



Work in progress *Elephant in the Room* 2019 oil on canvas 95" x 78"

## Clive Head Interviewed by Rosalyn Best about his on-going work *Elephant in the Room*

RB. When I was last here in August you were completing *Pearly White*. It looks as if you have had a very productive few months since then?

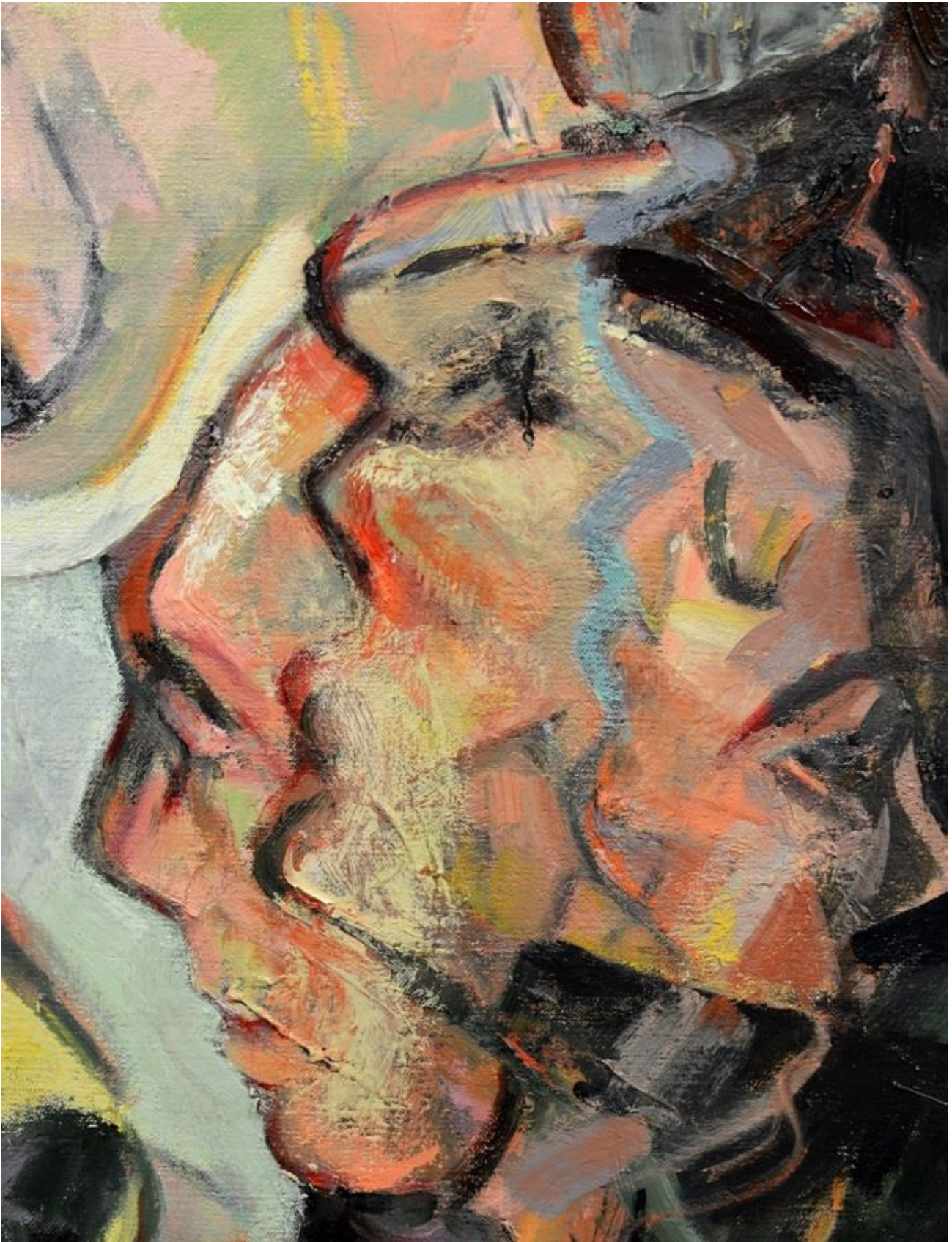
CH. Well, I completely repainted *The King is Dead, Long Live the King*. It was originally in grisaille but needed some colour to come to life. Then I made *Blue Pole Dance, The English Way* and now am bringing this new piece to some kind of conclusion.

RB. Does it have a title?

CH. *Elephant in the Room*, I think, or *My Coney Island*, at least that was the title of a drawing on which it is loosely based.

RB. These new paintings are all large. *Blue Pole Dance* must be 11 feet long, and this is what?

CH. About 8 feet high. Yes they are large though they are still within a human scale. That's important to me. You know I added another canvas to *Pearly White* so it's now a diptych which must be 13 feet in length. I have broken away from the easel painting scale of a year ago. And of course the scale of the mark making is also greater though it is amazing how I have to be so precise at times to make things work, a hair's breadth can make all the difference. Yet I can't fuss the surface, all I can do is keep repainting with as much force and deliberation that I can muster.



RB. This new piece has more colour?

CH. I have gradually worked my way back to more colour, though it's quite an anti-naturalistic scheme. One of the problems in purging the studio of reference material was what to do about colour. I suppose it was the same challenge as what to do about anatomy, or anything really that tends to propped up by reference to something else. In not having anything to hand, colour has become more liberated from any descriptive purpose and is now tied more to other concerns.

RB. Such as?

CH. Well, pragmatically it's used to create space. I use deep reds to create space as I find it a colour that recedes which goes against all the "how to paint" manuals. But creating space is just another way of saying that I am creating life, so that's not pragmatic at all. It's quite magical.

RB. I find it remarkable that you are painting without the subject for reference?

CH. It's not easy, not easy at all, but I have come to the conclusion that it's the only way, otherwise the painting just gets betrayed by the mundane normality of camera vision or classical drawing conventions. It's not that they are entirely absent in this painting, because they are part of my instinctive way of seeing and painting now, but they have become absorbed and digested. Fundamentally, my painting is not about selecting from that which is known but inventing afresh.

RB. Having a vision.

CH. May be finding a vision. Because at the outset I don't know how the painting is going to appear. All I know is that I am going to respond to the drawn and painted marks. It's perhaps about making visible those inferred possibilities. It's about having a dialogue with the canvas.

RB. You often say that. Almost as if it is a real conversation?

CH. It is. You know, you can either enforce some idea on to the painting, may be some formal scheme or a bit of social or political commentary or you can really look at what is happening on the canvas in front of you and figure out how that happening can be made clearer, more explicit...fuller. Invariably the solution floats from the canvas into your mind's eye and then you carry it out. So it is a dialogue. But you won't see or hear anything if you impose too much from outside. It's underpinned with a kind of humility.

RB. But you've made the painting! So you are only deferring to something that you have created in the first place. Sounds quite narcissistic.

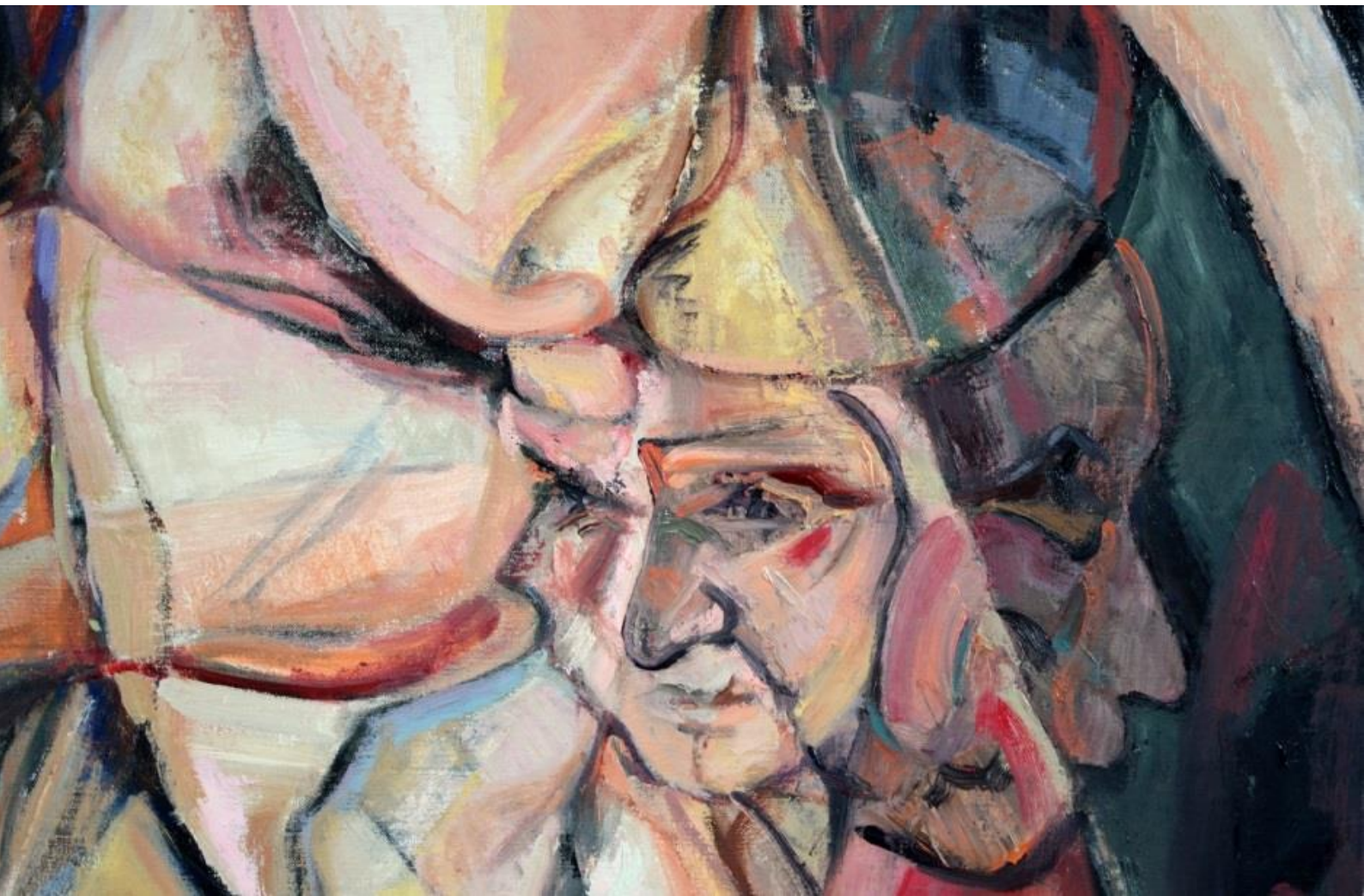
CH. It's a very distinctive discourse...probably at the core of what it means to paint. I am writing a play based on this relationship which gives the canvas an audible voice but I am trying to be truthful. It's absurd of course, but not as ridiculous as suggesting that my painting has been carefully orchestrated to communicate to an audience outside of the studio.

RB. But you are telling us something, albeit in a very enigmatic way?

CH. I am trying to make a painting. The studio is a very special place. It's definitely not a stage where I perform to others, quite the opposite. But I am not a vacuum. I paint, and respond to the painting with all kinds of imagery, thoughts, imaginings which define me. If paintings are going to be truthful to the human condition they can't be empty, any more than our dreams are empty. But that doesn't mean that what is figured on the canvas has any easy purpose for the viewer.

RB. Dare I ask why is this painting called *Elephant in the Room*?

CH. It began as an association that I have with Coney Island and elephants, not that it began with a trip to Coney Island. But I imagined taking the subway from Manhattan to Coney Island. It began with that fantasy, and my notion of Coney Island from some earlier era of adult excess, freak shows, and dark circuses.



RB. So it's an imagined reality?

CH. Which is as true in my mind as the actual reality. Certainly far more vivid as I am sure that I wouldn't be that interested in Coney Island if I went there.

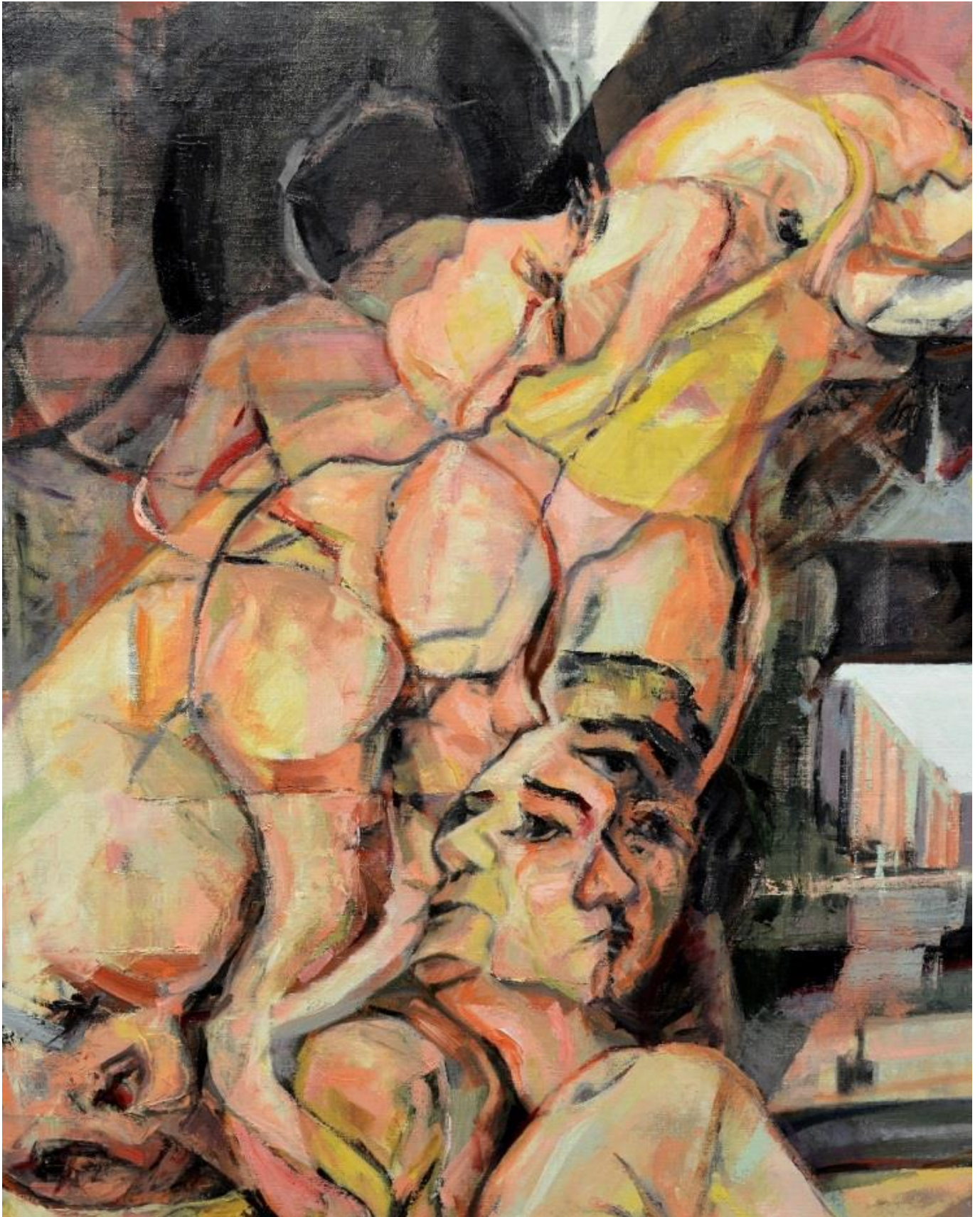
RB. So the elephants relate to the legendary hotel in the shape of an elephant as well as the circus animals.

CH. It's all a bit mixed up. But that's more true to the way we are isn't it? But I might also say that this painting is about other narratives, too multitudinous to really name and discuss. The "elephant in the room" is what I often describe my neurological illness, which is always there but rarely spoken of. It's a major factor that drives me into the studio as a space where I can more effectively manage my existence.

RB. That's not something you have ever discussed publically?

CH. Exactly....it's the elephant in the....And maybe I am not really comfortable with the idea of art being illustrative of ourselves in a confessional way, but at the same time it has to be rooted in the self.

You can see the elephants on the left of the painting and also stacking up on the right. The form of the elephant has become a sort of hidden geometry throughout this painting.



RB. Which you planned?

CH. No. Which I found. It's an interesting thought isn't it? In the heyday of modern formalism all kinds of paintings were being analysed in terms of hidden geometries like triangles, but what if we are more likely to find hidden forms like the shape of a person or an animal. That seems more likely doesn't it, given that it is difficult to imagine anyone fantasising about a triangle? Certainly I can think of paintings by Rubens

conceived on a massive underlying figure, and then of course there is Picasso's *Demoiselles D'Avignon* based on a drawing of an old man's head.

RB. But there are "sacred" geometries, like the crucifix which I do sense in this painting at the top.

CH. Yes that's true, and in fact the lower section of the painting resembles a figure on the cross, not that I expect anyone to see this. In fact, I don't really expect the audience to see much of my morphological transitions. They are not there for display but are intrinsic to the structure of the painting.

RB. So does that make the painting itself in a permanent state of flux?

CH. Yes, I think so. That's its objective reality as much as the paint crustations on canvas. It also happens to be the reality of so many great paintings from Western Art. It is the elephant in the room of Western Art.

RB. Because it's not widely seen.

CH. Exactly. It's not seen, and I don't think it is particularly desired either.

RB. Why?

CH. Because it complicates so much art historical interpretation. It makes the idea of art as a mirror to society very difficult if what we are being presented with falls away and becomes something else, particularly if all those transitions are tied to the impenetrable imaginings of the individual. It makes the tools of the deconstructionist pretty worthless if the painting is ungraspable as a single entity.

RB. That would seem to define this painting.

There have been a lot of articles on the internet on your work of late, all of which talk about your concern for depicting movement through the urban landscape.

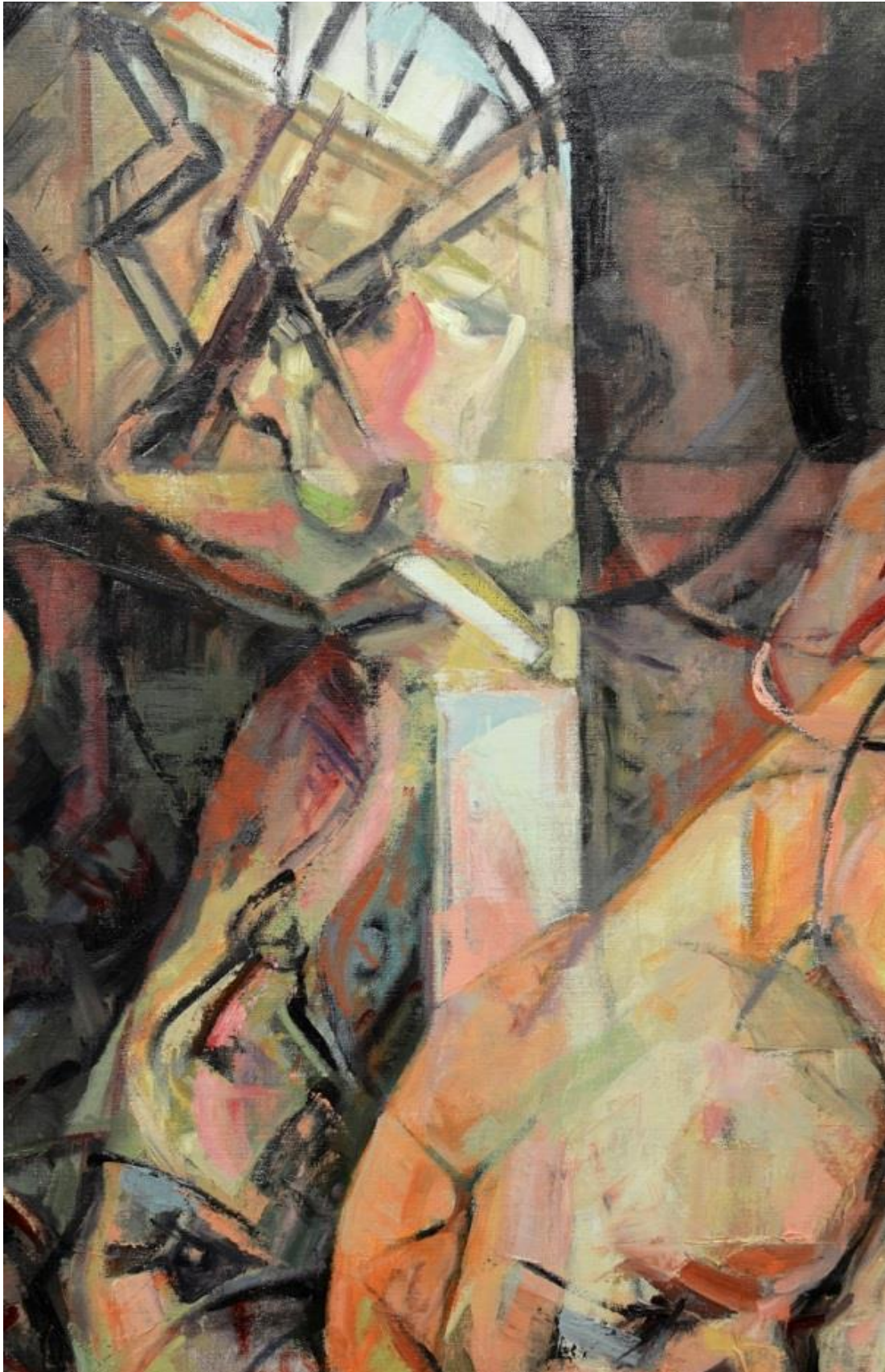
CH. Yes, dozens of similar articles. I am always pleased that people are interested to look at the work and talk about it.

RB. But you don't talk about movement in that way. You don't make much mention of Futurism or Cubism.

CH. I might do. There are figures moving through this painting. On the left there appears to be many figures running away, and there is a vast central figure which seems to be mounting some stairs. But you're right. I didn't witness any moving figures so this has nothing to do with analysing my perception of people in the urban landscape. This has all been discovered in the studio through the process of painting.

It's tricky. My paintings demand a lot of time to really look at, and we can examine ideas in a lengthy discussion like this whereas the internet is, and maybe the art world is becoming more geared to quick sound bites and that doesn't suit my work at all. Notions of metamorphosis are difficult to comprehend. One of the reasons that I might use the kind of layered imagery of cubo-futurism is to disrupt the usual time and space in the painting, and out of this disruption new motifs occur.

This is getting into the language of science-fiction, where rifts in the universe become portals through which monsters invade. But it is not so far removed from what happens when I paint. I often discover all kinds of creatures and strange people. I stumbled into several figures that span the entire height of this canvas. The head in the centre at the top is of a woman smoking. You can track her down through the painting, either seated or standing.



RB. The cigarette is?

CH. It was originally a fluorescent strip light....Well I suppose it still is. Everything functions in many, many ways. I want the paintings to be as dense as a novel or a film, denser and more mysterious.

RB. I was thinking that density, not just complexity, has become a real feature of your new work. I think the paint is denser, the darks are heavier and the paint itself seems to have more weight.

CH. You're right. It's important to me that they have a real physical presence. I want them to do so much and yet be as uncompromising as possible.



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