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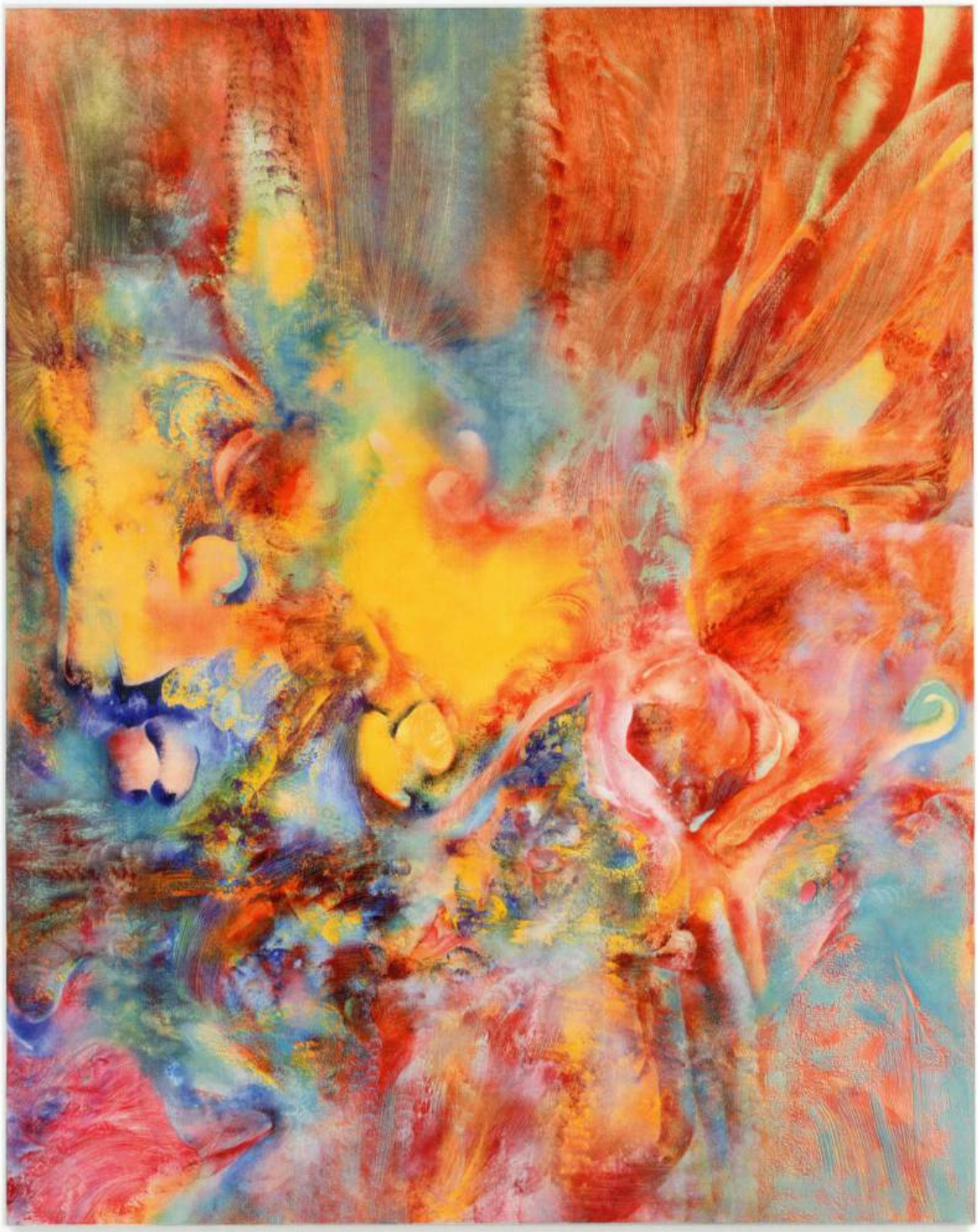

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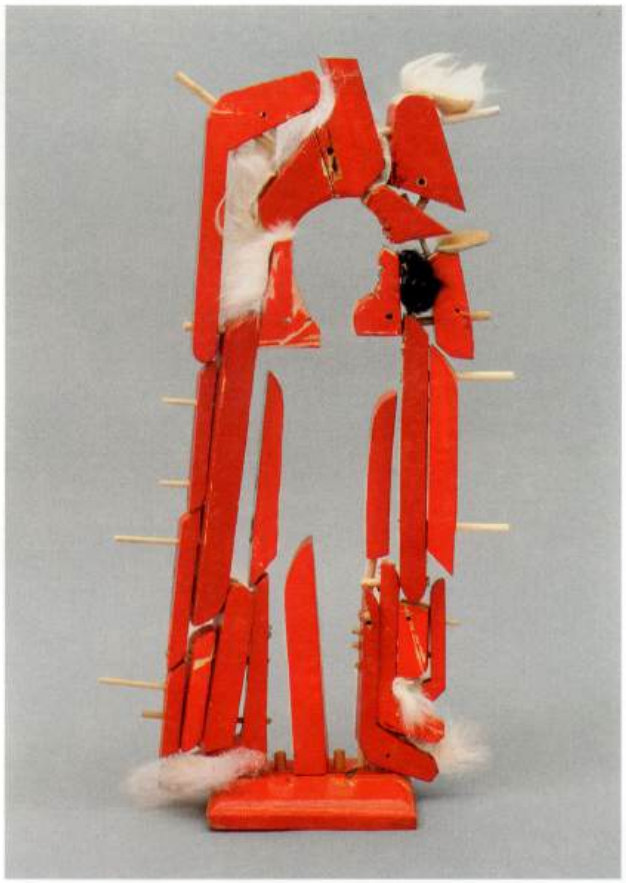
Lucy Bull

and



Elizabeth Englander

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Women by Women, a series of interviews between women visual artists, is made possible by the Deborah Buck Foundation with additional support from the Judith Whitney Godwin Foundation.

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Lucy Bull's paintings erupt beyond their flat surfaces, engulfing their viewers in vivid rushes of color. Though undoubtedly abstract, her works manage to resemble sublime landscapes as well as the chaotic, invisible worlds of our psyches. The seeming fluidity of her work belies an arduous process, in which Bull builds up complex layers of paint and then painstakingly etches into them to excavate what she calls "new avenues of discovery." In the past year, Bull's paintings have only grown in scale, with large-scale horizontal diptychs feeding the monumental quality of her work. *13:13*, a massive thirty-nine-foot-tall painting made on the occasion of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, her exhibition currently on view through March 2025 at the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, will hang in the museum's stairwell until October 2025.

The sculptor Elizabeth Englander salvages mass-market commodities—furniture, toys, nutcrackers, and so on—and then dismembers and reassembles them into figures inspired by Jain, Hindu, and Buddhist icons. By creating sculptures after these religious idols, Englander seeks to release everyday objects from their "karmic baggage, animating [their] material with new life." For a female nutcracker designed to crack nuts between her thighs, Englander fashioned the figure with a new set of legs and a Pinocchio head meant to signify deception, freeing the nutcracker from her purpose. Englander preserves and honors the material conditions of her components, striving not to obscure their histories but rather enact the kinds of transformation that might become possible when seemingly irreconcilable forms collide. Earlier this year, her first solo museum exhibition, *Eminem Buddhism, Volume 3*, was presented at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut.

Bull and Englander met in 2008 as undergraduate students at the Rhode Island School of Design, before Bull transferred to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2010. With Bull now in Los Angeles and Englander in New York City, the two artists convened in Taos, New Mexico, where they reflected on their creative processes and how, while working toward artworks that induce instinctual and embodied responses in their viewers, they too are transformed.

—Ha Duong, Associate Editor

page 86: Lucy Bull, *16:23*, 2024, oil on linen, 86 × 68 × 1.25 inches. Photo by Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

page 87: Elizabeth Englander, *Released Spirit (red)*, 2022, wood, paint, and faux fur, 15 × 8 × 3 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Theta, New York City.

opposite: Elizabeth Englander, *Yogini no. 32*, 2024, wood, paint, and faux fur, 41 × 38.5 × 38.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Theta, New York City.

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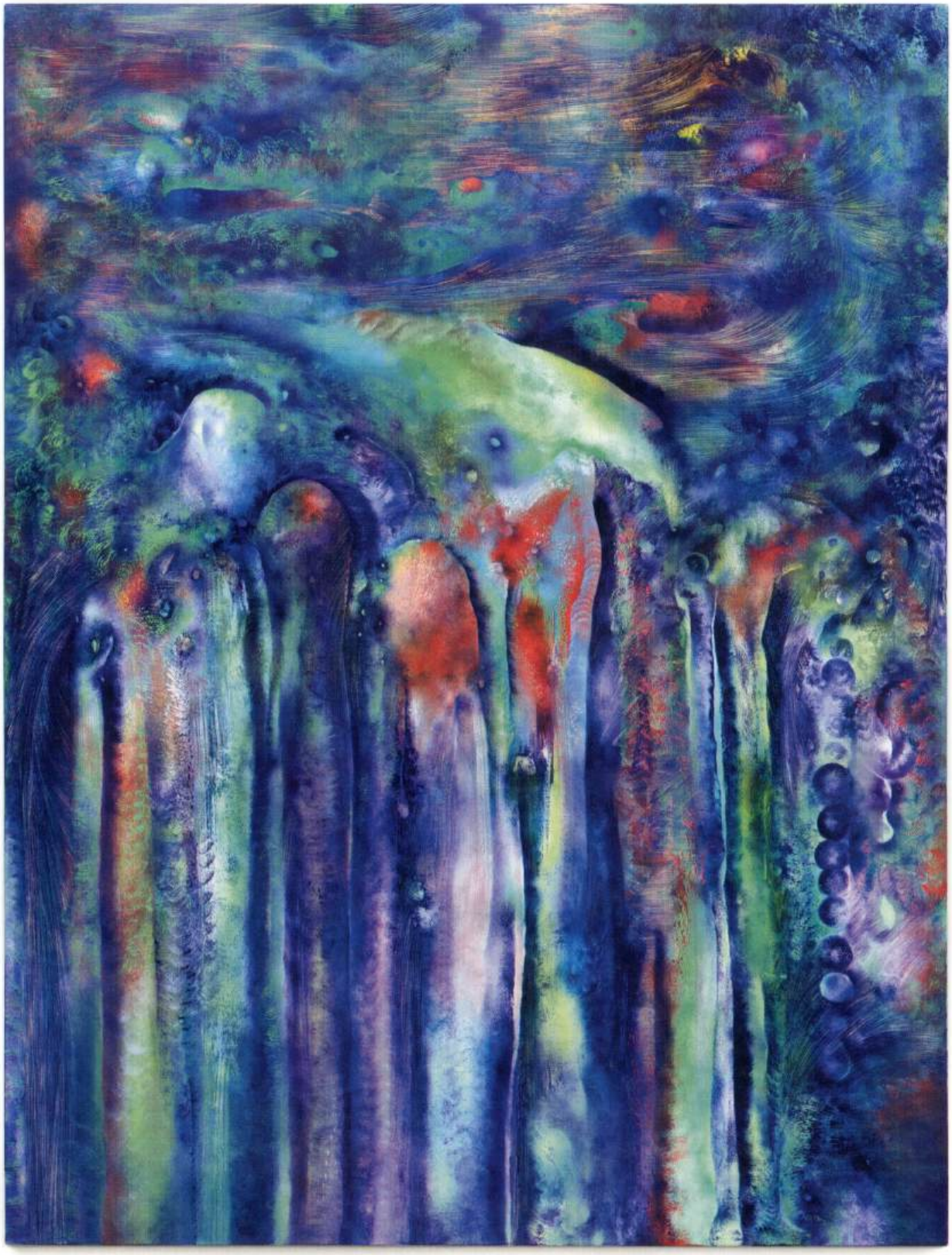

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LUCY BULL: We're here on the Italianos Canyon Trail, Luchita Hurtado's favorite trail in Taos, New Mexico, and we just walked through a beautiful aspen grove.

ELIZABETH ENGLANDER: We're getting eaten alive by bugs.

LB: (*laughter*) While sitting on logs. We ended up here because the Harwood Museum has a posthumous exhibition for Luchita Hurtado. When I moved to Los Angeles ten years ago, I had the pleasure of getting to know Luchita. She spoke a lot about the magic of Taos, and I was eager to see the summer home that she shared here with her late husband, Lee Mullican. She passed away not too long ago, at the age of ninety-nine. She was a special person—incredibly youthful and spiritual, with a deep love for nature. That interest in the spiritual and its relation to the natural world is something you and I share with Luchita. It's great that you were down to meet me here so that we could do this together in person—in nature!

Another place you and I converge is in our practices. We both have an interest in leaving room for discovery, associations, and transformations within the work. There's also a similar willingness to work through something. We are very comfortable and accepting of that process.

EE: Yeah. That process is also very physical for us. We've talked about how we have to exercise to maintain our practices. In a very literal way, the process is embodied.

You said once that you feel like your paintings can bypass the rational mind and provoke an embodied response. That's part of what I love about figurative sculpture. We are each trying to achieve a visceral impact. I try to achieve that through figuration, and you try to achieve it through what ends up looking like abstraction.

LB: Yeah, not that it's never figurative.

EE: It's a continuum that we sway along. There are elements of abstraction in the way that I work too.

LB: These distinctions feel arbitrary to me—I like to think that we're playing with that ambiguity.

EE: This is insider information, but some of your *Ash Tree* paintings actually had figures in them at some point. I was curious about that process. Is that something that's happened all along?

LB: Well, yes and no. My process involves a back-and-forth between a more automatic building up of surface and, in response to that, a more reflective teasing out of associations. *3:10*, the painting you're referring to, started out with more of an allover texture, out of which I started to develop a distinct face. I got really attached to how one eye in particular was emerging out of what I viewed as the larger landscape, so I pulled the face out in a more explicit way—way more than I normally do—as an experiment. Because the face was so overt, it felt like it would short-circuit any interaction that someone might have with other parts of the painting. I got rid of the face in the end, but it's funny, I can still see the deflated version of that face in the painting. The deflated face reminds me of the Ralph Steadman poster for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. (*laughter*)

As I work, I constantly imagine how the viewer might start to unpack a painting, but it's an impossible exercise because, of course, I know the painting too well. Eventually, though, as I work, I start to feel like a new viewer—that's what happens as layers build and interact. Rather than making something that might feel obvious at a glance, I'm more interested in how I can suspend the viewer's gaze, provoking them into spending time in front of the work. There needs to be room for the viewer to wonder and wander. I want them to eventually discover that one valley I find the most compelling in the painting, although they might not get there unless they're staring at it for thirty minutes. Or living around it.

EE: Your time and their time are acting together.

LB: Exactly. Early on, when I first worked with this particular process of mark-making and etching, I painted over paintings that I had previously considered finished. There was something very liberating about it, and it allowed me to trust that a painting isn't lost. It just informs whatever comes after. It taught me to be uninhibited. That's when everything got exciting for me. And that's also when people actually started to take interest. When something clicks for you, somehow it clicks for others, and this transference happens. I had to figure out how to elongate my own process of painting.

I've always considered your relationship to the act of research as an elongation of the artistic process. How do you see your relationship to research? Is it an elongation as I imagined, or is it something else?

EE: I think that, for me, research is really about enriching the work. My dad calls me a nerd, but I think I'm just an artist. Research has always been part of my process, but something shifted when I started to work from Indian religious art because I realized I really didn't know anything. The research had to intensify, and it pulled me along. There are thirty-five of those *Yogini* pieces; that only happened because I kept learning about more types of iconography that made the work more complex. Sometimes I fantasize about being a scholar, but I think art is more supportive of the idiosyncratic exploration that I need to do to live in the world.

Lately I've been feeling physically compelled to visit certain works of art and historical sites, even though I don't know how they might relate to my work. I have a project that's not even a project, I have no idea how the pieces go together, but I'm indulging.

LB: We let ourselves be guided to Taos! I feel like this is a research trek for both of us.

EE: That's exactly what this is. For me, intentional research and pilgrimage have been pretty important. But what I've found is that the thing I might incidentally see, the thing I didn't even know was there, is often what sparks something. Like when I go to

opposite: Lucy Bull, *15:17*, 2024, oil on linen, 100 × 76 × 1.25 inches. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

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a museum, it's the thing that's sitting next to what I came to see. With this trip, Luchita is important to you, and you're important to me, so I'm trusting that it's worth investigating. In that sense, I would say the research is both totally intuitive and also metonymic. It's concerned with the contiguous, which is ultimately everything.

Research has allowed me to take breaks from production—I'm still working, but I'm not in the studio. It helps with transitioning to a new kind of art, finding new ways to make things.

LB: Yeah, or even with maintaining that relationship of being present with the art because, when we were younger, we always had to squeeze in art. I honestly liked how having a waitressing job compartmentalized my time—it was productive. I had to wake up early if I wanted to get in painting time, and I would paint until I had to leave for work. But then as a working artist with all the time in the world, I need to insert some structure and ways of allowing myself to be a person outside of the art.

EE: To encounter the world. To not be in the studio.

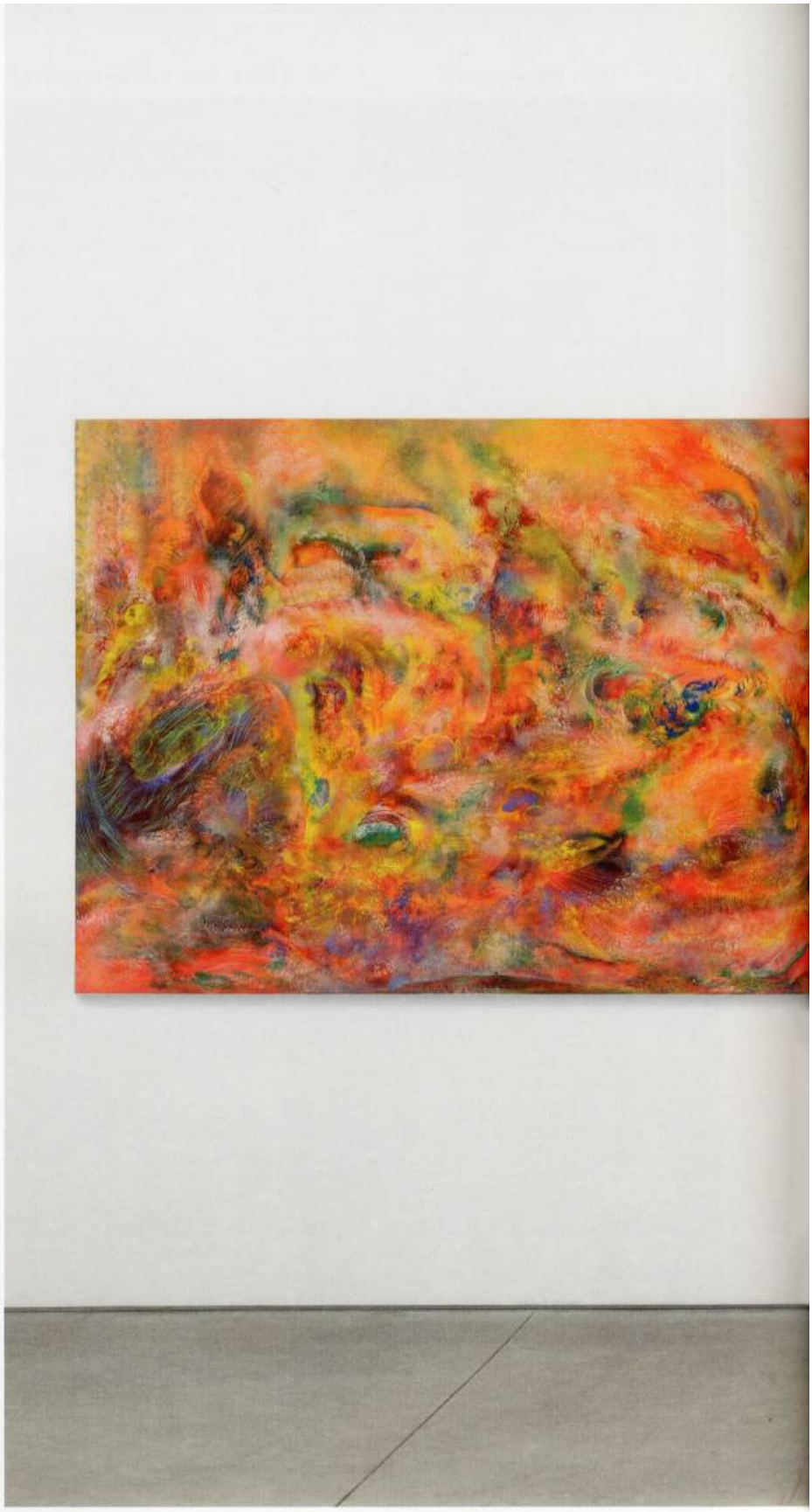
LB: To see friends and understand that there are other people out there. We're not just exploring our inner consciousness, we're also a part of a larger consciousness.

EE: It's so important. During the first few months of the pandemic, I had enough ideas to fill my apartment with a body of work that I haven't shown yet. But I hit a wall around September. I was like: Where do ideas come from? (*laughter*)

Ideas come from random encounters with the world, with people and things. Book learning is, in a sense, a poor substitute, but it was one way to explore the world during that time.

LB: Limitations are always productive. You have some limitations to the material that you're using as well.

EE: Yeah. I keep finding new things to make, even though my tools are just a handsaw, a drill, and work gloves. Your tools are similarly limited.



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Lucy Bull, *3:13*, 2023, oil on linen, 54 × 192 × 1.25 inches. Photo by Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

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right: Lucy Bull, *4:28*, 2024, oil on linen, 100 × 76 × 1.25 inches. Photo by Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

LB: That's true. I had to limit myself to one kind of brush and then expand the different ways that I was utilizing that brush in order to develop my own vocabulary. Experimentation has always been a crucial aspect to my process. In the beginning, I limited myself to working in black and white so that I could focus solely on the mark-making without the distraction of combining colors. Eventually, I added a sharp etching tool to my toolbox and reintroduced color, and that's when the depth of my work opened up. The etching helped me create a more interwoven network of layers to work through. This part of the process feels more like drawing—I can define forms by contouring in repeated striations and create space through the interplay of positive and negative space. That's something I feel like you're starting to embrace, too, with the more recent *Released Spirits*.

EE: I was so amazed by the Jain icons I was working from, these images of transcendent beings that are essentially silhouettes cut out of sheet metal. I love how they answer the spiritual paradox of representing transcendent matter with the sculptural paradox of a flat, empty figure. I'm always grasping for something that feels both full and empty in my work.

LB: I feel like I'm doing that too. There's more potential for the work to shift and morph and act more like a living entity when there isn't something too overt in it. It leaves room for future transformation and multiple entry points into the work.

EE: I definitely see my sculptures as living.

LB: They definitely are. That's one of the criteria I have for deciding when something's finished.

EE: I know I'm on the right track when it starts breathing. (*laughter*)

LB: Or when I reach the point where I'm like, Oh, wow, I'm looking at this with completely new eyes. It was just yesterday that I was working on it, and it—

EE: —it's transforming. It's growing.

LB: Do you have other criteria for deciding when something's finished?

EE: There's an engineering aspect to sculpture—the sculptures eventually click into place. They're more structural when they have all their limbs. Completion has to do with the physical integrity of the object.

LB: It stands up or falls down. (*laughter*)

EE: Gravity is what we're working with. All those pieces I made in graduate school that were sculptures of Diana balancing on one foot are, to me, the equivalent of painting a soap bubble—it's a show-offy, technical thing to be able to achieve that balance. Sculpture has that test: How it performs physically and if it can live in the world guides what you do to it and what that's going to be like. I appreciate the rigor imposed by the laws of physics, but just because it stands or is durable doesn't mean it's a good sculpture.

One of my favorite things about these wooden sculptures, compared to other things I've made, is that it's a bit easier to pull it back from a more advanced state. I can always take it

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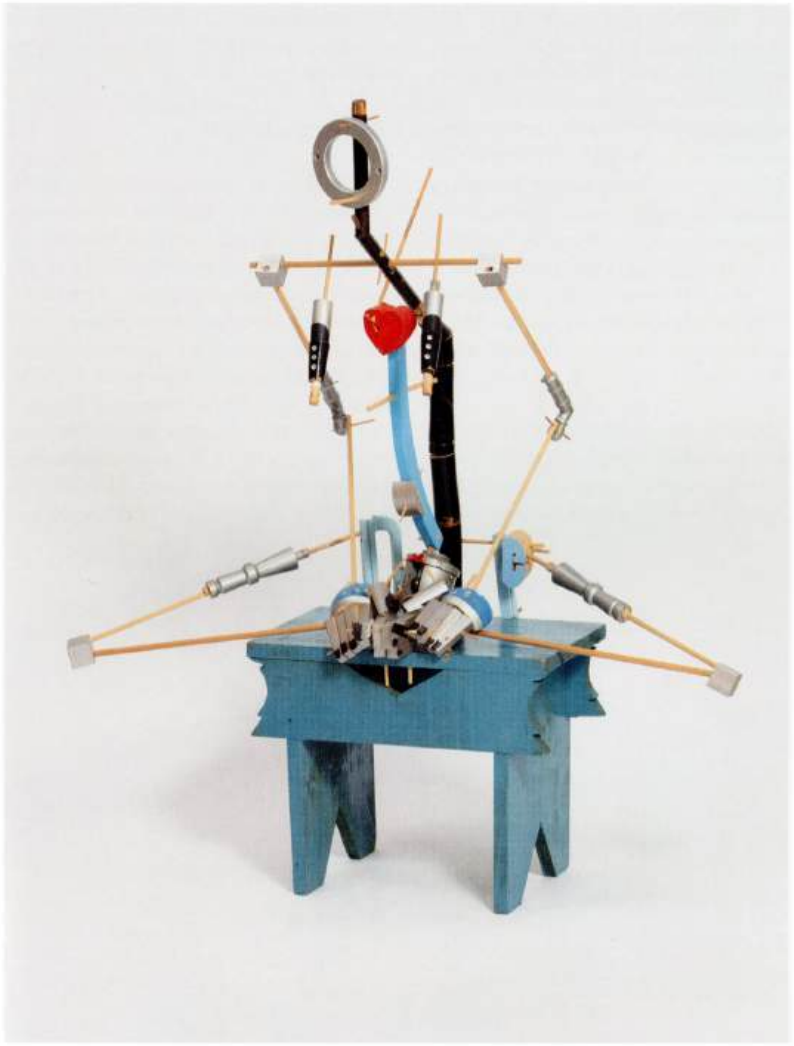

left: Elizabeth Englander, *Yogini no. 14*, 2022, wood and paint, 40 × 35 × 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Theta, New York City.

apart, take it back down to nothing, and then put it back together. *Yogini no. 1* was like that. I was making a way more elaborate sculpture, but then I looked at an earlier photo and was like, This was done two weeks ago. I stripped everything away. But now it has all these little strings on it that came from the things that were attached previously.

LB: That's the pentimenti! That makes it better, it provides nuance.

This reminds me of that moment in the video about Luchita at the Harwood where she says that beginnings are just as important as the ends of paintings. It's hard to articulate, but the beginnings set everything in motion for me. There's a level of directness that only the early stages of a painting can provide. I've found that working on multiple paintings at once allows me to access that directness. If I pivot between works more often, I am more able to catch those fleeting moments, moments that otherwise get buried in the rapid buildup of texture that comes when I focus on only one painting. It allows more time for reflection during those early stages. Having multiple starts across multiple paintings, all at the same time, allows me to develop each canvas bit by bit in staccato clusters of paint.

On the other hand, when a painting feels more complete from the get-go, it's harder to finish. I feel like I need to inject it with more depth and time for it to feel right. I honestly don't know if I'm capable of making a truly fast painting—maybe only paintings that look like they were done fast.

EE: I thought I wasn't capable of it either, but I've realized that I can go a lot faster than I thought. For many years, I was really committed to having the work look belabored.

LB: Because it feels generous!

EE: Yeah. I wanted it to feel like I really cared that much. One thing about art is it can take as much intensity as you throw at it.

LB: Art really is just stored time.

EE: Totally. But when I was making the *Bikini Crucifixions*, it got to the point where my hands were bleeding and I was like, Why do I feel compelled to prove it in this way? Can I do this with more ease? Is there a way that this can feel different for me? There's also generosity in something that has a light touch.

Making sculptures with only a few elements has been liberating. This year I made my first proper "unassisted" readymade, *Guardian Figure (Jordan)*. For an apartment show curated by Nick Irvin and Amalia Ulman, I placed a childhood castoff from Jordan Barse, of Theta, in a closet next to the front door, transforming it into a door guardian like the ones found in temples across Asia.

Speaking of ease and difficulty, how are you planning to approach your massive painting for the stairwell at the ICA Miami?

LB: It's going to be one painting made as a triptych and then stacked vertically. There are three different landings to view the painting from, so I've divided it in three parts. I decided the height of each part based on where I want the seams of the painting to fall in relation to the landings—the top two will be fourteen feet tall and the bottom part will be eleven feet. I imagine the seams will disappear once it's hanging.

It's scary to think that I won't be able to view it as one entity hanging flush on the wall until it's installed, but that's also exciting. Thankfully, with the three different vantage points to view the painting from, it makes sense to have the division.

EE: Each one will be a huge thing on its own.

LB: I've been really excited by these panoramic formats because of how significantly the paintings can morph depending on where the viewer is standing in relation to the painting—it's not just how far or close you are in relation to the work, but also the foreshortened angle from which you're looking. The horizontal paintings might unlock different associations when you're viewing them from the left versus the right, and there's a range in distance inherently embedded within that panoramic format. For a painting this tall, the eye-level of the painting will change depending on where you are on the stairwell, but this time you can actually look down from above, which is something that wasn't possible with the other vertical paintings I've done. I'm excited to see how this will work.

EE: With the stairwells, you'll be able to be at level with the painting, but you won't have that intimacy. It's a bit different, like monumental art.

LB: It feels like it inherently holds something more profound, powerful, and larger than life.

EE: It has more gravity.

LB: Working at such a large scale feels like a brain teaser. Because of how tall they are, I'm sure I will need to work on them sideways and separately at times. I'll also need to connect them on the floor to visualize and make sure they fuse together and function vertically. The sheer and utter scale pushes me out of my comfort zone and forces me to embrace negative space more than I already have. It will probably take at least a month to even touch every inch of this painting. I'm curious to see

what the equivalent of a large-scale work is for you.

EE: There was a piece, *Yogini no. 32*, that was going to be the big one for my show at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum. There is a smaller room there, and it was going to dominate it. The sculpture was built on a piano stool. I was looking at the bases of Japanese temple Buddhas, which are often complicated, layered lotus sculptures that are gorgeous in their own right. I was sourcing and assembling things to make the stool even taller, emulating these elaborate bases. And then Fernando Mesta from Gaga came into the studio and was like, "Have you thought about cutting that bottom part off?" I was like, "No!" (*laughter*) He felt it was an outlier. He was just going on intuition. The next day, I was like, Huh. Formally, I thought it looked nice, and the whole thing felt very Victorian to me. But I cut off the legs of the piano stool and brought that sculpture into the larger room with the other *Yoginis*, which freed up this space in the smaller room. So what was left was a weird flower-shaped table I had made, my version of a lotus base. I thought of these sculptures I had seen: Jain teachers and saints, as well as Buddhas, represented by footprints on a similar lotus base. I remembered that I had these wooden clogs with leather tops that belonged to my mom. I cut off the top of the clogs, and I could see

Installation view of Elizabeth Englander, *Wisdom Kings*, Theta at Liste Art Fair Basel, 2023. Photo by GRAYSC. Courtesy of the artist and Theta, New York City.

my mom's footprints. She wore them all the time. They're a total, pure relic to me. I put them on the base and the piece became *Released Spirit (Sturdy Susan)*, which we eventually placed in the smaller room.

LB: Wow, that's so fascinating. With painting, this seems like the equivalent of me realizing that maybe there's too much going on and that I need more of that blank passage—somewhere for the viewer to enter the space and project.

EE: Exactly. You could feel the presence of a standing human from the footprints. Oto Gillen, who photographed the work, initially photographed it horizontally. We hadn't talked about it, but he said, "Actually, I think I need to photograph it vertically because you need the space above it—that's part of the piece." That's my attempt at a big piece that literally got cut down to size.

Another impetus for this piece was that Eduardo Andres Alfonso, the associate curator at the Aldrich, decided to put two other *Released Spirits* in that room, and it felt like including a huge Buddha would overpower them. It was fun working with a curator who had their own ideas. This wouldn't have happened the way it did without his curation.

LB: There's a reason that your works take on the scale that they do. With the *Wisdom Kings*, their intimate scale is really important. They have a talismanic quality, which I don't think they would necessarily have if they were not compact and portable.

You wrote a beautiful text about your *Wisdom Kings* for a booklet, and I was curious about how much emphasis you give the research once the sculptures are complete, when they have lives of their own. When I talk about my paintings, I sometimes find it limits what they are to describe them.

EE: My dad read it, and he said, "You don't want to ruin the mystery!" He didn't think I should give too much away. But for me, the mystery is unruinable. It's not going anywhere. We can keep digging and it will only deepen.

Presenting this work in Europe and North America, it felt necessary to orient the viewer by introducing the

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iconography. I also think the sculpture that I've been working from is phenomenal and not as known as it could be to my audience, so I want to point to this sculpture through my work and through my writing about it. It's like, if you think my art's kind of bullshit, then here's this art that is real, go look at that.

I've talked about the nutcrackers as ancestor figures, miniature Caucasian patriarchs, and I think you know that I've used my own family's collection of cheap imports. *Yogini no. 32* has an entire nutcracker in its chest. I had this wooden tulip, and I wanted to make a yogini that felt really free, just empty with a tulip for its head. But I also really wanted to make one that had the full nutcracker body inside of it. Structurally, the whole piece ended up being built off of that nutcracker.

The nutcracker has a top hat. White men in top hats shaped the world we live in through capitalism, colonialism, industrialization, and environmental degradation. Turned-wood nutcrackers were first commercially produced in the nineteenth century in Erzgebirge, a German mining region. When the mining industry declined, people there used new lathe technology to transform their forests into these small utilitarian figurines. So they're products of these forces of domination.

I've talked to you before about how, when I'm meditating, the ancestors come out. This is not necessarily a comfort. What if your ancestors are fucking scary? Sometimes I think, How can I even sit here with these top hats inside of me? Angry little men who I should probably have more empathy for. What I realized is that I have no choice. Whatever I'm doing, I'm doing it with the top hats inside of me.

I can't choose to be empty with a tulip head. Making the piece showed me that. I can't go to the temple and pretend I'm a good person or just be quiet so they don't find out I'm a bad person. I have to go there as myself.

LB: Thinking about ancestry is like contemplating the unknown. I feel like, through our work, we are accessing the unknown.

Even though we both work in a way that allows for a more visceral encounter for the viewer, where their feelings can guide their understanding, it's important to let the viewer know that they're on the right track. It's important to be transparent.

EE: They want to know about the person making the art—I get where they're coming from. I noticed that in myself yesterday, when we were learning about Luchita. I was like, Actually, I needed this video about her in the exhibition. It wasn't her art, but it allowed us to understand the artist on a social level. It was also beautiful. Art is made by people.

LB: It helps knowing. It provides a new vantage point for understanding the work, which is always helpful.

EE: The viewer needs to figure out how they can relate, partly, to the maker. When I look at anonymous art, that's something I'm also trying to do. Sometimes it's worth clueing people in. Eduardo wrote a beautiful wall text for *Released Spirit (Sturdy Susan)*, where he borrowed language from my mom's obituary. The work's title is a play on words—my mom's name was Susan Sturdy, and the center of the flower is a tabletop that looks a bit like a lazy Susan. It was kind of intense to share my grief through a wall text, but if there's one thing people should probably know about me, it's that. And if my audience is grieving people—that's a huge audience, that's everyone.

LB: You're right; grief is something we all share.

One reason I go to the movies with friends so much is because I love unpacking the movie after, either with them or with people I run into later. You quickly realize everyone has their own understanding of what it is that we just watched. We all have specific and unique understandings, but these understandings are based on universal experiences, like grief. And sharing these understandings is where it gets really productive.

EE: That's where ideas come from.

LB: Sometimes I have to remind myself to articulate, really force myself to use words and describe things, because very often I just sublimate all of my thoughts through painting. (*laughter*)

EE: That's a highly developed skill.

LB: When you're developing this skill, it makes you bad at talking.

EE: That's completely true. I think you've just got to give yourself permission to do it anyway. I realized this year that whatever I do is literally the best I can do, whether it's good or bad.

LB: Giving yourself permission is part of the process. When you push through long enough, paintings can open up. You just have to trust that.

Something that I think about a lot is how being an artist is inherently foolish. You have this sort of inflated idea that people care about how you feel and see the world. But it's actually that foolishness that allows us to trust that things will work out.

EE: Totally. I've been thinking a lot about my high school printmaking teacher, Miklos Pogany. One time a kid asked him, "Why do people make art?" He said, "Because they want to be loved." I think being motivated by wanting to be understood and appreciated is not something to denigrate. I think everybody deserves that, actually.

LB: It's life's purpose, honestly.

opposite (top): Lucy Bull, *12:35*, 2024, oil on canvas, 100 × 76 × 1 inches. Photo by Elon Schoenholz. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery.

opposite (bottom): Elizabeth Englander, *Released Spirit (Sturdy Susan)*, 2024, wood, paint, and clogs, 13 × 33 × 33 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Theta, New York City.