



CLAIRE MCCONAUGHY
curious woods

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Red Fox Contemporary Art
55 Westchester Avenue, Pound Ridge, NY 10576
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Cover Image: *Sweet Summer Woods*, 2023, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"



Claire McConaughy: the Landscape Shaped into Memory

EKIN ERKAN

Claire McConaughy's painting directs us to a world of abstracted topography that is in keeping with transcendentalism of the American stripe. In a sense, McConaughy approaches nature head-on, albeit not entirely with the empiricist's scalpel. These are paintings that muse along the edges of the wilderness, following the slope and stride of hills, wafting into the edges of leaves and careening into the bend of branches. The titles, which wittingly or not act as bearers of meaning for artworks, are instructive: e.g., *Sweet Woods* (2022), *Another World* (2022), *Pink Path* (2022), *Summer Heart* (2022), *Wildflower Halo* (2022), *July* (2022). The otherworldly (viz., "*Another World*") dovetails with the worldly in these paintings—the pulse of the sun-kissed soil manifest and adjoined with summer memories wafting around in the mind's chamber. McConaughy goads a rapprochement between remembering and observing nature, ceding symbolism for romantic reverie.

"Episodic memory" is the term that philosophers and psychologists use for memories that are baptized in perception, whether visual, auditory, olfactory, or otherwise.¹ According to psychologist and neuroscientist Endel Tulving, episodic memory depends upon one's awareness of both their own existence and their awareness that remembered experiences have happened to oneself, "are not happening now, and are part of one's personal history."² With each act of retrieval from storage, a memory episode can take on different associative threads colored by the emotions or circumstances framing the moment of recollection. Memories can grow blurred or flush with novel washes.



Queen Anne's Lace August, 2023

This digression is helpful in understanding what, exactly, McConaughy's landscapes represent. For McConaughy is, above all else, a painter of her episodic memories than of landscapes proper: she does not paint *en plein air* but, by way of photographic affordances and sketches tacked on her studio walls. These references serve less as fixtures and more as sources of painterly accomplice, helping the artist retrieve images of nature. She prefers to plunder her memories rather than solely work from empirical observation, and the style of her paintings make this abundantly clear. McConaughy's images grow blurred, as in *Queen Anne's Lace August* (2023), where a verdant fledgling of grass fibers bleed into a green plash, interrupting only by the crystal-cupped eponymous wild carrot flowers. In this painting, we are privy to long brushstrokes, blades of grass stretched and expanded into curvilinear fibers. There is sparse "dotting" at play in McConaughy's gesture, the exception being occasional white and coral pollen-points that fleck flower petals. Even glancing at where the bright azure grass sinks into a unit we see how McConaughy's stroke individuates. The same calculated movement can be found in the shadows where flitting branches and flower stems occasionally burst aglow from the eclipsed meadow.

While the title of *Queen Anne's Lace August* aids us taxonomically, directly referencing the plant species, other paintings like *Away from the Road* (2023) reveal peaks that only hint at answers (are these flowers fleabane or some other wildflower? The answer matters not.) McConaughy's work does not seek to ground us but welcomes the entrance of the ethereal. Both paintings feature cragged electric strokes, *Queen Anne's* fitted with a semi-translucent magenta that coats a pallid trail and *Away from the Road* flecked by a pale yellow disc-pathed crosscut. In almost all of McConaughy's series, these auroral aisles of the mind coat the natural world, grooves and footpaths shaped by remembering and colored by the other-worldly.

Thus, while McConaughy may be presenting us with what first seem to be landscapes fitted with splashy flowers and lurching trees that blend into their shadows, she is, in fact, presenting us with amended memories. Where the New Romantics of the last few decades have often surveyed the sensuous only to anchor it to ecological and feminist admonitions, McConaughy prefers to festoon nature into a much more personal bouquet. None of this is to say that McConaughy's paintings do not invite eco-feminist and environmentalist readings; they certainly do, but to reduce them to such doxa would elide their transcendentalism.

If episodic memory is how McConaughy cleaves her terrain of symbolist thorns, it is through the path of American transcendentalism that she finds her ambulatory guide. McConaughy's transcendentalism is in pursuit of the American sublime, a hunt fitted by the human subject achieving an essentially "spiritual"³ becoming that is betokened only after meditative deference to nature—its fruit is won only after "letting go" of the fetherings of our everyday lives and the routines which undergird it. McConaughy's paintings point towards the fruits of such labor; these fruits are not appointed with a pang or voltaic elicitation but a meditative, slow immersion—the very kind of immersion that McConaughy's painterly musings on nature bring to bear and invite viewers to share. These paintings require slow viewing, not charting, darting eyes.

William James quotes Emerson as remarking that "[g]eneralization is always a new influx of divinity into the mind: hence the thrill that attends it."⁴ This poetic yet bemusing apothegm takes footing in McConaughy's *Sunlit View* and *Vertical Light*, where radiance casts a membranous cloud. Vertical columns of ochre are struck into thin strips, not pleated into the call of bark; scarlet-carmines throes are flitted into plumbing strokes atop lighter green-emerald tufts that peak into tawny yellows. We can always see the remnants of McConaughy's strokes in her paintings. Such is the case even in works like *Sunlit View* (2023), where waltzing coal-black additions of her stroke are temperate and tucked into the bottom of the canvas, the light blue zig-zags nearly lost in the pine of teeming tree canopies. The sun is often suggested, its rays never cascading but merely humming like muted orchestral strings. These paintings give us impressions of nature devoid of the short strokes that consumed Impressionism, proper—McConaughy's are impressions not of ocular vision caught in sun-smitten haze, but the sieve of memory. One might, in unison with Emerson, call them "generalizations" of nature.

McConaughy does not mend her electric strips—those circular additions enringing the pastures of *Sweet Summer Woods*, *Summer Heart*, and *Wildflower Halo*—into inert orbular ringlets but heaves them with an élan vital. At times they are painted in thicker strokes and at others more thinly. They spring into tress-like circles darting tangerine-orange and Stygian black bands crowning the lush greenery. They bounce from the sides of tree trunks and flirt with the edges of the mossy path. The motions may at first appear to chart the movements of nature—but upon approaching McConaughy's canvas closely one recognizes that it is light, or rather the motion of light, taking its own life. Perhaps this is not McConaughy's intention: in conversation, the artist notes that these radiant aureoles arrive downstream from her more formalist concerns. She speaks of the canvas as if it were an organic being with needs. Indeed, there is a genuine harmony at place between the light's promenade and the natural semblance that surrounds it. The former never threatens to envelop and subsume the latter. In *Sweet Summer Woods*, there is a cardinal-red-cum-orange wading pool whose palette matches that of the dancery trail struck ablaze, as if these spinning circular jitters naturally emerged from the ground. The adumbrated group of trees careen with darkness, that same darkness that buzzes the black orbit into a lancing perimeter. McConaughy has conducted this world of wilderness into one electrified by life.



Wildflower Halo, 2023



July, 2023

These paintings are clearly brooked in a deep love for the wild. This is clear not only in McConaughy's choice of prismatic palettes but also in her dutifulness to the machinations of the natural world. Retaining reference towards her preeminent subject, the wilderness, McConaughy also treats it with a great deal of discipline. In both her romancing with nature and her decampment from turgid realism, McConaughy never foregoes a commitment to naturalism. Instead, what it does require is a certain prudence towards compositional accuracy. McConaughy heeds this lesson: *Away from the Road* features a bush, its shadows accurately angled and downcast; the gust suggested by July exactingly brushes all vegetation westward. Thoreau once pronounced that "[t]he laws of Nature are the purest morality", which he dubbed "mythologic".⁵ This "mythologic" quality of nature also transpires in McConaughy's formal handling of the wilderness. McConaughy never oversteps her bounds and reveals too much, preferring to give us edited passages that never belie the role of the imagination in remembering.

"*Curious Woods*" is bristling with graspings—specifically, the graspings of memory and its blanched running-through-and-pulling that which is always being colored and amended. These paintings are fully content with painting's reflexive inability to fully recreate the natural world—they are attuned elsewhere. By way of McConaughy's Thoreau, we here also find ourselves stumbling back to Kant, for whom the world as a whole is never empirically or rationally knowable by us humans—we strive to come to terms with this urge for complete systematization that Kant termed the "unconditioned" and which is ultimately outside of our understanding. For the American transcendentalists, who were familiar with and inspired by Kant, this meant that the universal laws which we believe to operate in nature in fact originate in ourselves—thus rings true the self as the legislator of the universal. It was scientism and its demand that we humans imbibe the universal that American transcendentalists like Thoreau and Emerson hoped to restrain and shirk, offering restful quietude in its place. McConaughy's paintings similarly do their part to return us to such quietude.

None of this is to suggest that the restraint of McConaughy's paintings and their hedged views are phenomenologically mute—quite the contrary, in fact. McConaughy follows in the footsteps of Continental Romanticism and its coeval celebration of the natural landscape, reminding us of imagined classical scenes that spurn the sublime affects of pleasure, pain, and awe. McConaughy delights in that which we cannot fully make meaning out of. This is precisely why I am not confounded by my failed attempts to anchor what, exactly, those cirque of azure-blue, rose-red, and ashen-black peripherious bands charting McConaughy's paintings truly are. Instead, I allow my eyes to catch their shape and follow them, delighting in the trail. In his earliest painting, *Cattle and Distant Mountain* (1822), Thomas Cole—the leader of the Hudson River School—painted a young man gazing through a halo of trees towards a pastoral scene. Placed alongside a felled tree and a group of cows, sunlight wedges

the far distance, the object of the young male's contemplative gaze. McConaughy has retained the enraptured mood of the aesthetic sublime whose Romantic precedents have always looked towards natural landscapes molded by light. McConaughy has plucked away our need for organic agents and such symbolism of yore, whispering life into nature itself.

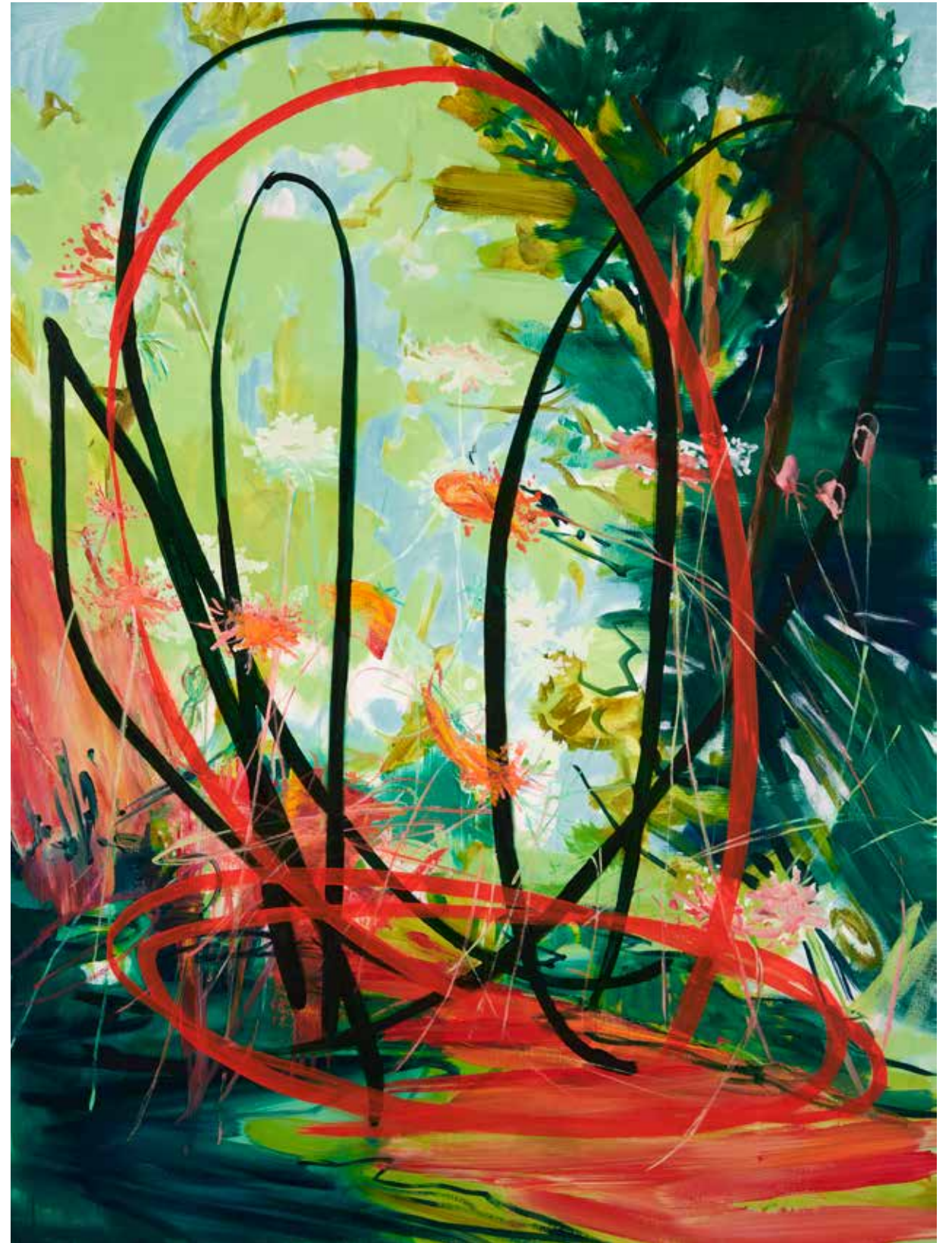
1. For the earliest conception of "episodic memory", see Endel Tulving, "Episodic and semantic memory," in *Organization of Memory*, Endel Tulving and Wayne Donaldson (New York: Academic Press, 1972), pp. 381–403.
2. BM Pause et al., "Perspectives on episodic-like and episodic memory", *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, 7:33, 2013, doi: 10.3389/fnbeh.2013.00033.
3. See: Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 6-8.
4. William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy*, eds. H. M. Kallen and Henry James (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 56-57.
5. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 309.

EKIN ERKAN is an art critic, art historian, and philosopher who works on issues relating to Kant, Hegel, German Idealism, and aesthetics. Erkan's work in art criticism and aesthetics is deeply anchored in that of Arthur Danto and Noel Carroll. Erkan contributes as an art critic to *Hyperallergic* and *Whitehot Magazine*, in addition to other outlets. Erkan's academic writing in philosophy has recently been published in *Oxford Art Journal*, *the British Journal of Aesthetics*, *Philosophia*, and *Owl of Minerva*. Erkan is a board member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA)–USA.



Pink Path (detail), 2023

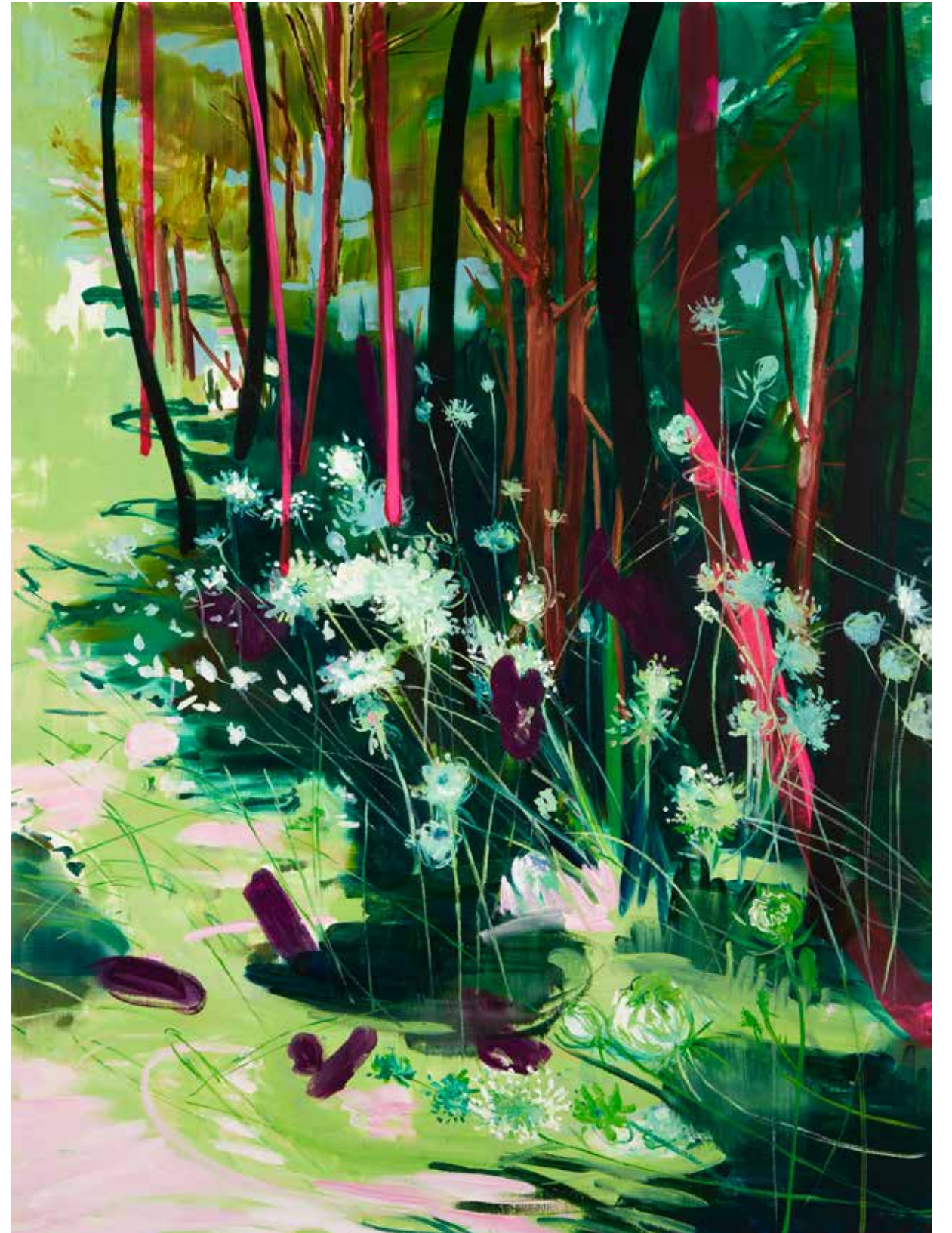
Sweet Summer Woods
2022
oil on canvas
48" x 36"



Another World
2022
oil on canvas
48" x 36"



Pink Path
2023
oil on canvas
48" x 36"



Wildflower Halo
2023
oil on canvas
30" x 24"



Queen Anne's Lace August
2023
oil on canvas
40" x 60"



July
2023
oil on canvas
30" x 24"



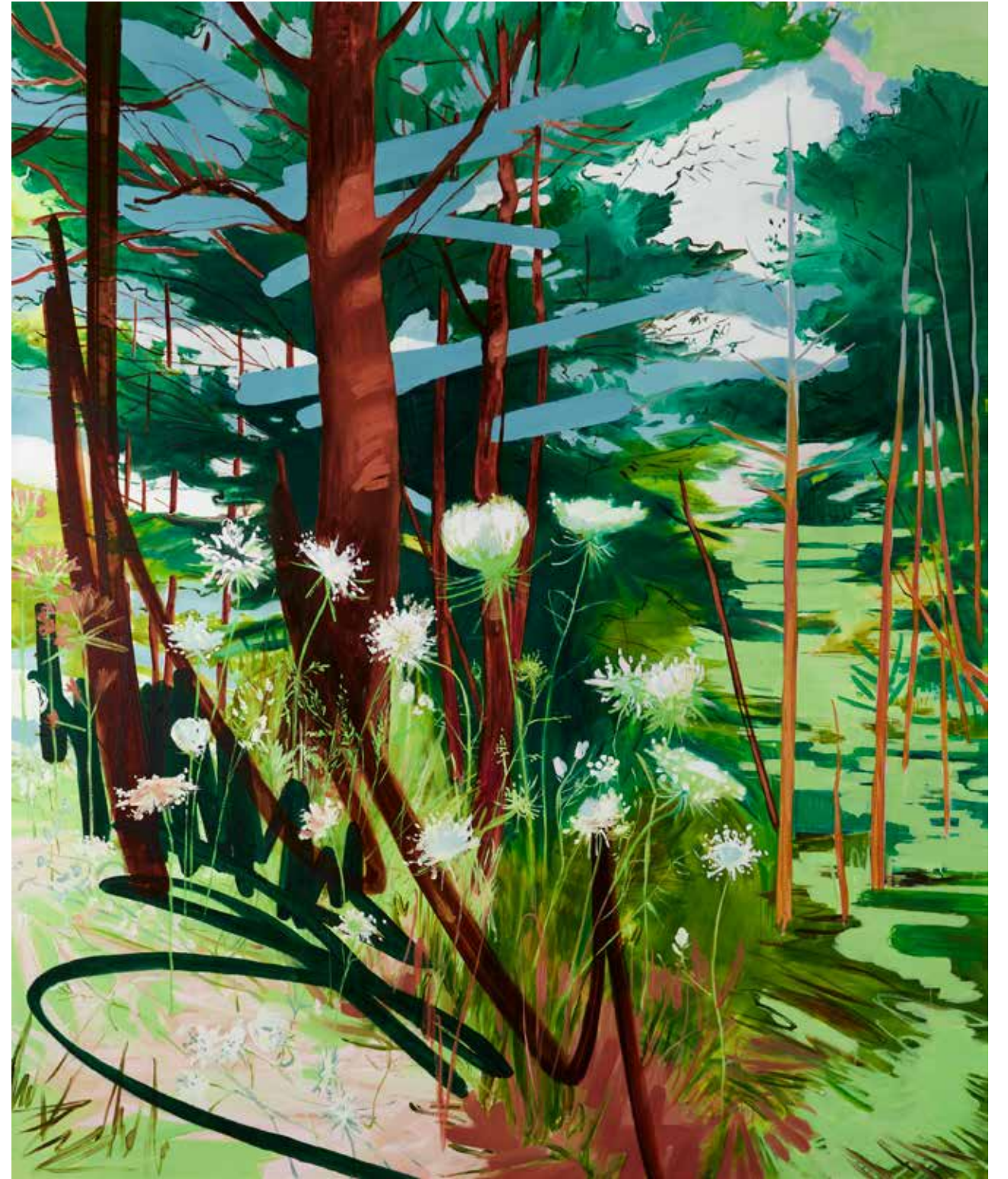
Away from the Road
2023
oil on canvas
36" x 48"



Summer Heart
2023
oil on canvas
48" x 36"



Sunlit View
2023
oil on canvas
72" x 60"





Vertical Light
2023
oil on canvas
10" x 8"



Wild
2023
oil on canvas
10" x 8"



untitled
2023
oil on canvas
10" x 8"



Top and Bottom:
untitled
2023
oil on canvas
10" x 8"

Queen Anne's Lace Sketch
2023
oil on canvas
8" x 10"

CLAIRE McCONAUGHY is a New York-based artist whose paintings draw on landscape in an innovative contemporary style. McConaughy has exhibited widely at distinguished galleries such as The Drawing Center, Sherry Leedy Gallery, Garvey Simon Fine Art, Art Resources Transfer, Boston Center for the Arts, Galerie Zürcher, Drawing Rooms, and many others. For over a decade she was on the staff of the influential art journal, *New Observations*. Her work is in various public collections with media coverage including *artcritical*, *White Hot Magazine*, *Artnet* and the *Boston Herald*. She is the recipient of fellowships at MacDowell, Millay Arts, the Santa Fe Art Institute, Ucross Foundation and was a Mid-Atlantic/NEA Visual Arts Fellowship finalist. McConaughy received her MFA from Columbia University, NYC, and BFA from Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh.

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Photographs by Jane Huntington

Wildflower Halo (detail), 2023

