

# FIGURE

A pink-toned photograph of a person's face and hand, with the word 'FIGURE' overlaid in large white letters. The person's hand is raised to their face, and there are some red lines or marks on their skin. The background is black.

*conversation with* **GEORGE ROUY**  
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*Stutter*, Acrylic on canvas, 56 × 46 cm, 2017.



*Flirting*, Acrylic on canvas, 225 × 300 cm, 2018.

**MARCO GALVAN** *in conversation with*  
**GEORGE ROUY**

**MG**

What was your first approach to art and how did you start painting?

**GR**

I've always painted really. My parents were very supportive in anything I wanted to do and they gave me incredible confidence in feeling I could pursue art. Maybe at first you start getting into art because you really love it or maybe, like for me, art was the most accessible way of communicating when I was at school. Teachers really liked me; I often used to stay after school and received their praise for my drawings. Then you naturally look back and realise you loved it and you were actually good at it, so subconsciously this gives you a strong level of confidence that pushes you to follow that path.

I studied painting at Camberwell College of Arts in London and in that period of time, I

think it was around 2012, painting wasn't the trendiest thing to be doing, especially figurative painting. Now that it has evolved and become prominent again, people engage in it and take it very seriously. When I left university it took me a little bit of time to find my way and understand what direction I wanted to take. I started to look at the figures, look at paintings and how I felt my position would be within that.

At a certain point, I realised that I had to strip back all the stylised idea of figurative painting. I tried to bring back an approach that was more a child-like and naive, with a lot of exaggerated features and without trying too hard to be canonic, even though I was getting a lot of inspiration from old masters.

As I started to get more and more into this approach, it naturally became more sophisticated and acquired a more mature connotation. A good example for that would be the show "Squeeze Hard Enough It Might Just Pop!" I did at Hannah Barry Gallery two years ago; I exhibited a series of paintings where red was a dominant colour and full of symbolism, the figures linked in hands and the focus was purely on the body as a way of saying something, taking away the clutter to put the stress on the figure.

Linking up to the show now, I would say it has been a continuation of that approach, but in some ways, there has been a reduction of how much information I'm putting out there within each painting.

**MG**

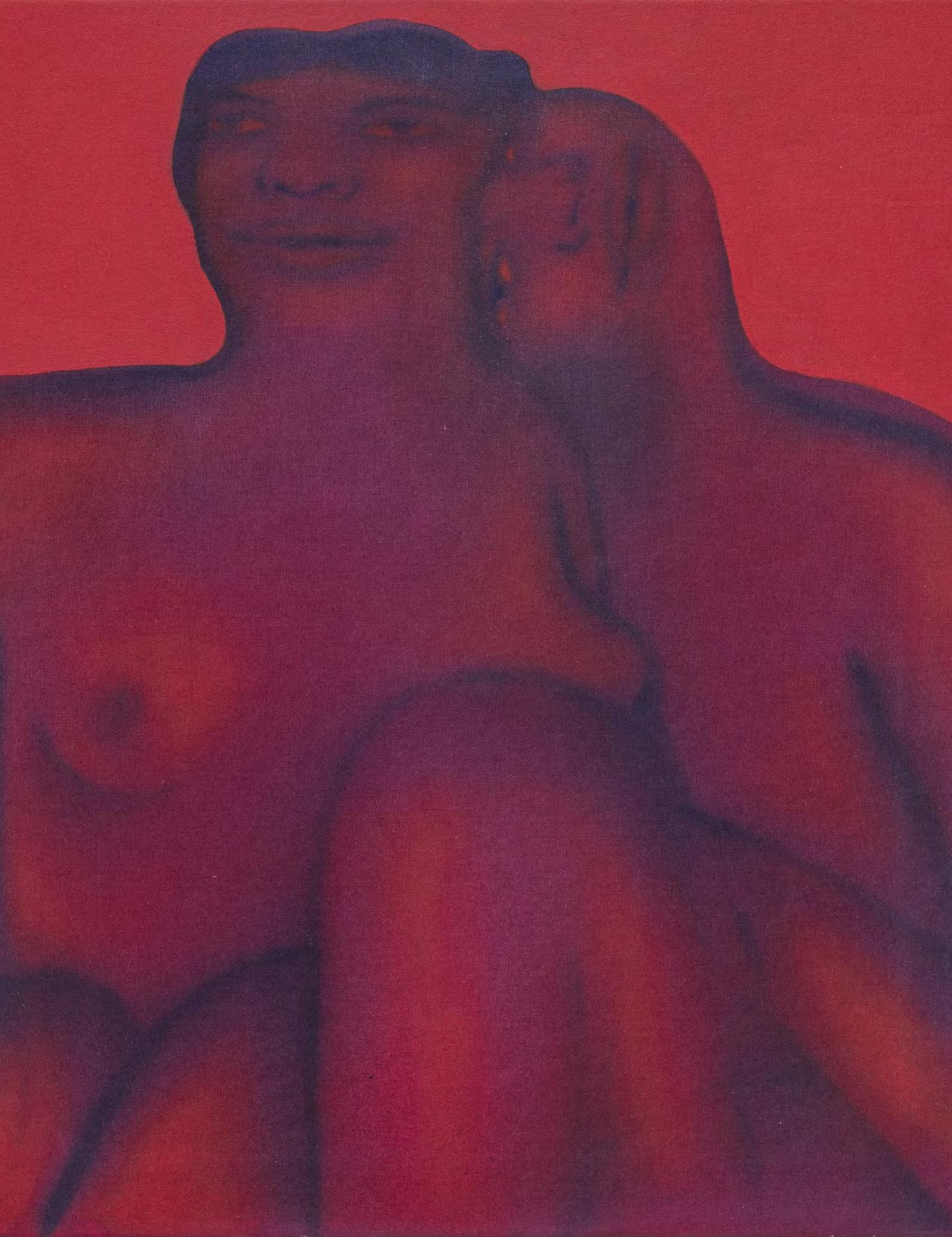
Your paintings are frequently composed of bodies that subvert and congeal anatomies, seduce one another with gormless, erotic stares and evoke a primordial energy. Can you tell us more about your visual language and how it developed?

**GR**

It was something I was looking at while I was at



*Comfort in Silence*, Acrylic on canvas, 250 × 180 cm, 2020.



*Lovers in Red*, Acrylic on canvas, 56 × 46 cm, 2018.



*Day Sleeping*, Acrylic on canvas, 180 × 225 cm, 2020.

university. I loved artists such as Chris Ofili, or Peter Doig, the classics—great painters. I know my work is very different from Chris Ofili's, but I've always been really drawn to the way he's looking at the figure. There's a certain beauty in the way he represents and chooses his subjects, an allure of mystery and magic within all his paintings. I'm really into the political themes related to his work.

While I was studying at Camberwell, I struggled to find what I was trying to say, what I was talking about, the reason why I was painting those figures ... because if it doesn't mean anything, what's the significance?

Overtime I learned to roll with it and I slowly started to see the direction I wanted to take, talking about emotions and provoking feelings and reactions rather than evoking a specific narrative. That's where my work situates itself: it's less about narratives and more about emotions, akin to life. I also like seeing a component of abstract. Although there's a tangible figure, it's a figure that works within an abstract setting.

**MG**

The seductive rendering of form and shape in your work generate almost sculptural bodies within a dream-like atmosphere. How important is the body in your work and do you have particular models? How do you choose the background and the setting of your subjects,?

**GR**

That is something that develops just as a thing itself. I think it's because, through doing a lot of paintings, you realise what you like and you don't like. I realised that when you take that space away from the painting, and take that setting out, the weight, the ground, everything, it adds such a symbolic feel to it.

Whereas as soon as I ground the work, or ground the figures, they take on different relationships. I have done it before, I have put the



*Between the Thighs*, Acrylic on canvas, 180 × 140 cm, 2020.



*Open Wide*, Acrylic on canvas, 56 × 46 cm, 2017.



*Dance*, Acrylic on canvas, 210 × 270 cm, 2020.

figures in settings, but I just think that everything becomes too cluttered. It sidetracks you from how the painting is supposed to be, becoming too illustrative as well as too representational.

**MG**

The figures in such a flat and monochrome setting create this rarefied atmosphere that is quite timeless. Could those figures exist anywhere in time and space? Did you consciously reach that effect or did it come naturally within your practice?

**GR**

I think it is conscious because they need to represent the time that we're in or they are made in, so I believe this comes naturally. What I really hope is that my paintings could exist in different periods, different times and they would still fit, have the same impact, have the same amount of effect, without just getting lost within time.

In fifty years, if you look at the elements in my paintings they'd still stimulate the same areas of feelings, still provoking questions in the same way. Everything is made within time so there's always an element of history attached to it, but you can still look at certain historical paintings and be overwhelmed by them. Over time, you look at those paintings and you discover something new or you watch them with different eyes ... you never get bored with those.

**MG**

Your last show at Hannah Barry Gallery, "Clot", presents a new body of work where you focus on the body as "a form of magic, meeting place or interstition; wounded, aberrant and enthralled." How important is the body in your work and do you have particular models? How do you decide the poses of the figures that you paint?

**GR**

Pose is something that I'm drawn to a lot. Poses are quite interesting because, when looking at a painting, there's always a natural intuition for the viewer on how it would feel to do that movement or to assume that pose. When I design the



*Dance to Death*, Acrylic on canvas, 150 × 120 cm, 2017.



*Tower*, Acrylic on canvas, 56 × 46 cm, 2017.



work it's always based on that feeling, rather than looking too much at poses as they are and being too literal.

Also, regarding poses, there is always a fine line between becoming too literal, too illustrative and pursuing that mission to find the beauty that distorts all that, or exaggerates it. If a painting becomes too one way, too ugly, it loses its friction, it needs to vibrate within that fine line and act within two realms.

**MG**

The figures in your paintings are most of the time taking control of the whole canvas space, contorting and adapting to its confines. What role does space play within the content of your work?

**GR**

It is so important. Considering the areas around the figures as a non-space, space really does influence the balance of the painting. The space in the background doesn't need to be decorative, but at the same time it has to complement the figure, because that's what you're supposed to be looking at. I spend a lot of time just working that out, I set my own rules to create a harmony on how the two "spaces" occupy the canvas: it becomes like a very balanced abstract painting, I think it's the same kind of approach, in the way you arrange those areas of space and focus on them.

The way marks lead your eye to various areas of the canvas is the same way in which the space behind figures articulates the perception of the painting. But it should be quite effortless for the viewer. It's not until that space is there that you realise how important it is because, when you are painting, it's almost chaos. Translating it onto the canvas reduces this chaos and it allows to have a visual space on which to channel it.

**MG**

Your colour palette is characterised by lurid blues, violet, crimson and red. How does colour relate to the narratives and compositions in your works?



*Flatted Nude*, Acrylic on canvas, 224 × 180 cm, 2020.



*In Syn*, Acrylic on canvas, 300 × 251 cm, 2020.



*Monument*, Acrylic on canvas, 300 × 220 cm, 2020.



*Forever*, Acrylic on canvas, 160 × 240 cm, 2017.

**GR**

The palette is a hard one as it's something that I had to really try to work out because I'm not very good with colour. I'm colour blind so I can't see areas of red and green very well, therefore it becomes a lot harder to mix colours to get various tones. In a lot of my works there are not many colours going on; they're always quite monochrome. In a painting you would have a juxtaposition of two colours, mainly, the background one and the figure one.

Every time I do a series, the colour palette tends to be quite restricted as well, I usually use around five colours, five that mix and match to create a whole series. For instance, for this show "Clot" at Hannah Barry, I made a massive use of black, and buff titanium: the way these two mix create different tones of grey, some sort of yellow-black, such a powerful tone. I try to limit the palette and keep it simple. Although the pink shades, you see in the canvas are not coming from red, they're coming from the mix between the actual buff titanium and the black, and maybe a bit of earthy brown. It feels like I'm trying to ban colours, but they always come back in there.

**MG**

In relation to colours, your figures are characterised by an apparently defined silhouette juxtaposed to blurry shades, creating an appealing balance between neat and fade, flat and volume. Can you talk about your technique when you paint?

**GR**

The marks and the layers of my painting link together while I'm doing them because they're all different parts of the same journey. When I'm applying paint, I either decide to blur it out or decide to leave it as it is. It's all about giving and taking, being conscious about what marks you want to put down first. For instance, I would start all of these paintings with a blurry layer first, then I'd probably distort that layer with the



*Is this love I'm feeling*, Acrylic on canvas, 270 × 200 cm, 2020.



***Black leather 2***, Acrylic on canvas, 200 × 270 cm, 2020.



*The In Between*, Acrylic on canvas, 270 × 211 cm, 2020.

brush, being a lot more fluid, pouring the paint on to it and dispersing the paint. Then I'd go back and add some more blur, so then the effect is an accumulation of layers.

When it comes to the faces I'd say that they are almost done in one take. I'm always fighting against the idea of things becoming too detailed and explanatory, that's why I only use two brushes, I don't use tiny brushes because then it becomes visually too exhaustive.

**MG**

Looking at a series like *Coast of the sun* or the painting that you exhibited at J Hammond Projects for the show "In Dirty Water", your figures are placed in natural environments, with water as a recurring element in some of them. What's the role of nature in your work and how does nature relate to the characters depicted in your paintings?

**GR**

I approach nature in the same way I approach the figures. From doing a horse, an animal or doing a plant, they all have the same presence, they occupy the same non-space within the canvas. I'm really into nature, and particularly its symbolic part.

**MG**

Talking about symbolism, some of your paintings present animals, objects, water, a bleeding finger ... I'm thinking about *Vanity* or *Stutter* for example. Is there a component of symbolism behind these elements?

**GR**

When I painted *Vanity* I realised I had really started to find my place. It was very early in the journey. I think within the whole area of work where I started using symbols like the frog and the shell I was very much looking at symbolism, looking at gestures, looking at the meaning of things, like the swan for example, or the bent neck. Symbolism is present but I wouldn't say that I'm trying to repeat old symbols. There's a personal link to all these elements that you've cited, as well as with all the works. Every work



*Vanity*, Acrylic on canvas, 56 × 46 cm, 2018.



*Squeeze Hard Enough It Might Just Pop!*, Acrylic on canvas, 56 × 46 cm, 2017.

has a hidden bit, that I don't try to over expose.

Blood and bleeding fingers are really important. I find myself revisiting blood a lot. I think I still want to do a lot of paintings around blood, and I'm working out the best routes to do so.

In general, concerning symbolism in my work, nothing is too direct. The work leaves a space for interpretation, purposefully. When the work doesn't, or when it feels like it's just a bit too tight and representative of something specific, it loses something about it, and you don't realise it until the painting is finished.

**MG**

How do you think your work translates to the viewer in solo representation vs in a group show with other artists?

**GR**

When it comes to selecting a work, for a group show for example, you have to find a work that stands well on its own, almost as a presence that says everything that you want to say, like the work exhibited in the group show "No Man is an Island" at Almine Rech Gallery in London, which forms part of the series I'm showing at Hannah Barry Gallery. With Hannah, we picked that specific one because we felt that it was the most direct but also it worked well by itself, having enough mystery, enough of the alluding in the hand gesture, and again representative of that ethos of not overcrowding but reducing.

Whereas, in my solo show "Clot", there are a few paintings we didn't include because we felt we didn't need them and they would have taken away from the impact of the rest altogether. When you're walking around this exhibition, there needs to be a sense of awareness of each painting around you, their own presence, their own identity. I don't want them to seem like a crazy repetition. With the solo show you can take away the pressure off one work and focus on the flow and articulation of



*A Flood*, Made in collaboration with Harley Weir, Framed type C photogram,  
202.5 × 143.5 × 15 cm, 2019.



*Three*, Made in collaboration with Harley Weir, Framed type C photogram,  
202.5 × 143.5 × 15 cm, 2019.

all the artworks' existences.

**MG**

Can you talk about *Blindly Touching the Flood*, the collaborative series you've made with photographer Harley Weir?

**GR**

Harley is my partner, and I really wanted to do a project together. At the beginning, we were doing photograms of each other, some family members and friends all in one room, all dark. Over time, the project has developed its own language and we started to push the process. We took around fifty or sixty photograms and we would put liquid, bodily fluids, eggs, food on it, to see how it would react to the photosensitive paper on the floor. Everything was captured exposing it to an overhead light. The flash of light capturing the body silhouette on the paper has almost like a burnt effect, and the whole process became quite physical and performative.

I think it was a great collaboration also because the subjects of the photos had to do with the figure, so Harley and I met halfway on the same spectrum, one as a photographer and one as a painter. It was also great to have the possibility to show them as a series at the exhibition "Transformer: A Rebirth of Wonder" at 180 The Strand. Working on this project helped me to think about my next paintings, really about the performative aspect of making a work.

**MG**

The peaceful expressions of your figures usually tend to collide with their poses and the colour palette. Is there a tension between sweetness and sadness embodied in your work?

**GR**

Vibration, friction. When I was at university, I was writing my dissertation on how the context can change the idea and perception of a thing or a subject: if you place something in a different context it completely subverts its meaning. I was looking at Yue Minjun, a contemporary Chinese

painter who makes really witty laughing self-portraits. At the time I was really attracted by this approach to conflict, as if the laugh was despair, as a natural human response to events. I have operated a sort of re-evaluation and I have taken this idea to my own figures, trying to limit the amount of emotions on faces, keeping a subtlety. I find that more intriguing.

Essentially, that's where I'm at right now: the body, the space, the whole image, the feelings, the scale, the colours. They almost exist as abstract paintings—their presence as entities overcomes their illustrative nature.



*Sides of Being*, Acrylic on canvas, 250 × 200 cm, 2020.

George Rouy, Figure Figure 2020  
Courtesy of the artist and Hannah Barry Gallery

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