



GUNS & RAIN

ADRIAN FORTUIN

*A Blue Burn,
A Slight Return,
And Other Ways to Fall*

Guns & Rain
Investec Cape Town Art Fair 2024
SOLO
Booth S6

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“I see the figure or human form as the vessel from which we experience life. It is the site of human interaction, connection and conflict.”

– Adrian Fortuin

For the 2024 edition of Investec Cape Town Art Fair, South African artist Adrian Fortuin has made a new body of work titled *A Blue Burn, a Slight Return and Other Ways to Fall*. With a shimmering palette of contrasting colours and the characteristic graphic marks that make Fortuin's work so distinctive, this collection of paintings is concerned with weight and weightlessness, motion and stillness, and the presence of the human form as the vehicle through which we experience the world.

An enigmatic cohort of subjects populates the 14 new paintings presented in the SOLO section of the fair, which is guest-curated by art writer and journalist Sean O'Toole. These mostly human subjects command our attention because they are profoundly mysterious, and often vulnerable. Sometimes, as in the works *In Service of Dreams* and *With an Eye to Their Later Existence as Ruins*, they are falling or floating, caught between the sky and the earth. Others, like the man whose legs and feet are seen in frame in the work *Idle*, or the leaning woman in *Catch and Embrace*, are supported by another person, by or the ground. In *Idle* we see the ambiguity of this relationship between vulnerability and bracing: is the man resting or hurt, or worse?

Fortuin is an adventurous colourist, and approaches his materials with a combination of intuition, an affinity for symbol and a surprisingly methodical approach to the relationships between forms and line. These qualities are expertly handled in the two large-scale paintings, *Where Are They Going?*, which depicts an enigmatic crowd moving through a hilly landscape, and *A Pale Fire, a Blue Rider*. In the latter, a lone rider on horseback looks into a swirling night sky suspended over a body of water. We are presented with a natural environment very different from the highveld landscapes of Johannesburg - where Fortuin grew up and still lives. While an earlier body of work, produced for the two-person exhibition *Fresh Voices* (2023), dealt with the confluence of remembered places and found images, the sense of place in his new paintings is marked by strangeness and ambiguity. Alien trees such as firs and palms evoke otherness, while the lemon tree in the background of *A Slow Burn* suggests domesticity, the banality of the familiar.

Fortuin's work is rich in references to the work of other artists. In this collection, many will recognise Jane Alexander's *The Butcher Boys* (1986) in the painting *Butcher Boys Blues*. This painting shows an abattoir scene in which the three iconic brutes, augmented by a fourth member, flank a carcass, itself an image that has appeared on several occasions in the history of Western art. Rembrandt, Chaim Soutine and Francis Bacon have all painted beef carcasses in their time. Fortuin sees the image as a symbol of mortality, transformation and even futility. His reference to Alexander's sculpture also points to the haunting extensions of apartheid into the present, 30 years into our democracy, and the persistence of newer forms of extraction and violence.

Other artists who cameo in Fortuin's work include British artist Simon Starling, Dutch Golden Age painter Carel Fabritius, and Francisco Goya (*With an Eye to Their Later Existence as Ruins* is a reworking of Goya's 1798 painting *Witches' Flight*). Subtler influences include Peter Doig, David Koloane, Edvard Munch, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Michael Armitage, Henry Taylor and Danny Fox. Fortuin's steeping in the art world, both historical and contemporary, gives his work a richness and shows his commitment to the discourse of painting over time. He places these references and found imagery on an equal footing, "sampling", in his words, from both without a sense of hierarchy.

Drawing has always been integral to Fortuin's practice, as a form of thinking, preparation, and reflection. For his presentation at the Investec Cape Town Art Fair, Fortuin draws on the walls themselves annotating and supplementing the paintings, revealing the connections between his marks on canvas and on paper.



Adrian Fortuin

A Pale Fire, a Blue Rider

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

150 x150 cm



A Pale Fire, a Blue Rider (detail)



Adrian Fortuin

After-Study #7

Pen and archival ink on paper

21 x 14,8 cm



Adrian Fortuin

Lest We Forget

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

160 x 120 cm

RESERVED



Lest We Forget (detail)



Adrian Fortuin

After-Study #4

Pen and archival ink on paper

21 x 14,8 cm



Adrian Fortuin

Where Are They Going?

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

150 x 150 cm

SOLD



Where Are They Going? (detail)



Adrian Fortuin

With an Eye to Their Later Existence as Ruins
2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas
140 x 120 cm



Adrian Fortuin

After-study #1

2024

29,7 x 21 cm

Pen and archival ink on paper



Adrian Fortuin

What Time Hides Forever in Plain Sight

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

120 x 140 cm

SOLD



Adrian Fortuin

In Service of Dreams

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

160 x 120 cm

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In Service of Dreams (detail)



Adrian Fortuin

After-Study #5

Pen and archival ink on paper

21 x 14,8 cm

In Conversation

Adrian Fortuin & Anthea Buys

Anthea Buys: What would you say are the main themes and concerns in this latest body of work? What were you chiefly interested in/ trying to achieve with this work?

Adrian Fortuin: I started looking at images and photographs that were on the periphery of violence, or on the edge of conflict. Not all the paintings reflect this though. I was also reflecting on 30 years of democracy and my 30th birthday this year. It's a very interesting time to be alive and there is so much happening in the world right now, it's almost impossible not to be affected by current world events. I was interested in making paintings that are able to suggest a narrative. I think that narration is a powerful form because of how stories are shared, experienced and inhibited by those who tell them. However, the suggested narration in the paintings are not explicit, and I wanted them to be 'open' for interpretation.

The idea of inertia became apparent while I was working, and this was an important step towards thinking about the body of work and its title, "A blue burn, a slight return, and other ways to fall". The idea of inertia suggests continuous uninterrupted movement but also stagnation or idleness; there are moments in this body of work where figures are falling or slightly off balance or caught in movement the way a photograph would capture them. I liked these contradictory moments of movement and stillness, and perhaps the hues of blue and orange/vermillion naturally became symbolic of this polarity of expansion and contraction.

AB: Over the past few years you've experimented with different styles and artistic media, and it seems you've now landed up in a very productive space. Can you tell us a bit about your journey through these different registers and what led you to the kind of work you're making today?

AF: I started making performance installations while I was doing my undergraduate degree. These performances were rooted in the combination and configuration of found objects and a darkroom photography practice. I really enjoy being in the darkroom and I'm still drawn to black and white photographs. Perhaps this is why I only use black and white images as references for my paintings. After my undergrad I set up a painting studio and wanted to find out what painting could be for me. I would paint and reflect on the process through writing. I played around with many different visual languages, from formal abstraction to expressive figuration, often painting over a single canvas as many as 7 times. I was also making small drawings on the kitchen table using leftover watercolours, pencils and oil pastels. This process really freed my hand and I learned how to make marks intuitively and respond to them as a kind of conversation. I often keep things along the way which I refine, such as a kind of mark, shape, symbol, colour and so on. All these moments have led me to the way I'm working now.

AB: I know you really wrestled with the question of whether you were more interested in - or, rather, would like to work with - abstraction or figuration. However, if I'm not mistaken you've arrived at a way of thinking outside of this binary. What are your thoughts on the relationship between abstraction and figuration in contemporary art, African or otherwise?

AF: I see the figure or human form as the vessel from which we experience life. It is the site of human interaction, connection and conflict. Maybe it's less so now with the continuous advancements in information technology, but the figure is the primary vehicle for conscious and unconscious movement through time and space.

In my paintings, figurative abstraction becomes an approach to bridge the gap between a pragmatic visual representation to something that reaches further - almost to the edge of something that could easily fall apart because of its vague or abstract qualities. In the work I'm making today, this has become a scale of transformation that moves back and forth between abstraction and figuration. I was also interested in allowing the various shifts between abstraction and figuration, so that the paintings don't do the same thing but have a range that creates a wider scope of reference. I think that there have been interesting approaches to this across the continent for a long time. I have definitely been influenced by many artists, movements and schools of thought that reach for something just beyond figuration.

AB: Who would you say are some of your main artistic influences, and what is it that you admire or look to in their work?

AF: Issa Samb also known as Joe Ouakam is an important influence. I didn't meet him before he passed on some time ago, but I have seen interviews with him and documentaries about him. I have always been drawn to his approach of living life as an art form, the art of living, or living as a form. Not in a performative sense but as a profound immersion in the spirit of living.

Besides Samb, I saw the work of Albert Adams at the Wits Art Museum a couple of years ago and I was amazed by his approach to figuration. I was impressed by the weighty layering and intensity of emotion in the paintings, but there was also a freeing spontaneity in the mark-making that I sensed was guided by intuition. I also enjoy the work of the late David Koloane. The energy of gesture in his mark-making reminds me of a seismograph that records motion and movements in the earth.

I sometimes look at images of Marlene Dumas paintings - there is a vibrancy and intuitive use of colour in her figures that interests me. I also enjoy looking at Dorothee Kreutzveldt's paintings. She has an approach to depicting space within the picture plane that excites me, and the relationship the paintings have to abstraction seems measured and considered.

I look widely at other artists' work, and some of my favourites are Jennifer Packer, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Henry Taylor, Danny Fox, Micheal Armitage, Peter Doig, Edvard Munch, Francisco Goya, Rembrandt, Antoni Tapies and even Joseph Beuys' works on paper.

AB: In 2023 you started an MA Fine Art at Wits University, with Dorothee Kreutzfeldt as your supervisor. What has this context offered you as an artist? How has it helped you refine your thinking and making?

AF: To have Dorothee as my supervisor for my MA has been a great honour and privilege. We have been able to have many engaging conversations about painting, but also about research, identity, writing and what exists on the periphery of painting or what makes up the network of painting. What I mean is, we have been able to engage with that which informs the process of painting, its context, research, references and various modes of paint application. These conversations have been extremely helpful.

AB: Which of your new paintings is your favourite, and why?

AF: It's difficult to say which is my favourite because at the time of writing this I am still understanding the paintings. The more I see them in different contexts or configurations, the more I learn about them. I think they are still growing with me. So it's difficult to choose one at this moment; perhaps over time, with some distance, a few will stand out. But what I will say is that my favourite painting is my next painting. The one that is still to be made.

AB: How do you come up with the titles of your works?

AF: I collect words and phrases from books or conversations, or things I see online, and I stick them up on a wall in my studio. I keep phrases, sentences and words that resonate with me. Sometimes a work starts with a title, and at other times the title becomes a combination of these phrases and words that are puzzled together to make something new.

AB: Can you describe your artistic process when setting out with a new painting? Do you prepare with sketches? How and from where do you gather and “sample” your reference materials?

AF: I'm constantly looking at pictures and collecting phrases or words that I am drawn to. A painting can start with a phrase that I respond to or with an image which I reference. I use the composition of a reference image as a starting point and it will often depart from the original in some way. Sometimes a painting is a combination of reference material. I make a drawing with charcoal on the canvas and then start to paint when I feel the composition is in place. Sometimes this doesn't work and then I work on top of the painting combining layers to bring about a new relationship between the various elements that accumulate on the surface.

AB: In an earlier iteration of the work *In Service of Dreams*, there were two policemen standing over the Icarus figure. Why did you decide to paint over them?

AF: In that particular painting, the composition was not working for me and I wanted to draw more attention to the falling figure. Having the policemen there created a particular reading that felt limited to a sort of political reference, which I found interesting, but it also closed the painting off from broader interpretations. It was also a moment where I had to destroy what it was so that it could progress. I removed them because their presence grounded the painting too much. I found it to be more interesting to have the figure falling through space differently.

AB: What is interesting for you about painting in particular? This could be a personal preference (a matter of enjoyment perhaps) or an interest in the history of the medium, for example.

AF: I enjoy being in the studio and I enjoy the journey of painting. I enjoy the process of starting a painting and not knowing where it may end. It is the most interesting and challenging thing I have ever tried to do.

AB: Can you tell us about the symbols that sometimes recur in your works, particularly in the drawings: triangles, stars, certain words, skeletons, birds, etc.

AF: Sometimes I just like the shape of something and I like to recreate it in some way. Sometimes, like birds, they are symbols that I constantly think about. Some ideas stick with me for some time. Perhaps they are ideas I am still grappling with. For example the kind of scribbled marks echo David Kolane and even Cy Twombly, this is a moment of energy transference in that type of mark-making. I am sometimes interested in the kind of performative gesture that produces a mark. In this body of work it has translated into a more meditative and slower process at times, which feels like counting. Each of these smaller marks seems to account for something but also provides particular textures on the surface. The motif of the bird recurs because of my interest in weight and weightlessness. The birds symbolise defying gravity or weight, and perhaps a kind of ascension to something pure or freedom from something limiting or oppressive. The skull for me is a symbol of mortality but it also has connotations of the dead and death. Perhaps it serves as a quirky reminder of this fact in a time in which there is so much fear and uncertainty.

AB: *Butcher Boys Blues* references both Jane Alexander's famous sculpture *The Butcher Boys* (1985-6), as well as Chaim Soutine's painting *Carcass of Beef* (1925). Can you tell us about this juxtaposition?

AF: I have seen the carcass of beef referenced a few times in the history of painting. Francis Bacon often used it in his paintings, and I have also seen Goya use it. I see it as a symbol of mortality, a reduction of a living animal to flesh and bone, completely transformed. Even the name changes from cow to beef. It's this transformation, the awareness of mortality, the consumption of flesh and perhaps a sense of futility all together intrigues me. Yet, even though the original *Butcher Boys* suggests these ideas with a subtle violence, they seem immortal and totally removed from the butcher or slaughterhouse. Perhaps the slaughterhouse becomes a metaphor. For me, to use them as reference situates the painting in a South African context.



Adrian Fortuin

Catch and Embrace

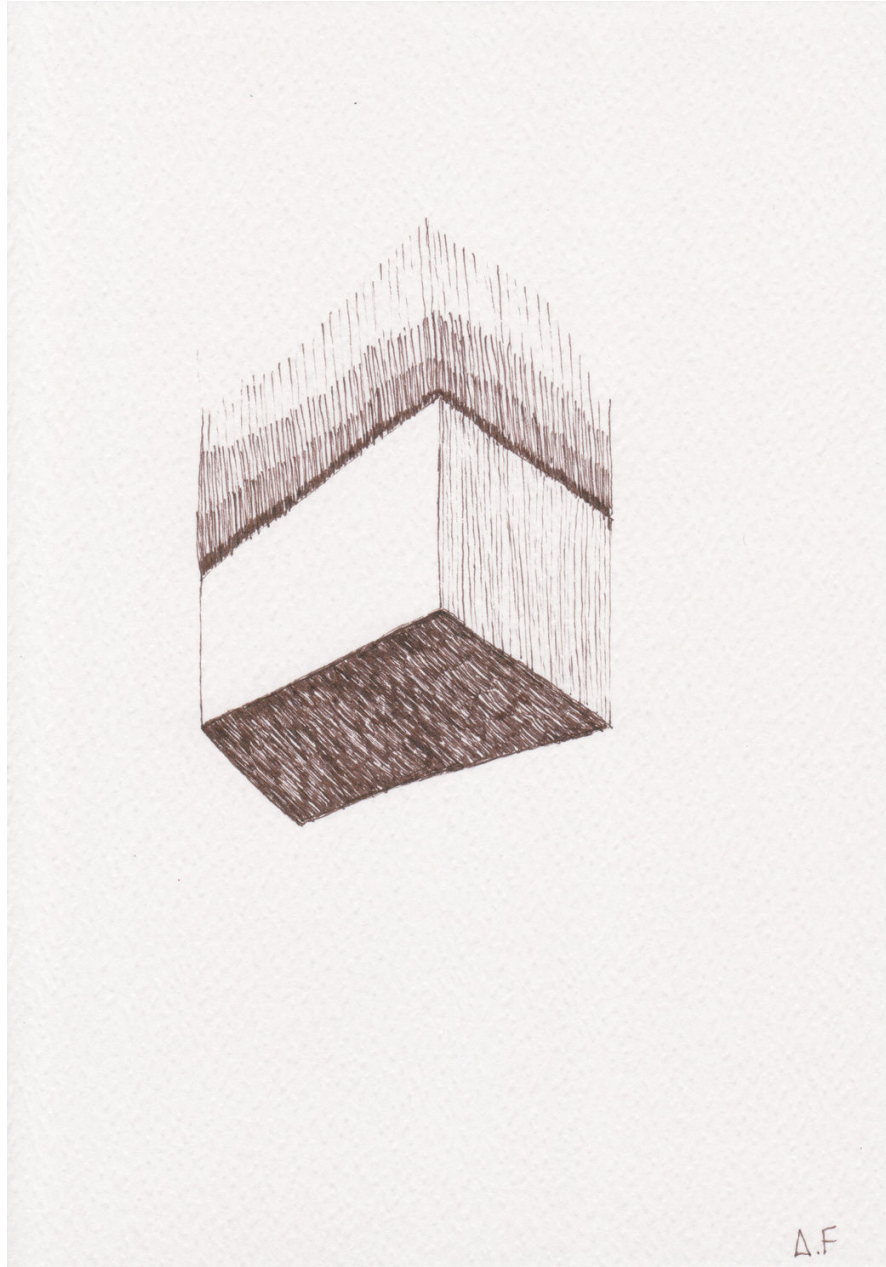
2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

80 x 60 cm

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SOLD



Adrian Fortuin

After-Study #2

Pen and archival ink on paper

21 x 14,8 cm



Adrian Fortuin

A Slow Burn

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

80 x 60 cm

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Adrian Fortuin

Butcher Boys Blues

2024

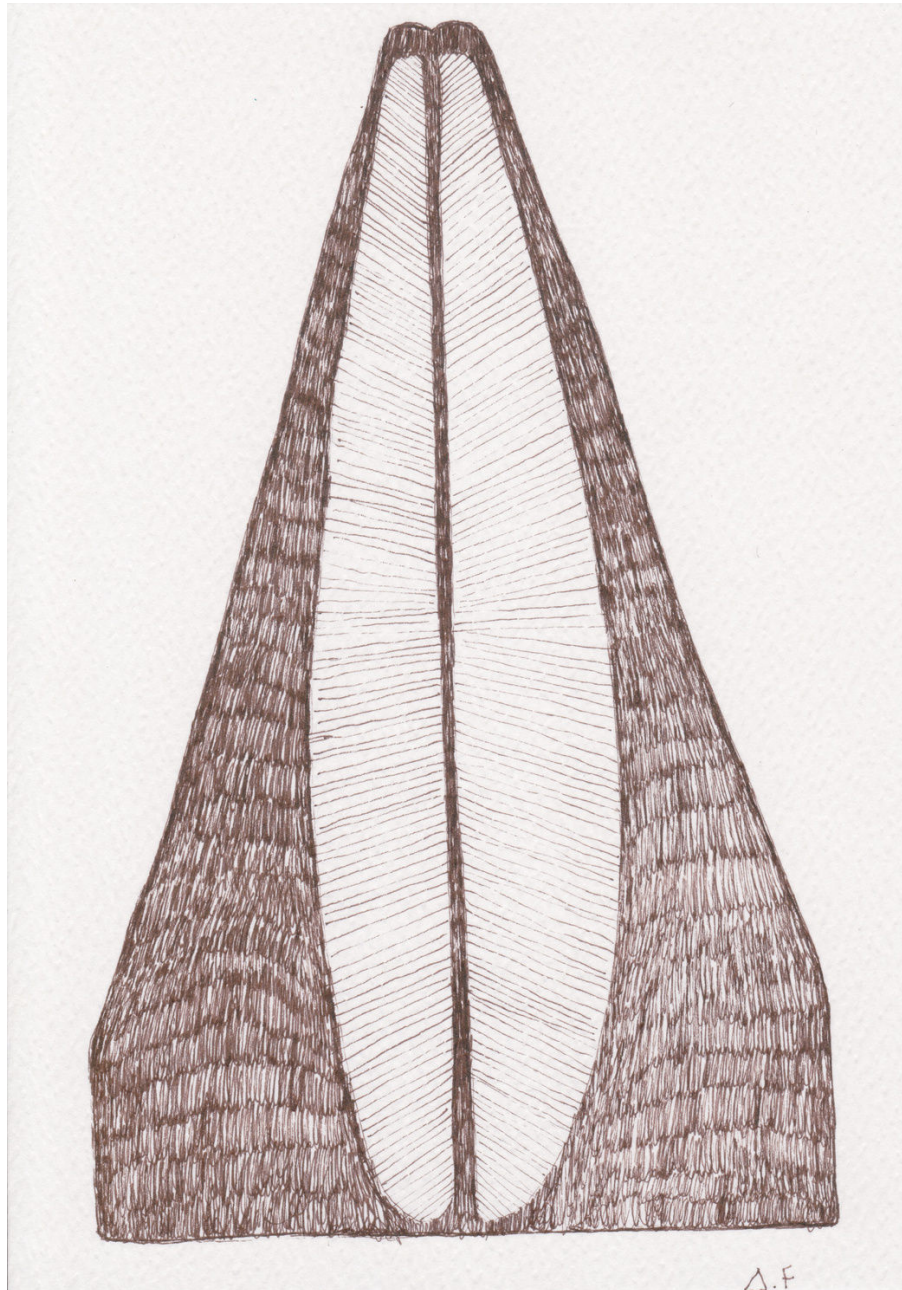
Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

80 x 60 cm

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SOLD





Adrian Fortuin

After-Study #3

Pen and archival ink on paper

21 x 14,8 cm



Adrian Fortuin

Regression Service

2024

Charcoal, pencil, watercolour, gouache
and oil pastel on paper

76.5 x 56 cm



Regression Service (detail)



Adrian Fortuin

Idle

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

30 x 40 cm



Adrian Fortuin

Southern Masked Weaver

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

40 x 30 cm

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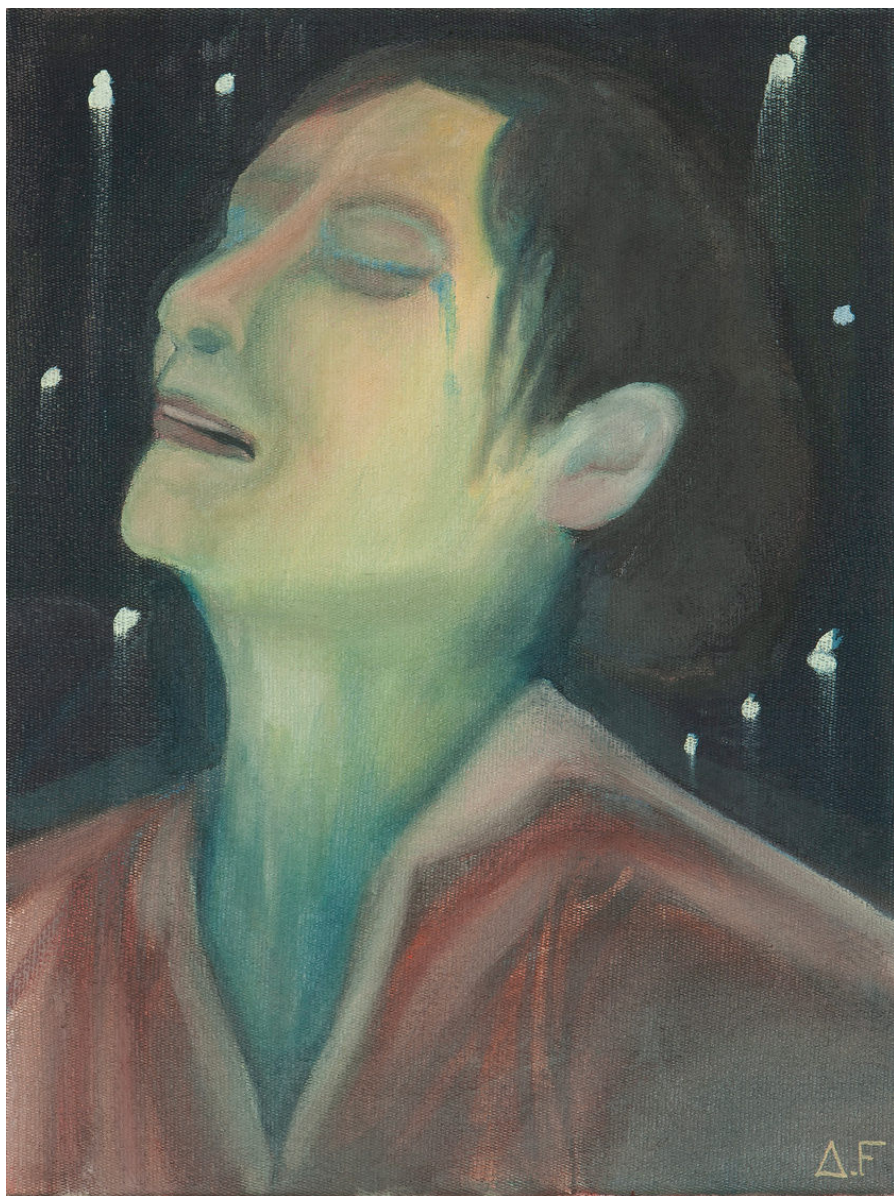


Adrian Fortuin

After-Study #6

Pen and archival ink on paper

21 x 14,8 cm



Adrian Fortuin

Inertia Droplets

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

40 x 30 cm

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Adrian Fortuin

Study for a Final Portrait

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

40 x 30 cm

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Adrian Fortuin

Seated Umbrella

2024

Oil paint and oil pastel on canvas

40 x 30 cm

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About the artist

Born in 1994, Adrian Fortuin is a Johannesburg-based artist whose work is concerned with the relationship between figuration and abstraction in the context of post-apartheid and post/de-colonial South Africa. Working in a range of media, the scope of which is primarily informed by a conceptual approach, Fortuin is interested in the limits of representation and how personal identity is connected to family, language, ancestry, community, and society more broadly. He draws on personal, public and popular image archives to investigate the role art can play in restitution, memorialising, and narrative-making.

Fortuin graduated from the Wits School of Arts with a Bachelor of Fine Art degree in 2020, and was the recipient of the Wits Young Artist Award and the Martienssen Prize in 2019. He is currently enrolled in the MA Fine Arts programme at Wits University in Johannesburg, where his practice has shifted from a performative and lens-based approach to a transmedia engagement with painting and drawing. His paintings are characterised by an obsessive process of revision, in which paintings are sedimented under newer paintings, so that the painted surface becomes an archive of thought and gestures, and a metaphor for the endurance of personal historical traces in the present.

Fortuin has shown his work in group exhibitions in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Kampala, and the roaming African platform Boda Boda Lounge, and in 2022 completed a short residency at the David Krut Print Workshop in Johannesburg. In 2023, his work was part of the two-person exhibition *Fresh Voices* (together with Kaelo Molefe), and was presented at Art Joburg.



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