

Martyn Cross

All The Things You Have Been

“It’s funny what makes up an artist’s brain,” says Martyn Cross. I’m talking to the artist in his studio in Bristol about *Soft Radiant*, *Half Buried*, the exhibition he curated this year at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York. I explain how surprised I was by the inclusion of works like David Altmejd’s *The Comets* (2025), a hypnotic, rhinestone-studded half-bust sculpture of a male torso splitting into three. It seemed so different, at first glance, from the work Cross typically makes: paintings suffused with an ancient strangeness, awesome and goofy as a hill figure. Their textures appear less made than unearthed, seeming to belong less to the present than a world of wattle and daub, raw ochre, chalk and woad. I half-imagined walking into the studio to be met with a cowled monk.

What I do find in the studio are four dead frogs, pressed like flowers (some Cross collected, others have been given to him) and a wall of postcards, layered thickly like a mulch of fallen leaves: saints, stone-work, waterfalls, Hilma af Klimt and Piero della Francesca. What grows from this fertile mix, Cross explains, is what all his work is about—that is, recording the emanations from an ongoing, organic aggregation of stimuli. Like spring water that passes through rocks, absorbing their minerals and changing its flavour—or, Cross offers, “like a filter coffee where it’s just like everything goes in and drips through.” “In the past six months I’ve seen this stuff, I’ve read this stuff, I’ve listened to this stuff, and this is what is coming out of my head right now. It’s just what comes into my head at the point I’m drawing.”

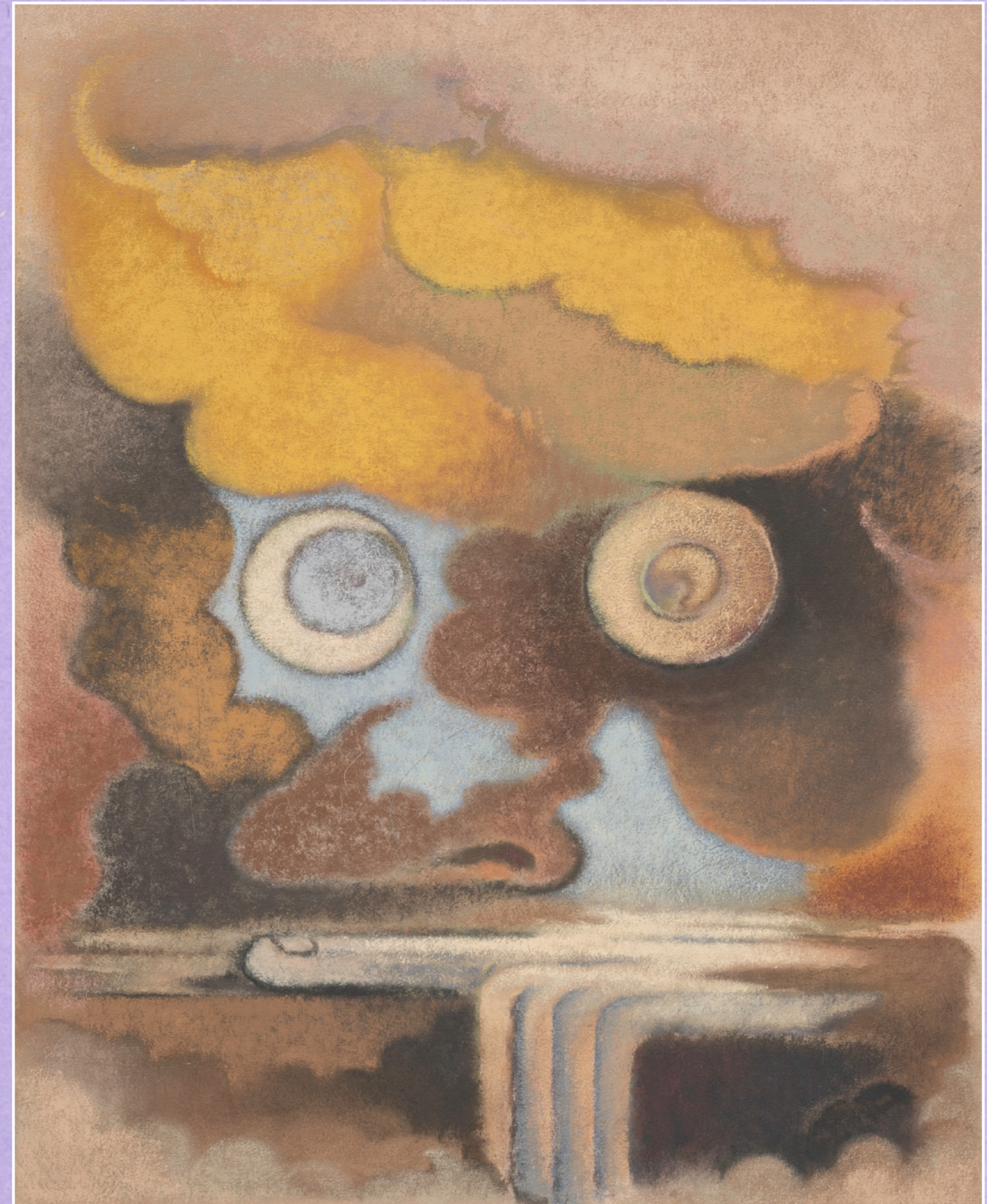
Some examples of these drawings are pinned to the wall in the studio—simple, unshaded lines jotted down, sometimes in pencil, mostly in charcoal. These are never direct observations, Cross says, but pure ideas—they have the spontaneous natural, idle ease of a doo-

A sleepy shifting logic takes root: clouds become brains.

die. (For a moment, I hesitate to use the word, fearing its derogatory connotations, but Cross confirms: “They’re absolutely doodles.”) They remind me sometimes of the fantastical, bawdy happenings—a rabbit riding a lion to a joust, a man surrendering to a snail, a disembodied hand, fingers long and limp as noodles, pointing at key parts of the text—that appear in medieval manuscripts as marginalia. The kind of free association that flows in a state of distraction. Cross began drawing a as a child growing up in Yate, a town 12 miles from Bristol, which was “just houses,” he says: “The sort of place where you have to make your own fun.” After art school in Bath, he worked in the town for two years as a postman—which is one way to really get to know an environment, and really get bored of it. When I ask him about where he feels his paintings are located, he grants that they “may be kind of aspirational in a way”—that is, a sort of scape—“relating to a place that is potentially not a city.”

Cross’s drawings are generally small, perhaps a hangover from when he made Christmas and birthday cards as a child, but also reflecting their spontaneity, made in notebooks or stray sheets of paper or card. At some stage, he finds a drawing that speaks to him and begins to translate it into a painting. Sometimes a bigger drawing is scaled down, but most often a smaller drawing gets scaled up. This warping of scale is paralleled by a warping of time—from the “quick thing” of the drawing, comes the “really slow laborious task” of painting.

Cross has been working with oil paint since 2017, learning its tricks himself: discovering a red that is both red enough and dull enough, for example (the solution lies in grasping the difference between Winsor & Newton’s Bright Dull Red and Winsor & Newton’s Dull Bright Red). There’s something I find gleefully perverse in using a medium that usually lends itself to lushness and glossy finish to create paintings that so often look chalk pale, as if the colours have been sieved to their bare essence. He



Let Us Go Hence, 2022, oil on canvas, 101.5 × 81.5 × 2.2 cm



applies oil with a mostly dry brush, but using the flat length of the brush, not the stipples — “just dragging it across the surface, stroking it with a dryness.” He moves between paintings to allow these layers to dry, often working on as many as 15 different paintings at once. Cross says hues emerge through the drying of these layers — he doesn’t blend as he paints, letting the extremely subtle layers of colour do that work instead. This process is open to unexpected occurrences, mistakes, resolutions.

“The drawing side is where the image comes from,” he adds, but “the paintings are about the mechanics of painting.” Mechanics not as a rote process of perfection, but something altogether mysterious. “Something happens on here and on there that becomes magical. It becomes something that is like, I don’t know, it’s almost unexplainable.” Recently, Cross has started adding layers of gesso, sometimes scratching into this surface to create crackly marks, like blisters in the glaze on a pot. Sometimes he’ll add shop-bought sand to a layer to “give it some tooth.” “The surface has to operate in a certain way,” and when that happens, the painting is on the right track.

Perhaps it’s because of this emergent palimpsest of texture — smooth like a worn bench, scratchy like a piece of idle graffiti on a stone column — that Cross’s paintings remind me so much of church murals. Or perhaps it’s because of the way they seem to tell legends I can’t full grasp the narrative of. Cross says his interest in mediaeval paintings and how he works “kind of just developed together”, rather than one generating the other. He periodically undertakes a “medieval painting pilgrimage,” as documented on an Instagram account of the same name. For one trip in 2023, he produced a T-shirt recording all the churches he visited, like merch for a band’s arena tour. Cross describes the tour as a “very condensed amount of looking. I think I saw like 25 churches in in about five days.”

Sometimes painting can get a bit too big for its boots.

One thing Cross finds in these churches, is “this kind of weird juxtaposition” — of something profound and revered, like an ancient painting, “but then right next to that, you can have wires and sockets and a bin bag and some Nescafé coffee.” There is a similar sense of — anticlimax? bathos? — in Cross’s paintings, when an event as awesome as sunrise also becomes a moment to stare up someone’s nostrils (*Eternity Trunk*, 2024) or gaze at the face shining out of a tonsured monk’s bald spot (*Humming from all Quarters*, 2024). “Sometimes painting can get a bit too big for its boots”, Cross reflects. “It’s nice to be able to just bring it down a peg or two and play around with silly things as much as those things that can be revered.”

The other thing that church-going grants Cross is a sense of place. “It’s about the experience of these things [...] There are some places that you would go into, and you would absolutely sense something. You’d feel something.” Perhaps, he wonders, it’s because “these spaces are so old, many people come through them that there’s this energy within them.” In any case, he would agree with the writer Russell Hoban that: “The air is different in different places; it is the local atmosphere, the medium through which pass the history of the place and the ideas there indwelling.”

A postcard on Cross’s wall depicts one particular place: the nave of Canterbury Cathedral, where a massive mural depicting the apocryphal legend of Saint Eustache was painted around 1480. It was an encounter with this same painting that inspired Hoban’s magnum opus, *Riddley Walker* (1980). The novel, which tells the story of the title character as he progresses through a regressed society in post-nuclear England, was a “light bulb moment” for Cross when he first read it. He’s returned to it several times since; having worked for many years as a bookseller, Cross is more avid a reader than some — than me, at least.





easy left

OF OIL
AND EARTH

Dandy Duster

Worlds Best
PAINTER

Martyn

STOP LOOKING AT
YOUR PHONE

Ray Sarryhaen*

EVOLUTIONEN

PAD SET

FEARLESS

XL FRAME
8 1/2 x 12 1/2
OUTSTANDING

776



Hoban wrote *Riddley Walker* in a unique dialect, which reads a bit like Chaucerian Middle English, with loanwords that have half-survived from modern times (an archbishop is an *Ardship*, the Prime Minister is *Pry Mincer*). Part of the novel’s magic is seeing traces of our era poke through into another via this motley language, just as the legend depicted in the painting of Saint Eustache is threaded through the novel in glimpses of the Eusa story—a sort of broken creation myth that is performed via puppet shows. In Cross’s studio, too, there’s a parallel attempt at estranging the present: a series of flags that look straight from a joust in a picture book—but are in fact based on the logos and brand colours of British high street chains, like Greggs and John Lewis.

In one moment early in Hoban’s novel, the titular Riddley addresses his community as the village’s “connexion man”—a sort of shaman-cum-storyteller, whose job is to interpret the meaning of the Eusa story shows. After one performance, Riddley struggles with a vision—where Eusa’s head grows monstrously large, and he sees a darkness beyond darkness. Finally, he exclaims: “Eusa’s hed is dreaming us!” In the novel, no one understands the statement, including Riddley himself (“so every 1 wer lef hanging. Me and all”). But it seems to convey a specific kind of panpsychism, a belief not just that mind is throughout the universe, but that the universe is mind.

The notion that we are moving through a dream we are part of—a world that lives in some mystic being’s head—resonates throughout Cross’s works. In these inner landscapes, a sleepy, shifting logic takes root: clouds become brains; a giant, its head a shining moon, laps at the sea like a cat; a web of wormy tunnels forms a figure, crouching under the soil. For all their oddness, there is a sense of deep harmony in these pictures. Everything seems made of the same, dreamy stuff. And because of this, it can change—fluidly, growing, shrinking, shifting from

the landscape. It was such a steep climb and felt like I was gonna die several times.” At the summit, “I was alone, there’s no one else around, all I’ve got is insects buzzing, birds tweeting and the sound of my breath. I felt like I was that that I was walking in.” The pure bliss of this oneness, the humming intensity of it, was interrupted, after 40 minutes, by a barking dog off-leash, as a feeling of oneness with nature also reminds us of the particularity of our experience—that the only person who will ever experience something so vast and eternal through these eyes, ears, nostrils, fingers—is you. The outside reminds us of how much we are inside, ourselves, always.

I think the words I’m looking for are Wallace Steven’s, from “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” (1921):

“I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.” §

They are pure ideas, they have the spontaneous natural, idle ease of a doodle.

form to another according to its own, ungraspable logic, as a wasp eventually becomes a fig, or a seed a tree.

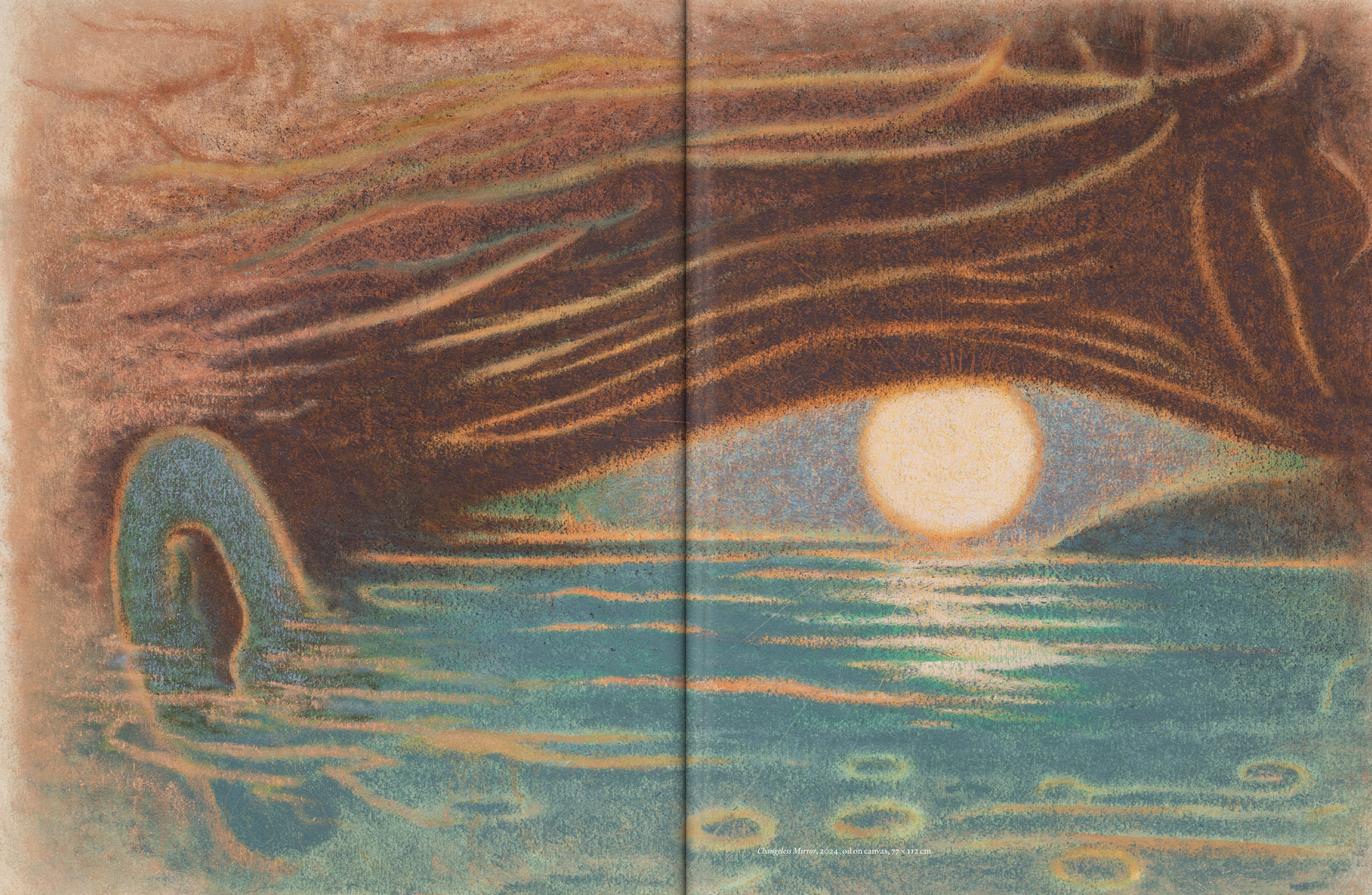
It’s “the interconnectedness that everything is,” Cross says. As we talk, he pulls out his phone to read from another literary text, this time the 14th century bardic Welsh poem *Cad Goddeu* or *The Battle of the Trees*: “I’ve been born in many shapes before I attained a congenial form / I’ve been in a narrowblade of sword / I’ve been a drop in the air, a shiny star, been a word in a book / I’ve been a book originally.” “That for me, is just like describing the fact that you have been *everything*,” says Cross. “That’s what I would say is what my paintings are about. As far as I can describe them at all.”

At 50, Cross has been many things: a postman, a painter, a reader, a father, a little-known artist and a recognised one. Each of his “assembled selves” (to borrow the title of his 2023 exhibition at Flatland Projects in Hastings) is shuffled together, like strata in a fragment of rock. The words he cites from *Cad Goddeu* point to a deeper history still, a kind of cellular memory, in which the oxygen, carbon and calcium that make up our bodies carry the traces of their other lives: as water, as plankton, as rock, as ash.

We are all this stuff, and yet we are also ourselves, uniquely. However much we try to share, one person’s inner life remains, on some level, ultimately impenetrable to another—as a fox’s mind is to a fish.

It’s gloriously ridiculous to be so part of the world and so separate from it. Funny, perhaps. Lonely too. Cross describes a recent residency he undertook with the Roberts Institute of Art in Scotland, when he “spent so long just walking around and taking in the landscape.” He recalls one walk to Loch Brandy, 2,000 feet above sea level above Glen Clova in Angus. “I have to use that awful word, ‘immersed’, because I was immersed in





Changeless Mirror, 2024, oil on canvas, 77 × 112 cm