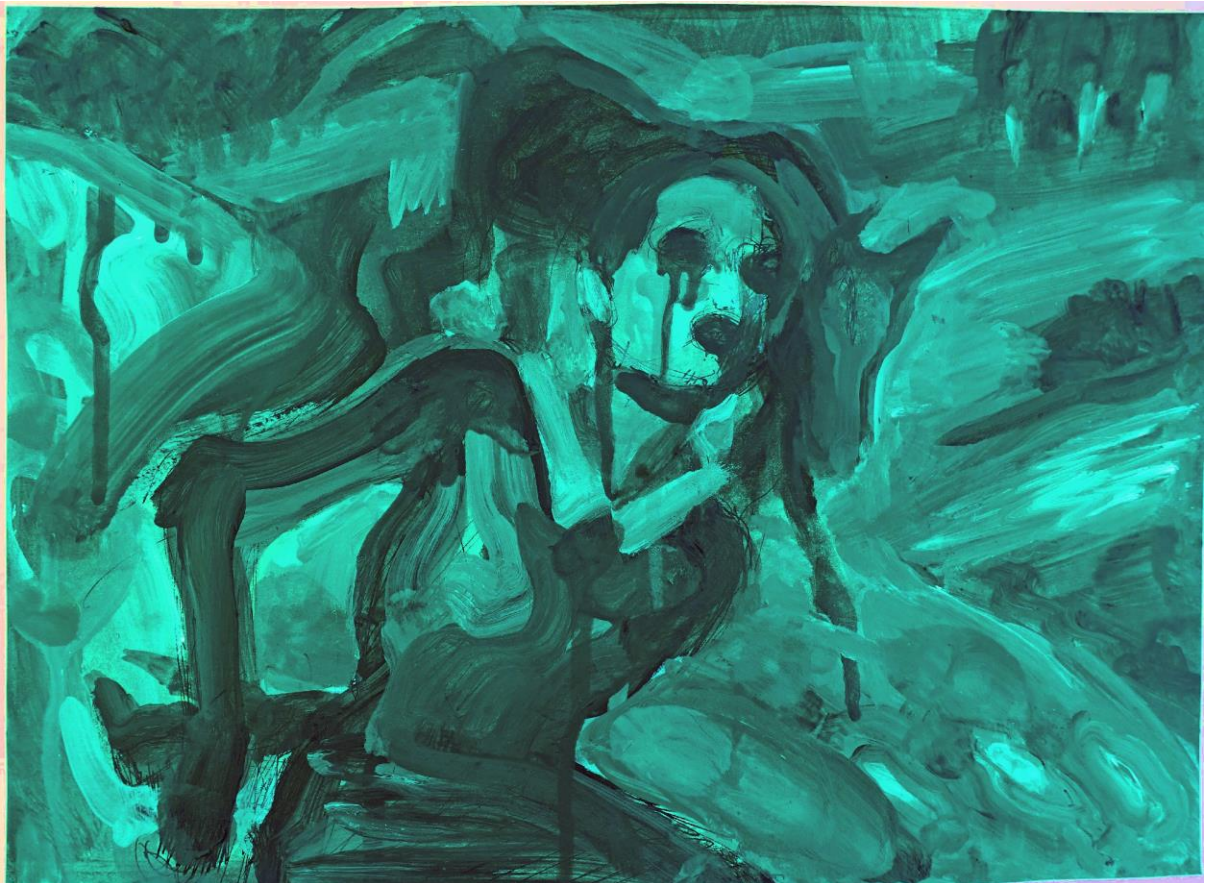
Ruth Calland: The figures in my paintings that you refer to are often portrayed as captives, and are also captives of the film narrative they are enacting - just as all of us are captive to our wider contexts. The alchemists were persecuted and seen as heretical, and needed to express their ideas in coded imagery and texts. I'm using scenes and figures from early vampire films, *Nosferatu* and *Vampyre*, and my perspective on the vampire narrative is about the overturning of civilised ideals, in favour of the liberation of a fuller self. The darkness of our interior selves is where our power, creativity and individuality is held, but societal norms

teach us not to explore this. The people in my paintings are having an opportunity to engage with a powerful darkness, but they are afraid.

SH: So, I'd like to talk more about your use of film. How does the film still, separated from the whole, become changed when used in a painting? And how does the horror genre relate to your search for balance and conjunction? Is it to do with the ever present residue of fear and confusion that lie within us and need to be connected to consciousness?

RC: I look for the moment of tension, or suspense. The type of horror film that I'm interested in often contains anxiety about being changed in some way that is not consciously wanted - but may be creatively needed. By taking one image and combining it with other things, not in the film, you break its integrity but hopefully give it new life, new relevance. Many artists have done it, R. B. Kitaj was the first I became aware of. I will add something in, perhaps a figure from another film, or a landscape in my own life which I think has similar qualities.

I like to set up a resonance between different pieces of culture, places or history and situate myself there, exploring the relationships between them and bringing about a reciprocal mutability. A bit like those horror films where there's an eccentric laboratory and two hapless subjects are being made to swap minds, all conducted through mysterious rays or lightning. I wouldn't say I'm looking for balance, I enjoy the cockeyed and unpredictable nature of things colliding - the anxiety and confusion you mention, perhaps, when reality is in progress.

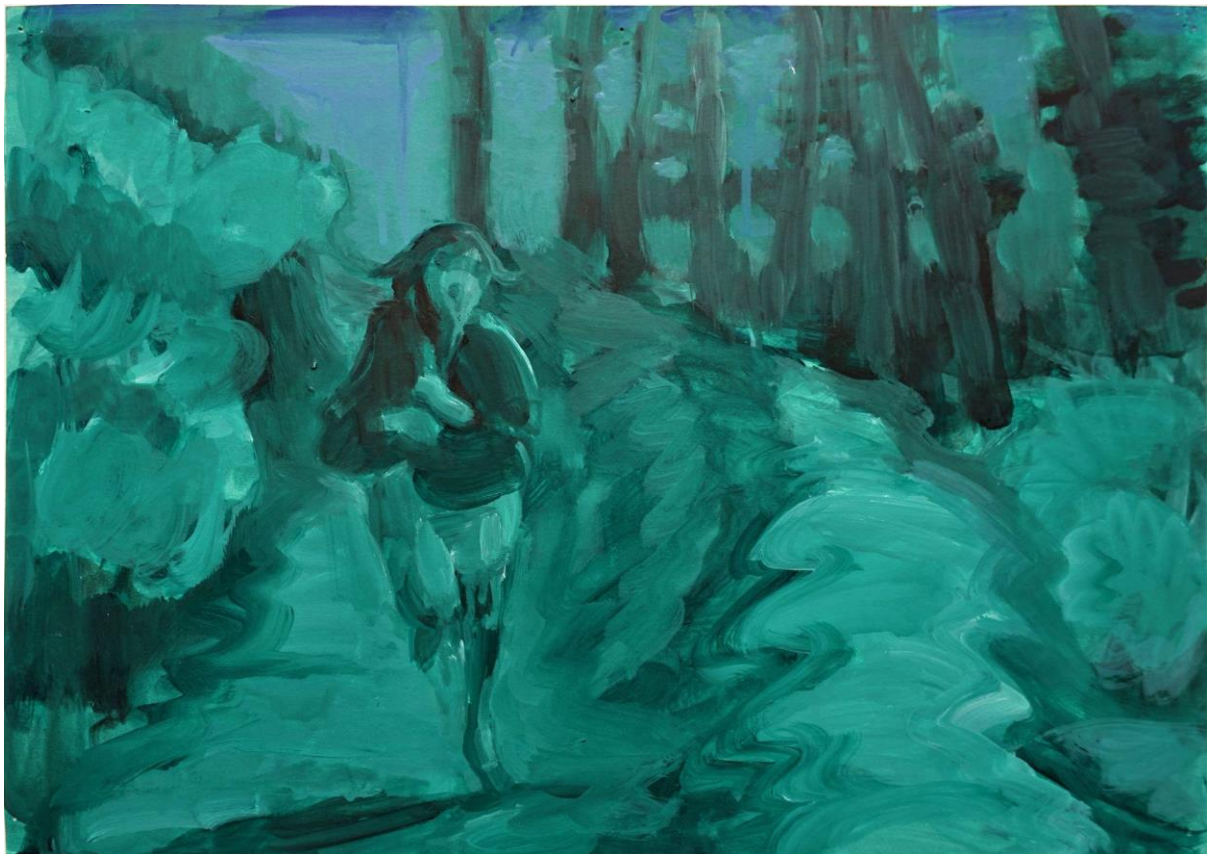


Actress, oil on paper, 23 x 31 cm

SH: Yes, this reminds me of your painting *Actress* where there is an interesting ambiguity in the shape that she is bearing. It looks like a demonic figure or like an animal or like a strange, unnameable shape. Is such ambivalence important in your work?

RH: Ambiguity is the realm of suggestion, the fluidity and in betweenness of all possible meanings, where metaphor and poetry and creative potential lives. The study you're talking about was made quickly, which increases the chance of something intriguingly ambiguous happening.

I deliberately placed the animal near her head so that it became part of her, compressing the space so that the horse is either coming out of her mind and/or pushing into it. I think that's a true psychological experience, we don't always know if things are coming from inside us or are outside. We are very absorbent of our surroundings and other people, and we can also project a lot outwards. The shared 'in between' can get lost if we have to always know definitively what belongs to whom.



Actress running near where deer were seen, oil on paper, 30 x 42 cm

SH: Thinking more about the image of the actress, is it related to the concept of the persona? Maybe the Bergman film *Persona* is a film you admire. The idea of having to fit into a preset role, what you describe as 'dissociation, fragmenting or dismembering the self in order to fit

round a situation where it's not safe to be yourself', is this operating in the *Actress* paintings or indeed in your other works, your Performances?

RC: I agree that the *Actress* paintings relate to the performance pieces I've done. Now that I know I am neurodivergent, I can understand that I've been partially acting all my life. If you don't feel that you're like other people, you try to at least seem as though you are, even to yourself. I'd perfected a version of myself which I'm really glad to have let go of now - perfectionism is so constricting. I've always felt a huge need to be authentic when I was painting though, and I'm grateful for that. In my performance work, the greatest compliment I got was from a friend who looked at me through my elaborate costume and bizarre makeup and said 'What I love about this is that you're just being yourself, you're not acting a part at all'. In fact I felt that I was freer to be myself in that situation than in normal life.

SH: Would you say that the coniunctio or alchemical union of opposites illuminates the social and political aspects of your thinking and painting? Is the concept useful in combatting prejudices about difference and otherness, the embracing of what does not appear to be 'me'? It would seem to be illuminating in thinking about sexuality and the concept of the non-binary for example.

RC: Exactly; that which is perceived as 'not-me' creates a rupture which needs to be repaired, whether it appears externally and/or internally. I've made a lot of work about Jung's concept of the contrasexual, the idea that each person contains within them a psychological gender opposite - either anima or animus. His thinking was skewed at times by patriarchal conditioning of course, and he still thought in terms of a binary, but essentially he was onto something. We are now seeing this manifesting in people all over the world, which is incredible, but very challenging for people who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth and have no experience of anyone who is different to themselves. The global backlash against people who are non-binary or trans is horrific.

SH: The artist, alchemist and therapist seem to have much in common. They are (to quote *King Lear*) 'anglers in the lake of darkness', in the 'nigredo', and they attempt to bring things to light. But how much must remain obscure? Jung said that the 'work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is never unequivocal'. Is the obscure an aspect of painting that you value? The *Bat* paintings in which a misty shape is coming into being while whirling in space seem to suggest that it is.



Bat study 4, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 21 x 30 cm

RC: I relate to bats. One of my performance names is Dame Batlove - when I make paintings blind. I had vivid early experiences of fruit bats flying around tall palms outside our house, when I was 4-7, when my family lived in Australia. They are really extraordinary and of course appear at dusk, existing therefore as signifiers of the unknown hinterland between the light and dark, the conscious realm of the ego and the depths of the unconscious. Many psychologists admire or even idealise the artist's ability to negotiate the transcendent function, the ability for the two realms to communicate. This is contingent on allowing the unconscious to speak in its own way, and embracing mystery. For me, paint speaks best when it embodies, rather than explains. I aim to paint like that but it's difficult to maintain, I have lots of times where I'm pinning things down too much and have to loosen up again.

SH: In relation to the above, is the idea of the unfinished also important to you? It resists closure and limit and so might be valuable in suggesting what can never be fully defined.

RC: I'm seeing a connection to your work here Susie! I love the looseness of your work and how you suggest form so concisely and powerfully. I try to make paintings that hang in that deliciously enticing space/moment of suggestion rather than description. It's largely about becoming comfortable with a language, and as I seem to have a habit of shifting between languages I also have to keep re-finding myself in paint. I think my blind paintings have a sense of form simultaneously assembling and deconstructing, and it's an ongoing project to bring that freshness and embrace of surprise to working with my eyes open.

SH: Yes I can see this connection in our painting, and also a similarity in our use of the 'uncanny'. This is Freud not Jung of course, but it seems to me that this 'uncanny' image, an image that is strange because it evokes a repressed familiarity, is a powerful force in your work and in the films that have influenced you. Would you agree?

RC: I do agree with that. I've always been drawn to the frisson of the uncanny, triggering anxiety, disconnect and excitement all at the same time. Images are not just visual of course, but can come through any of the senses including interoception. I think that the vampire image may get a lot of its power from our repressed early experiences of hunger. The portrayal of the vampire in *Nosferatu* has a wonderful air of a sad unfed baby, it really seems as though he needs to suckle, and of course blood does get mixed in with the milk once a baby gets little teeth. Later images of vampires focussed more on the sexual. The song *Unchained Melody* expresses the overlap of hunger and loneliness: 'I hunger for your touch'. Maybe the need to paint is connected to this, perhaps it sublimates these cravings.



Bitten, triptych, oil on canvas and paper with velvet ribbon, 60 x 80 cm

SH: Yes, indeed. I was going to ask you something related to this. As you would know far better than me, Jung thought that the human quest and challenge was individuation. Without suggesting that art is simply therapy, would you agree that being an artist is one way of achieving or facilitating this? It seems to me to be able to turn painful things into pleasurable

ones, to resist inertia through creative action, to be a tool in self-discovery and to give one the courage to resist group-think or herd-mentality.

RC: I can only speak for myself, and I know that if I don't paint I get ill. I become disconnected from my embodied self and live in my head too much. When I'm painting and it's going well, I get a terrific feeling of virility. It specifically always seemed like virility, rather than fertility. The studio is my play palace but also where I think and grow. My practice is where I take risks the most, fail the most, get up and try again the most, and am most thrilled when it goes well.



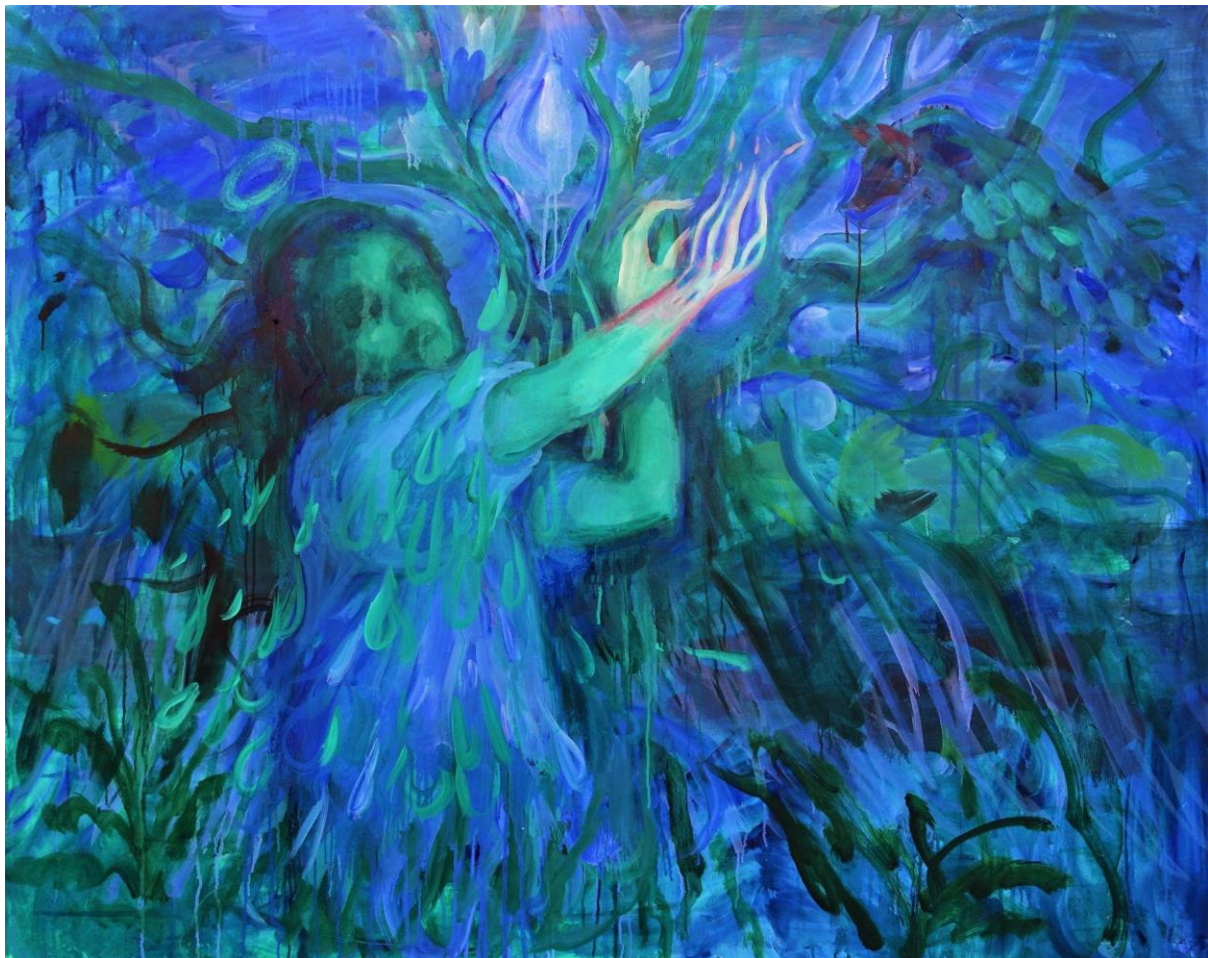
Schizoid Lunch, oil on canvas, 76 x 67 cm

SH: Some of the *Blind* paintings remind me of Baselitz and of George Condo. Could you tell me which artists have inspired you? Your use of semi-blindness or blindness in order to surprise yourself in painting reminds me of Bacon's love of accident in trying to 'trap' sensation and unlock hidden areas of feeling. Is he an artist you admire?

RC: Baselitz has always been a key painter for me. I remember seeing his paintings of dismembered feet at the Whitechapel, and fell under the spell of their grotesque beauty, you could almost smell the gangrene. Focussing attention like this on a cut off part as if it was a whole person, was also a revelation to me: psychological trauma leading to splits or dissociation could be visualised materially. When I'm painting blind I tend to be focussed on

splits that need healing, either in myself, another person, or society. My mark-making is informed by emotions connected first with one side of the split, then the other. Sometimes I'll use two objects to represent the two sides - such as the skull of an executed murderer, and a Buddha head. As I alternate between my affiliations, then a single image appears which combines the two in a new way that I couldn't have foreseen.

Bacon's work always seems very controlled to me, deliberate, despite having the look of an abattoir. I love it but I lean more towards looseness and am a bit besotted with Corinth and Soutine. Contemporary people I admire: the enigma and vigour of Laura Lancaster, Kaye Donachie's deft handling; the anarchic vitality of Armen Eloyen, Salman Toor, Dawn Mellor.



Self-sacrifice Scene, oil on paper on canvas, 122 x 183 cm

SH: The Mina figure in *Self Sacrifice Scene* has tapering fingers/hands which seem to be twisting into the branches of the tree, as in the transformation of Daphne in Piero Pollaiuolo's painting of *Apollo and Daphne* in The National Gallery. Metamorphosis seems important in your *Sacrifice* painting and metamorphosis in response to an attack, as in Pollaiuolo. How does Mina's metamorphosis relate to the title and the idea of self-sacrifice? And could you comment more generally on the theme of metamorphosis in your work?

RC: In *Nosferatu* the character of Mina sacrifices herself to the vampire to save the town, and he is so blood-drunk that he forgets to leave before dawn, and is killed by the sunlight, as she planned. I question how her own act of murder is painted glibly as a good deed, and think that she missed an opportunity for transformation - she could have explored and come to understand the dark side of her character, certainly a more interesting one than the kitten-kissing handkerchief clutcher we see her as most of the time. I wanted to give her that missed chance to transform in my painting. My practice has centred transformation, but not from one thing into another, it's more of an ongoing sense of emergence that I'm interested in.

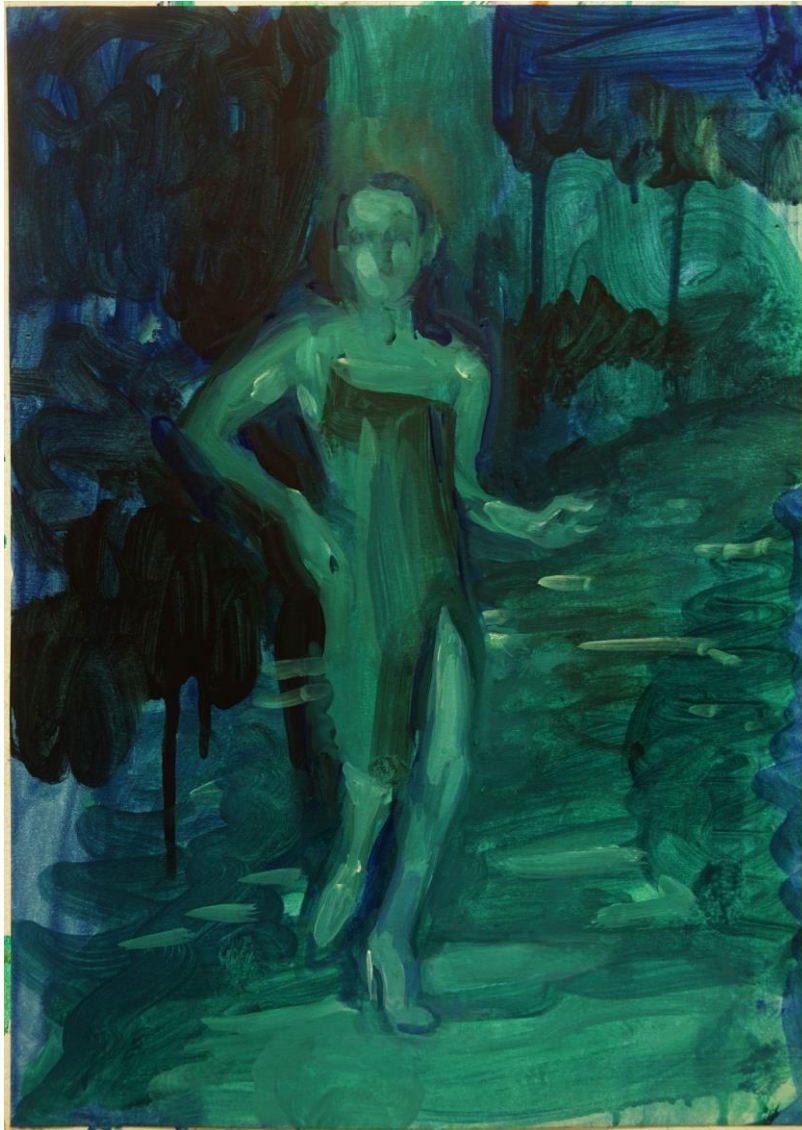


Scene, oil on canvas, 51 x 61 cm

SH: Your green pictures have a dreamy underwater quality. Is the image of the sea important here or is the green colour a conjunction of land and sea? Are the images of water and of the ocean related to the idea of the depths of the psyche, the unconscious?

RC: The Ocean feels like a resonant metaphor for the unconscious. I think the personal unconscious and the collective/cultural unconscious have to be taken very seriously but also explored with a light touch, a playfulness. In one of my live performance pieces, I made paintings blindfolded on the beach. The set up was that people would ask me to mediate for them, to obtain advice from 'the Deep', and I was physically connected to the actual sea by a

long rope. I would hold their written question while painting with 'psychic sauce' - a concoction of seawater, paint and squid ink. It was interesting how people responded to the painted 'Answers'. One person started crying, some people couldn't speak because they were laughing so much. Probably because we did some dancing to whale sounds and sea shanties, and then they had to lie down with one foot immersed in sea water, and hold my leg while I painted. The unconscious can be a dark and frightening place to visit, so I think it's helpful to have a sense of humour.



Jeffrey Marsh dancing, oil on paper, 42 x 29.5 cm

SH: You took part in *Pasture Project Space* in the Suffolk landscapes of Constable and Gainsborough. Were these artists influential? And how did you envisage combining the outer landscape of East Anglia with your visionary, dreamy, inner worlds? In other words, did you foresee the project as a new opportunity for conscious looking and knowledge of art history to combine with the fluid, ambivalent, fantastical phenomena of the unconscious?

RC: My interest in bats led me to track down the local bat colonies whilst I was there, who had made their homes in abandoned bunkers, used to attack and bring down enemy planes in the world wars. These concrete pill boxes, now made picturesque with ivy, and largely ignored in hidden corners of the beautiful water meadows, seemed like the only evidence of a history of violence, including our colonialism in Constable's time. These landscapes of the repressed are still haunting my studio, and I am using them as a backdrop or stage for other contemporary narratives. My current paintings aim to bridge experiences of both trauma and beauty.

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