HYPERALLERGI

INTERVIEWS • WEEKEND

Beer with a Painter: Judy Glantzman

“Although I think authorship is questionable, I am interested in inventing my own language.”

Jennifer Samet24 hours ago

Judy Glantzman, “My Bonny” (2006), oil on canvas, 60 x 50 inches (all images courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery)

When I first met Judy Glantzman in the 1990s, I remember how her daughter — a toddler at the time — would be at her side in the studio or the gallery. The fluidity between home, motherhood, the studio, and gallery business — and the physical attachment between mother and daughter — made an impression on me. It wasn’t that she shifted quickly between roles as much as she didn’t feel the need to: she occupied those places simultaneously.

In the fall of 2016, we were both teaching at Purchase College, and we carpooled, along with fellow artist Susanna Heller. During those drives, we weathered the political rollercoaster surrounding Election Day by talking non-stop about everything from our teaching experiences, to our personal lives (Glantzman was caretaking her elderly mother at the time) to planning political responses, which, in addition to protests, included an exhibition I was curating of explicit

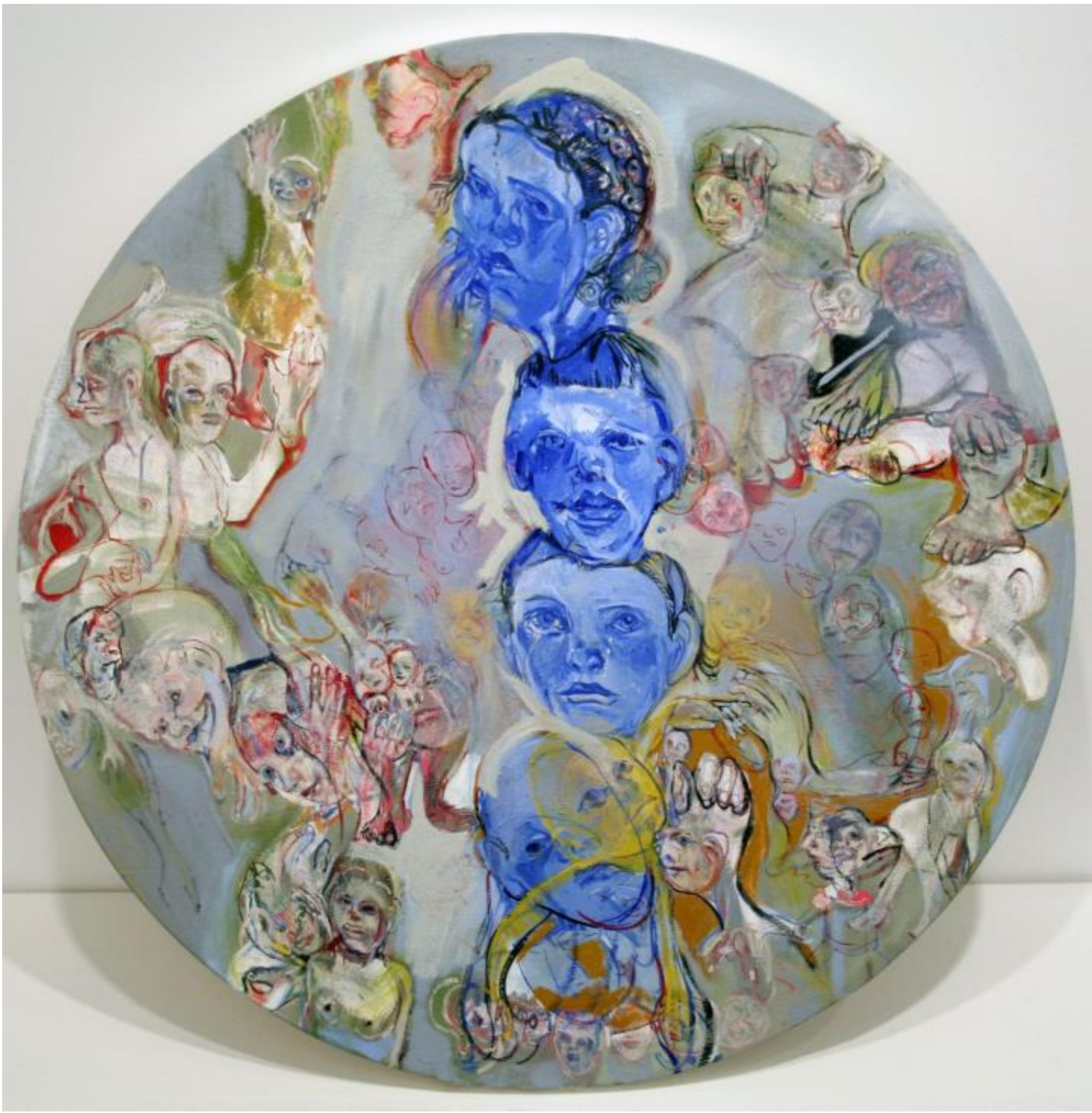
feminist art. Glantzman's and Heller's work was included in the show, and they also helped me to conceptualize the project. Glantzman decided that her contribution to the show would be a copy of Courbet's "Origin of the World," and within a week or so she brought me the small painting swathed in bubble wrap — she had taken care of everything, from concept to execution, including the delivery.

For me, those experiences capture something of Glantzman's spirit: she gets things done, and she's not precious about how she goes about it, leaping with a comfortable agility between the personal and the professional, home life and art life. For the last several years, her studio has been in her home in SoHo; she works at her dining table and on the couch, even in front of the television.

Glantzman's work has a pulsating energy that is in harmony with the way she navigates the world: rapidly, generously, in motion and in conversation. In her paintings of the 1990s, she positioned figures with outsized heads centrally on the canvas, their aura and painterly fields extending outward. In more recent works on paper, the whole sheet is often covered and layered with forms and lines; emblematic objects shift from place to place, cut and re-collaged, turning their fields into universes where disparate entities can pass through and co-exist. Her paintings and her sculptural objects feel emergent and raw, suggesting unadulterated desire, yearning, and grief.

Glantzman graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1978. She began exhibiting in the early 1980s in the East Village art scene, at Civilian Warfare and Gracie Mansion. She followed these shows with exhibitions at Blum Helman and Hirschl & Adler Modern in the 1990s and at Betty Cuningham Gallery, where she has shown for the past 15 years. She had a 30-year retrospective at Dactyl Foundation, New York, in spring 2009, and a solo exhibition at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, in 2018.

The starting point for this interview was a public conversation with the artist at Betty Cuningham Gallery on the occasion of her exhibition *1979-Today* in January 2019.



Judy Glantzman, “Blue Totem” (2005), oil on canvas, 36 x 36 inches

Jennifer Samet: *You grew up in Long Island and New York City, along with four years spent in Puerto Rico, and studied at the Rhode Island School of Design. Do you have specific memories of looking at art or drawing?*

Judy Glantzman: I drew from a very early age, usually in a linear way. I won first prize for a painting that I did when I was about four years old. I still really like it. It was an oil pastel on paper, a multicolored abstraction with a center axis that reminded me of an electric fan. My mother noticed that, even as a child, I was connecting the Lachaise drawings at one end of the museum to the related Lachaise sculpture at another part of the museum. We had a reproduction of a Modigliani, and I think that was my first real experience of loving a painting.

My mother was an abstract artist who believed in an improvisational approach to painting: standing in front of a blank canvas and responding. I learned the most from her. I also learned by not taking part of her approach. She was trained as an interior designer. I do not want to arrive at a good design solution for a painting. My drawing teacher Victor Lara at the Rhode Island School of Design termed this "evolve — not resolve." My most important painting teacher on the faculty was Roland Belhumeur, who did not really exhibit his work.

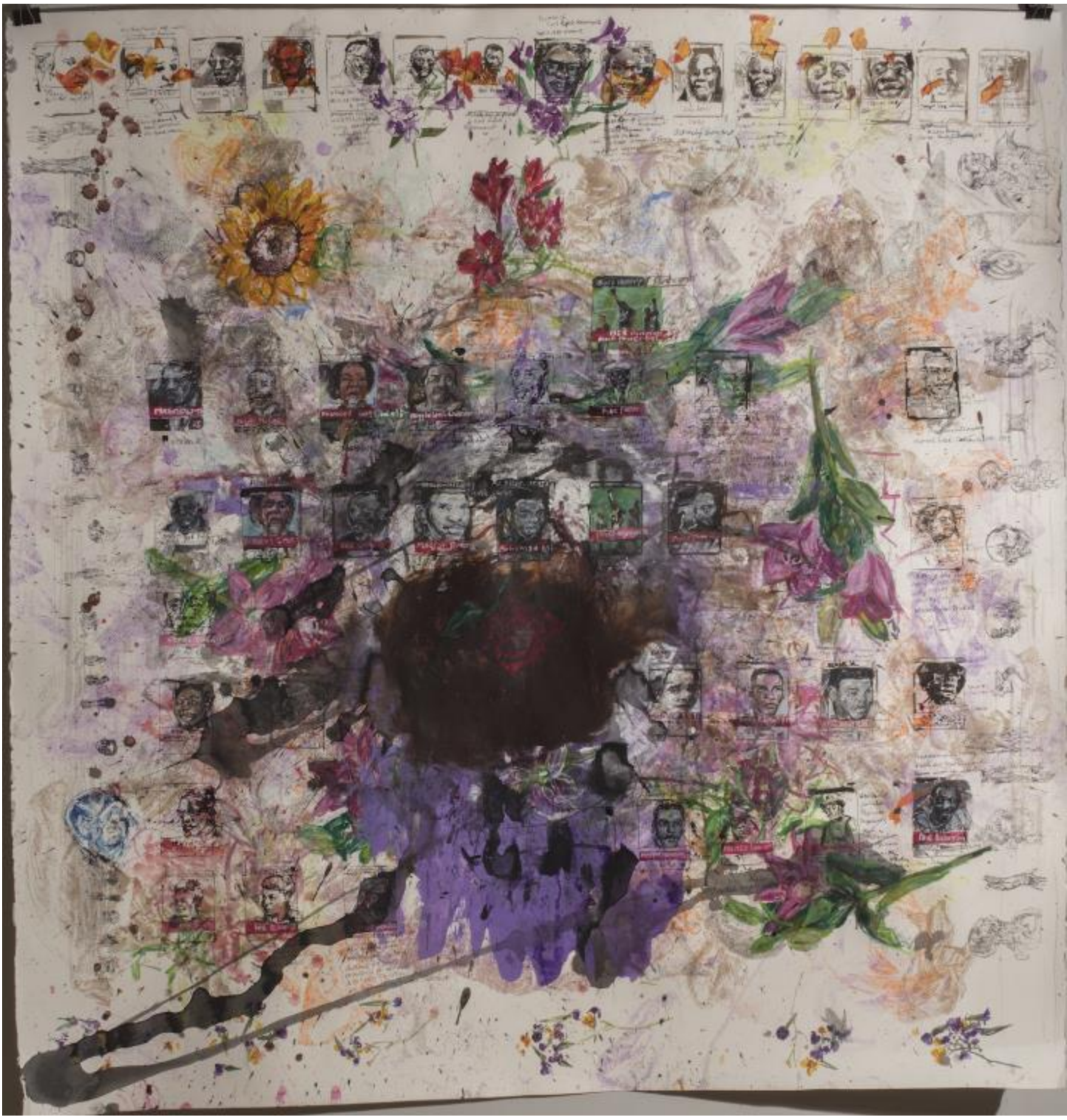
JS: *In the 1980s you were associated with the East Village scene, a close friend of David Wojnarowicz, and showing with Gracie Mansion and Civilian Warfare. Can you talk about that period?*

JG: I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time. I was five years out of school and trying to find a gallery so I sent my slides into Hal Bromm Gallery. Around the same time, I brought a giant tube of canvases on the subway to Fashion Moda in the Bronx, and I was invited by Stefan Eins to have a show there. It was totally by chance; I took someone else's spot. I made a little card for it; I put a painting of mine on the Xerox machine. So, on the same day that I got a form rejection letter from Hal Bromm Gallery in the mail, Hal must have seen that postcard, because he called and accepted me into a group show. At this show, *Climbing: The East Village* (1984), I met David Wojnarowicz, Luis Frangella, and Mike Bildo, and I was invited to go over to the pier.

At Pier 34, you could take a wall and paint anything you wanted. So for a little bit of time, a few years in the mid-1980s in the East Village,

it was a very democratic, open situation, and you were able to do things. There was no commerce. That particular group of people had a rawness to them and a feeling of “Let’s do this thing,” which matched my own temperament.

After we did the pier we did a show in Louisville, Kentucky: *The Missing Children Show* (1985). We all painted murals on the walls. By 1986, David had been diagnosed as HIV positive, and Peter Hujar had already died. From that point, David and I became closer friends. David was an artist of incredible integrity. He was somebody who had no choice but to speak.



Judy Glantzman, “Learning About Heroes” (2018), acrylic, India and walnut ink on paper, 53 x 51 1/2 inches

JS: *In the late 1970s you made quirky still life paintings. Can you discuss the use of disparate and specific objects that carry meaning, as well as the scale and sense of whimsy in your work?*

JG: I had a large collection of dolls. I realized that I can collect disparate objects, put them into a framework, and think of them as having a conversation among themselves. They become portraits: maybe a portrait of me, or maybe somebody else. They come together and add up to something greater than their parts.

I have an interest in emblematic things. Like, if you were to arrange a nude figure with PeeWee on the left… go to town! When I was trying to talk about war my husband Gary said to me, "You better look at a gun; you don't know what a gun really looks like." So for Valentine's Day he got me a plastic AK47. I would draw it with walnut ink and quill pen.

Because of my orientation, I didn't really learn about narrative. Narrative is something I have brought into my work. In painting there can be two things happening at the same time. You can settle into a story and break it apart at the same time. If I give you the ingredients and the right ratio and relationships between them, you can find your narrative.

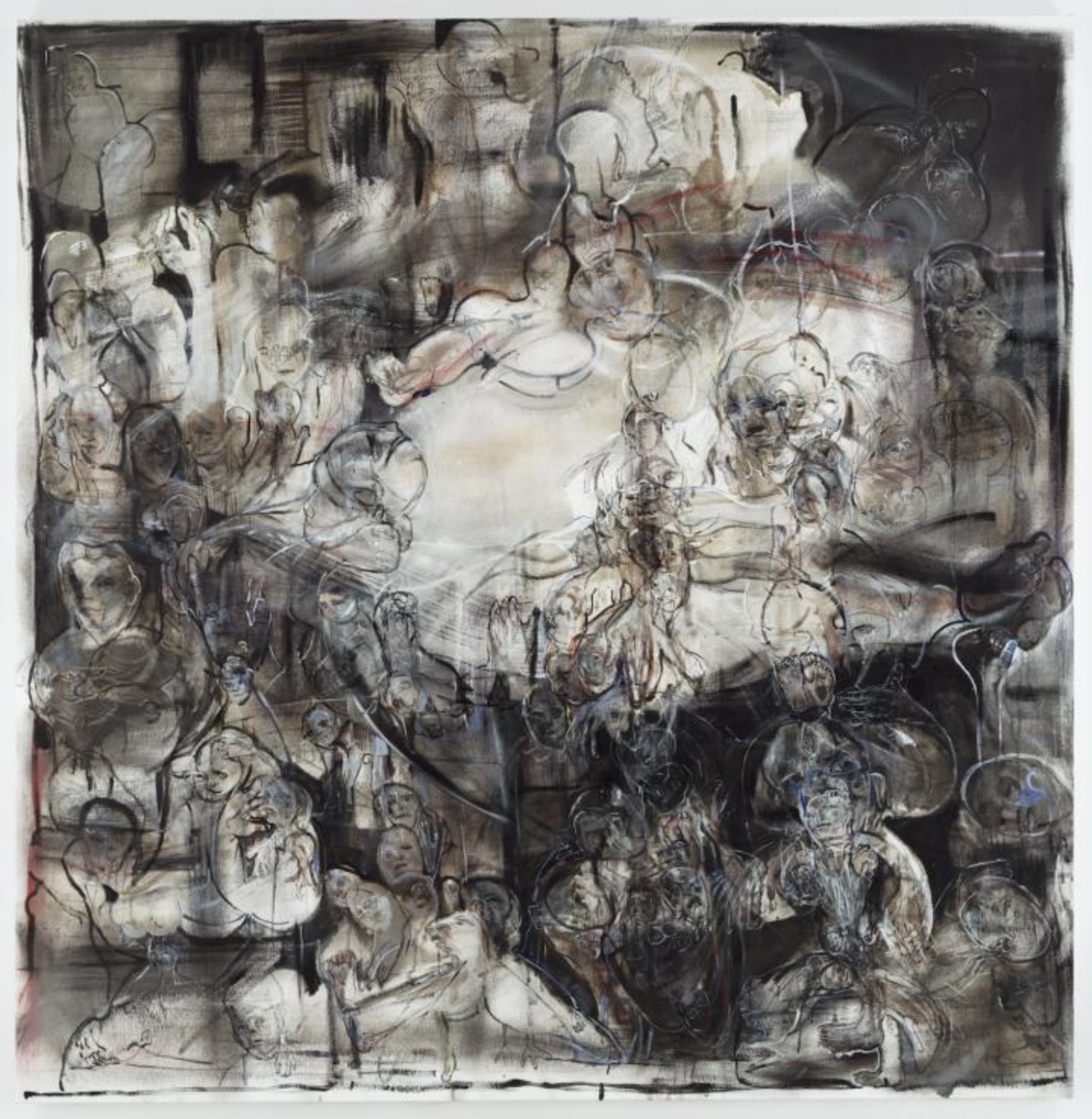
JS: *In several of the paintings from the 1990s, a figure appears out of the ground, often with a head and limbs that are larger than the torso. Sometimes these people or creatures are dressed up in tutus or other garments. They appear to both emerge and fade back into the ground because of the way they are drawn and painted. What were you thinking about as you made this work?*

JG: The singular person in the middle of the painting is a strategy I used for a long time. When I showed the paintings with the big heads, people said they looked like giant babies. But I didn't really think of them as giant babies; I just wanted the head bigger because the head is a source of more information. They are all dressed up; they are aware, sometimes even sexually aware, so they have a strange knowingness and not knowingness. They always have bare feet. I was

spending time with David. You don’t see a person’s feet much – unless you are intimate with them, or a caretaker.

This is where I began to define subject versus content. The subject might be these screaming babies, who are in some ways innocent, and in some ways not innocent, and exorcising trauma. But they are also funny in terms of how they are dressed up. Their bodies, because of the physicality of those paintings, are kind of decaying. They are layered into linseed oil. Even though the picture depicts a person, the square of the canvas is a body as well. This skin is interrupted, and some of them even “bled out” when the linseed seeped through the paint skin.

I thought they were all dressed up with nowhere to go. Some of them are wearing tutu skirts, which is like an aura or a protective membrane. So there is a ridiculousness. I thought it was okay to humiliate them a little bit.



Judy Glantzman, “Whirling Dervish” (2007), oil on canvas, 66 x 64 1/2 inches

JS: *I’m interested in the way painting can embody aesthetic markers associated with the female and the feminine. Do you think that there*

are qualities in the work that explore the feminine or your experience as a woman?

JG: I think there is a quality of the domestic in my work that comes into play, especially since I work at home. The big oil paintings were done in my studios in Jersey City and on West 14th Street. When I moved my studio back home, I started to work in acrylic on paper. These have a quilt-like quality; I carry them around on the train, which also relates them to domesticity. Their sentimentality, emotionality, and potential corniness are also — perhaps in the pejorative — in the feminine category.

When I was pregnant I made drawings of a membrane with two heads. It could be one person with two heads, or maybe a child invading the parent's physical space. A mother and child are really one in terms of the body and touch, the openness of a mother including the child in her physical sense. This work was about the idea of permeable membranes.

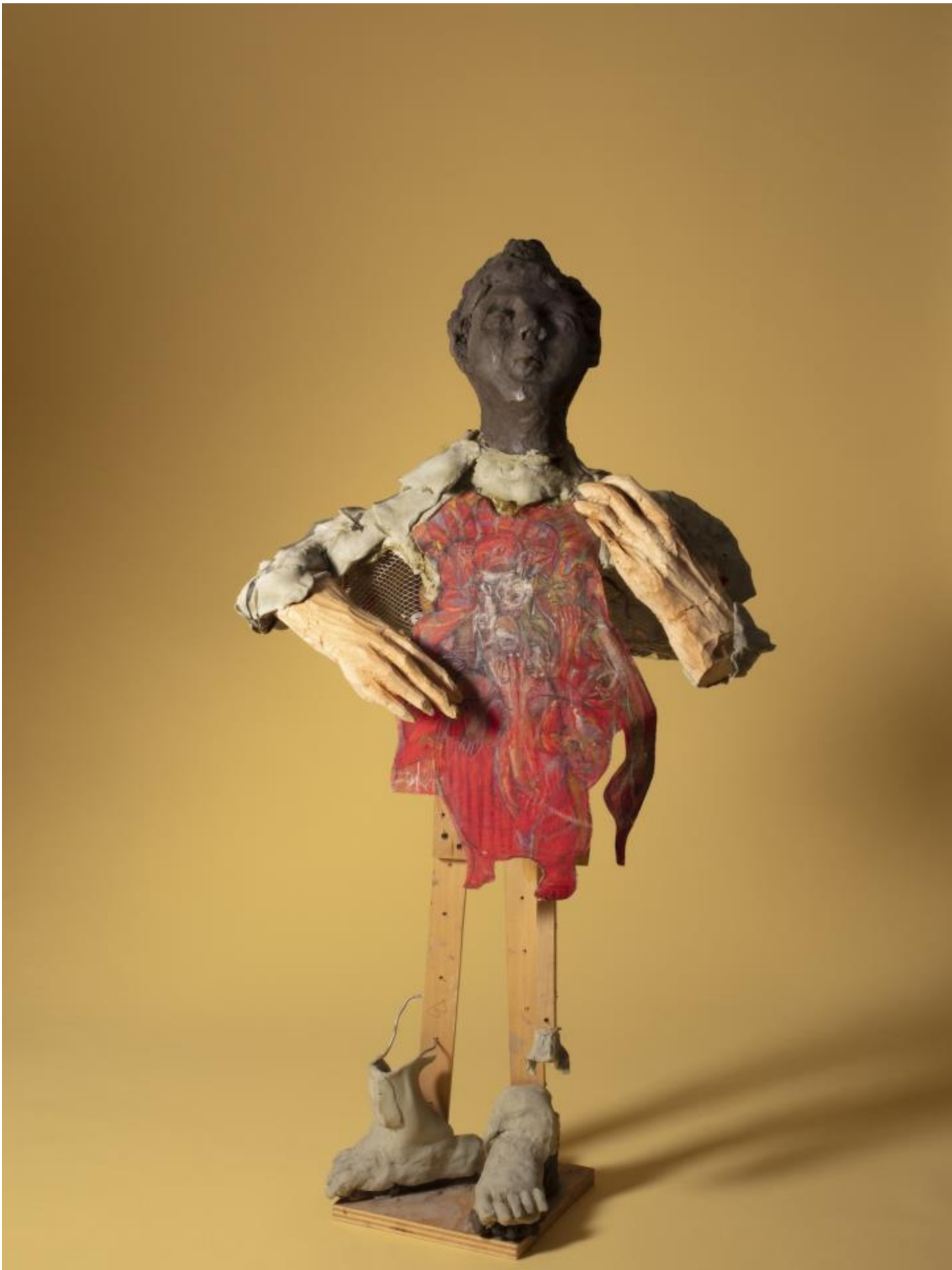
***JS:** Even though people may know you more as a painter, you've made three-dimensional work for decades. How did you start working with Super Sculpey, and what did the form and medium allow you to explore?*

JG: I used the Super Sculpey when I was pregnant, and because it was a children's material, I thought it would be safe. But you have to cook it, and I used my toaster oven. I'm sure that breathing in the burning flesh of these things is not a good idea.

They were my biggest jump into three-dimensional objects, which made me realize that I'm interested in characters, as opposed to being a figurative painter. It made me think about the differences between working with painting and sculpture. I found something liberating about the sculptures' actual-ness. If I didn't like the nose, I could just squish it or push it in. Making changes to a painting can be more cerebral.

Because I didn't identify as a sculptor, I had a lot of freedom. They are hollow, and their mouths were also open and hollow. I thought of them as being quieted; there was a sound that was muted and trying to talk.

I can identify that with the artistic impulse. There may be something you are trying to say, but the direct route is not the way.



Judy Glantzman, “After Donatello” (2015), wood, epoxy clay, self hardening clay, wire, canvas, pipe cleaner, 45 x 23 x 9 inches

JS: *You have done a lot of work that involves copying from old masters: copies of portraits by Jacques Louis David, Francisco Goya, and paintings based on individual elements from Winslow Homer’s “Dressing for the Carnival” (1877). You’ve also copied Donatello and Nanni di Banco sculptures. What interests you about copying? What does it allow you to explore?*

JG: There is a famous Philip Guston anecdote about how, when you are in your studio, one by one, your teachers and influences leave your studio; and eventually, you leave the studio. But, in some ways, the easiest way to leave the studio is to enter somebody else’s studio. I can tap into the thing they already built. When I copied the Davids and the Winslow Homers I copied them in acrylic paint on pre-stretched canvases. There was no pretense of working like an old master.

The motif is the subject, but the manner in which it’s made — the materiality, the process, and the repetition of it — generates the image. I was most interested in the variations that came from the same rules. You roll the dice and watch it come out differently. You hope to generate something that is not the original. It is as if a painting is a mirror and you are finding yourself in it.

The notion of authorship and doing something completely on your own has not been my experience. When I was preparing for my last show I thought, “What if I am Swiss cheese and everything comes through me?” There is a digestive process that results in something else.

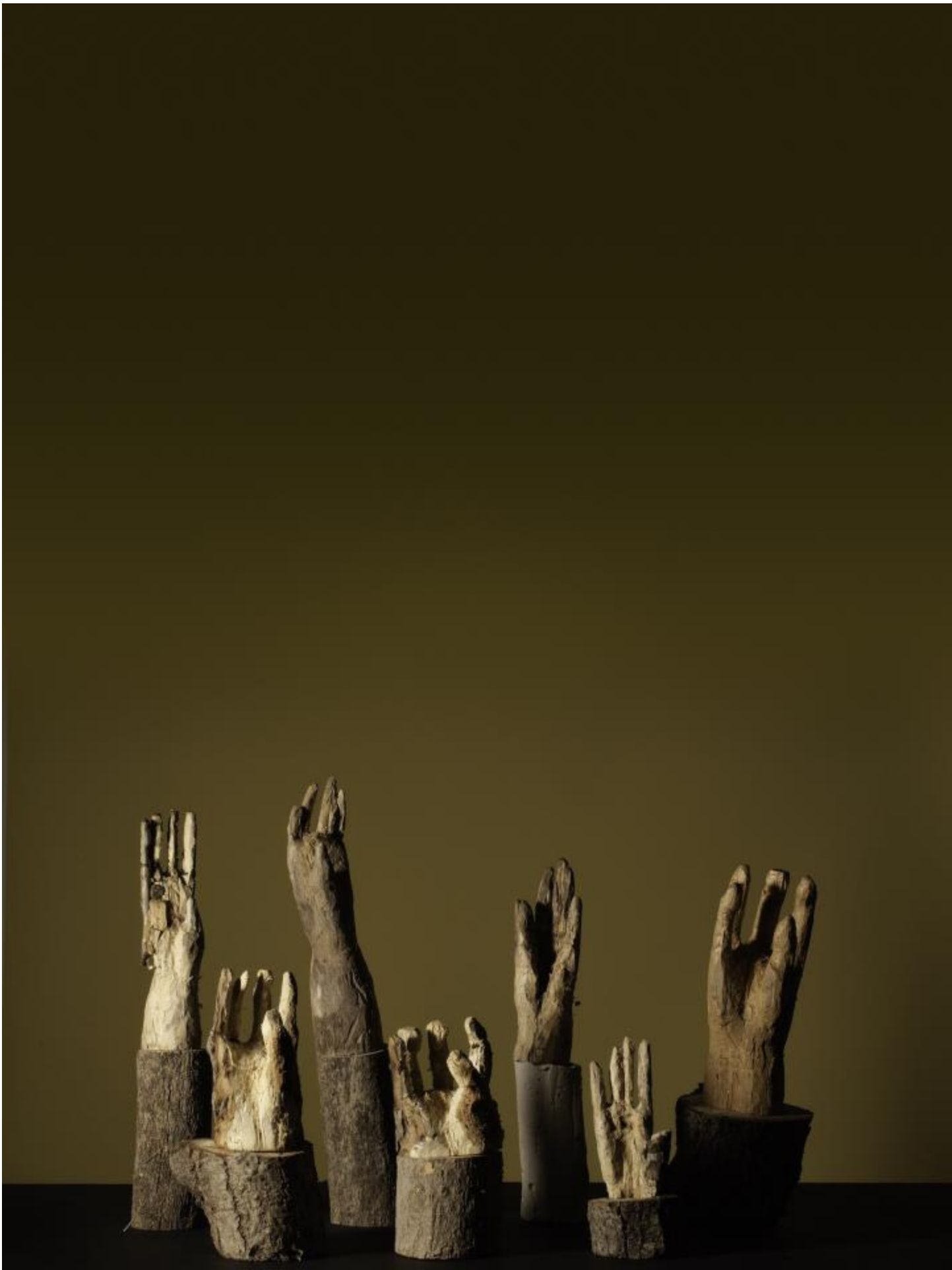
Although I think authorship is questionable, I am interested in inventing my own language. I believe that artists spend a lot of time inventing a new set of rules. These can be driven by circumstances or necessity. In each group or series of work, a set of rules becomes a language. In my recent paper pieces, the language is the combination of controlled accident (like throwing a paper towel at the piece), along with illusionistic elements and emblematic elements.

Like parts of speech, if I put those things together, hopefully the painting will tell me something I didn't know before. I'm using a kind of a grammar and hopefully that grammar will reveal the content to me. Repetition of something is really important to me: repetition with multiple paintings, and repetition within one painting. For me there was a freedom in multitude, that each piece did not have to be the sum total of everything; they can be iterations.

JS: *How and why did you start folding sheets of paper as part of the process making large-scale works on paper?*

JG: The idea of folding paper came from a friend of mine, Dawn Clements. I was packing to go to Vermont, and I mentioned to her that I didn't want to just make small pieces. She told me that she folded large sheets of paper and carried them around, to periodically draw on them. It was very inspirational to me. I could work on the train as I was traveling.

It is also an example of how "not knowing" is a part of what artists do. In folding it, you can't see the whole. You work on parts. It was really fun at night to open it up, to see what happened that day. I came up with strategies to deal with not seeing the whole, like working on the border. This made me consider the idea that maybe I didn't have to make the whole thing; I could make a border or frame. I'm looking at the world around me, and when I contain it within a rectangle, I make it visible.



Judy Glantzman, “Reach” (2017-18), carved wood, various sizes, 17 pieces

JS: *In recent works on paper, you address African American heroes, and racism. What led you to explore these subjects? Do you consider the problematics of addressing these histories when you are not a person of color?*

JG: When I went to Dartmouth and started to work on these pieces, I wanted to talk about racial injustice and racism. I do consider the difficulties of addressing these subjects, and although I am working on them, I may have yet to succeed. Nevertheless, I think about how David Wojnarowicz used to talk about being invisible. He would say, “I’m not represented in this culture.” As artists we essentially made things visible; we allow things to be seen that might not otherwise be seen.

I ordered a set of “Black History” flashcards made by the online store Urban Intellectuals. They are the source for the emblems around the center. I thought about the pathetic aspect of learning about history in this way. Many of the histories were new to me. My eyes were being opened and then progressively more opened, the more questions I asked.

I also started making paintings based on news reports I heard on the killing of Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, and Philando Castile. I didn’t know what they looked like, and by the next day, there was another story. The news cycle keeps moving. Art, on the other hand, is slow. So I felt I could slow down, honor these people, and commune with them.

JS: *You’ve said you have a rule about your studio, that you have to enact what comes into your mind by making it. Why do you have that rule?*

JG: I come out of an Abstract Expressionist tradition. The notions of impulse, improvisation, and intuition are at the core of my interests. The rule is also a way of combating aesthetics. I fail as many times as I succeed, but the goal is to let go of a conscious idea of what a

painting should be. The job becomes the manifestation of what an impulse looks like.

It is very common that when I make a suggestion to students, they will say, “Oh, I thought of that, but I didn’t know if I should, or, I didn’t know if it would be good.” But I say, “How would you know unless you see it?” So there is a certain connectivity between the thing that flips into your mind, and the thing that emerges, and bypassing your critical voice. Your critical voice is valuable in terms of looking at things, but it is essentially crippling in terms of the making of things.

JS: *There is a raw quality to your work that lends it a directness and intimacy. Can you talk about this?*

JG: The idea of showing an impulse is, by nature, raw. In my work, it’s related to how a painting stops at the point where the image starts to become clear. It’s like a photograph in a developing tray.

One of the biggest questions an artist asks is “When do you finish? When do you stop?” For me, it’s the moment when all of the pieces in the puzzle just start to lock into a shape, but they are still uneasily moving into one another. In working with wood, the idea was that the wood itself already had so many properties, like time and materiality, fleshiness and skin. It is a great moment when you have a piece of wood, and start to see it become a hand, but also stay a tree.

I hope that I have an ability to bring inanimate matter to life. You do that not with what you put on the surface, but by implying what lies underneath the surface. I’m looking at you, but it’s also your eyes and the interior of you that I’m interacting with. A painting is a surface, but we are hoping to elicit a response to what is underneath.