



**DAINA HIGGINS**

**Growing Up Graffiti**

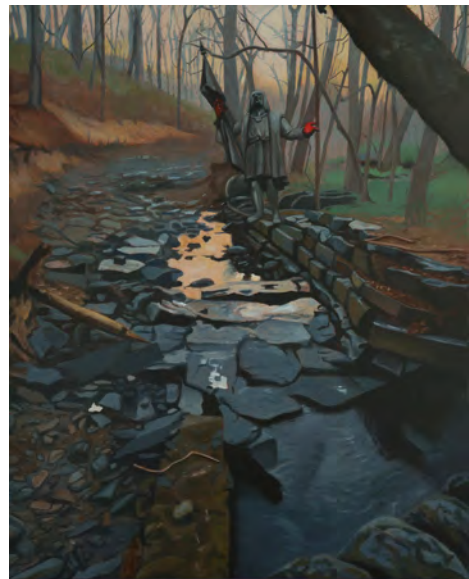


**Growing Up Graffiti**  
**DAINA HIGGINS**

*CONTEMPORARY  
ART MATTERS.*

243 N. 5th Street, Suite 110  
Columbus, OH 43215

[contemporaryartmatters.com](http://contemporaryartmatters.com)



**left:** *The Spot (Under the Prospect Expressway)*, 2003, Spray paint on panel (diptych), 12 x 6 in. **center:** *Blackbook 1 AP 1-5*, 2014, Archival pigment print on rag paper (unframed), 27 x 20 in. **right:** *Christopher Columbus Discovers the Wissahickon*, 2020, Oil on panel, 20 x 16 in.

# Introduction

By Rebecca Ibel

I am excited and pleased to present “Daina Higgins: Growing Up Graffiti”, featuring a selection of the artist’s recent paintings and an essay by Jonathan Stevenson. This new body of work marks the artist’s exploration into her family history and her own personal journey, using a most elegant and powerful approach. We are grateful to have Stevenson, a New York based arts writer, editor and regular contributor to “Two Coats of Paint” blogazine, bring an in depth look at the artist and her paintings.

This catalog is being launched in conjunction with “Belonging: The Long Island City Studio Collective”, a group exhibition co-curated with Laura Sanders and featuring the work of fourteen painters from around the country who share a studio space in New York. The exhibition will be on view at Contemporary Art Matters in Columbus April 10 - May 30, 2025 with special events in the studio in early May, 2025. The show provided an opportunity to examine Higgins’ paintings in greater depth and celebrate this moment in her career.

Higgins’ life as an artist began taking shape as a student at Ft. Hayes High School in Columbus, Ohio, a city school dedicated to the arts, where she matched her formal training during the day with equal passion to her endeavors as ROPAS, a graffiti writer at night. As Higgins takes a personal, almost diaristic approach to her art, there is a natural crossover of these worlds both

in subject matter and technique. The first exhibitions we did together at the Rebecca Ibel Gallery, starting in 2005, featured her small paintings of lonely urban landscapes made exclusively with spray paint - a genius pairing of concept and technique. In the decade that followed, the young flâneur explored city life from Brooklyn to Philadelphia and her paintings reflect her journey. In 2021 Contemporary Art Matters reconnected with Higgins and presented a solo show of her work aptly titled ‘Pandemic / Protest’, where she masterfully blended her passion for tracking monuments being reconsidered in a time of widespread protest with a sophisticated representational style. This new body of work is the most personal to date, met with equal passion and conviction. She has resettled in New York and the experiences go beyond the surroundings, traveling in time and distance with an interest in her family history, creating scenes from home to her travels to Lithuania and even looking back to her time in Ohio.

It has been a joy and honor to work with Higgins over the past twenty years, a long time during which we have both grown so much personally and professionally. I admire Higgins’ passion for her art and commitment to her values, which are always intertwined. One cannot help but be inspired by the intensity of her unflinching eye. She captures every detail, revealing deeper truths of the world outside, inside her imagination and maybe some truths lurking within our own souls.

Daina Higgins: At Home with Discord

By Jonathan Stevenson

New York City, February 2025

Daina Higgins began her vocation as an artist in the 1990s as a quintessential outsider: she was not only a graffiti artist in her native Columbus but also one of the few young women then so engaged there. Her noirish attraction to the oblique angles and ominous shadows of a presumptively benighted urban landscape in the Rust Belt has never flagged. At the same time, her paintings and drawings have acquired the existential gravitas that comes, if an artist has the requisite talent and mind, with the travails of life, the burden of lineage, and the compulsion to reflect on them. Her elegiacally retrospective 2024 painting *Growing Up Graffiti* embeds both her creative origins and their thematic throughline. She draws as well as she paints, which allows her to get very busy on the canvas without flummoxing her audience. A forbidding gray arch beneath a city bridge catches fearless light from the Day-Glo applications of two taggers at work as swirling charcoal auras waft upward from makeshift shelters and distressed flowers to the moon, struggling to break through crosshatched, tendrilled darkness. Alongside the beavering artists are railroad tracks that gain illumination as they proceed Oz-like into the distance towards a water tower – traditionally a symbol of progress, community, and providence – blessed by a setting sun, its light unimpeded.

The piece showcases the deft narrative synthesis and the correspondingly elegant visual integration that distinguishes Higgins’s work. These features are decidedly hers, accented as they are with the fantastical, though here her exacting composition and cryptic New World optimism nod towards Charles Sheeler and the Precisionists, her harmonization of complex and varied content and unflinching embrace of conflict and angst towards David Humphrey. Sources of loss and distress, of course, are abundant. For Higgins, they are psychically located in her background as a child of a Lithuanian war refugee. These influences emerge in the sardonically titled painting, also made in 2024, *I Went To A Genocide Museum On My Honeymoon*, which Higgins in fact did. The painting itself, however, does not visually reference war crimes, their institutionalized memory, or romantic escape. Instead, it presents a naked male, back to the viewer, standing

on open sea, and aligned with the hands of a vintage General Electric alarm clock, gently glowing. Higgins may be refracting the tension between jeopardy and security, spanning an ocean, that her heritage carries. The ambivalence of displacement is also eloquently rendered on three smaller, less elliptical canvases – *Birth Home / You Can’t Go Home Again*, *Family Tree*, and *Dual Citizen* – each presenting an eerily fraught domestic tableau nestled in plants, the pastoral trappings of arrival and comfort.

*Folk Art*, a very large painting, complicates this purposefully arch schmaltziness, deadpan and irreverent, with a kind of humble resolve. A lightly caricatured figure visible through a lighted window, clearly the artist herself, putters around inside a gray commercial building while another woman lays on the roof trying in vain to paint graffiti on the façade with a roller.



Forbidden Drive, March 2020 (Pandemic Painting), 2020, Oil on panel, 20 x 16 in.

fringing the top and bottom of the picture are the patterns of a needlepoint sampler. On the right is a narrow road out of the city, brightly lit and not taken. Higgins thereby dubs a fondly recalled outlaw activity legitimate, if putatively lesser, art. In itself, this is hardly revolutionary; it goes back to Basquiat and in spirit farther still to the Ashcan School. But she is angling for repose rather than upheaval. Her plight is that contentment with one’s lot is hard to find. To her credit as an artist, she refuses to circumscribe her world to make it easier. In the “Ridge Avenue” series, she stays close to home, recording with delicate visual equanimity the clashing

social influences that have mottled that Philadelphia road. In a series she calls “Letters To Home,” *Black Market*, a grippingly multivalent piece reminiscent of Max Beckmann, both haunting and droll, vaults back to Eastern Europe. The painting lionizes a wartime smuggler – based on a Lithuanian relative – clever enough to slip vodka and Marlboros as well as bread into a refugee camp, bathing the man in dingy light as he presides burgher-like over the profitable distribution of his haul.



California Smoke, 2021 , Oil on panel, 20 x 20 in.

If Higgins is at heart an émigré painter, she is also a resolutely American one. Refugees aboard the ship in *From Europe to the Technicolor World*, landing with their papers in *Arrival of the Displaced*, and finally ensconced in blithe consumerism in *Two American Girls* bid farewell to the earnest matrons in *Women of Kaunas* and *Kūčios* Table. Seamlessly marshaling oils, acrylics, and sometimes spray paint, Higgins often replicates in her paintings the lines of the legal pads she uses for studies, imparting at once the contingency of itinerancy, the stability of the grid, and the casualness of doodling – metaphorically, persistent dread and the need to control and leaven it. Such skill, versatility, and inventiveness enable her to blend photorealism and surrealism, grittiness and loftiness, observation and protest, symbol and narrative over the breadth of her oeuvre. It’s her ensorcelled edginess and constructive insomnia, though, that make her work so arresting. Her grooves are the landscape and the portrait, but they serve as repositories for mordant agitation, exposing, like Christian Petzold’s 2018 film *Transit*, the trepidation that sticks. Ostensibly innocuous family portraits are styled “epitaphs,” and

several post-emigration paintings – *Summer of Fire*, *Grandma’s House in Cleveland*, *Housing Crisis*, and *Triangle of Sadness* – signal inescapable dangers, physical and psychological, over here.

While Higgins’s pieces are occasionally straightforward – for instance, *California Smoke*, which situates a struggling sun in the middle of football goalposts, *Dark Cloud*, depicting the hovering imperilment of an American flag in a parking lot, and the pandemic painting *Forbidden Drive* – they invariably calibrate assertiveness with inquisitiveness and tinge doubt with hope. In the wake of George Floyd’s murder and the Black Lives Matter protests, Higgins chronicled the decay, graffitiing, and felling of monuments that celebrated Confederate figures, colonial predators, and latter-day racists. These paintings differ from *Folk Art* and *Growing Up Graffiti* in their stark and phlegmatic hyperrealism, which reflects Higgins’s sound assessment that the subject and the act of painting alone tell that particular story without requiring discursive enhancements. Yet the aesthetic decision merely to make and show the paintings prompted targeted harassment that wreaked havoc in her life and forced her to relocate. Alerted in advance to all the nastiness that such a project could visit on her, Higgins might well be compelled to take it on anyway.



Dark Cloud, 2021, Oil on panel, 20 x 20 in.



*Two American Girls*  
2024  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
33 x 25 in.



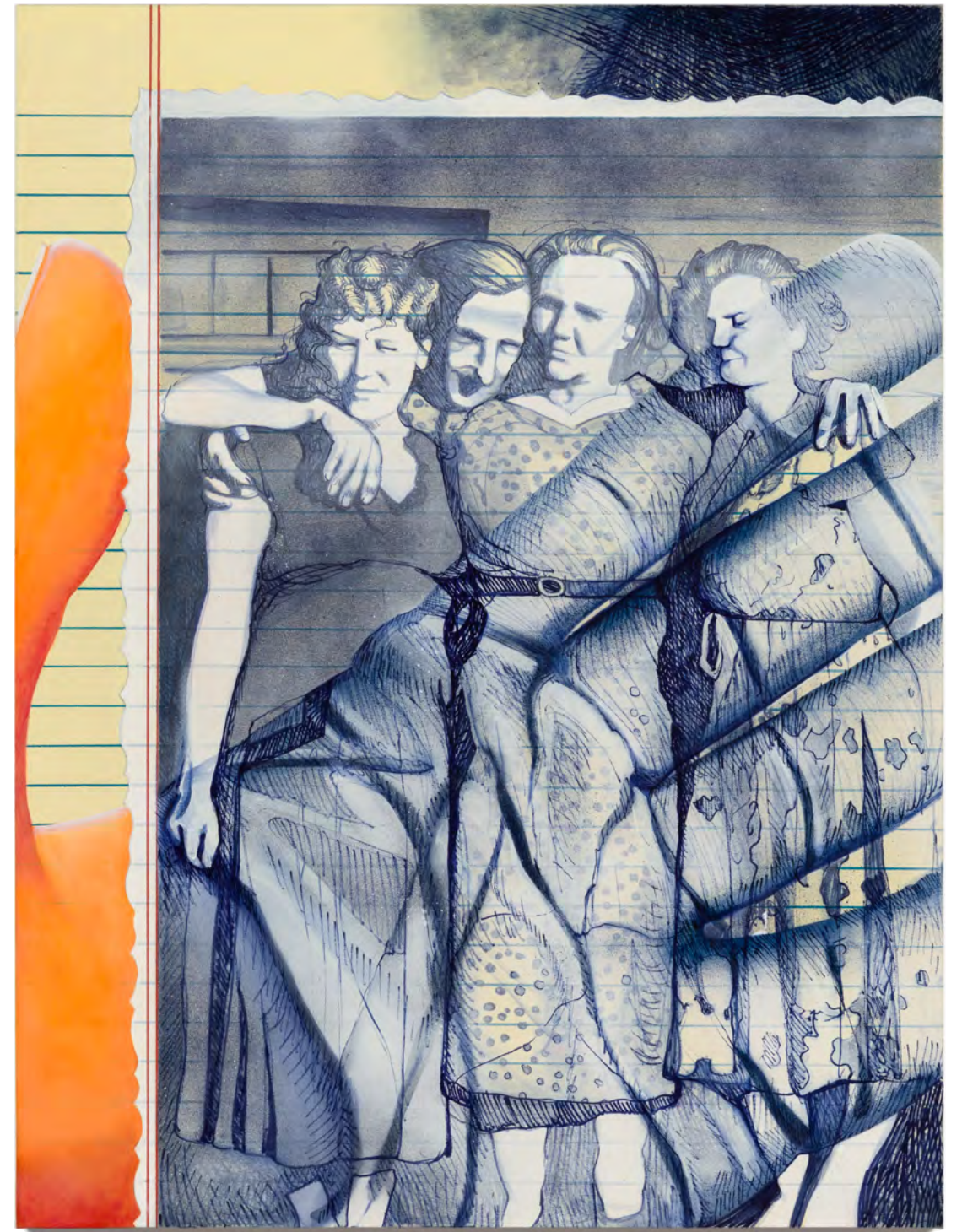


*Black Market*  
 2023  
 Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
 54 x 42 in.





*Women of Kaunas*  
2024  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
33 x 25 in.





*Birth Home / You Can't Go Home Again*  
2023  
Oil on canvas  
34 x 26 in.





*Family Tree*  
2023  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
33 x 25 in.





*Dual Citizen*  
 2023  
 Oil and spray paint on canvas  
 34 x 26 in.



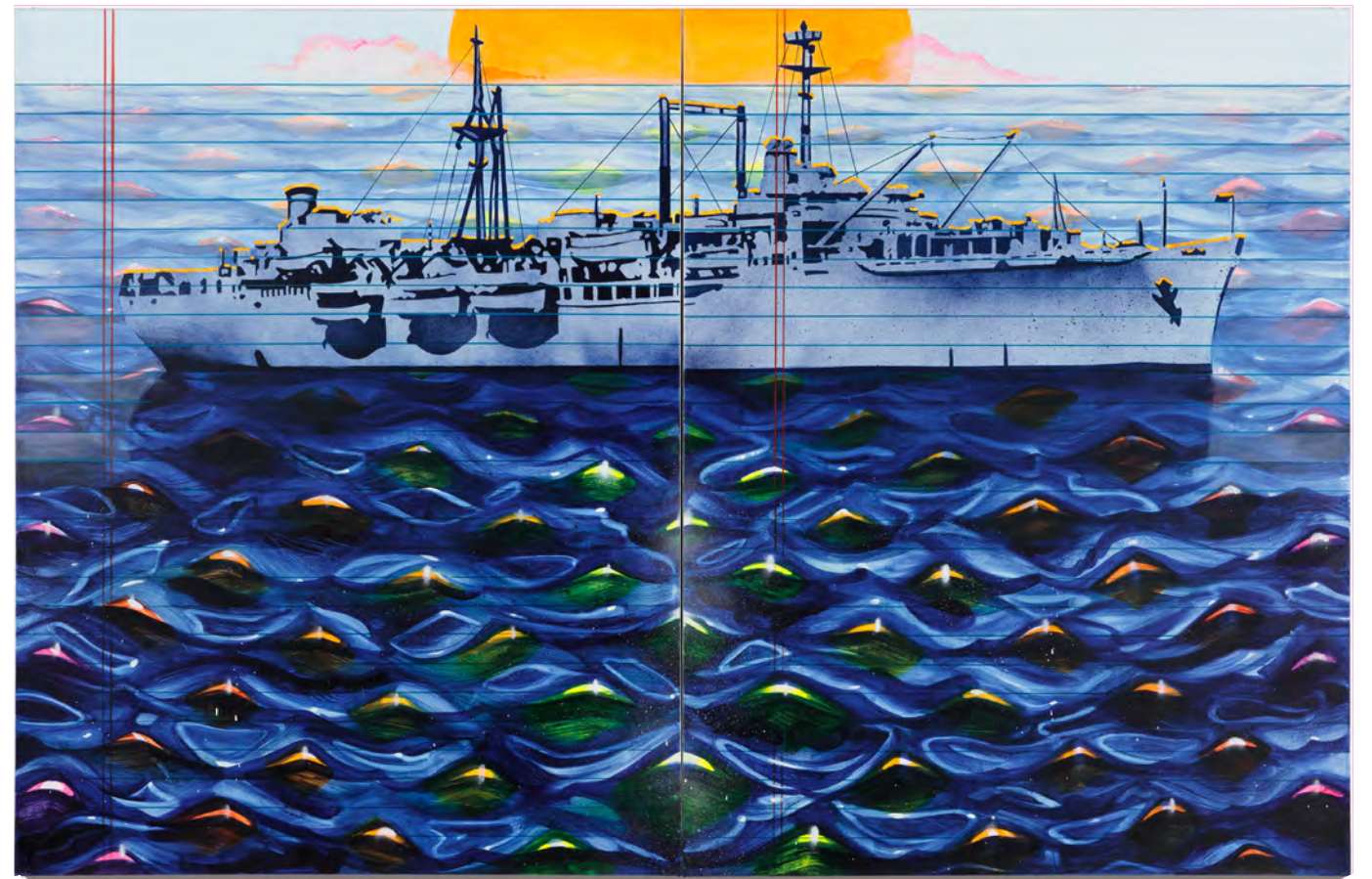


*Kūčios Table*  
2024  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
44 x 34 in.





*From Europe to the Technicolor World*  
2023  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas (diptych)  
33 x 50 in.



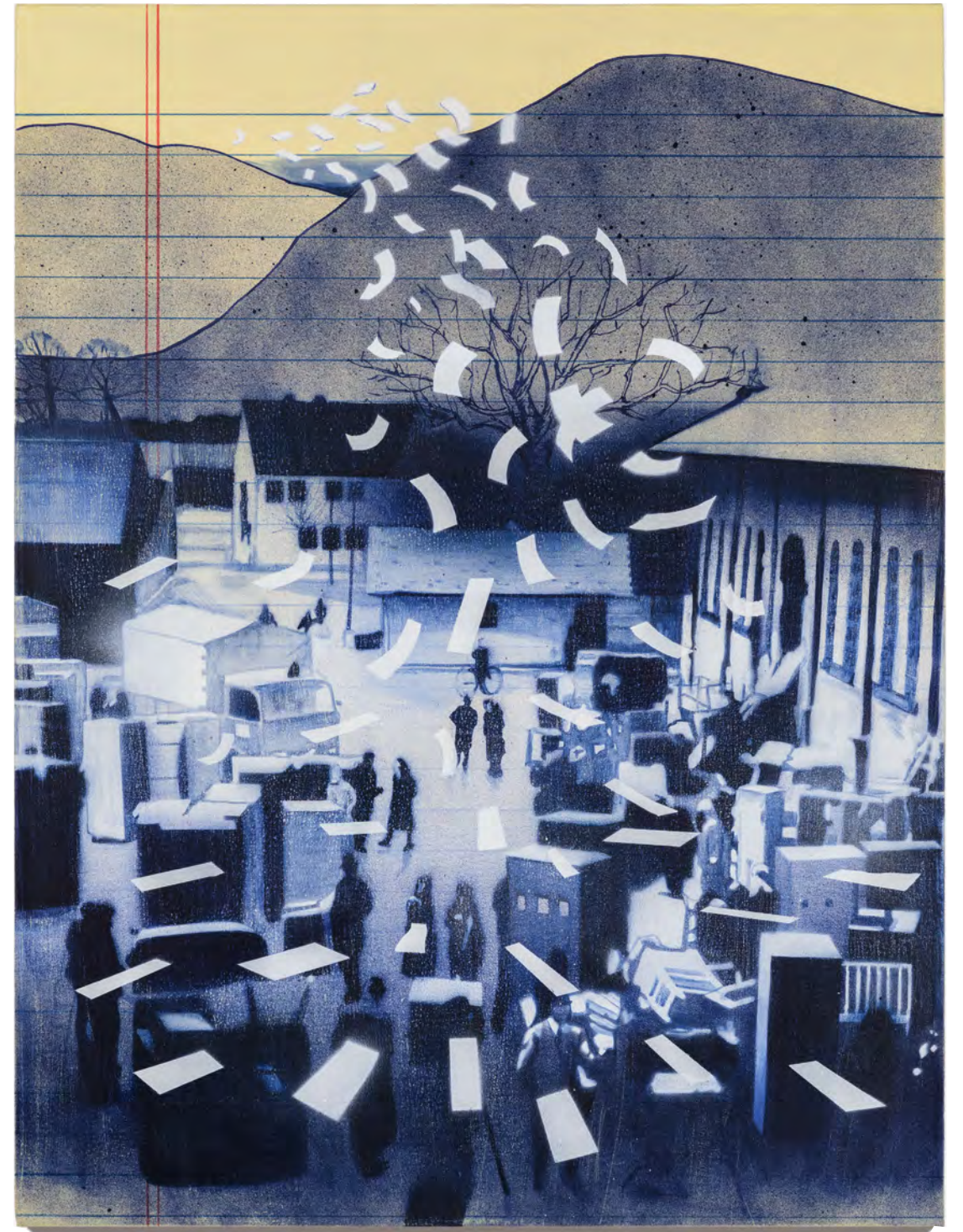


*I Went To A Genocide Museum On My Honeymoon*  
 2024  
 Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
 54 x 42 in.





*Arrival of the Displaced*  
2023  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
33 x 25 in.







*Grandma's House in Cleveland*

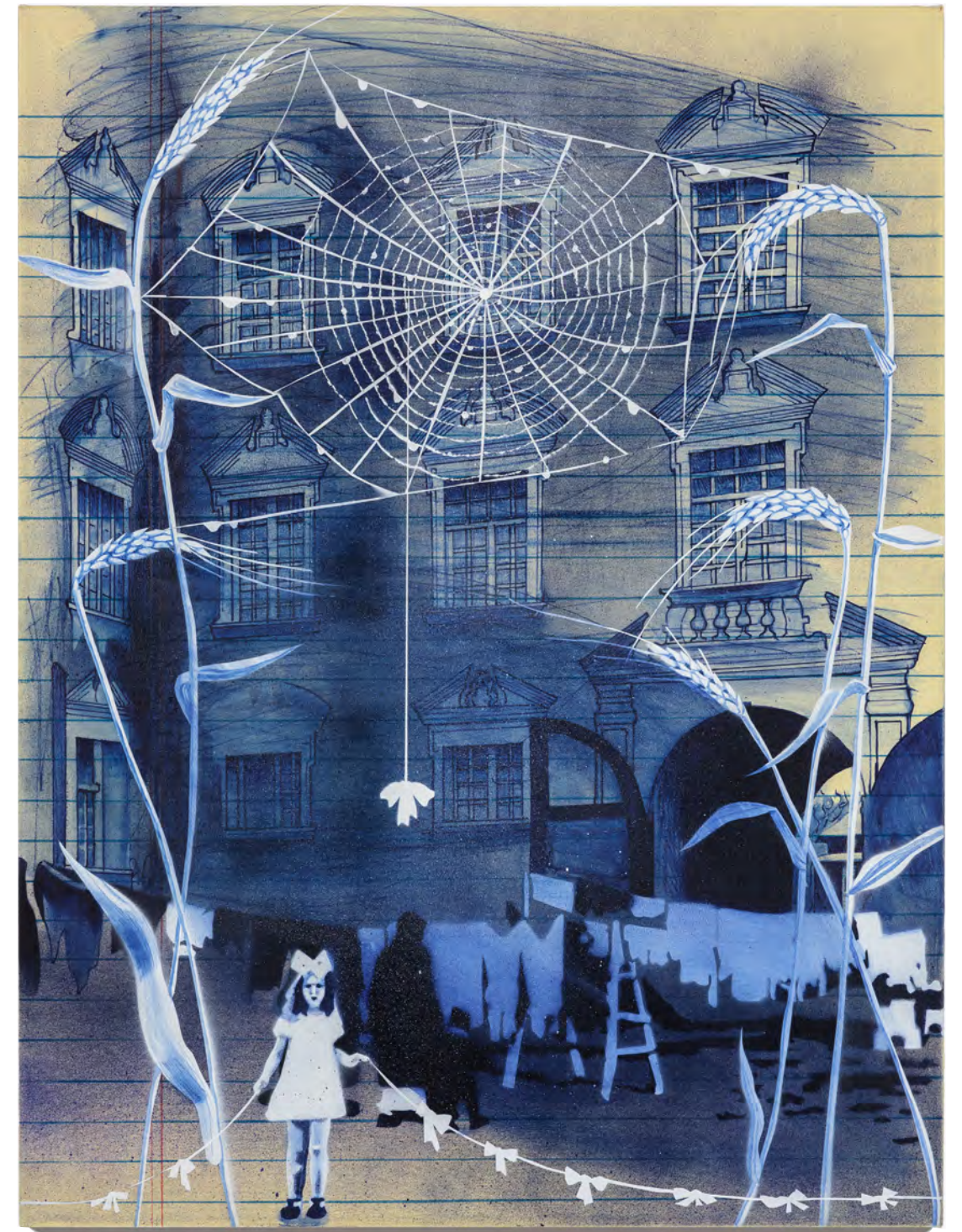
2023

Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas (diptych)

33 x 50 in.



*Laundry Day in Kempton Courtyard*  
2023  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
33 x 25 in.





*Summer of Fire*  
2023  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
54 x 42 in.





*Triangle of Sadness*  
2023  
Oil and spray paint on canvas  
34 x 26 in.





*Growing Up Graffiti*  
2024  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
54 x 42 in.

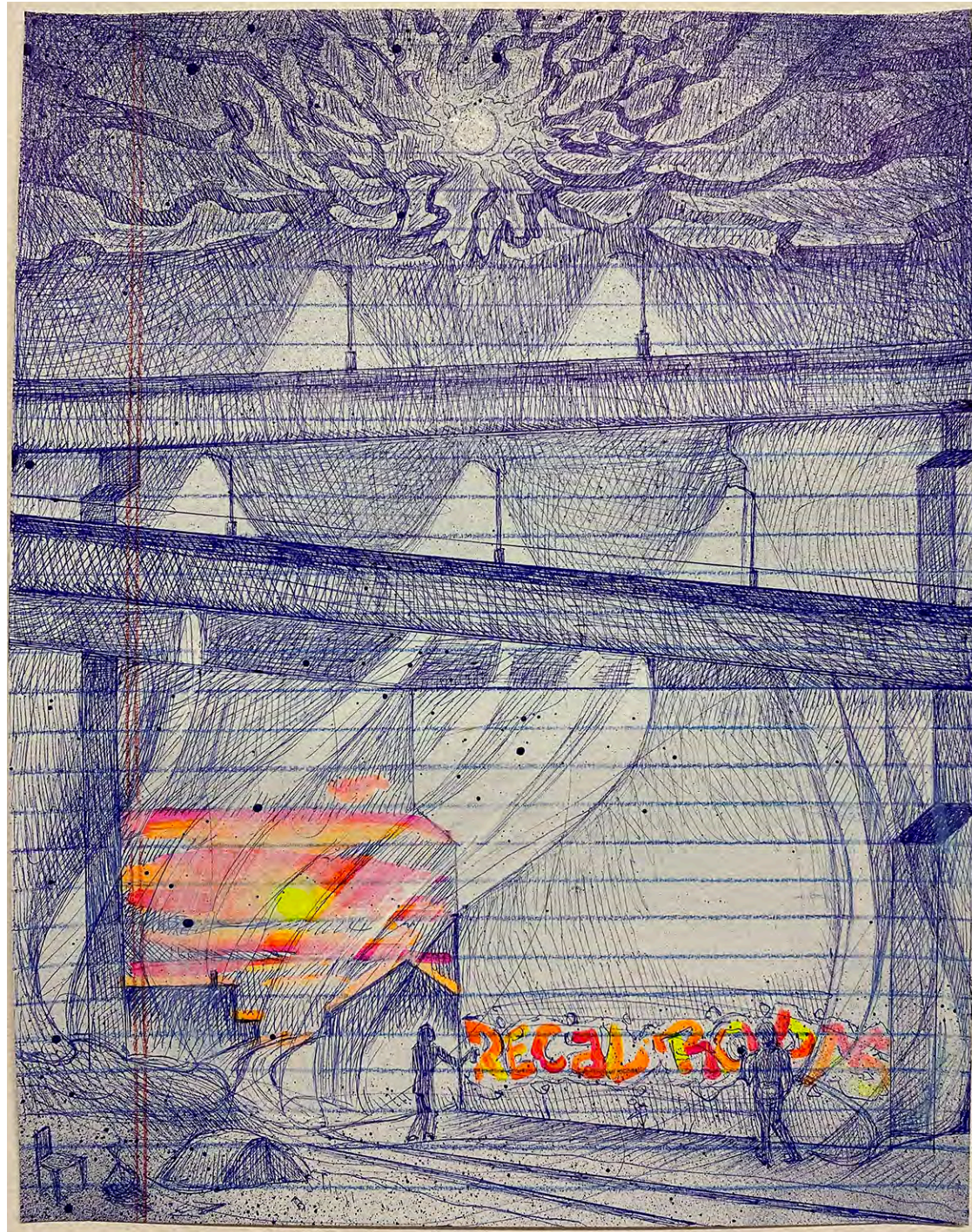




*Folk Art*  
2024  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas (diptych)  
54 x 84 in.







*Study for Growing Up Graffiti*  
2024  
Acrylic, colored pencil, and pen on paper  
11 x 8.5 in.



*Study for Folk Art*  
2024  
Acrylic, colored pencil and pen on paper  
11 x 17 in.



*Keeping the Family Together*  
2024  
Oil, acrylic and spray paint on canvas  
33 x 25 in.





Growing Up Graffiti  
Daina Higgins

The artist would like to specially thank  
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Contemporary Art Matters  
243 N. 5th Street, Suite 110  
Columbus, OH 43215  
(614) 313-4360

Rebecca Ibel, Owner + Director  
Cathy Williard, Sales Director

contemporaryartmatters.com  
info@contemporaryartmatters.com

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Front & Back Cover:  
Daina Higgins, Folk Art, 2024, Oil, acrylic  
and spray paint on canvas (diptych)  
54 x 84 in.

DAINA HIGGINS is a multi-media painter working  
in oil, gouache, watercolor, and spray paint. Her work  
has been exhibited nationally in New York, Columbus,  
Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Her work has  
been featured in sixteen solo exhibitions since 2005.  
In the fall of 2023 she mounted a solo exhibition at the  
SUNY Westchester Community College Art Gallery. In  
2021 she mounted a solo exhibition at Contemporary  
Art Matters in Columbus, Ohio. Recent group exhibi-  
tions include Thomas VanDyke Gallery (Brooklyn,  
NY), Cerulean Arts Gallery (Philadelphia, PA),  
Woodmere Art Museum (Philadelphia, PA), and Piano  
Craft Gallery (Boston, MA).

She has been featured in various publications  
including The New York Times, The Brooklyn Rail,  
ArtNews, The Columbus Dispatch, and The Village  
Voice. In 2006 Roberta Smith reviewed her exhibition  
at Elizabeth Harris Gallery, ending her review with  
“[she]...creates a poetic awareness of the passage of  
light, moving through the world, bouncing off things  
and making visual experience fleetingly possible.” That

same year, her graffiti art was featured in Nicholas  
Ganz’ book Graffiti Women: Street Art from Five  
Continents.

Higgins has been awarded numerous grants and  
prizes including the prestigious Joan Mitchell  
Foundation MFA Grant, three grants from The  
Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, The FST Studio  
Projects Fund Grant, The Artist’s Fellowship Grant,  
and the Silas H. Rhodes Merit Scholarship to attend  
The School of Visual Arts, where she earned her BFA  
in 2001.

Her work is in the public collections of the Columbus  
Museum of Art and the Pennsylvania Convention  
Center, where it is on permanent view. She is a  
member of the Long Island City Studio collective in  
Queens, NY. She is represented by Contemporary Art  
Matters in Columbus, Ohio.

Higgins received her MFA from Queens College, City  
University of New York in 2009.





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