

George  
Petrides

The Beauty  
of Imperfection















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Petrides

# The Beauty of Imperfection

## TEXTS

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## PHOTOGRAPHS

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## GRAPHIC DESIGN

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## PRODUCTION

G. Kostopoulos Printing House SA

## BINDING

J. Mantis & Sons CO

## COVER ARTWORK

*Frances of Auxerre*

2020

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids  
46 cm high x 25 cm wide

## BACKCOVER ARTWORK

*Emily, Untitled Film Still*

2020

Acrylics on canvas board  
66 cm high x 50 cm wide

## FIRST PAGE

*Marathonomachos*

2002

Charcoal, blue crayon, watercolor paper  
collaged with matte medium  
69 cm x 46 cm

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## A FEW THOUGHTS ON THE SCULPTURE OF G. PETRIDES

George Rorris

I knew of George Petrides' love of Art. A resident of New York City from a young age, he had every opportunity to cultivate his personal relationship with the whole spectrum of Art through that city's numerous museums and countless exhibitions, in which the art lover is immersed, advancing and broadening his knowledge.

Knowing this side of Mr. Petrides, I mean that of the thirsty lover of art, I was surprised, but not much, when I saw his first steps as a creating artist. The two-dimensional space of Painting did not hold him for long, but it offered him the experience of color, a color-material, rich and thick with intense "physicality" more suited to rough construction of images rather than for refined visual dialogue. That's when I realized for the first time Petrides' intense relationship with the elements of earth, stone, soil. That deep relationship, unrecognized and unconscious, gushes up in all his visual gestures.

After not much time, Painting stepped aside, giving a head start to Sculpture. This art came as an outburst. An outburst of euphoria, an outburst of love and of mania.

The forms, as if crowded for a long time, waiting for the right moment, sprang up, one could call them unadorned, sloppy, rough. No grooming, no finishing. There was no time for such! The next form was waiting; its turn was coming for it to come to light. To emerge from the hands of the creator who forms it and gives it visible shape. And then another. And another...



At first glance, there is a paradox in the case of Petrides. One expects, if one remains at a superficial level, to see polished art, shining, cleansed of physical intervention and the subsequent damage it causes -- in short, a more intellectual and logical art. The art of a cosmopolitan New Yorker familiar with the nature of the urban landscape of his city and the emotional distancing of the work he practiced for a long time.

The soul, however, likes to refute appearances. And so in Petrides' art the "primitive" sensuality of his soul is reflected, indomitable and unadulterated.

His forms smell of soil, clay, rain. The fire and the furnace gave them their final appearance. They are figurines of prehistoric appearance. We come across such statuettes in the showcases of archaeological museums, and we are always moved by the efforts of those people to tame material. An incomplete attempt, if you compare it with the evolution of Art, but how necessary and how hopeful! The first step by those from whom we descend. A trembling step, and full of hesitation, but the seed of the future. They still move us because we recognize in these works something of our own.

So Petrides turned in that direction, almost instinctively, and began to mold his clay and add color to it. Earth colors, and red ochre, ochre, siena, black, creating solid harmonies. Thus the works resemble figurines that were just brought to light by an archaeological tool, covered with stains, mud and soil, or resemble the people made into monuments forever by the lava of Vesuvius in Pompeii.

One expects the inevitable evolution, the changes that will gradually appear in Petrides' Sculpture. This too is an indication of human curiosity and impatience. Yet, looking at the works now, they invite us to rejoice in them, feeling the source emotions that emerge from their innocence.







## WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE: TIME AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE WORK OF GEORGE PETRIDES

By Shannon Leahey

"Wet clay," George Petrides recently commented while beginning a new sculpture, "is how it all starts." He was referring to the process of working in the studio: capturing the form of a live model in clay or plasticine, then later layering on sculptable epoxy and ground metals, acid patinas and mixtures of paint, and carving into the accumulated materials until the shape of the figure, marked by the methods which brought it into being, finally emerges <sup>[fig. 1]</sup>. But the artist might as well have been referencing a far vaster and more mystical process: the beginning of beginnings, the myriad of creation myths in which the first man springs from clay. Petrides' works are not simply about the human form, but rather about what it means to be human.

1

When it comes to his personal history, making art is both something timeless and something newly awakened. As a child, Petrides had an affinity for drawing and a nature that was drawn to the museum visits and art classes that later proved to be foundational. He continued to make art for decades, but it wasn't until later, after he'd already fashioned a successful career in finance, that he shifted and began to embrace it as a full-time pursuit.

Figurative sculpture, of course, has a history as long as our interest in the human condition. Petrides lists as influential the products of several of the very oldest civilizations: ancient Egypt, pre-classical Greece,

Fig. 1 Two clay figures in the studio.  
Photo by George Petrides.



Rome [fig. 2]. These are sculptures that were created with ceremonial purpose rather than pure aesthetics in mind. They were intended to appease the gods, to record history, to boost one's health or fertility. Some of the most famous Archaic Greek sculptures are the kouroi, youthful male nudes that were once thought only to portray Apollo, but are more recently believed to depict human individuals as well--a grave marker that shows who is buried inside, a trophy that celebrates the form of the actual tournament victor.<sup>1</sup> It's the directness of these ancient works that Petrides admires. "This kind of sculpture has life the way an apple has life," he said. "You see the volume, feel the juices inside it, pushing outwards. I'm interested in the immediacy of it."

Many of Petrides' early sculptures were small, measuring only a foot or two tall. Recently, though, they have grown to life-size and beyond, another connection to the looming figurative statues of Egypt, the massive kouroi of the Cycladic islands. "If it is meant to be a representative of a person or the energy of a person, then maybe it's not



Fig. 2 With the "Sounion Kouros" at the National Archaeological Museum, Athens Greece. Photo by George Petrides.

supposed to fit on a shelf," Petrides said. In other words: more volume, more juices, and perhaps, more immediacy.

Petrides, who spent part of his childhood living in Athens, sees the Greek sculptures of the pre-Classical Archaic era (c. 800-479 B.C.E.) as most closely aligned with his intent. "People soak up influences from their culture. You can spend your whole life rejecting that influence, but it's the truth: it gets in your system," Petrides said. Today, those ear-

ly inspirations still surface in his work. He sometimes asks models to take on the poses of famous works from the Archaic

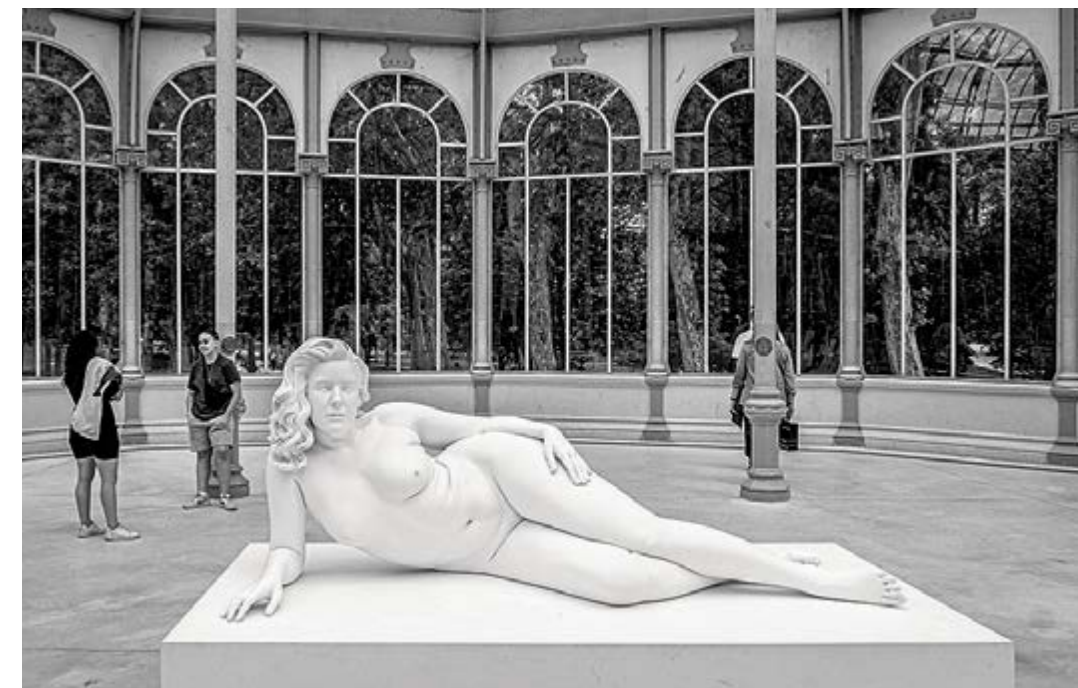


Fig. 3 Charles Ray, "Reclining Woman," 2018. Photo "Reclining Woman (Charles Ray) #2" by Ignacio Ferre is licensed with CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

or Classical Greek periods (such as Ilissos from the West Pediment of the Parthenon) or the later Hellenistic period (such as the Belvedere Torso or the Venus de Milo) while he is creating the clay or plasticine core of a piece.

Despite their connections to the past, Petrides' works feel entirely contemporary. They echo some of the figurative work of Charles Ray, who saw ancient sculpture and contemporary sculpture as two sides of the same coin [fig. 3]. Ray has been quoted as saying: "I see great archaic and classical sculpture as contemporary. I'm interested in ancient art not as... an emissary from the past."<sup>2</sup> Petrides, too, seems to be working in dialogue with ancient sculptures. Sometimes he likes to switch the gender of the original subject, highlighting the universality of the emotion being captured, as in "Sarah as the Dying Gaul." (Suffering, as he pointed out, is not male or female.)

Rather than the idealized forms of the Classical era or the realism of the Hellenistic, Petrides is interested in an abstracted rendition of the human body and the human experience. After that initial impression in clay, he works to transform his understanding of his subject, and so transforms the piece; working from memory and imagination rather than a model at this stage, he adds materials and uses tools to reshape the layers. Through this reworking of the human form, he wants to explore "the beauty and the imperfection of people and of life."

Take, for instance, Petrides' version of the "Venus de Milo," the famous Hellenistic sculpture from around 100 B.C.E that now resides in the Louvre. The original statue—smooth, graceful, untouchable—fills



the viewer with exactly the kind of awe one might expect of a goddess of love and beauty. Petrides' "Alex de Milo" is a goddess come to Earth: the body still beautiful in form but now roughened with molded epoxy and dripping with patches of paint, a wabi-sabi remix of the divine original. Because the ancient statue is a cultural touchstone, the tenderness the viewer feels for her contemporary counterpart is not unlike discovering a milk mustache on a loved one's face—the humanness of the flaw engenders more fondness than perfection ever could.

## 2

There are plenty of other landmarks in the figurative sculpture pathway between ancient Greece and Petrides, from the work of Rodin and Maillol (who were both heavily influenced by ancient Greek works) to that of contemporary artists like Huma Bhabha and Thomas Houseago [fig. 4]. To be sure, it can be risky to walk on such well-trodden ground.

There is always the danger of repetition, of figures losing their essential "directness." And yet there is resource in the reiteration, too, in drawing on precedents to capture life anew. Of Houseago, Andrew Berardini once wrote that his figures "sometimes give the impression that they're trying to look back to look forward, to figure out what it means to make a thing in this general mishmash of digital ethereality, exotic financial instruments, after a half-century of conceptual art."<sup>3</sup> Of Bhabha, Danielle Shang wrote that "her work can be analogized to expansive, encyclopedic archives, in which times and spaces—throughout histories of art, civilization, and anthropology—are consolidated and re-presented to propose our destiny."<sup>4</sup> Petrides, who lists Bhabha and her giant amalgamated forms as a key influence, also works to collapse the gap between seemingly disparate times and places, swan-diving into the past to comment on the present moment. His "Alex Withdrawn" looks not unlike one of the actual humans un-



Fig. 4 Huma Bhabha, "Receiver," 2019. Photo "'Receiver' by Huma Bhabha, Frieze Sculpture 2019, Regent's Park" by Loz Flowers is licensed with CC BY-SA 2.0.

earthed from Pompeii, albeit one that has taken on a thoroughly modern habit of gazing inward.

While sculpture is the central focus of Petrides' practice, he also draws (usually in preparation for a sculpture) and paints (in order to gain a different perspective on a subject). "Sometimes I need to look at the same model through a different lens," Petrides commented. "In

more than a few cases, as with "The Jazz Guitarist", a model has posed for sculpture, drawing and painting at different times, and each work informs the other."

Petrides admires most the artists who have mastered different disciplines. "Matisse, Picasso, Degas, Giacometti," he said, listing inspirations. "People who are good at all three disciplines are relatively rare." He follows in the footsteps of the greats with a focus on volume, more than color, which has led some other artists to describe him as a "sculptor's painter." "I'm more interested in volume and mass and weight, even in paintings," he said.

It is perhaps telling that Petrides considers Alberto Giacometti an influence above all others [fig 5]. Similarities exist in their process: the use of live models, the carving away of an initial form, the fluid movement into painting or drawing when the subject requires it. Giacometti was known to return to

the same works again and again, endlessly reshaping the figures in an attempt to capture his changing perspectives, and Petrides often does the same. (Here, too, we encounter the idea of wabi-sabi; according to the writer Richard Powell, "Wabi-sabi nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect."<sup>5</sup>) At times, when it could be deemed finished, he breaks a piece apart and reassembles it into a new configuration, or he strips the surfaces and begins the process again. He describes his process as "image seeking" rather than "image making." "It's not unlike Basquiat painting over his earlier work on a canvas

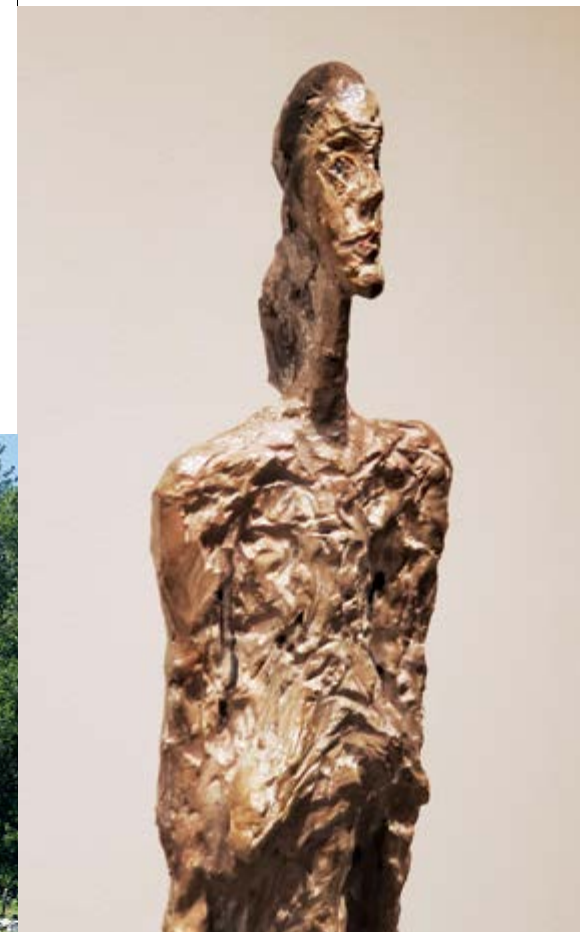


Fig. 5 Alberto Giacometti, "Woman of Venice II," 1956. Photo by George Petrides.





Fig. 6 Jean-Michel Basquiat, "Flexible," 1984. Photo "Basquiat" by Stephane Jaspert is licensed with CC BY 2.0.

or crossing out words," he explained [fig. 6].

Petrides also sees himself as a successor of the Neo-Expressionists and their ethos of capturing subjective perception over physical reality. Markus Lüpertz, with his abstract reimagining of subjects like Apollo and Odysseus, seems a particularly apt comparison [fig. 7]. "If you look at the Neo-Expressionists, there are no shiny surfaces or conventional beauty," Petrides said. "But it's not sloppy. It's about a moment of feeling." That use of the physical body to explore the chaotic terrain of the mind can sometimes result in works that appear primitive or even grotesque to the viewer (think, for instance, of George Condo and his Psychological Cubism [fig. 8]), but they also

open possibilities for close emotional connection. In a recent Petrides painting, a bold skull in angular blacks and grays fills almost the entire frame. This is no anatomical study or delicately composed still life; it is the artist's "moment of feeling" as he sat quarantined in his New York apartment a few blocks from a refrigerated morgue truck filled with victims of the Covid-19 pandemic. After posting an image of it, his Instagram feed immediately filled with comments of people experiencing that same moment.

3

Petrides recently spoke to me about how his piece "Litigator at Rest" came to be. "I saw the "Boxer at Rest" way back in 2013 at the Metropolitan Museum and it blew me away," he said of the bronze Hellenistic sculpture from around 100 B.C.E. He appreciated the turn toward a realistic style, and the incredible detail, like the cuts in the boxer's lips and nose, stuck with him.



Fig. 7 Markus Lüpertz, "Odysseus." Photo "A Wooden Statue of Odysseus by Markus Lüpertz" by Dave Hamster is licensed with CC BY 2.0.



Fig. 8 George Condo, "The Madman," 2005. Photo "George Condo" by scalaja is licensed with CC BY-SA 2.0.

multiple strata of life and career, each bringing its own joys and struggles. These layers of experience are clear in the way he creates, particularly when, having completed his initial cast of the model, he sits alone with the piece; it's in the accumulating of different types of material, the cutting down and back and in with a hammer, a chisel, a power tool, before accumulating more. Petrides uses these layers to capture the imagined experience of the model, the amalgamation of lives lived, the merging of one into another. This process--layering and cutting, adding and subtracting--brings to mind other artists, such as Mark Bradford, who builds up a canvas, then "attacks it with power sanders and other tools, exposing earlier layers, flashes of color, and unexpected juxtapositions."<sup>6</sup> To embed destruction within our acts of creation is a story writ large across the ages of man but also woven into our individual stories, our personal ebb and flow.

Over these layers, none of the sculptures bear pristine final coats of paint or shiny bronze; they instead show their guts to the world, the entire messy process of molding and cutting and grinding on display for all to see. "Frances of Auxerres," for instance, is a patchwork of

Years later, after Petrides and his lawyer won an important case, the memory of the sculpture came back to him, and he decided to sculpt a contemporary version of a fighter as an attorney. "I told my lawyer I wanted to sculpt him, which puzzled him, and no surprise, he declined," Petrides remembered with a laugh. "So I found a model that was somewhat like him in build and had the model pose nude, and did the head and face from my memory of him." It's a story of translation and transformation--from classical to abstract, from heroic to workaday, from historical to personal--and a process that captures much about Petrides' work.

A belief in transformation and evolution is what led Petrides to his current vocation. He brings to his art the experience of maturity--human maturity, having lived through



ground metals and acids. The result brings to mind the golden cracks of a piece of kintsugi pottery; it's not the idealized form that draws the eye, but rather its scars. Pieces with these "contemporary finishes" as Petrides calls them invite the viewer to contemplate time: the broad, almost inconceivable timeline that stretches back to Archaic Greek sculpture juxtaposed with the work's own timeline, what it looked like one layer ago, two layers ago, all the way down to its clay core. His methods of exposing these layers, power tools and all, can appear brutal, though there is obvious feeling for his subjects. His work, consequently, hints at a fascination with other people even while not always being able to connect with them, a desire to honor the complexity of human life while acknowledging the rough and ragged kind of work that living can be.

In a photo from Petrides' studio, a fired clay form bobs in a pool of milk <sup>[fig. 9]</sup>. It hearkens back to a prehistoric method of sealing pottery to make it more waterproof and sanitary. It has an aesthetic function here, removing the dry look of the clay, but it is hard not to see the image as somehow embryonic. Soon enough, the clay will emerge into the world, transform, take on layers, sustain damage, transform again. Soon enough, it will tell a story, a temporal trajectory through beginning, middle, and end. Soon enough, we will look at it and see a human.

#### Footnotes

1. "Kouros." Encyclopedia Britannica, edited by Chelsey Parrott-Sheffer, <https://www.britannica.com/art/kouros>
2. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, New York, "Charles Ray, Two Horses," Accession number 2019.556.
3. Berardini, Andrew. "The sculptor's wrecked giants aren't of this time. So where do they come from – and what are they waiting for?" *Art Review*, Sept. 2012, pp. 64 – 69.
4. Shang, Danielle. "Phantasms of Huma Bhabha." *Mousse Magazine*, <http://moussomagazine.it/huma-bhabha-danielle-shang-2020/>
5. Powell, Richard R. *Wabi Sabi Simple*. Adams Media, 2004.
6. Tomkins, Calvin. "What Can Art Fix?" *The New Yorker Magazine*, June 22, 2015

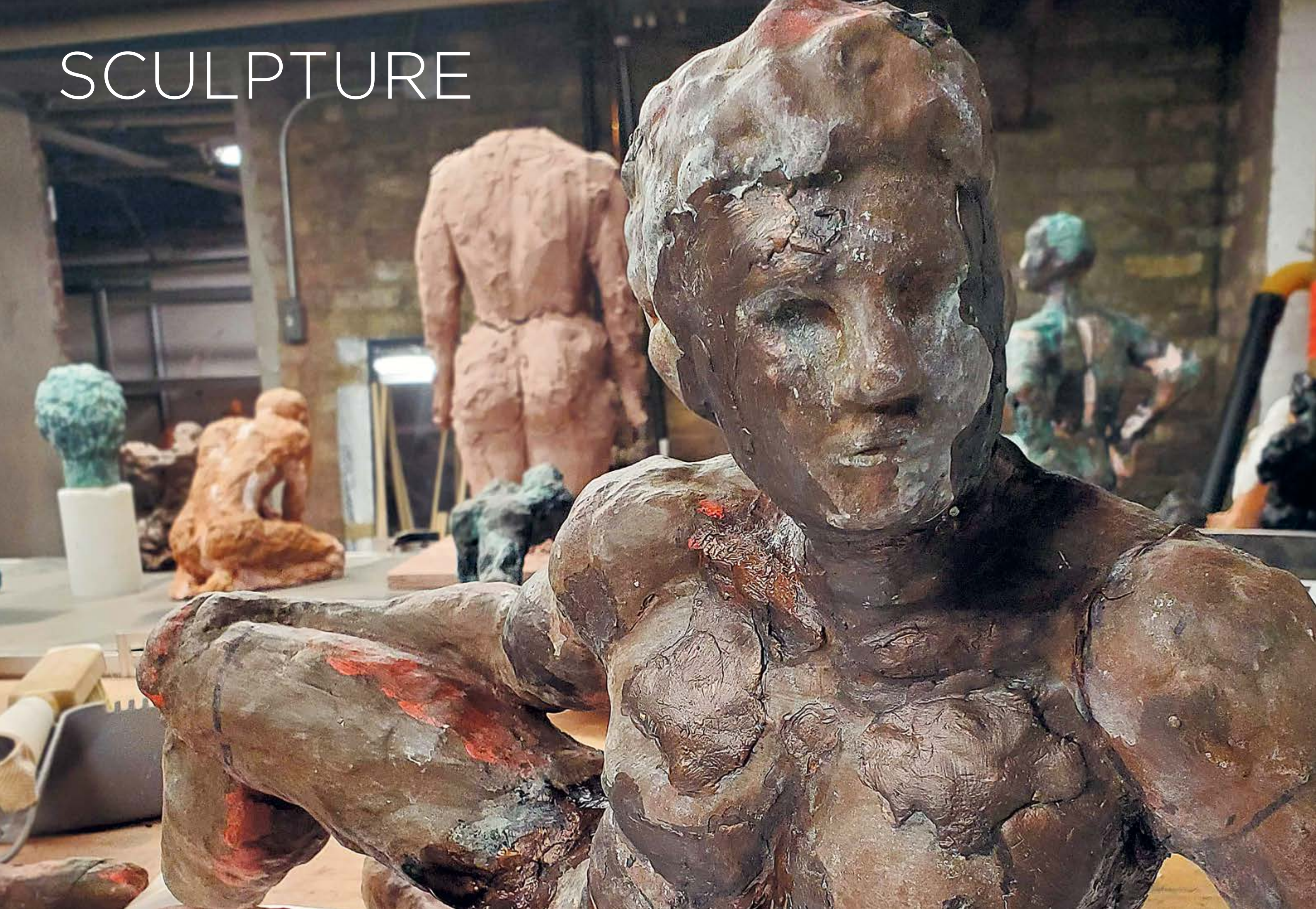
\*Title respectfully borrowed from *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare.



Fig. 9 Prototype of "Alex Withdrawn" soaking in milk after being fired in the kiln, before reworking with tools, epoxy clay, acrylic paints. Photo by George Petrides.



# SCULPTURE





*Frances Reclining, 2019*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, dairy milk  
18 cm high x 38 cm long





*Frances of Auxerre (Prior States), 2019*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids, acrylics  
46 cm high x 25 cm wide





*Frances of Auxerre, 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids  
46 cm high x 25 cm wide









*Kevin Belvedere, 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids, acrylics  
34 cm high x 23 cm long







*Blue Girl, 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, acids, dyes  
23 cm high x 23 cm wide



*Katy as The Naked Solicitor (Lucian Freud), 2019*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, brass  
17 cm high x 47 cm long





*Brutus*, 2019

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids, found stone as base  
13 cm high including base

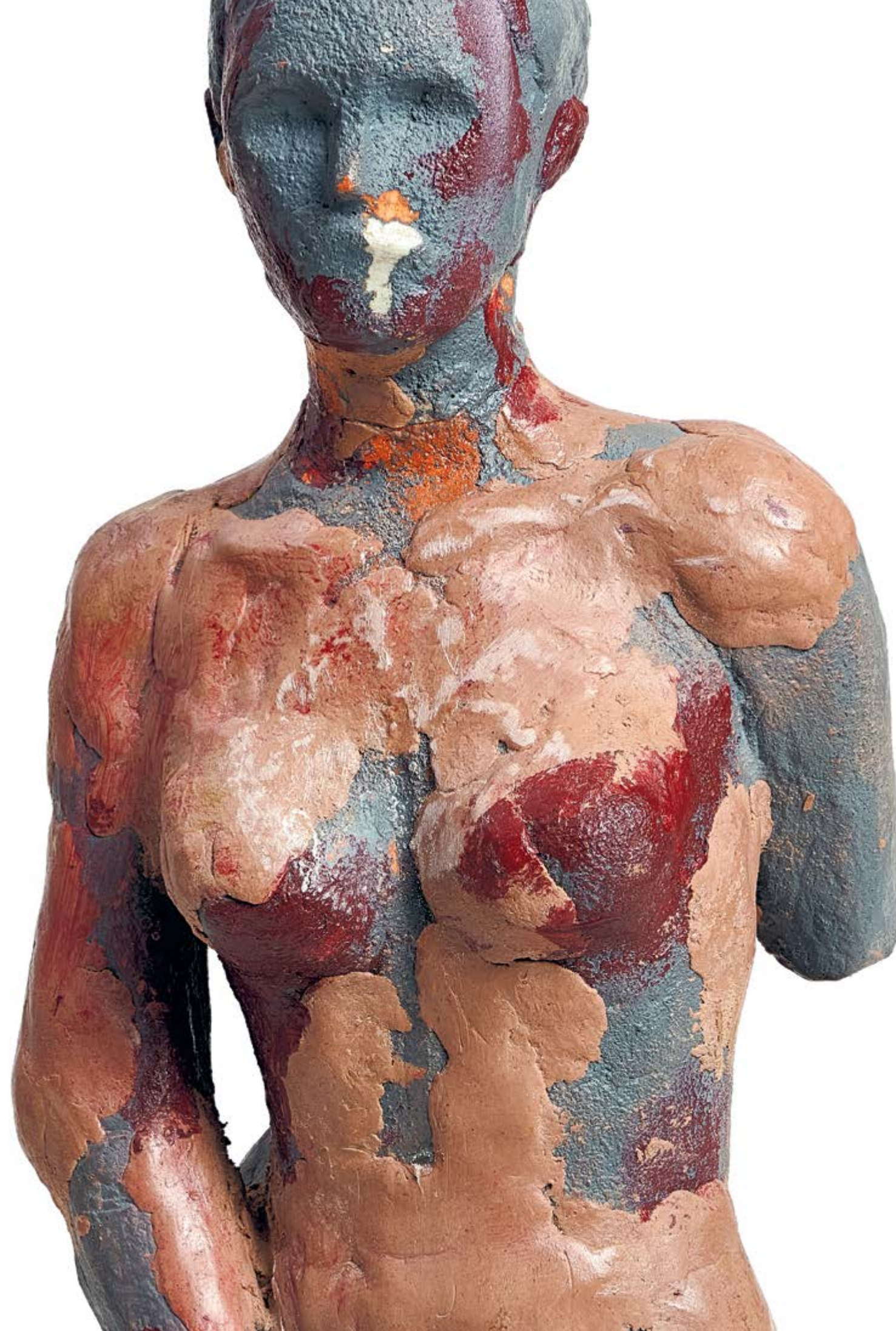




*Alex de Milo, 2019*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, acrylics

43 cm high with alabaster base x 12 cm wide









*Alex Withdrawn, 2019*

Resin, marble chips, custom dyes and patinas (each unique)  
17 cm high x 21 cm long





*Middle Aged Guy, 2019*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids, dyes,  
oil crayon, construction brick  
32 cm high x 20 cm wide





*Katy, Jazz Guitarist, 2019-2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids, dyes  
46 cm high including base x 21 cm wide





*Primitive Head, 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids  
13 cm high (head) + 10 cm (each side) travertine marble cube





*Paola, Cross With Me, 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids, dyes

41 cm high including travertine marble base x 21 cm wide





*Litigator at Rest, 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids, dyes  
40 cm high with base x 29 cm wide









*Deisis (original), 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, dairy milk  
22 cm high x 22 cm long





*Deisis (Lifesize), 2020*

3D Printed in PETG, 15 Components  
in randomized colors  
91 cm high x 90 cm long x 51 cm wide





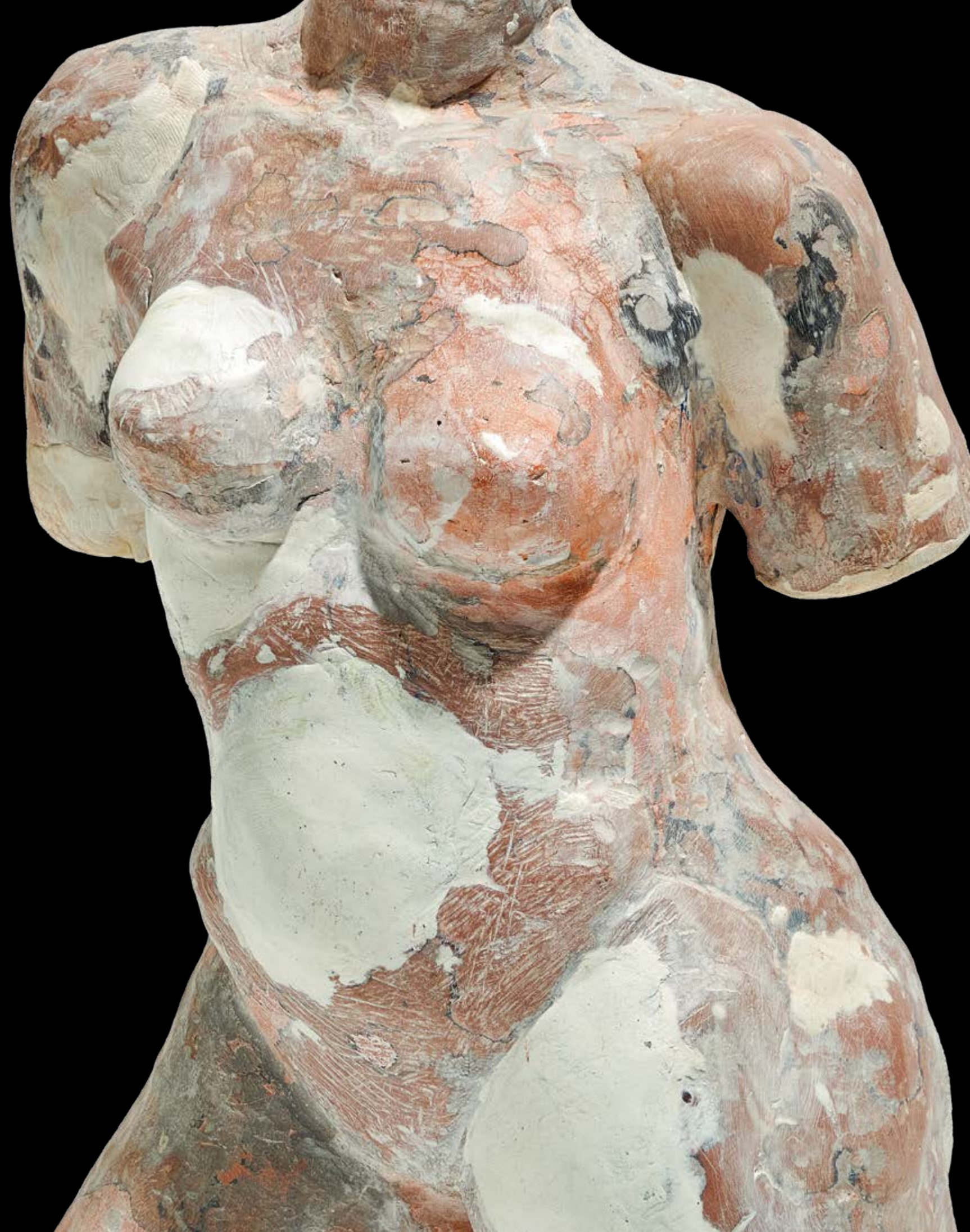
*Pensive Aarron*, 2018-2020  
Natural clay, epoxy clay, copper, black wax  
21 cm high x 21 cm long





*Alex as Action Enchained*, 2019-2020

Natural clay, epoxy clay, acrylic paint  
43 cm high x 22 cm wide











*Sarah's Head from the Dying Gaul, 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals  
12 cm high



*Reacher, 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids and wax  
9 cm high









*Girl from Antikythera, 2020*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, metals, acids  
19 cm high x 18 cm wide





# DRAWING







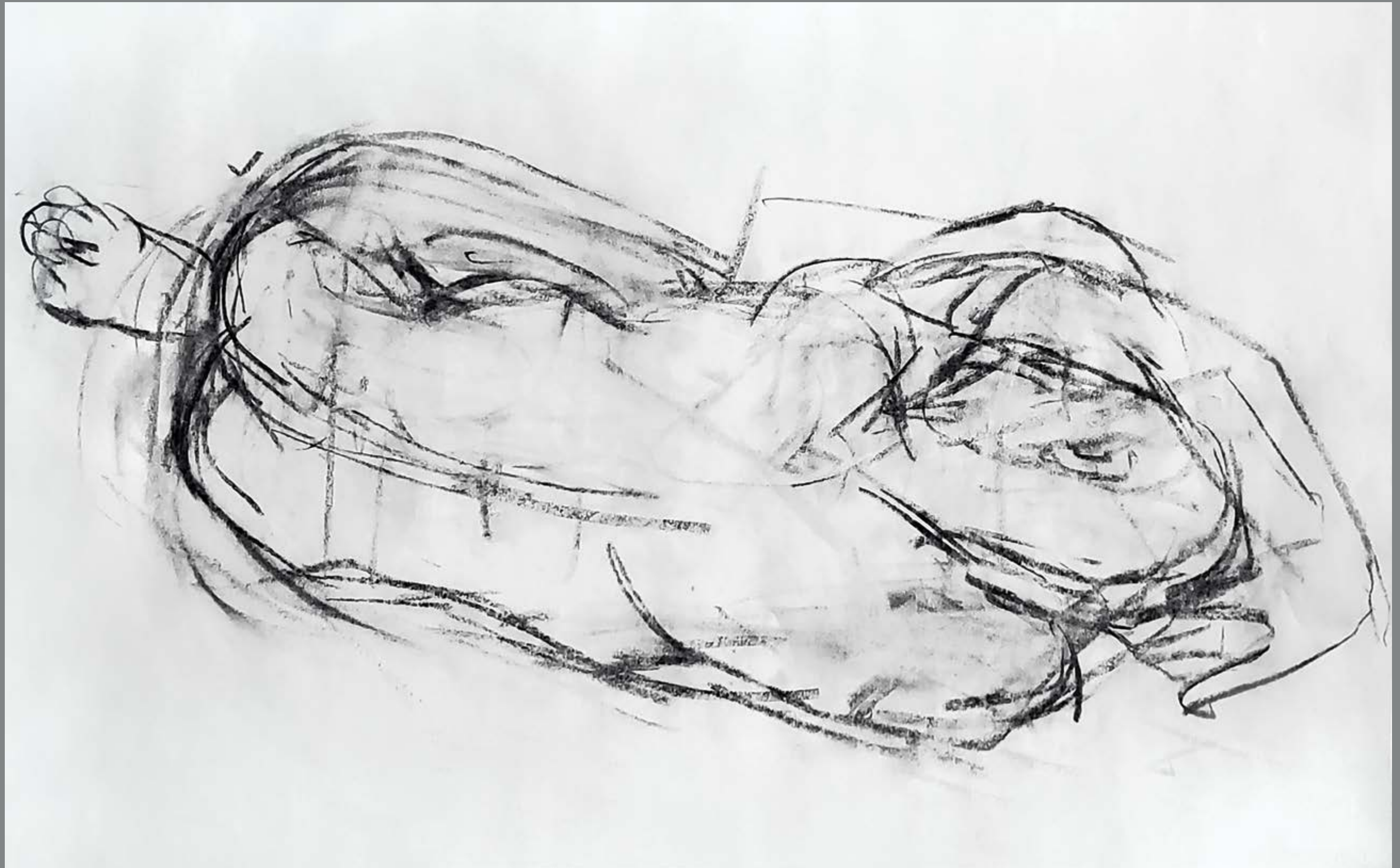
*Study for Marathonomachos, 2002 (Above)*  
*Marathonomachos, 2002 (Right)*  
 73 cm x 56 cm (includes frame)

















# PAINTING





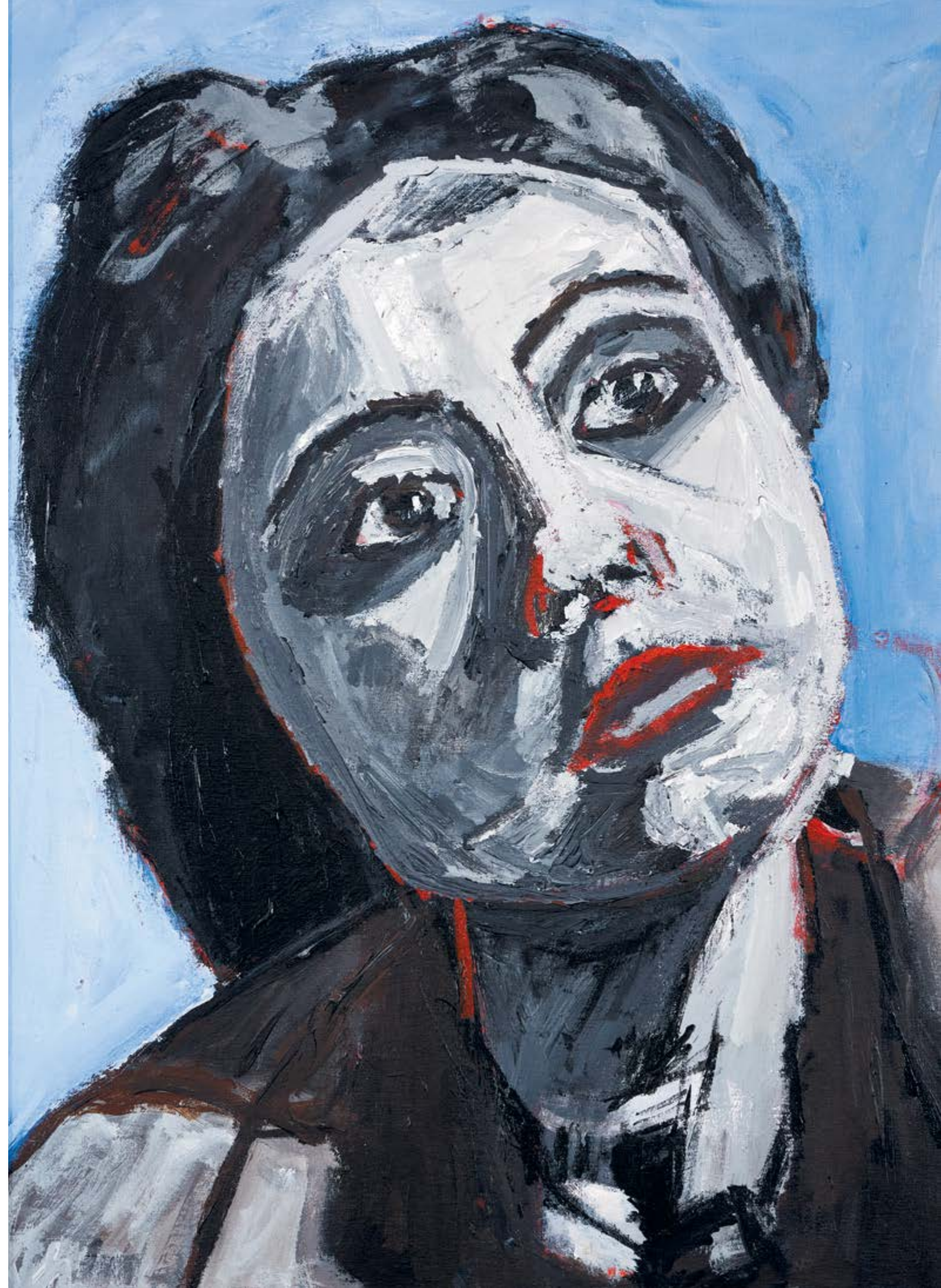
(Previous spread)

***Katarina x 5, 2020***

Acrylics on canvas board glued to found canvas painting  
62 cm high x 72 cm wide

***Emily, Untitled Film Still, 2020***

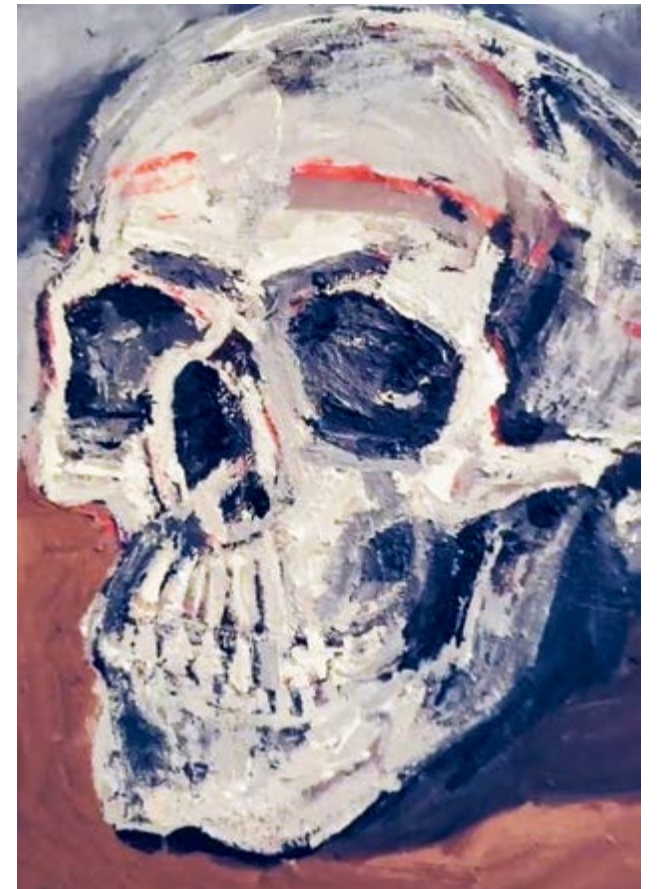
Acrylics on canvas board  
66 cm high x 50 cm wide





*Locked Down in New York, 2020*

Acrylics on canvas board  
36 cm high x 27 cm wide (each)





*Women's Bath (Life Drawing), 2018*

Charcoal on kraft paper, acrylic border  
89 cm high x 69 cm wide



*Women's Bath, 2018*

Oil and photo transfers from my life drawing  
and Albrecht Durer's *Women's Bath* (1496) on canvas  
100 cm high x 100 cm wide





*Laurel with Teapot, 2019*

Charcoal, acrylic on canvas  
122 cm high x 86 cm wide





*Yuna on the Move, 2019*

Black and white acrylic paint on Canson paper  
mounted on board  
91 cm high x 91 cm wide



*Yuna, Pensive, 2020*

Black and white acrylic paint on Canson paper  
76 cm high x 58 cm wide





*Sarah at the League I, 2019*

Gouache on paper mounted on board  
62 cm high x 44 cm wide (includes frame)





IN THE STUDIO

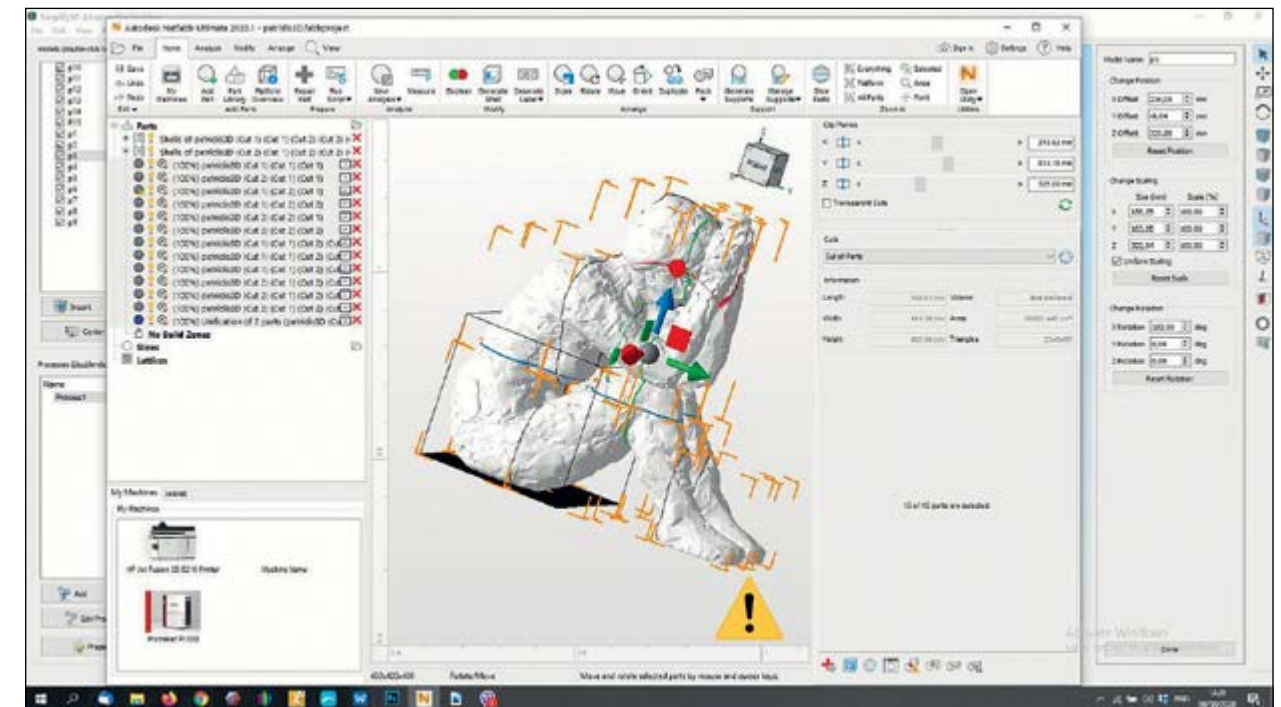




## *Deisis (Lifesize), 2020*

3-D printed PETG from a scan of Deisis (Original)

91 cm high x 90 cm long x 51 cm wide









*Sarah as the Dying Gaul (Various States), 2019*

Natural clay, epoxy clay, acrylic paints

Dimensions variable







*The Artists Mother, 2020*

**Painting**

Acrylic on Canvas Board  
61 cm high x 46 cm wide

**Sculpture**

Plasticine  
Lifesize

















