

**CLAIRE McCONAUGHY**  
*not so far away*



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October 29–November 23, 2019

Reception Friday, November 1, 6–8pm

**THE PAINTING CENTER**

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Cover Image: Detail *Suede Blue Lake*, 2019, oil on canvas, 72" x 60"

# FEELING TONE

## *Claire McConaughy's Landscapes*

BARBARA O'BRIEN

When first experiencing *Not So Far Away*, an exhibition of ten new paintings by New York-based artist Claire McConaughy, one might be tempted to see a representation of a place or a thing, tree or branch, cloud or horizon, pond or shoreline—in short, a landscape. But one soon understands not only that these oil-on-canvas works are meditations on place and memory, but also that McConaughy's command of color and its emotional depth are the momentum behind them. It is in the ineffable that their power resides: the light of the sun that has been diffused by a cover of clouds; the time between seasons when the lush and the barren meet. The moment just before a reflection shifts, the color of the water changes, the sun sets in a blaze of competing shades of red, yellow, pink, and orange against the sky of deepening blue, green, and black. Deeply saturated blues and greens meld one into another, suggesting a sense of a time between spring and summer, then and now. Charcoal blacks and pine greens create deep shadows that blur the distinction between what is seen and what is felt, what is imagined and what is known. Brilliant, theatrical slashes of vivid cyclamen pink, tangerine orange, and ripened plum insinuate both a setting sun and the speed of an approaching future.

McConaughy shares a philosophical and formal affinity to French painter Odilon Redon (1840–1916), a brilliant colorist and important member of the Symbolist movement, first influential in the late nineteenth century across Europe. McConaughy takes inspiration from the natural world into



*Redon and the Sun*, 2019

the studio to create paintings that exist between landscape and dreamscape, recollection and imagination. Her painting *Redon and the Sun* (2019; above), is an homage to the artist who, while known in the public imagination for images of great psychological mystery—free-floating heads in a state of dreamlike reverie—often explored the landscape.

French art historian and curator Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond explains the Symbolist relationship to the landscape in this way:

Rejecting both the Realist style of the Academicians and the freer touch of the Impressionists, the Symbolists declared that they would not attempt to reproduce the reality of the visible world. Instead of observing external appearance, they would practise interior vision; instead of copying they would create. Symbols, plastic or iconographic, would return the imagination to its primal source, the idea in the mind of the artist.<sup>1</sup>



*Suede Blue Lake*, 2019

McConaughy uses her own photographs, watercolors, and sketches as source material for the paintings she creates in her Brooklyn studio. She makes these studies on foot in locations that matter to her; places to which she assigns a personal meaning that is not objectively part of the resulting painting; her home in southwest Pennsylvania, to which she often returns; and her Brooklyn neighborhood.

I gather resources in a lot of places. I take photos of trees in my local parks, even sidewalk trees. Sometimes I sketch, sometimes I do watercolors and bring those back to the studio. The photographs are in my studio—I tape them up on the wall or scatter them on my couch. Especially for the trees, I tape them on the wall. I paint the trees more specifically than the land or water masses.<sup>2</sup>

In *Suede Blue Lake* (2019; above), striations of light and paint—permutations of blues, whites, grays and burnt umber along the far shore—etch their way in wide sweeping bands outpacing any presumption of horizontal, vertical, or diagonal. They are nearly cyclonic, moving our gaze from the

edge to the central image of a body of water, a far shore, and bank of hills behind which a glowing yellow is perceptible. The energy is gestational; the act of creating the painting in the studio hearkens to the great creation myths. Finely articulated bundles of pine needles stand in stark counterpoint to the lyrical and broad gestures of the painted sky—a field of white, and turquoise blue—upon which they are grounded.

In this painting, and others on view, it seems not quite right to use a noun—sky or lake or shore or horizon—as the *subject* of the painting, although we might upon thoughtful looking see any and all of those *things*. What is most clearly seen and experienced are the observations of the painter; the memory of this experience; the photographs taken at the time, brought back into the studio and translated using the language of the painted gesture—the sweep of an arm and the reach of a torso on the surface of the canvas. How are we to understand the stance of the original observer, the artist? Was she standing with her feet solidly on the ground, on the earth that is here not visible? Is she looking straight at the branches that may have been softly waving in the breeze and here, by virtue of a photograph, are held in a suspended motion? It is as if we are holding our breath, freeze-frame, time stopped. The push and pull of paint across the canvas brings us back to the action of the studio. McConaughy assigns the terminology “sense feeling” or “feeling tone” to the landscape paintings



*Cerulean Lake*, 2019



*Appearances*, 2019

like this one: “It is a landscape, but I hope there is metaphor, sense feeling, and other relationships in the work. Sometimes the feeling tone is electric and energized, and sometimes it is incredibly quiet.”<sup>3</sup>

The dynamic between the specificity of place—the visual source materials—and the discipline of the studio is central to the power of McConaughy’s paintings. This inherent tension is played out in the relationship between drawing and painting, the drawn line and the painted gesture, that is a central component of McConaughy’s artistic vocabulary: the never-too-imposing branch; the tender leaves that never quite obscure the branch upon which they appear; the twig that seems to do what we know all living things do—lean toward the light. We are never quite allowed to look “at” the ostensible subject: tree, sky, shore, lake, clouds. The viewer must decipher the space between, amongst, amid, and toward. This unsettled nature of looking offers no quiet resting place for the gaze or the psyche of the viewer. The paintings, and by extension the viewer, are never quite on solid ground. We are in a space of intellectual and aesthetic engagement, the seeing and the being.

In *Cerulean Lake* (2019; opposite below right), a single large branch pushes up against the edge of the picture plane; alerting us insistently to the edge: of the painting, of the image, of our experience. Like a heavy stage curtain drawn back to



*Sweet Green View*, 2019

introduce the action of a theatrical play or the flickering reality of a movie, the painting presents a subjective reality. The experience of viewing a painting by McConaughy moves back and forth between a belief in the real—the ostensible subject matter—and the awareness that this is a painting, not nature at all, but a remnant of time spent in the world and brought back to the activity of the studio: the activity of drawing and painting.

The pair of paintings *Appearances* (2019; above left) and *Sweet Green View* (2019; above right) is a powerful exemplar of the relationship between drawing and painting that is a signature of McConaughy’s style, influences, and studio practice:

It came to me intuitively to combine the two methodologies. ... It wasn’t an intentional idea to combine them. When I was describing objects like trees, they came out of my brush in more linear strokes than other areas of the painting, and the color was more singular. ... Sometimes the “drawing” of the trees allows for parts of the painting to be seen through the object which creates an interesting relationship.<sup>4</sup>



The titles of these two paintings reflect the experience of the artist; it is how she sees both the “appearance” and the “view” that is important. The title *Appearances* is taken from “Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances” (1860, in *Leaves of Grass*) by the nineteenth-century American poet Walt Whitman, who was well known for his mystical reflections on nature. The “doubt” of which he speaks is presented as the “may-be” of things, and is well suited to McConaughy’s relationship with objects in the natural world: “May-be the things I perceive, the animals, plants, men, hills, shining and flowing waters, The skies of day and night, colors, densities, forms, may-be these are (as doubtless they are) only apparitions, and the real something has yet to be known ...”<sup>5</sup>

In *Sweet Green View* staccato slashes of paint suggest blades of grass and the tips of tree branches, ochre buds about to push up through the warming spring earth, and shadows falling along the shore. These animated gestures are in an uneasy truce with the broad swaths of swirling paint that move our gaze into a mysterious space that seems sometimes flat and at other times deep. The trees are denuded, vulnerable astride the bank of a lake. We see them rooted to the earth, but precariously so. Small spits of land at a distance serve to ground the viewing experience, but the transition of winter to spring, or of spring to summer keeps us as off-kilter as the barely there, thinly brushed blackish-blue tree trunks. Striations of powdery blue



*Blue Air*, 2019

cut through the charcoal black of a tree trunk, creating the illusion that we are looking not just “at” but also “through” the trunks in *Appearances*. With its thick painted eddies of water in opal and softest periwinkle blue, alongside an acid-tinged spring green shore, *Sweet Green View* demands that the paint and the ostensible subject matter share pride of place. The weight of gravity in the studio has created a long trickle of oil paint against the passage of water along the shoreline.

The tender is a partner to the turbulent in McConaughy’s paintings. In *Blue Air* (2019; below left) she muscles the paint in swirling impasto, a physical counterpoint to the weightless nature of the sky and a branch jutting into the composition foreground from the left side of the canvas. The branch, more drawn than painted, is placed against a sky that is more painted than drawn. The visual impression is of movement, never quite still. With no place to back away from the action, it is as if we are being held in a close-up cinematic frame. Our stance is uncertain. Are we looking up or down, toward the sky or perhaps the ocean at a distance? The artist offers only the certainty that we are looking at air, which we can perceive only as light. In that complexity lies a hint to the power of this body of paintings.

The titular “air”—bands of periwinkle blue and grayed-down white, painted in a wide swath of blue—appears as twists and turns of a slalom ski course atop an underpainting that, like the range of pink tones often seen during a sunset, peeks through. The process of its creation is representative of the confident, improvisational studio practice that McConaughy employs:

That painting [*Blue Air*] has at least two other paintings under this final version. The previous painting was very complicated with deep space, water in the lower two-thirds, a land mass, and sky with clouds. There were a lot of brushstrokes and colors. I simplified the water into the large blue brushstrokes and started painting the branches over it. Then I realized the top third with the colorful land and sky was too fussy and distracting. The branches and the big blue brushstrokes were the point of the painting. So, I covered the top third with the same blue and added more branches.<sup>6</sup>



*Shadow Lines*, 2017

The paintings on view emerged after a two-year period during which McConaughy was using graphite on paper as the medium for modestly scaled landscapes that, while tree filled—sometimes presented from a long distance and showing the entirety of a mature tree, from solidly placed trunk to the tip of top branches—might as convincingly be seen as meditations on light itself. I call attention to one in particular, *Shadow Lines* (2017; above), where the graphite was thinned with rubbing alcohol, creating translucent forms out of what are ostensibly tree trunks. We are amidst a stand of lyrically bent slim trees composed seemingly of light itself. The barely weighted lines offer no solidity to the forms, allowing the objects pictured to move easily into the arena of metaphor or time passing.

While not a plein air painter, McConaughy is preoccupied with not just the thing, but the description of the experience of the thing, putting her in the fine company of American painter Lois Dodd (b. 1927). In *Blair Pond* (2014; right) Dodd describes with a spare application of paint; she stands alone as a witness to a copse of tender trees and the first buds of spring positioned along a swath of shore that creates an abstract cradle along the bank of a pond. The water is both subject and abstract form whose shadings move with mute power from ebonized black to charcoal gray to pearly white. The modest

scale of the painting reflects not only the intimacy of the scene, but of the close relationship between the artist and the place pictured. Blair Pond is a location Dodd knows well. While not quite intruders on this tableau, as viewers we have a strong sense of the theater of the moment and our first-person role in a relationship to the place, as well as to the painting.

It is the existential stance of the artist (and by extension of the viewer), the sense of personal power and choice that connects these paintings to the phenomenology of the experience, the standing alone, looking at or toward or through a vista. It has long been my belief that what the gaze falls upon is no accident; a lifetime of walking and looking, and looking at art, has affirmed this conviction. The experience of observing a painting, as a thing, has become synonymous with, developed an equanimity with, my process of looking at and understanding a tree, a pond, a child eating a meal with her mother, an abandoned storefront.

German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) proposed an understanding of the relationship between the object and the object observed called phenomenology. Sarah Bakewell, a contemporary British theoretician, posits, “Husserl’s philosophy became an exhausting but exciting discipline in which concentration and effort must constantly be renewed. To practise it, he wrote, ‘a new way of looking at things is necessary’—a way that brings us back again and again



Lois Dodd (American, b. 1927)  
*Blair Pond*, 2014; oil on Masonite, 15” x 15 7/8”; Private Collection  
©Lois Dodd, courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York



*Interlaced Sunset*, 2019

to our project, so as ‘to see what stands before our eyes, to distinguish, to describe’.<sup>7</sup> In the process of using painting to describe the object observed, we face a reality without facing the real. The painting is a powerful connection to the artist; the lived observations of the artist and the melding of memory and photographs; the choice of paper or canvas or Masonite (in the case of Dodd) as a support; the mixing of color to create a deeply personal palette; the choice of a brush, a comb, a pencil, or a stick to apply the medium of choice.

*Interlaced Sunset* (2019; above) is one of the few paintings on view that suggests the activity of humans, through a band of low, horizontal structures whose architecture and shadows of powdery pink and softest cranberry red bisect the lower third of the painting. These buildings, perhaps abandoned, are placed in relief by the assertion of a pair of slim tree trunks, shadows of deep magenta-laced black creating a profile in the foreground. Painted both in front of and behind the tree trunks is a streaking tail of light; yellow tinged with fiery red, atop and among which heavy branches of pine needles languorously drape. The buildings could be in the act of disappearing; a trio of small windows reflects the pulsating glow of the end-of-day light, while the pine tree trunks, an object in which we believe, become more solid than the built structures. A stand of small trees in the lower right corner, thinly painted in a muted grey green, offers an impressionistic counterpoint as they catch the glow of the yellow swath of paint pulsating its way across the sky. We never imagine for a

moment that this painting represents or recreates a place; but we are certain that it presents the lived experience of the artist and the complexities of seeing, describing, remembering, and painting. Alongside the artist, we stand as witness.

It is the experience, not simply the thing itself—tree trunk or branches, lake shore or depths, cloud filled sky or setting sun—that resonates. I note these “things” without adjectives, without descriptors, without qualification, for it is not the thing itself that McConaughy sees, interprets, and presents. It is the experience, the existential stance, the description that motivates the walking, the taking of photographs, the watercolors and sketches on site, the gathering of images and memories in the studio, and finally the painting. Loosely drawn branches, the line breaking here and there, are in a pas de deux both tender and exhaustive, accentuating and calling out its own name, thickly painted with swirling, swooping passages, broad strokes laid one atop the other and sometimes atop another painting altogether. The memory of the experience—place, stance, time of day, combined with the natural phenomena of the shifting light on the surface of the water and even the temperature of the air suggested by the quality of light—is described in the paintings without being reproduced, replicated, or illustrated. McConaughy’s paintings offer the opportunity to stand where she stood, see what she saw, and to understand that the translation of her experience—into paintings of great formal command and emotional depth—becomes our own.

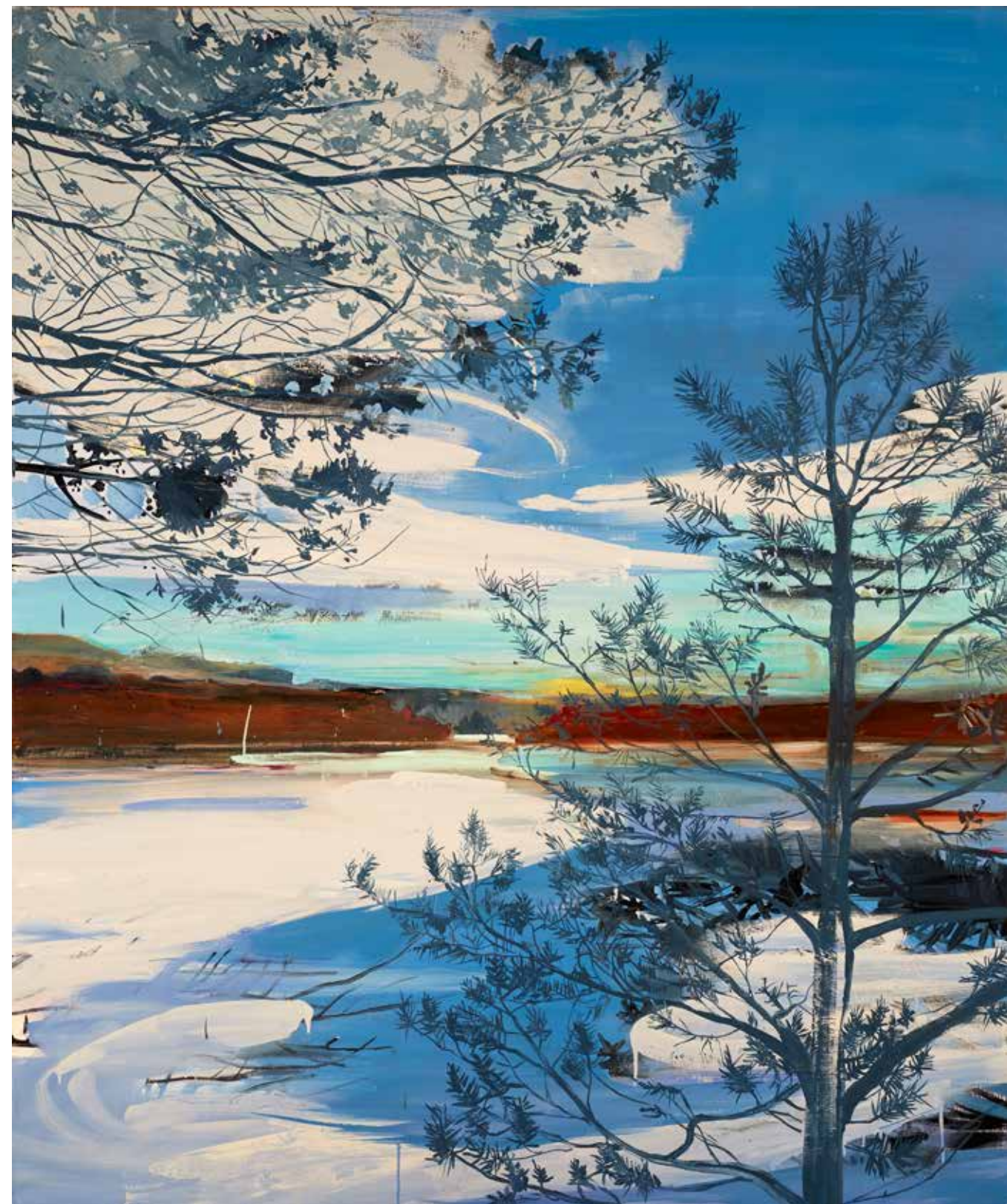
## NOTES

1. Jean-David Jumeau-Lafond, “Landscapes of the Soul and Painted Landscapes,” in *Mystical Landscapes: From Vincent Van Gogh to Emily Carr*, ed. Katharine Lochnan with Roald Nasgaard, Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario and New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2016), 113.
2. Claire McConaughy, telephone conversation with the author, August 16, 2019.
3. Ibid.
4. McConaughy, email to the author, August 14, 2019.
5. Walt Whitman, “Of the Terrible Doubt of Appearances” (1860), *Leaves of Grass*, Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, eds., (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1973).
6. McConaughy, email to the author, August 14, 2019.
7. Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* (New York: Other Press, 2016), 39–40.

BARBARA O’BRIEN, an independent curator and critic based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was Executive Director of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri from 2012 to 2017, after serving as chief curator and director of exhibitions since 2009. O’Brien is an elected member of AICA-USA, International Association of Art Critics. Her three decades of curatorial practice and criticism have focused on the art and artists of our time. In the 1990s, O’Brien showcased prints by McConaughy in a solo show at Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, Massachusetts. Later that decade, paintings by McConaughy were included in a group exhibition, “Dumb Bunnies and Dishcloths,” at the Brickbottom Gallery in Somerville, Massachusetts, curated by O’Brien in conjunction with her receiving the 1999 Virginia Gunter Contemporary Curators Prize.



*Suede Blue Lake*  
2019  
oil on canvas  
72" x 60"



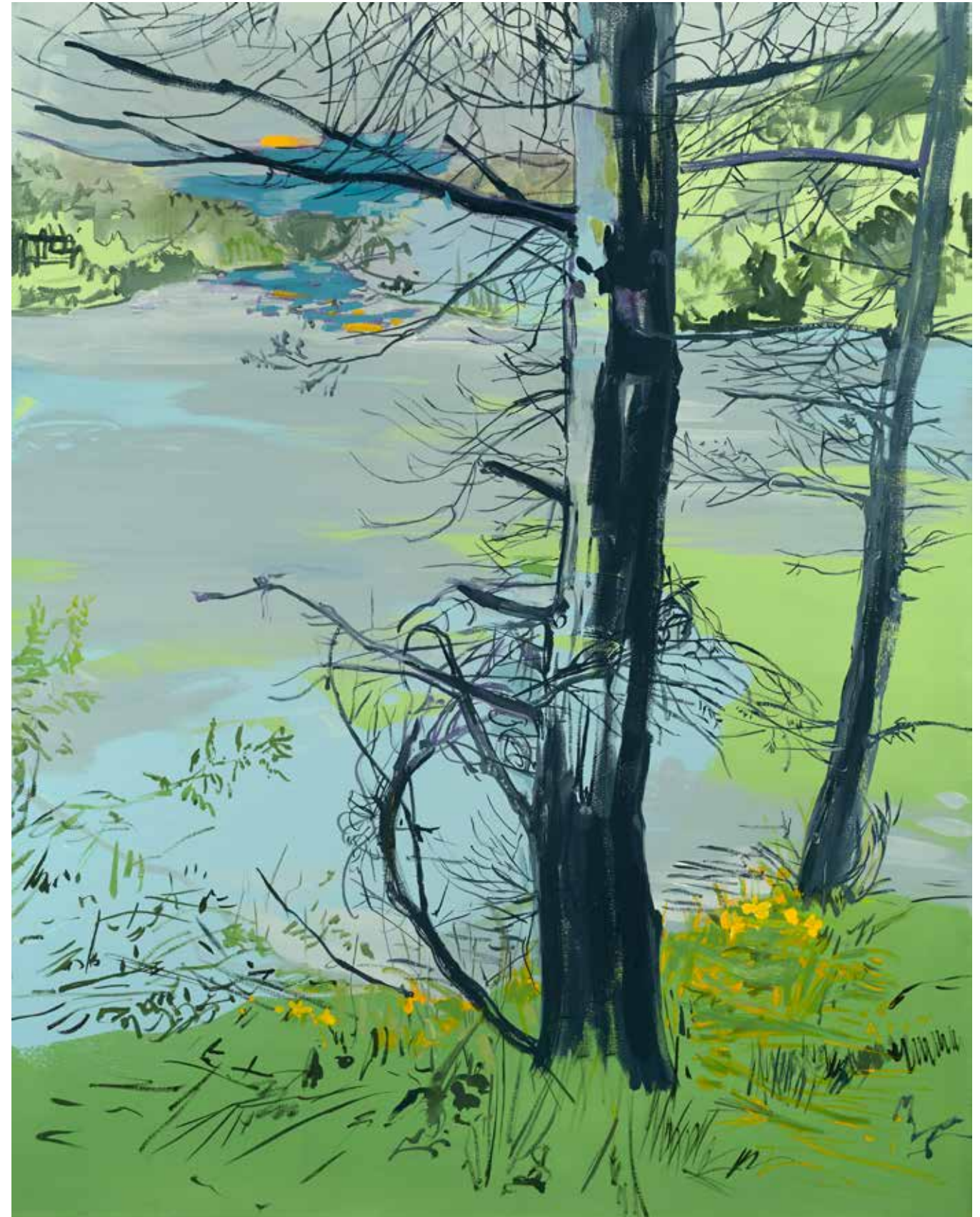


*Cerulean Lake*  
2019  
oil on canvas  
72" x 60"



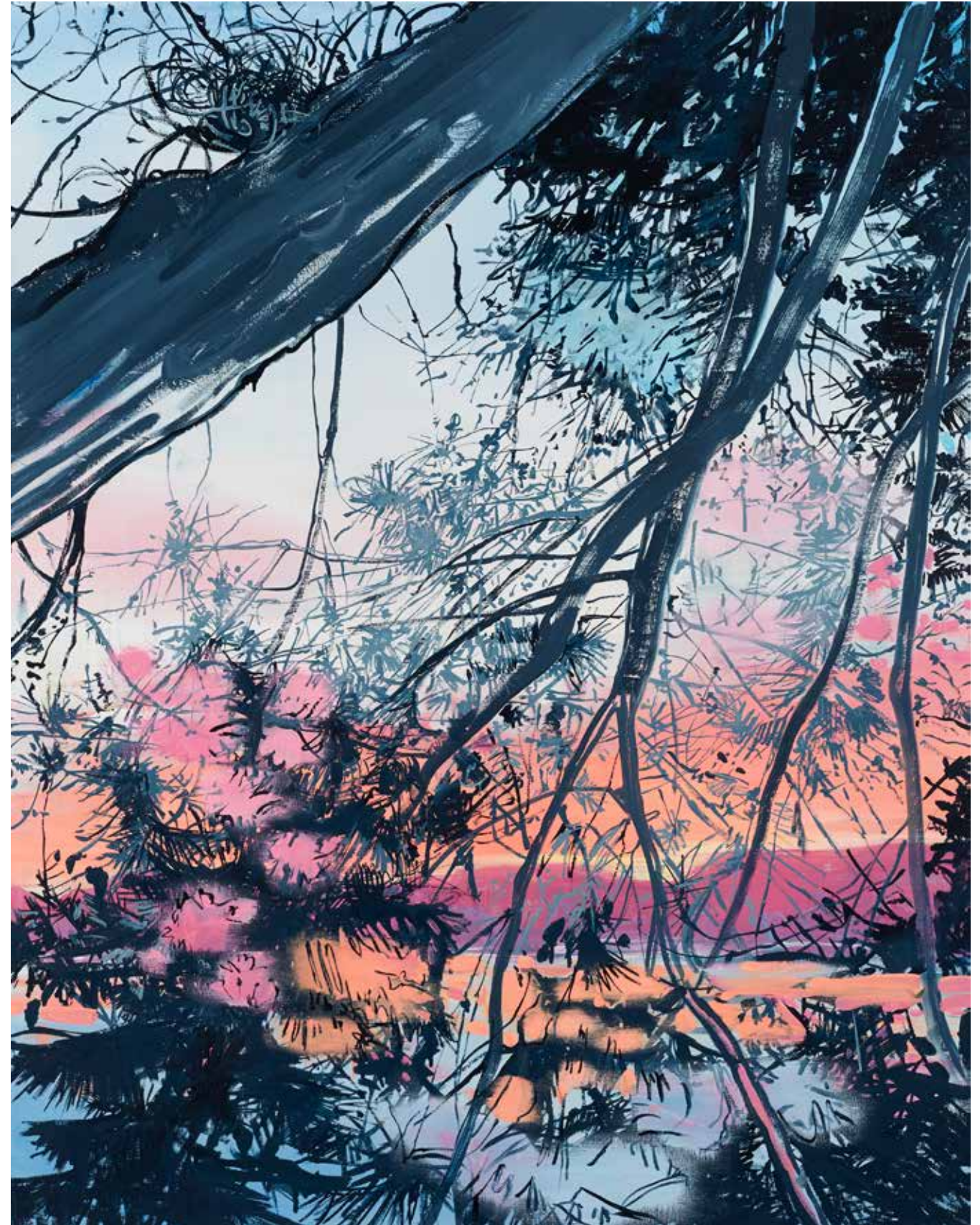


*Appearances*  
2019  
oil on canvas  
48" x 38"





*Dream Sunset*  
2019  
oil on canvas  
48" x 38"



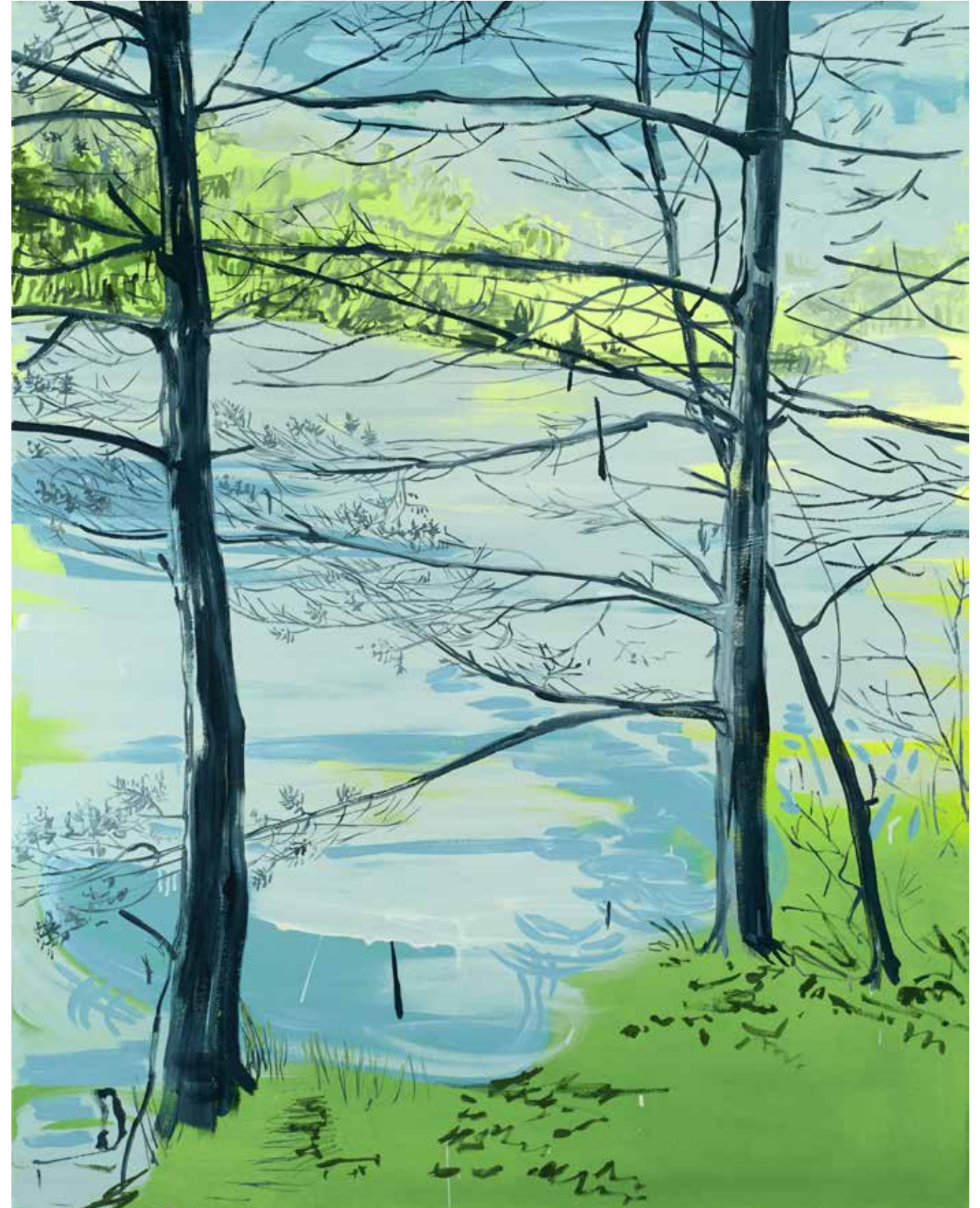


*Interlaced Sunset*  
2019  
oil on canvas  
48" x 72"



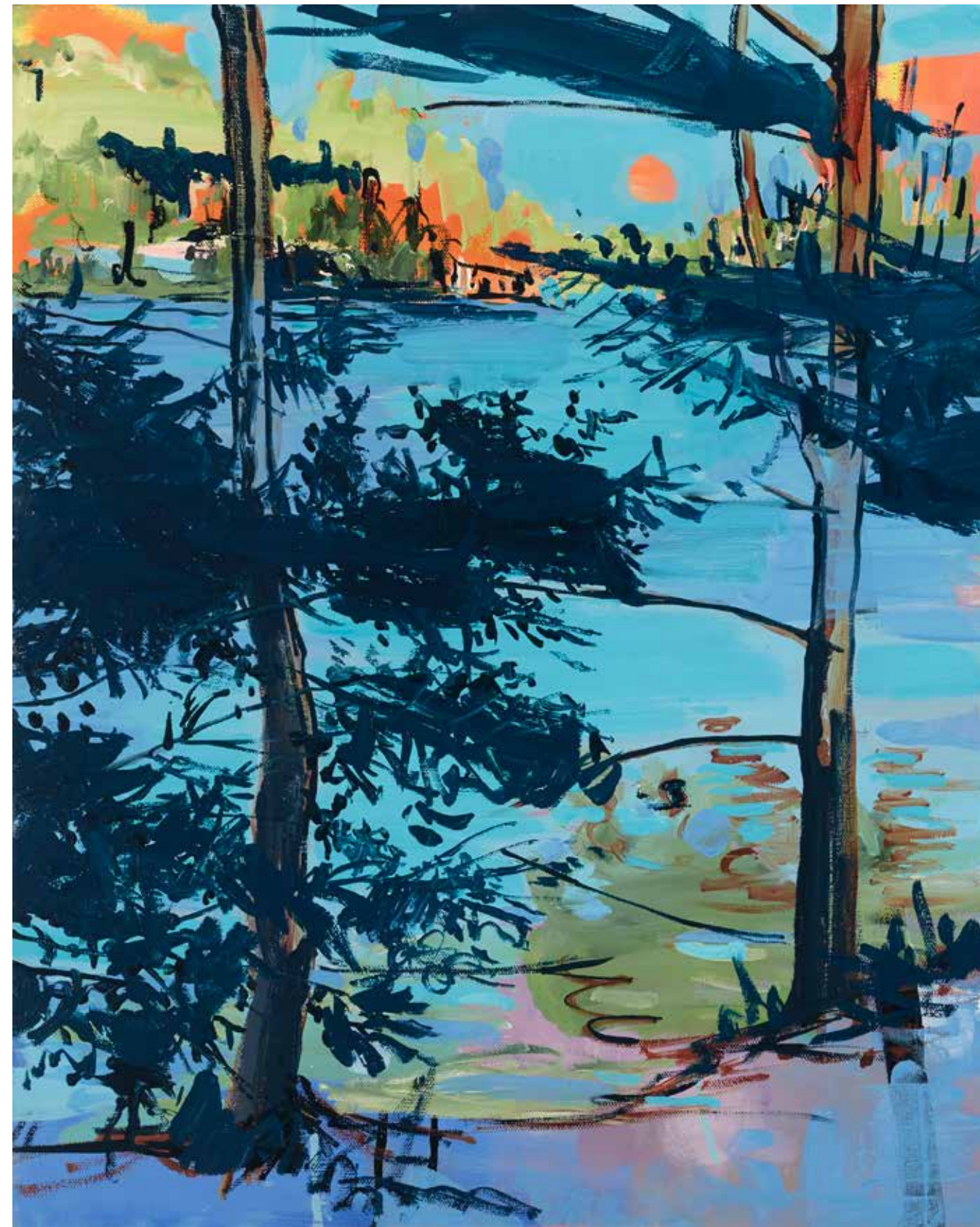


*Sweet Green View*  
2019  
oil on canvas  
48" x 38"





*Redon and the Sun*  
2019  
oil on canvas  
20" x 16"





*Close to the Moon*  
2019  
oil on canvas  
30" x 24"





*Blue Air*  
2019  
oil on canvas  
24" x 30"





Top Left: *Rustling Marks*, 2019, oil on canvas, 10” x 8”  
 Top Right: *Intersecting Branches*, 2019, oil on canvas, 10” x 8”  
 Bottom Left: *Vibration*, 2019, oil on canvas, 10” x 8”  
 Bottom Right: *High Sky*, 2019, oil on canvas, 10” x 8”

CLAIRE McCONAUGHY lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. McConaughy has had over 50 solo and group exhibitions at distinguished galleries such as The Drawing Center, Art Resources Transfer, Boston Center for the Arts, Lichtundfire, Jay Grimm Gallery, TZ Art & Company, and Drawing Rooms, in addition to being on the staff of the influential art journal, *New Observations*. Her work is in the collections of JP Morgan and Sony Music with media coverage including *artcritical*, *White Hot Magazine*, *Artnet* and the *Boston Herald*. She is the recipient of fellowships and residencies at the Santa Fe Art Institute, Ucross Foundation and a Mid-Atlantic/NEA Visual Arts Fellowship finalist. McConaughy received her MFA from Columbia University, NYC, and BFA from Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh.

[www.clairemcconaughy.com](http://www.clairemcconaughy.com)  
[claire.mcconaughy@gmail.com](mailto:claire.mcconaughy@gmail.com)  
 Instagram @mcart431

Essay editor: Michelle Bolton King  
 Photographs by Jane Huntington except Lois Dodd,  
*Blair Pond*, p. 7 and McConaughy, *Shadow Lines*, p.7