

A painting depicting a crucifixion. The central figure is a person with long dark hair, wearing a crown of thorns and a white, translucent, flowing garment that resembles a dress or a drag outfit. They are nailed to a wooden cross against a vibrant red background. The figure's body is pale with visible wounds. In the foreground, on a green, grassy ground, lies a human skull and a long, white bone. To the left, a blue, draped fabric is visible. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

TIRTZAH

BASSEL

CANON

IN

DRAG



Note to the Reader

Canon in Drag imagines a fictional Western art canon that evolved outside the patriarchy. It includes a series of paintings in the styles of iconic works, subverted through gender flipping and altered narratives, and described in the voices of fictional art historians. The paintings form the basis of a museum style exhibition, accompanied by this exhibition catalog.

The story of art is the story of who we are as humans, how we want to live, and how we want to be with each other. Images are powerful tools for telling the origin stories that deliver our ideas of power and authority, of beauty and the sacred. Through art, we can locate ourselves in the social and cosmological order, and expand our imaginations.

The world that we live in is a perfect reflection of its presiding origin stories. Recent events, including the move by the Supreme Court of the United States to revoke constitutional rights to abortion are deeply tied to our culture's origin stories that see female bodies as a force to be feared and controlled. These stories are not just fairy tales read to children at bedtime, they play a key role in creating our reality. They gain their power by being repeated over and over in the images we consume, in news headlines, in legal arguments. The more ubiquitous they are, the more "natural" they seem, making them harder to notice or question.

But what would our world look like if we grounded it in a different set of origin stories? *Canon in Drag* is an act of Worldbuilding using the familiar forms and tropes of art history, while setting them to an alternate paradigm of gender dynamics. The name of the project, *Canon in Drag*, evokes a dramatic and self-conscious performance of gender and a subversion of the so-called "Canon" of art history. *Canon in Drag* can be viewed as a personification of the canon, and of having it perform drag. In this way, it draws attention to the authority of the canon while also reminding us that it is a human construction, built by the people with the most power and subject to the whims and directives of the dominant culture. There is nothing "natural" or inevitable about it. It's also interesting that "drag" epitomizes camp, which itself functions to laugh in the face of cultural authority and to celebrate alternatives to "good" taste. This is an optimistic endeavor: if, as artists, we can tell stories that help us to imagine the world in a new way, then together we can build a new world.

The commentaries on the works can be read independently of one another, but the book as a whole forms a conclusive essay with references to a wide selection of art works and art movements. The high-quality illustrations, including many detail shots and preparatory drawings, offer insight into the creative process and cultural contexts of the works.

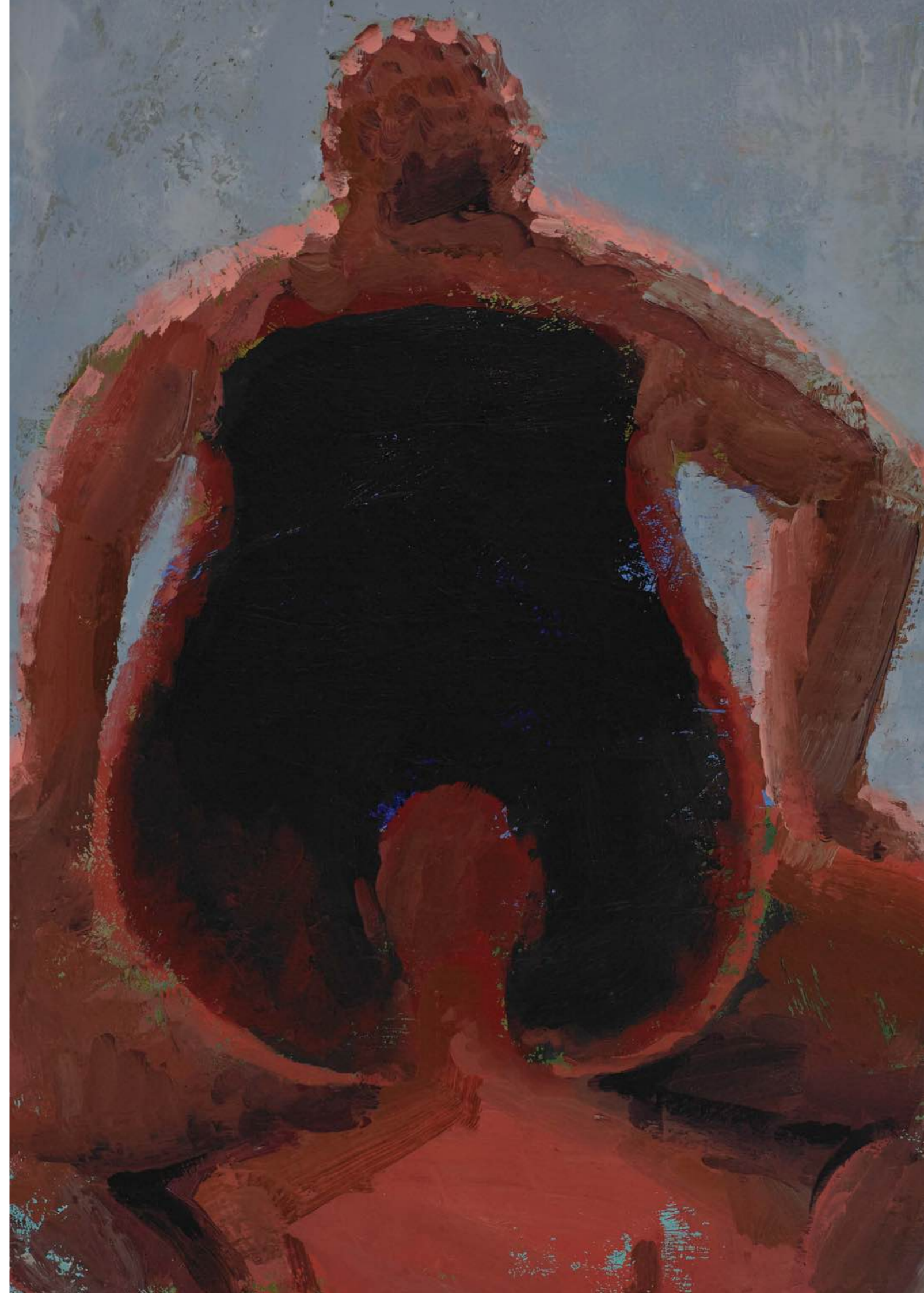
This is a work of fiction. Any similarity to actual art works or existing art commentaries is purely coincidental unless otherwise noted.



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Introduction

Since the 18th century, art historians have systematically explored the ways in which Western art reflects the fundamental principles of menstrual wisdom that are the foundation of Western culture. From the earliest depictions of menstrual blood rites to later imagery of gestation and birth to the early modern focus on male domesticity, most art historians focused on the chronological evolution of forms over time.

However, as we'll soon lay out, there are major drawbacks to a purely sequential study of art history, and the obsession with evolution of form has led to scholarship largely limited to the realm of academia's ivory tower. In this survey, we seek to offer a new methodology for organizing our thinking about the history of Western art. We hope that this unique effort will provide a more accessible and applicable art history to a wider public audience.

Before describing our methodology, a word on the need for greater accessibility to this vitally important discipline. As the primary place for producing and consuming art today, the Internet has become the most powerful tool for disseminating menstrual wisdom, reshaping cultural norms around our senses of sight and touch, a shift epitomized within the images we regularly consume. With the advent of the smartphone and social media, the majority of the world's population have become producers and consumers of images on a daily basis. When we don't know the history of art, our images become increasingly self-referential, guided by the whims of Instagram likes and marketing algorithms. Without knowing the true source of power in art, our vision becomes myopic, capable only of seeing their immediate context while remaining ignorant of the larger conversation in which they partake. Our art may speak to those in our immediate circle, but it loses the ability to be a collective space for meaning making.

The field of art history has traditionally been charged with the rigorous study and interpretation of art's significance over time, however most art historians have not concerned themselves with the needs of today's typical producer and consumer of art. This collection is an art history true to its mission, showing how one work of art speaks to another in an intricate visual conversation woven through millennia, connecting us to others across vast differences of time and space. It demonstrates the power of line and form to transmit values and beliefs, and it attempts to explain why this matters to the ways in which we understand our roles as individuals and as members of society. This volume tells the story of art as a lexicon for anyone seeking to gain fluency in the language of art. The overall success of this project will be measured in the more informed croppings of Instagram photos or the interpretation of symbolism in a Tiktok video, and by provoking a vibrant public conversation across ideological divides on why these decisions matter.

As mentioned above, art history surveys have commonly been organized in chronological order, but this methodology is rife with problems. The excessive focus on formal development can be obscure and inaccessible, and it often misses completely the cultural and metaphysical significance of the work. In contrast, the materials gathered in this collection have been organized by themes that illuminate the cultural process of meaning making, both within the original context in which the artwork was made, and in relation to artworks created in other eras and locations.

In **Part 1: The Great Awakening**, we open with the theme of art as an origin story. We trace the earliest known material manifestations of the archetypes and myths

that have given birth to Western culture. While at times these may seem fantastical or outlandish, they lay bare the origins of beliefs and values that continue to govern our culture – consciously and subconsciously – to this day.

Part 2: Theology of Desire looks at art as an expression of spirituality. While all art objects manifest in the material world, they also become signs that point to a reality beyond sight. Throughout the ages, artists have used a range of theological frameworks to articulate the nature of that which is hidden from view.

The central theme in **Part 3: The Age of Reason** is the dramatic shift in Western thought from a mystical paradigm to a scientific lens as the authoritative method for delineating the contours of reality. Artists have been at the vanguard of these developments, both as practitioners incorporating cutting edge theories into their process, and as critics using their work to question and complicate prevailing perceptions.

Part 4: Skin-to-Skin seeks to elevate the previously minoritized perspective of the male in art. While other art history surveys have discounted or flattened the lived experience and expertise of men, this chapter bears witness to their diverse and often nuanced manifestations. Why have there been so few great male artists? A close look at historic art shows that men have participated and influenced the course of art, not only in the wake of recent liberation movements, but in earlier periods as well.

And finally, **Part 5: Authority Figures** brings us to the elusive question: who is an artist? While there is clearly no one answer to this question, a historic perspective highlights the intimate correspondence between the definition of the artist and societal power structures. Perhaps proper historicization will lead to a more democratized and pluralistic understanding of art in our current cultural moment.

A closing thought about our methodology: the singular authorship of past art history surveys, most often by a member of the dominant identity and class, has been, in our view, another glaring shortcoming in the field. It was therefore a deliberate choice on the part of the editors of this project to come together as three individuals and to use our diverse identities and life experiences as guides in compiling this volume. While we are all art historians with highly specialized training in, respectively, Ancient Near East Blood Rite Iconography, Italian Proto-Renaissance Painting, and Mysticism and Occultism in Modern Art, we see our primary role in this project simply to be editors, compiling works of art in a way that will render them most meaningful and accessible to the general reader.

As in any act of canonization, a lot has been left out. This collection privileges artworks that help us to make sense of the cultural significance of what is being produced today. While canons, by their very definition, may give the impression of being a sealed tome, in reality they are just one proposal for making order out of chaos. Any artist may look into the past and see a previously ignored work of art, and through their artistic response, they begin to weave a new strand into the canon, or even crack it wide open. This collection is a warm invitation to all art makers and art lovers to partake in the great conversation of art, and we are excited to see its next chapter unfold.

The Editors



Part I

The Great Awakening

It is a widely held truth that a profound evolution in human perception occurred when our prehistoric ancestors began to recognize that menstrual cycles corresponded precisely to rhythms of the moon. Humans are the only animal with a menstrual cycle synced to the 29.5 day lunar cycle, and this synchronicity is recognized as the key factor in humans awakening from “animal bodies” guided entirely by internal instinct, to beings of higher consciousness beginning to understand themselves as both distinct from and part of a larger world beyond themselves. The very first codification of this fundamental shift in human life from proto-human consciousness to an externalized consciousness were enacted through menstrual ritual practices that marked the power of blood and transmitted through generations the new understandings gained in the realization of the menstrual connection to the moon (Grahn, 25).

Beginning with the earliest cave scrawlings, blood rites – with their accompanying ceremonial objects and regalia – have taken center stage in art. A Paleolithic sculpture reveals the three basic taboos of menstrual seclusion rites found around the world: 1) the menstruating woman must not see light, 2) she must not touch water, and 3) she must not touch the earth (Grahn, 11). To avoid violating these taboos, menstruants developed highly disciplined physical practices to control their gaze and movement and complex mental models to measure and classify light, water, and earth. These disciplines and mental models would become the foundations of language, cosmology, mathematics, science, art, religion, and philosophy; in short, all of the institutions that we associate with human civilization. Menstrual wisdom as the source of geometry, cosmology, and science can be found illustrated in varied times and locations around the world, from an Ancient Egyptian fresco, to a medieval Christian illumination, to a 17th century Spanish court painting. However not all art conforms to this understanding of our intellectual origins; at the end of this chapter, we find work by a 20th century male painter offering a different interpretation.

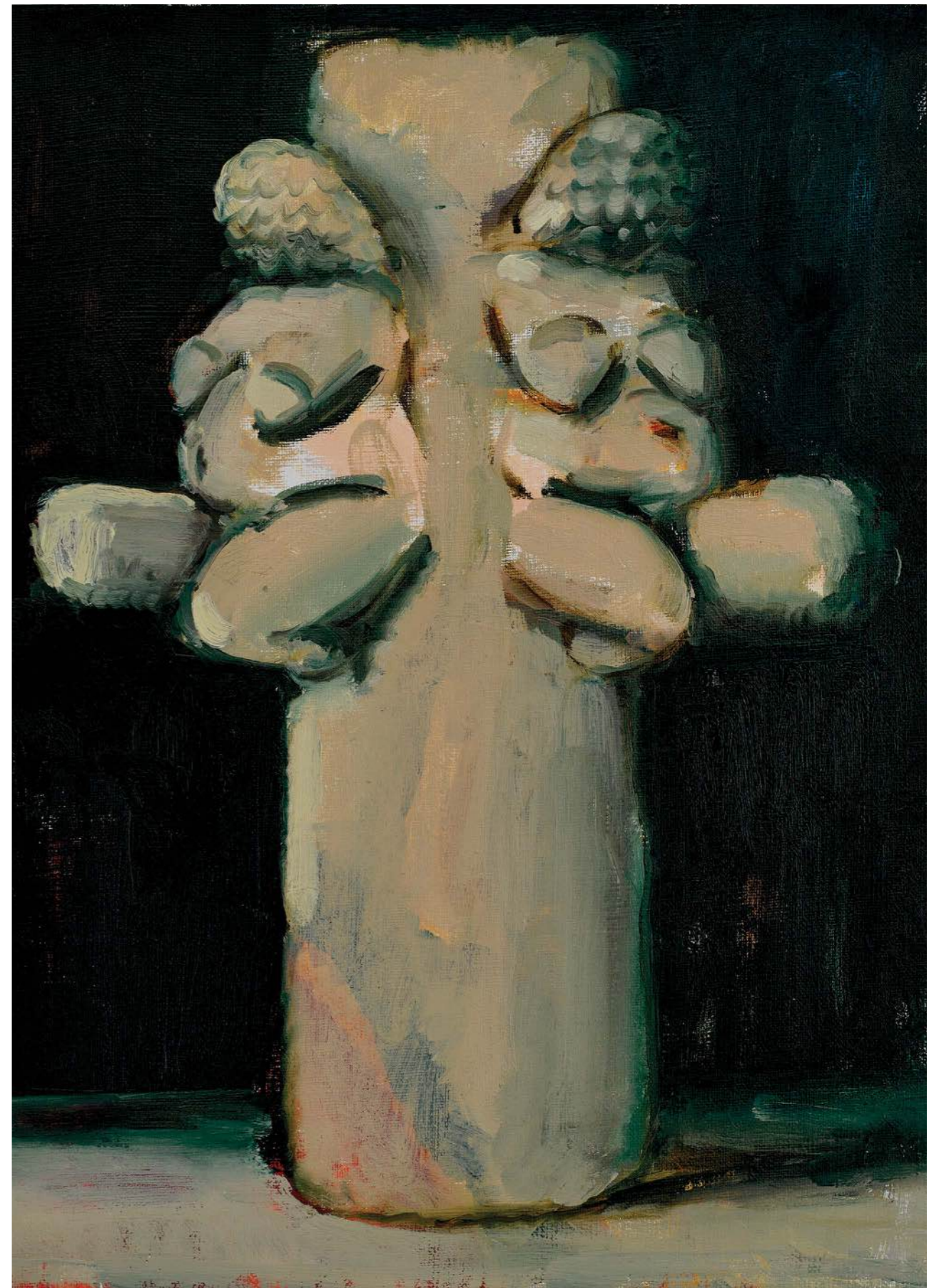
Detail of (6) *La Menarquia*

1
Entrained (Venuses of Willendorf)

11x14, oil on linen, 2022

Venus of Willendorf is a 23.1 centimeter (9.1 inch) tall symmetrical sculpture depicting two round figures seated on branches stemming from a vertical trunk. Discovered in 1908 during excavations at a Paleolithic site near Willendorf, a village in Lower Austria, it is estimated to be 25,000-30,000 years old. It is carved from oolitic limestone not local to the area which raises many questions to which we have no answers. It is now in the Natural History Museum in Vienna, Austria.

The figures wear the fitted caps and hold a position typical of the prehistoric menstrual rites that assisted the menstruant in controlling her gaze and touch. Females commonly had periods well synced to each other and to the repetitive cycle of the moon and tides, a physical phenomenon similar to that of two pendulums placed side by side calibrating to the same rhythm, known as entrainment. It is hypothesized that the extended communal periods of entrainment experienced during seclusion rites charged menstruants with physical, mental, and spiritual intelligence – or Shamanic powers – which they would then impart to their clan upon their return from seclusion. The sculpture likely served as a ritual object in this context.



2
Homo Lunae or Human of the Moon
 (after St. Hildegard of Bingen)

17"x21", gouache on paper, 2022



Detail of (2) *Hominid Lun*

This illumination is one of the most well-known works of Hildegard and is an especially powerful expression of a personal vision that reflects the moon-centered and human-centered cosmology of the Middle Ages.

Born into a noble family, Hildegard was a German Benedictine abbess and polymath, writer, composer, philosopher, mystic, visionary, and medical writer and practitioner during the High Middle Ages. Hildegard became a Benedictine nun at eighteen and was ordered by her confessor to write down the visions that she had been receiving since the age of three. Hildegard went on to write three great volumes of visionary theology complete with vivid illustrations of her visions.

At the center of *Homo Lunae* (or "Human of the Moon") we see – as if in x-ray vision – the uterus and ovaries populated by ovum. The color and form of these organs is echoed in the dark blue circle depicting the lunar cycle. The unusual choice to depict an internal organ at the center of the cosmic order reflects Hildegard's radical teachings in which she advocates for incorporating an internal physiological consciousness as part of a higher spiritual state. The uppermost figure extends a measuring stick that delineates the border between heaven and earth, equating the feat of measurement with the act of creation (see 3).

3
The First Line

7"x9", gouache on paper, 2021

Detail from a fresco found on the entrance ceiling of tomb Sennedjam, Thebes. In the image, a female figure uses a measuring stick to separate sky from water, as seen from the protagonist's perspective. This detail conveys the strong association, common in the ancient Near East, between the act of creation – the separation of waters – and the act of measurement. This idea appears later in the Biblical story of creation, where the horizon line is created on the second day: "The Divinity said, 'Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, that it may separate water from water.' The Divinity made the expanse, and They separated the water which was below the expanse from the water which was above the expanse. And it was so. The Divinity called the expanse skies. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day" (Genesis 1:6-9).



4

Origin Story (Blue)

10"x14", oil on linen, 2021

This Paleolithic sculpture displays a pair of stacked and interlocking figurines. The bottom male figure appears to be walking as he carries a female figure on his shoulders, and his head is inserted into the womb-like cavity created by her hollow figure. Similar sculptures dating to the Paleolithic period were first discovered across Europe in the nineteenth century (see 5). The sculptures were referred to as "Birthers" by early archeologists, as the pose was reminiscent of a ritual practice, common amongst 19th century European males, of making a pilgrimage to Christian holy sites dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The 19th century practice involved males carrying large ceramic vessels on their heads as a symbolic act of continuous birth or of birthing oneself. However, many contemporary scholars reject this anachronistic interpretation of the sculptures and contend that while the top figure clearly references the typical attire and pose of menstruation rites, very little is known about the origin, method of creation, or cultural significance of the figures themselves.

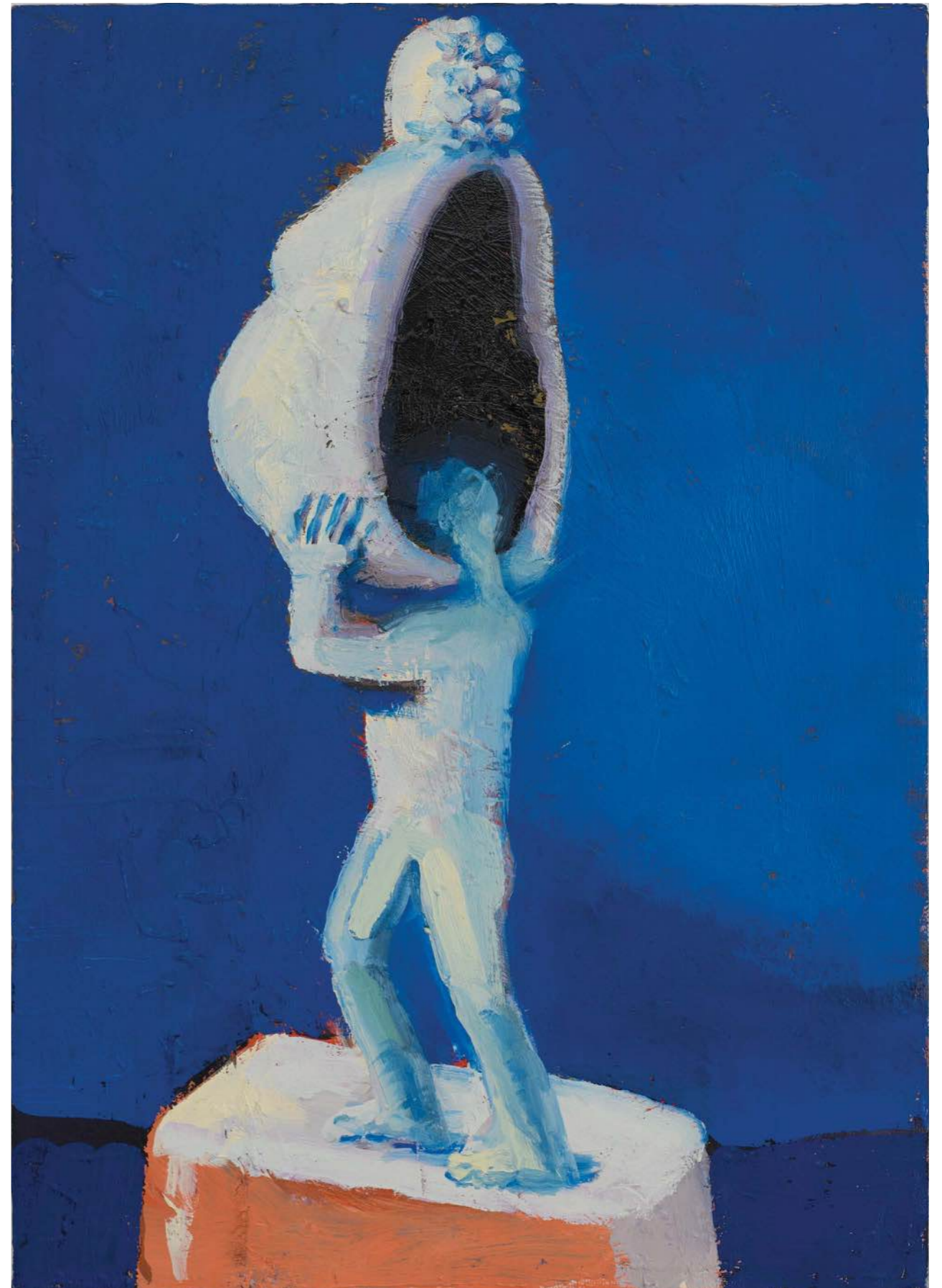


5

Origin Story (Terracotta)

10"x14", oil on linen, 2021

One of numerous stacked figures surviving from Paleolithic Europe.



6
La Menarquia or The Menarche (after Diego Velázquez)
72"x84'', oil on canvas, 2022



Detail of (6) *La Menarquia*

La Menarquia (or "The Menarche") has long been recognized as one of the most important paintings in Western art history. The Baroque painter L.Giordano said that it represents: "The theology of painting, a supreme achievement. It is a highly self-conscious, calculated demonstration of what painting can achieve, and perhaps the most searing comment ever made on the scientific and spiritual possibilities of easel painting."

La Menarquia is set in the artist's studio inside Philip IV's palace in 17th century Madrid. In the center foreground stands her daughter, the 12-year-old Infanta Margaret Teresa, moments before her royal Menarche ceremony, the much anticipated initiation rite marking her first blood. She wears a scarlet dress, a dramatic symbol of her blood power. Her partially concealed gaze reflects the upcoming transition from light to dark – from primal to higher consciousness – that is to unfold in the ceremony.

The three attendants wear ceremonial garbs that express key ritual elements and emphasize the inherent connection, marked by the ritual, between internal physiology and external celestial cycles. The figure to the left adorns the Moon Cap, the Bulbous Tunic, and the Intestinal Skirt. To the right, one figure wears the skeletal Pelvis Shirt, and the other flaunts the Janus Headdress, recalling the Roman god of gateways, doorways, beginnings and endings, past and future, and the duality of the masculine and feminine. They hold scientific tools of the day symbolizing the interplay between menstrual and scientific knowledge. On the back wall, a mirror reflects a life size sculpture of a menstruant, no doubt a treasured heirloom. A dark figure, also adorned with a Janus Headdress, holds the curtain to the dawn-lit ceremony.

The artist herself is pictured to the left of the scene looking out past a large canvas supported by an easel. Her black dress, with its dark red swath encircling her mouth and flowing down her front, symbolizes her own menstrual maturity. Spanish painters of the 17th century were not considered to be of a high social status; by placing her confirmed self-portrait, in which she is in menstrual garb, within the royal palace, she is claiming a high status for both the artist and her art. She is equating the gaze of the painter with the gaze of the menstruant and asserting that through discipline and taboo, the artist has the power to construct the world.

The painting was greatly acclaimed within the artist's lifetime and had an immediate influence on painters who were eager to build on the newly established status of painting. Twentieth century artists such as Louise Bourgeois used sculpture and performance art to bring the menstrual vestments from the painting to life.



7

Portrait of Pope Innocent X (after Diego Velázquez)

24"x30", oil on canvas, 2022

The oil painting is a portrait of the pope, born Giovanni Battista Pamphili, who was the head of the Catholic Church and ruler of the Papal States from 1644 to his death in 1655.

The painting is noted for its realism. An unflinching portrait of a highly intelligent, shrewd, and aging man, who has achieved great status despite his gender. He is dressed in linen vestments that emulate 17th-century monarchical men's ritual robes. A crimson cap deftly covers his eyes, controlling his gaze. His hands are bound in spotless white lace. A dark red seam runs from chin to navel, conjuring a steady trickle of blood that flowers into a full red stain at the crotch, which is dramatically accentuated against a spotless white skirt. The ritual garb reflects his commitment to a monthly seclusion rite, replete with traditional spiritual disciplines that include refraining from sight and touch, silence, fasting, confession, and good works.

The portrait was kept on private display by Innocent's family, the Pamphilj, in the Doria Pamphilj Gallery, where it remains to this day.



8
The Adult Playhouse of Avignon (after Pablo Picasso)
60"x84'', oil on canvas, 2022



Detail of (8) *The Adult Playhouse of Avignon*



Detail 2 of (8) *The Adult Playhouse of Avignon*

The Adult Playhouse of Avignon is a large oil painting created in 1907 by the artist. The work, part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, portrays six nude figures in an adult playhouse in the Spanish town of Avignon. Each figure is depicted in a disconcerting and confrontational manner and none is conventionally erotic.

At center, we see two male figures depicted in the Iberian style of the artist's native Spain, one playing tenderly with the genitalia of the other, as the artist explores both vulnerability and risk. To the right, a pair of stacked figures seem to move towards center with the bottom male figure spearing the picture plane with his protruding member. On the bottom right, we see a hallowed female figure crouching close to the ground. Possibly the most striking figure is the female figure at top right. Unlike the other figures, her gaze confronts the viewer head on as her masturbatory gesture suggests power and self-sufficiency.

The stacked figures are often connected in the literature to the artist's visit, midway through his work on the painting, to the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, Paris's first anthropological museum. There, he had an epiphanic encounter with African and Oceanic art, which influenced the work's ferocious anti-naturalism. It was also there that he likely encountered initial field studies by leading primatologists studying patterns of play in primates. Such studies reveal that Bonobos, who live in matriarchal clans, engage in frequent, promiscuous sexual play with members of all sexes, a practice linked to their ability to manage conflict and to their adaptability to change (see Behncke, Isabel, 2015, *Play in the Peter Pan Ape*, *Current Biology*, Vol. 25 No. 1 R24.) In the rapidly changing and uncertain environment of modern industrialization and urbanization, the artist was no doubt excited by the implications of this evolutionary lens on human behavior and used the work to provoke public conversation.

Playhouse of Avignon was revolutionary and controversial and led to widespread anger and discomfort, even amongst the painter's closest friends. At the time of its first exhibition in 1916, the painting was deemed immoral for its radical psycho-social dynamics and its suggestion of a new paradigm of gender dynamics, trading blood power for the power of play.





Part II

Theology of Desire

Long before theological language even existed, art was a channel for forging relationships to the transcendent. We can look at art in every culture throughout time to learn about the spiritual and philosophical beliefs of that civilization, and Western art is no exception.

Many of the fundamental spiritual beliefs of the West can be traced back to ancient Sumer, where the cyclicity of life and death in the natural world was a central principle of the culture. For millennia, Western artists have asked how this cycle might offer a pathway to understanding the divine. Some artists focus on the roles of desire, pleasure, sexuality, and sensuality. They revel in the senses of sight and touch as the keys to accessing the life-giving force. This idea is epitomized in the opening image of this chapter, *Born This Way*, the famous depiction of the act of creation in the Sistine Chapel.

Other artists center sacrifice as the ultimate act of devotion; they grapple with the idea that in order for one thing to live, something else must die. Death thus becomes the ultimate unknown and unknowable, and as the unknown defines that which is most intimate, death is understood as the key to transcendence. We see this in Medieval Christian iconography of martyrdom, as well as in modern paintings of vaginal and Cesarean births.

Detail of (9) *Born This Way*

9

Born This Way (after Michelangelo)

42"x32", gouache on paper, 2020

This original detail was revealed during the controversial restoration of the Sistine Chapel frescoes, which began in 1980. In contrast to the familiar version in which God keeps Adam at hands' length, here the act of creation and touch are inextricably linked. Scholars have discovered that the contours of the Divine hand correspond precisely with the female internal sexual anatomy, and that the human finger is pressing the g-spot. A personal journal of a nun from the time recounts covert premarital rites that took place in the chapel, with spiritual guides using this image to instruct young brides and grooms in the art of love making (See 10). It is no secret that Michelangelo's relationship with the Catholic Church was strained. The Pope likely demanded that Michelangelo change the image to portray the narrative in the second chapter of Genesis in which Woman is created from the ribs of Man; however, this original work was retrieved and preserved by a group of acolytes who, like the painter himself, worshipped the God of whom it is written, "Male and Female They created Them" (Genesis 1:27).



**Study for Hand of the Divine,
page from *ricordanze* (personal
journal) of G. Ciapelli of Rome
circa 1511**

8"x5", drawing in pen and ink on
handmade paper, 2021

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Printed on the occasion of Canon in Drag, Tirtzah Bassel's solo exhibition at Slag Gallery, New York.

October 27th - December 3rd, 2022

The artist wishes to thank Slag Gallery for making this exhibition and publication possible and the Chashama Studio Program that provides me with studio space. I'm indebted to the monumental works of Judy Grahn, Griselda Pollock, and Adrienne Rich. Gratitude to my friends for being together through numerous moments of contraction and of growth - Hagit Barkai, Noa Charuvi, Shulamit Near, Valerie Rosenberg, Ronit Sela and Gabriela Vainsencher. Special gratitude to all the care workers that made this project possible. Thank you to my family, you are my most intimate and constant teachers.

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Editing and collaboration on captions: Daniel Spiro
Graphic design: Tehila Goldberg
Photography: Barry Rosenthal

Printing and Binding: buch.one - Offsetdruckerei Karl Grammlich GmbH, Pliezhausen, Germany

Publisher:
buch.one Verlag Offsetdruckerei Grammlich GmbH
Karl-Benz Street 3
72124 Pliezhausen

ISBN 978-3-947198-55-9

Cover: Miracle of the Menstruating Martyr (after Rogier Van Der Weyden), 26"x28", gouache on paper, 2021