

CLAIRE

TABOURET



Claire Tabouret has no assistants. Her studio, located in a high-ceilinged former warehouse, looks like a one-woman factory, with Tabouret at the helm, dressed in paint-splattered machinist's coveralls. You enter through a tidy office, furnished with a table and bookshelf, before stepping into the studio itself. Too large to take in with one glance, it is lined with drying racks, work tables, metal scaffolding, and paintings. Lots of paintings. On a back wall is one of the giant ensemble portraits of women and girls that Tabouret made two or three years ago. There are probably a dozen new midsize canvases hanging in the main room, several more in another, in colors ranging from acid green and chemical yellow to dusty purple and faded pink. Against one wall are racks of monoprints in sunset hues. All of these will soon be shipped to Hong Kong for a solo show at Perrotin. Each of the new series depicts a couple engaged in one of two activities: wrestling or copulating.

TRAVIS DIEHL

At what point did you move from painting groups to painting pairs?

CLAIRE TABOURET

I think it was really prompted by Picasso. The last show I did, in September [2018], was called *I'm crying because you're not crying*, and half the show was set up in Picasso's studio in Paris. I can't really think of Picasso without thinking of his relationship to women. But I feel so fond of his body of work and his mythology as an artist. I was also thinking of my own relationship to Picasso, and the first thing that came to my mind was these paintings he did of the photographer Dora Maar, the woman crying. It's a big series, like forty different paintings, and half of the time her face is really distorted in anger and pain. She was extremely horrified by what was happening in Spain, and she prodded Picasso to do something about it with *Guernica*. But she was also crying because he was being so cruel and cheating on her. So it's mixed up between the big things and the intimate relationship between them. For me, when I see those paintings, I have this double movement—one movement towards her as she cries and one movement toward him, who's painting the tragedy. I can understand both and I can be both and it's a bit of a back-and-forth. Which sometimes figures as wrestling for me. And so I did a show that was mainly two bodies wrestling, which for me was also a way of talking about love, relationships, and especially breaking up and the idea of going in opposite directions. In wrestling, I find this moment, when someone wants to pull their opponent to the ground, truly beautiful and tragic, because that's how you win—and the

opponent wants to escape this embrace, and so if she stops him at a certain point it can be a really metaphorical slipping towards sex.

TD

Was it all men?

CT

In that show, yeah. The last show was really about fighting and wrestling. It was men against men. But there was a lot of erotic tension, I feel. There was tenderness, there was anger, there was despair, there was everything. Every painting had this repetition. But every time it's kind of a new story. I've been working a lot with pornographic images. So in the image is the idea of the viewer, the camera, but also—it's a bit cheesy, but—the mirror of someone's eyes, their desire. Like, who do I paint for? I dedicate each painting to someone at the beginning, even if it's just one person; then it becomes wider, bigger than that. Painting can also be a way of reaching out, and about what you'd do to be loved. For me, a painting exists with someone's desire, someone's eyes. It also reminds me of Rorschach tests, because the point of these is that you see something in them. This monoprint (from the *Born in Mirrors* series, 2018), for example—this shape can also become a bit like an octopus. I don't know if you've seen this Hokusai print, *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*—the octopus with all its arms going around a woman's body. For my last show, I asked myself, "Can I make a painting like a sad love song?" and this time I was like, "Can I make a painting that would be like a porn movie?" This painting over here (*The Couch*, 2018) is the first time I painted on a found fabric. For me this background is already heavy with content, like

a couch that has been used a lot. The background has a smell.

TD

Is this a hole in the fabric?

CT

Maybe a cigarette hole? This one (*Fall*, 2018) also has this patterned fabric. The two figures are performing a dance piece by Angelin Preljočaj, a French choreographer, in which they try to find the balance point, where really the only point that touches are their mouths. The repetition of this movement is really interesting, because they keep falling.

TD

Do you always use a specific source image?

CT

Yeah. As I was saying, I looked at porn and in fact there's, you know, so many categories. You can find anything. There's actually a wrestling category. I was looking at those, and I thought that the moments that were interesting were those when the two actors are resting, because you can tell they're not convinced by the wrestling. Like they're just, you know, doing it, and then they end up fucking. But the transition moments, when they go from one position to another—I like those moments because they are not choreographed. They're not taken care of.

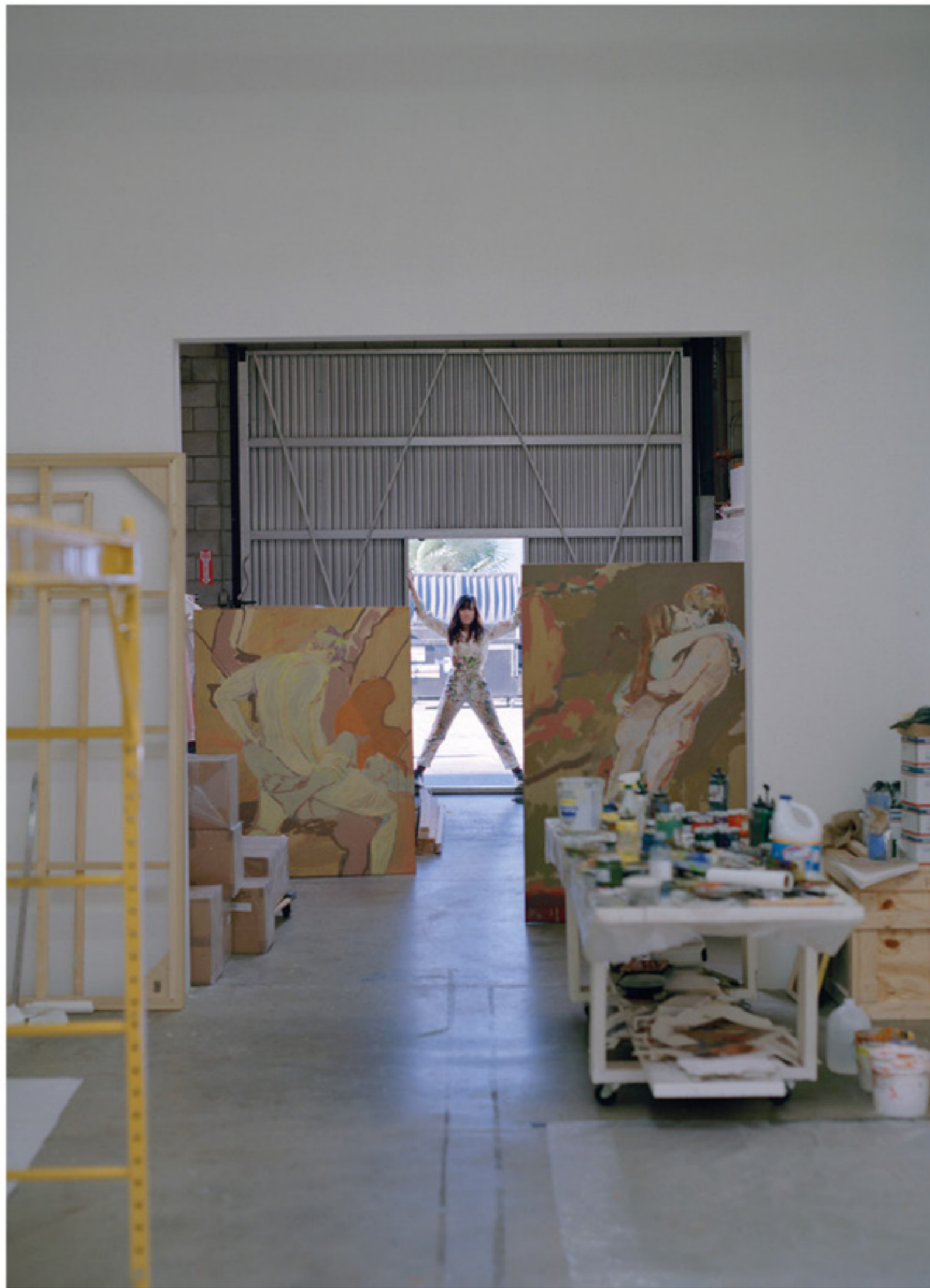
TD

Right. The performers are just moving as themselves.

CT

The acting is dropped, and the sexual tension is dropped. And then there's a bit of awkwardness, which I thought was interesting. You think, "Oh, maybe this is about fighting," but then this is very tender or this is very desirable or this is about sex. They have a glimpse of





everything. At the end, I mean, you don't really feel the wrestling, but the positions I choose have a lot of movement to them. Like this position here (*Born in Mirrors (gold)*, 2018), we feel she locks him. He's stuck, you know?

TD

He's also trying to pin her.

CT

There's a question of power. She's lying on her back and she's under him, and yet she is still the one who can pin him.

TD

How do you think about the clothing? I mean, it feels very classical. Wrestlers, especially in Greek bronzes—it's a common theme.

CT

Yeah, I was still hesitating on this one (*Thunderstorm*, 2018). At one point they were not wearing anything and then I added this. But it's true that now it reminds me of American paintings of boxing in the beginning, maybe the end, of the nineteenth century. Maybe it's the colors.

TD

The colors too. But also, it looks like he's wearing a swimsuit from the—

CT

From 1920. I quite like this ambiguity.

TD

Ambiguity in terms of the time period.

CT

Where are we and when is it, you know? And then the color I use, like this yellow that glows in the dark, and this silver—it's a way of stepping into mental space, more than into nature or physical space.

TD

Right. So that's the contemporary cue: the really plastic, chemical colors.

CT

This one (*The Arch*, 2018) I painted so it becomes like two bodies but one form, just an arch position.

TD

Uh-huh. And they're just wearing boots.

CT

Just boots and tights. And so, yeah, I feel like it started with the breakup, kind of—two people wanting to go down different paths. And now I just feel, oh I can stay longer with two bodies and just keep turning around the bodies and the movement. So suddenly there's two bodies and there's also way more movement. While for me the group paintings were more about stillness and frozenness and the impossibility of movement. Being stuck, stuck in the fabric, stuck with their hair. Everything is tied up.

TD

Another difference is the way that the figures address the viewer. In your older work, for a while, it seemed like almost all of them were staring straight out at the viewer.

CT

It's really about how you look at a painting and how the painting looks at you. And this confrontation—where do you stand, how do you react.

TD

You see that as a confrontation?

CT

Yeah. That's really what it was about. And it's true that now the face is sometimes hidden by the arms, or under the body. The more recent paintings show the movement and language of the body at the time of confrontation. And I think that's also why I had to think about the viewer in a different way. Images that are made for the porn industry are aimed towards a certain viewer. But

not as this kind of confrontation, but as if you are viewing something as it is happening.

TD

They act as if the viewer is not there.

CT

Which is a bit the same thing as a mirror. When you do something for yourself in the mirror, or when you do something in front of the mirror, you act as if it isn't, but really it's meant for the eyes of someone else.

TD

Right. You have the viewer in the mind.

CT

Yeah. It's actually something I realized when I was listening to Pina Bausch talk about her work. I think her work is a lot about dancing for the one you love. Dancing to be loved and not to be abandoned. It has this desperation.

TD

It feels to me like the wrestling paintings, the more recent ones, are a more



direct confrontation. There's two figures, but like you were saying, you're not sure if you want to be the woman in the painting or paint the woman... The conflict feels reoriented somehow, like it's between you and the painting, rather than between the painting and the viewer.

CT

I agree. In the wrestling figures you can have the sense of the same person fighting against themselves.

TD

Can you talk a bit more about your feelings about Picasso, but also about modernism in general? Is that history something you struggle with on a larger scale?

CT

It's how I came to painting, as a child, as a very early vocation. Maybe like a religious vocation. When I was four years old, I went to Paris with my parents, and we went to the museum and I saw Monet's *Water Lilies*. I got overwhelmed by the colors and the texture, like an orgasm. I didn't know what a painter was, what art was. But I had these intense emotions and I wanted to recreate the sensation as much as I could. I feel my life has been trying to find this again. So I'm painting, painting, painting. But then, living in the south of France, I didn't know much about contemporary art. There was this museum in my city that really focused on the nineteenth century, and that's how I built a lot of my early relationship to painting. The museum only showed works by men, many representing naked women. So as a teenager

I was also drawn to their sensuality. I didn't know if I wanted to be the woman in the painting or if I wanted to be painting the woman. I just wanted to be a part of the thing. I constantly travel between that. And then I moved to Paris for my studies. The world became, you know, not easier but larger, and I could see so many more ways of being and living. But so that's how I arrived, starting from the nineteenth century and moving into the twentieth century.

TD

What was it like being paired with Yoko Ono at the Villa Medici in Rome (for their joint exhibition *One day I broke a mirror*, curated by Chiara Parisi, presented at the French Academy in Rome, May–July 2018)?

CT

I liked the surprise effect of juxtaposing her work with mine. I could choose some of her work, so I chose more mysterious work, like her *Painting to be Stepped On* (1960–2017), a tiny piece of fabric on the floor. This was placed in front of one of my group paintings. She wanted to do a performance from the 1960s, in which she wraps a chair. But then she fell ill and she asked me to produce the performance for her, and it really worked well with the wrapping of my paintings. It was really about the absence of a body in the chair and how in my paintings somebody was so there.

TD

Right. It's a different kind of one-on-one conversation than the one you have going with Picasso.



CT

Yeah. I mean, someone else created this situation, but I like it because it brings things to my work that I would not have predicted.

TD

In the series with the children putting on makeup—how do they relate to your own coming-of-age story? It seems like to this day your relationship to painting is still focused on, or built on, this childhood experience.

CT

Even the sex ones?

TD

The subject matter is more mature, for sure. But there are still bright colors and a kind of quickness...

CT

The other thing about the makeup portraits is that they're about covering, about the way I paint. When I paint bodies, I first paint the bodies, then I dress them. Some painters paint straight away, they paint sweatshirts, but I paint what's underneath first. You feel this something underneath, like it's inhabited, even if in terms of painting it's sometimes a bit rough, a bit weak. I was looking at YouTube tutorials about makeup and I felt—as a kid it's one of the first experiences you can have with paint. You can change the shape of your face using techniques from sculpture and painting, in fact, working with lines. It has a relationship to stains and how we can be terrified of stains when we grow up, because makeup is about beauty and control, but as soon as it is not exactly precisely what it should be, you know, like if you have lipstick stains on your teeth, then there's a feeling of terror, like, "Is she crazy, or—what's wrong with her?" I'm really fascinated by that, because sometimes in images you go from the beautiful to the crazy. And so I made some paintings with younger girls and some with older women, and with this makeup all of them are very proud and very strong and very beautiful, and it becomes a war paint.

TD

Is that makeup to you? Or is that paint?

CT

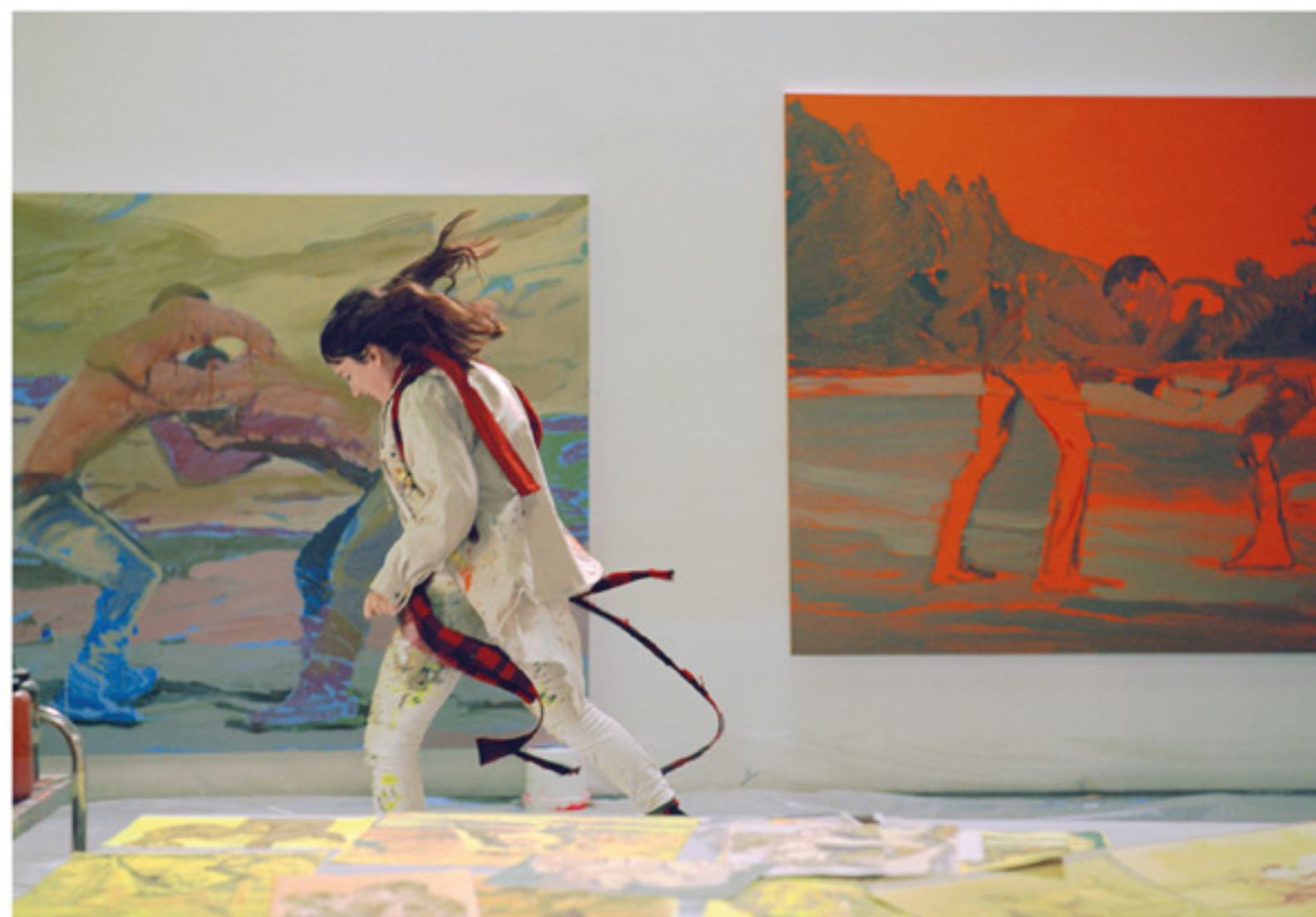
Makeup is paint for me. If I put makeup on myself I still think I'm painting.

TD

The rule about makeup is that it's supposed to look natural, you're not supposed to notice it.

CT

For people who like really heavy makeup, I don't think it's meant to look





natural. I mean it's really a signature. It looks like it's meant to be in control.

TD

Is there a feminist aspect to your work? And what's your relationship with the politics of feminism?

CT

From the beginning, I was conscious of the gaze. At one point I needed to create my own heroes, so I painted this woman (*Battleground*, 2016), who was taller than life-size and had this superhero kind of vibe. It was also a way for me to play with the idea of the artist in the studio. I find that today we tend to create heroes out of artists, especially when you see artists in photo shoots, in a huge studio with assistants running around, like everything is big and powerful and muscles. I wanted to make fun of this in my own way, so I painted this Amazon warrior. At the same time I painted Agnes Martin in the desert (*Big Calm*, 2016)—she's seated, she's really not trying to spread her legs or take up much space or even be vertical. She's kind of blending into nature. I was always interested in a superposition of a wide range of possibilities of how you can live in your body and take up space.

TD

Right. You seem like you have a very studio-based practice that does fall into that romantic category of the Artist in their Studio.

CT

It's true. For me the painting and the studio are very much together. As much as I wanted to paint, I also wanted to have a private space of my own. Even if I'm not painting, I come here. I spend twelve or thirteen hours a day on my own. That's my normal day.

TD

But do you think of painting as a combat? That part of the myth—that it's the artist versus the canvas?

CT

For a while I thought that way. For example, I would think of shadowboxing, like a mirror again, but fighting against your own shadow. I think I also had a lot of anger, and you see lots of anger in the paintings, and—in the steadiness of the character, you can see in her eyes something like a fire.

TD

Where did that anger come from?

CT

I don't know. I feel like I was born angry, for so many reasons. But to channel revenge—I had lots of energy like that,

and I think that's why I was working so much. I was animated.

TD

So you feel like you've mellowed out a little?

CT

I'm not sure. I'm trying to not just be a robot. I love, for example, Agnes Martin, one of her last paintings, *Loving Love*. I admire it so much. Like, the adventure of creation—I would like it to be towards...

TD

Towards something.

CT

Towards something, more than something else... *Loving Love*. It's so great. Like a whole life of work.

TD

It's interesting that you depict Agnes Martin just, like, sitting. Because she's not painting, right? She's kind of thinking. Her process, like yours, is very vivid, it's about visualizing, having a vision,

then the painting appears and then she goes and paints it.

CT

Yeah, but she sits a lot, she sits for hours and days, and then she has a vision, and it's small, like this.

TD

And again, it's not certain, it's so abstract. Like you said, you can sort of tell what's happening, but not *when* it's happening.

CT

Yeah. That's what makes my paintings my paintings, when I reach this.

Los Angeles, Nov. 21, 2018

