

LARKIN DUREY



ANDREW MAUGHAN

THE GREAT DIVIDE

31 MAY - 21 JUNE 2024

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A Road to Nowhere

An Essay by Matt Carey-Williams published to accompany *The Great Divide*, by Andrew Maughan

May, 2024

CHAPTER ONE : The Great Assassin

As every divided kingdom falls, so every mind divided between many studies confounds and saps itself.

Leonardo da Vinci, no source.

Any number of actions or agents can inflict debilitating schism upon a place, its people, or their pillars of belief. Weather, wars or alternative Weltanschauungen: all these enzymes of mischief have the propensity to shift the balance of presence and, by extension, empower surrogate readings of a past now made redundant which subsequently governs a labyrinth of different outcomes for a future made more malleable and manipulable than ever before. So it is that division wormholes across time and space because of various catalysts – villains, vicissitudes, and vortices alike – recalibrating hitherto unquestioned epistemologies of experience through the assonance of regeneration on the one hand, and the dissonance of erasure on the other.

Enter 'The Great Assassin'. The flocculent, masked necromancer of several nefarious arts that prickles across landscapes of terror and terroir in the paintings of Andrew Maughan. Our protagonist oozes a dark, perplexing perversity, made even more profound and problematic by his depicted and repeated engagement in the most mundane or naïve of actions. This latest exhibition sees Maughan's anti-hero make manifest such routine (yet spooky) humdrum with a simple road trip. Our 'Great Assassin', a rendition seen often in abbreviation, forcing our eyes on the road ahead, sometimes smoking a cigarette, stopping only to build a bonfire that lights up the desert's bitumen night. It's all so inane - so delightfully and ironically comic-strip – and yet this easy, almost diagrammatic delineation of arcs so wantonly ordinary harbours secrets that are anything but.

Maughan's figure – and especially their moments of visual contraction – throws the viewer into orbits of doubt and anxiety, momentarily cursed with some kind of visual and indexical prosopagnosia, because we cannot get beyond the mask. This cuts the first divide between subject and object; between presence and absence. The assassin's dense, black, furry hood betrays nothing yet interrogates its viewer with a kind of abject absurdity born of a metonymic coagulation of several sinister streams of Signification, swirling around art, film, and history. The second divide thus emerges, one that both splits yet strangely melds the known with the unknown, whispered by the past yet still corrupting the certainty of futures. The monstrous, magnetic confrontation of Edvard Munch's *The Murderer* (1910, Oslo, Munch Museum) spills into the ideogrammatic infantilisation, of both design and definition, of Maughan's figure, equally echoing Sydney Nolan's Ned Kelly paintings, and which serve us this ineluctable fidget and foreboding that throb before our eyes - beating under the assassin's mask, getting under our skin - much in the same way that Philip Guston's hooded Klansmen works breed both panic and folly.

The Great Assassin is the actor who always owns centre stage even when they do not physically occupy that space. They are the sign that resists its thirsty transmogrification into signifier with the hooded mask – inspired, as it is, by the 'Zodiac' serial killer and, specifically, the police sketch of the outfit he made for himself and wore when killing his victims – betraying an innate Phallic power-play as Index, unveiling an ordinarily veiled vocabulary of violence, phobia and transgression at odds with the simplicity of its Image, which, of course, speaks so clearly to the extravagant savagery of our contemporary experience. One scarred by war; confused by the irrational; plagued by ambiguity.

So it is that Maughan's frightening yet curiously seductive figure masks our fear of the truth even as he unmask the very truth of the fear we're all trying to speed away from. That fear – this division - is the fear of the 'other': cauterized in binaries of Left and Right; Democrat and Republican; West and East, burning chasms of antagonism across planes and plains of thought and action which cause the great division Maughan's exhibition seeks to unpick. Faults articulated compositionally and geologically but which truly cut to the quick when considered politically and culturally. Our protagonist, then, is our chauffeur whisking us off to lands we think we know, but don't. Into what look like sunrises of hope, but which could so easily be understood as sunsets of dereliction and doom. The Great Divide is upon us; it's time to buckle up as our Great Assassin takes us on a journey through 'scapes dazzling in Hollywood's neon chroma, beating to a distinctly American visual twang of eruption and disruption, as we await the flash of their inexorable encounter and competition.

CHAPTER TWO : A slice of Americana

'Sal, we gotta go and never stop going 'till we get there.'

'Where we going, man?'

'I don't know but we gotta go.'

Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957).

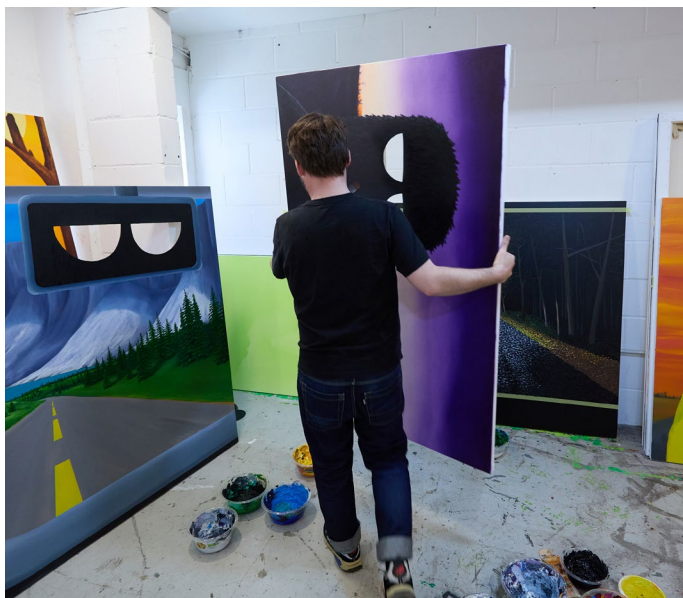
The notion of 'The Great Divide' trickles through several tributaries of American culture, cutting across disciplines as various as geology, politics, literature, and music. The term is often used when referring to the continental divide of the Americas or the oft recalled conflict between George Washington and Thomas Jefferson over various issues including foreign policy, the Presidency, and the very durability of the Union which they had both fought so hard to win, but which wobbles ideologically today. An album by Willie Nelson (2002) and songs by George Jones with Tammy Wynette (1972) and, separately, Neil Young (2000) have the title *The Great Divide* whilst William Vaughan Moody wrote his celebrated play – a drama that focussed on the clash between puritanism and individualism (the same as it ever was, to paraphrase David Byrne) – with the same title in 1907.



The theatre in which the drama of Maughan's road trip plays itself out is, of course, his take on the great American West and the various monuments of natural beauty that ornament the landscape of that part of the country. One moment we are zooming through Utah's Valley of the Gods Loop, the next we're rushing past various buttes one finds in Montana or Wyoming. Nearly all the paintings in the exhibition serve up the same sense of rugged, romantic vastness that the 'Great American West' is so renowned for. Maughan's interest in this specific landscape is, however, less propelled by an interest in geology or geography but driven more by the mythos and bathos such terrain inspires, which, of course, is then consciously capsized by its interrogation of and intervention with Maughan's deadly assassin.

As with much of Maughan's work, many of the paintings in the exhibition possess a cinematographic vim; the viewing experience transformed from merely looking at a picture to now going to the pictures. Wide screen; surround sound; Panavision; Technicolor: this is how Maughan presents his narrative and, in turn, how that colours the viewer's optics and haptics with the work. One can't help but hear notes of *Thelma and Louise* (1991) and *Easy Rider* (1969) sounded not just in the landscape but, importantly, in the clear, straight road that cuts through it. Always the road that, in those films and in these paintings, provides our hope for the future. Add to that the serial-killing protagonists in films like *Badlands* (1973) or *No Country For Old Men* (2007) and the road eventually – inevitably – runs out, like time, like hope, and thus prefigures a typically grisly but profound denouement. Sitting in the back of the car, we're hoping for the former; driving in the front, the Great Assassin knows the latter.

The great divide here, then, purrs in the anticipation of the space Maughan has delivered: one which unfurls – Wizard of Oz like – a journey through a highly sentimentalised, familiar landscape made more exotic still through a vibrant, prismatic saturation but one which we know – and cannot ignore – ends so badly for the victim. That oscillation between sunny optimism and hazy pessimism; between peppy innocence and the sardony of experience is clearly delineated and directed by Maughan’s road carving its way through the American landscape. The road now that fine line between what is and what could be, between tenets and tensions of lefts and rights. A line that both shapes and then veers between such polar opposites but never fails to keep going. Kerouac’s Sal may not know where he’s going on the road, he just knows he’s gotta go, just as we may not know the answers to some of the world’s most pressing problems, other than we know we gotta answer them.



CHAPTER THREE : A Road to Nowhere

Well, we know where we’re goin’
 But we don’t know where we’ve been
 And we know what we’re knowin’
 But we can’t say what we’ve seen

And we’re not little children
 And we know what we want
 And the future is certain
 Give us time to work it out

Talking Heads, *Road to Nowhere* (1985, written by David Byrne, Tina Weymouth, Jerry Harrison and Chris Franz)

I like to think our Great Assassin is listening to Talking Heads’ greatest hits in his car: *Psycho Killer*, *Burning Down the House* and, of course, *Road to Nowhere*; David Byrne’s paean to regret and his reminder to us all just how important it is for us to carve out our paths, even if we can’t see where it eventually takes us. There’s a city in everyone’s mind – that psychedelic Xanadu of promise – that we’re all – even Maughan’s lethal executioner – desperate to get to. The problem is that place called Nowhere is, like Oz, like the edge of the canyon before Thelma and Louise, the end of the world and it’s an end that, right now, adumbrates no meaning other than its own cruel absence.

Maughan’s slice through the signifying tropes and coda of America (as landscape, political machine, and idea) is only so that he can reveal just how hairy the journey is and how futile the destination (and our desire for it) ultimately proves to be. His compositional recipe, not unlike Warhol’s determination for seriality, remains steadfast as Maughan’s body of work narrates our shared journey to the abyss of absurdity: a space where notions of aggressor and victim; hope and fear become oblique. The mountainous landscape and the eventide gloaming inspiring awe and cliché in equal measure. The road always ahead yet always diminishing. The gloved hand (an image purloined from a thousand horror movies) casually clutching the steering wheel but not without a whiff of leathery menace. And the Great Assassin’s eyes, literally lacerated from the canvas, haunting the viewer as Hitchcockian reflections in a rear-view mirror. The hegemony and horror of the hairy mask and hidden face not abandoned but now cut and condensed down to just one solitary empty stare. Staring not at the hallucinogenic landscape but at us, the viewer, pointing us so adamantly to a geography of fear that, as much as we believe we know and can remedy, remains unheard, unseen, and unforgiven. And if that doesn’t speak to the madness of rent and rift our world is in the throes of right now then nothing does. Maughan’s road to Nowhere most certainly does.

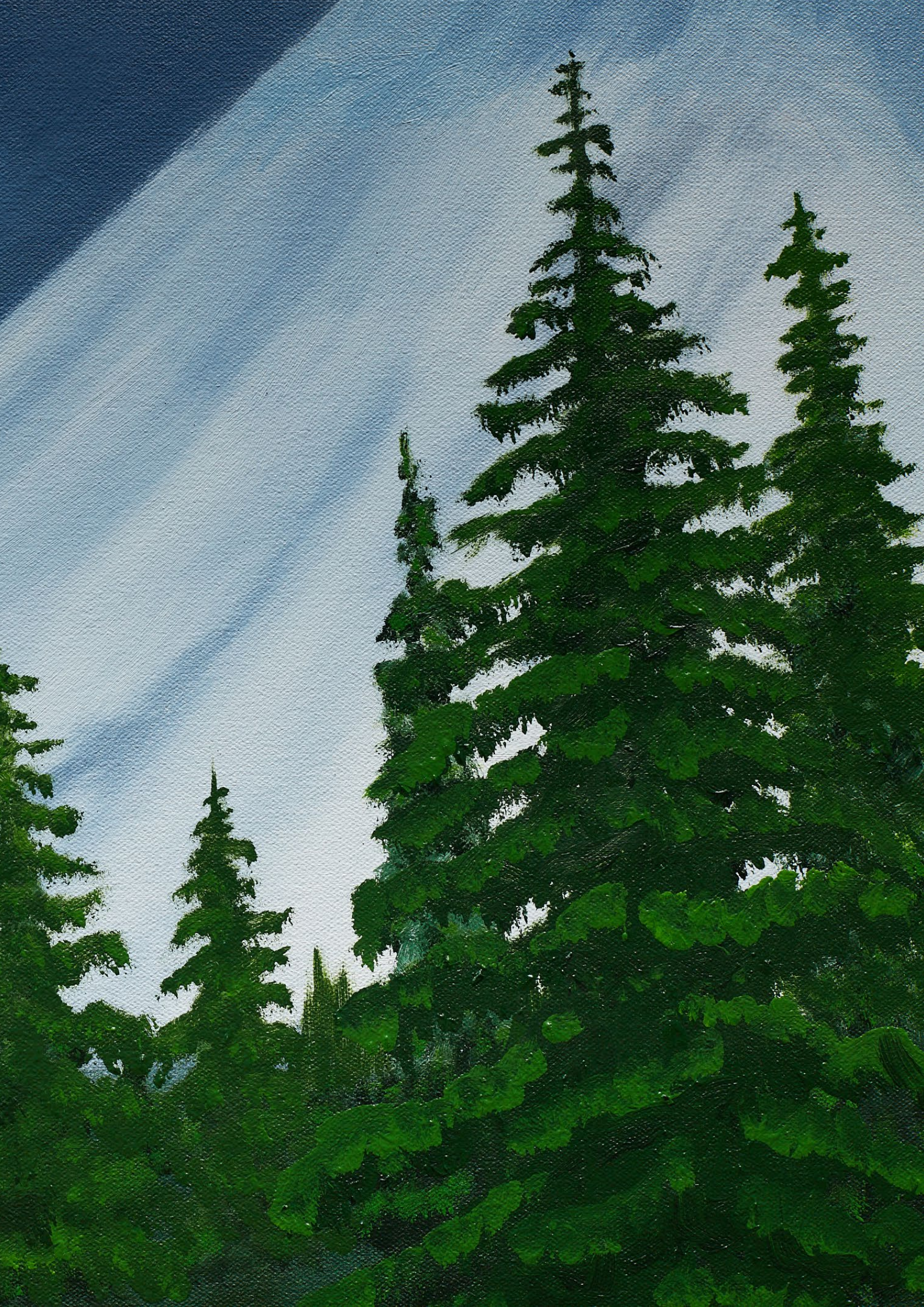
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IMMOVABLE OBJECTS, 2024

Oil on canvas
58 1/4 x 72 7/8 in
148 x 185 cm
(03230)





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DETOUR, 2024

Oil on canvas
58 1/4 x 72 7/8 in
148 x 185 cm
(03231)





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BIG SKY, 2024

Oil on canvas
58 1/4 x 72 7/8 in
148 x 185 cm
(03232)





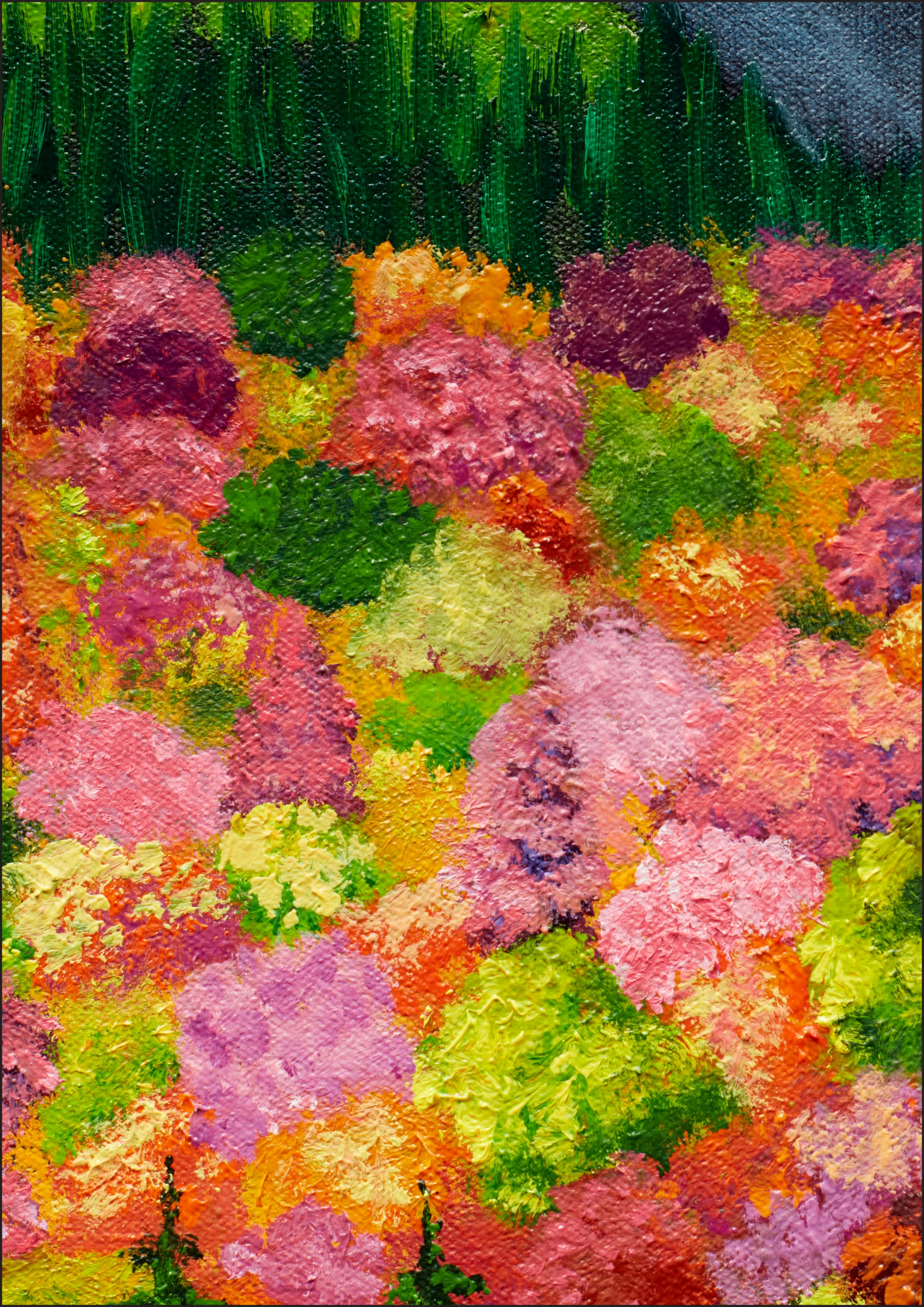
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THE GREAT DIVIDE, 2024

Oil on canvas
58 1/4 x 72 7/8 in
148 x 185 cm
(03233)





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THE STRANGER, 2024

Oil on canvas
39 3/8 x 59 in
100 x 150 cm
(03234)





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COLD LIGHT, 2024

Oil on canvas
55 1/8 x 44 1/8 in
140 x 112 cm
(03235)





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FURTHER INFORMATION

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COLOPHON

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