



As The Sparks Fly Upward

Michael Igwe

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LOS ANGELES

Gallery Statement

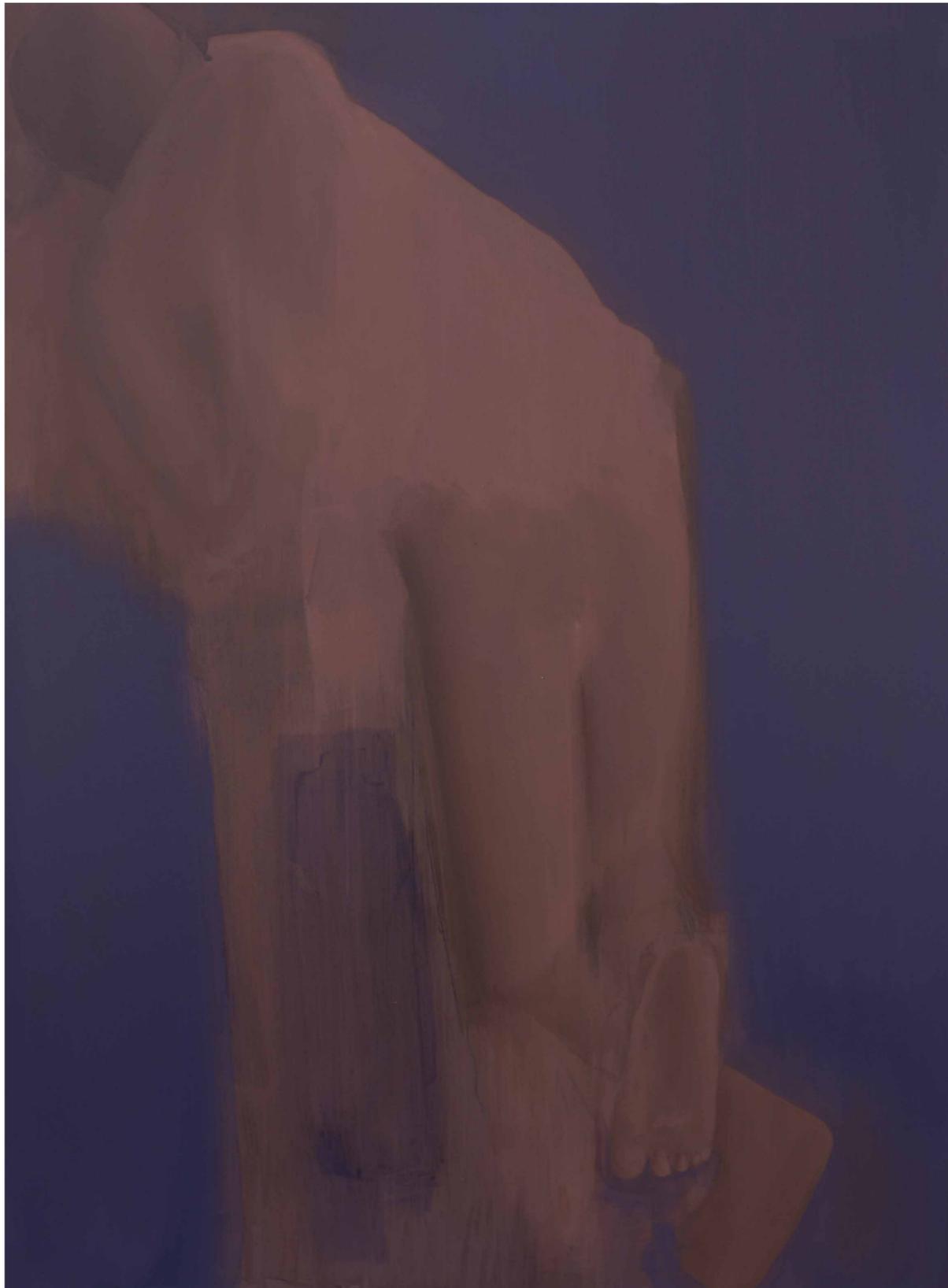
Rele Gallery Los Angeles is pleased to present *As the Sparks Fly Upward* a solo exhibition featuring the works of Lagos-based contemporary artist Michael Igwe. This is Igwe's debut exhibition in the Los Angeles space and will be on view from September 17th 2022 through October 18th 2022.

In *As the Sparks Fly Upward*, Igwe uses paint as a medium to invite his audience to find solace in this often unrelenting world – particularly in Nigeria's unremitting and stifling socio-political climate. His paintings reflect on life's commonalities and complexities. He describes his featured works as a manifestation of “permanence and striving;” striving to make the best with the cards one is dealt amidst the permanence of life's oscillation between challenge and upliftment.

Process is essential to Igwe's practice. He has learned to engage in conversations with his medium, allowing the paint to simultaneously extract from him and absorb him. As a result, he channels powerfully, evocative and intuitively emotive paintings that are emblematic of his surrender to the process. *As the Sparks Fly Upward* speaks to distilled memories and collective existentialism. In this body of work, Igwe compresses moments and experiences into the paintings, pulling from personal experiences as well as his practice of observing people.

This series is a continuation of previous works, showcasing obscure silhouetted figures primarily rendered in hues of dark browns, yellow ochres and merlot reds – a choice initially driven by necessity and accessibility rather than aesthetic. He methodically mixes colors to achieve rich and distinctive shades. His presented works showcase even darker color schemes with the addition of abstract paintings. These abstract works function as extensions to his figurative works, providing nuance to the transmission of his lived experiences while inviting viewers to do the same.

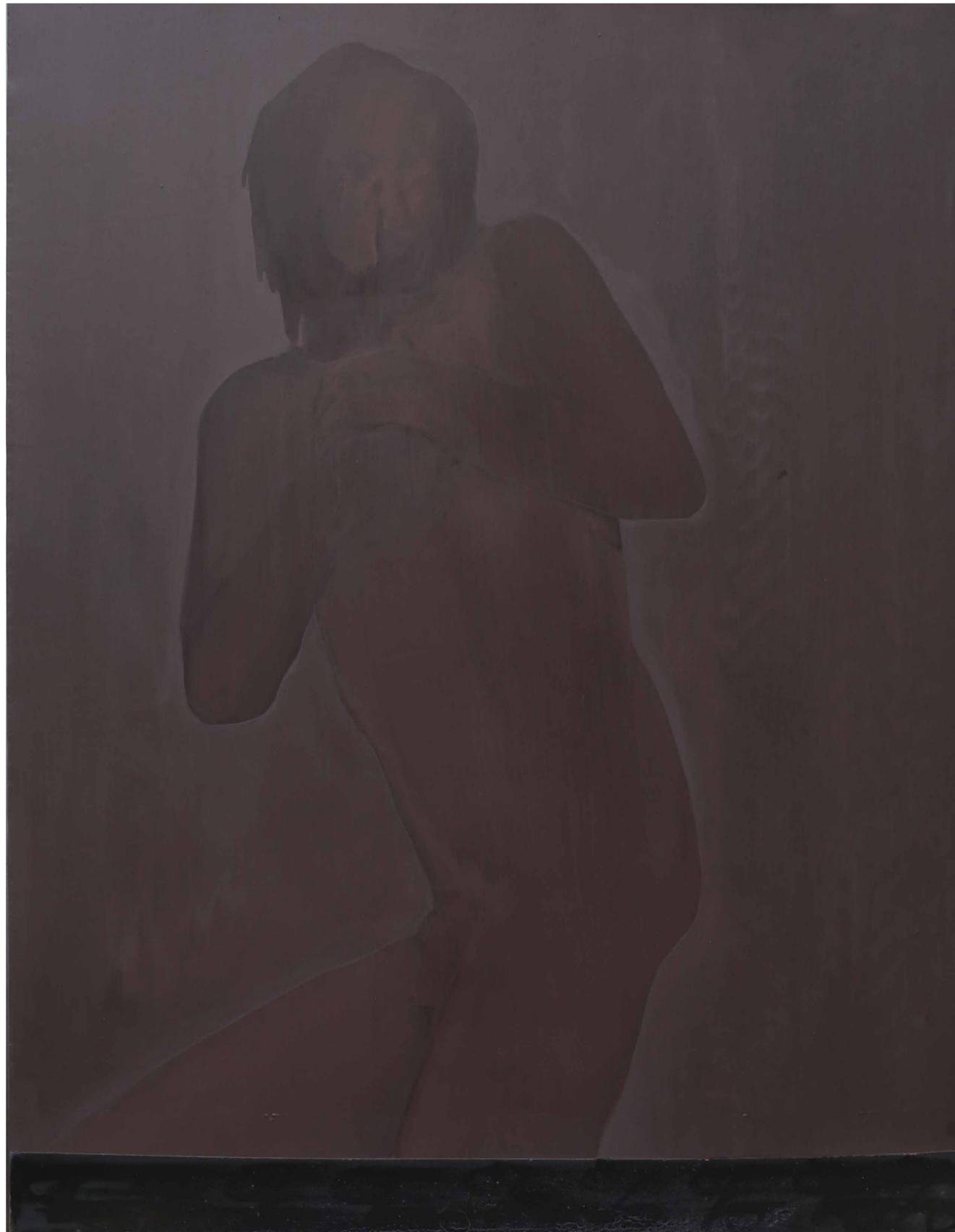
As the Sparks Fly Upward also draws from Igwe's experience during the two-week-long End Sars protest that took place in Nigeria in October of 2020, which ended in several fatalities due to the Nigerian army opening fire on peaceful protestors. For Igwe, the experience ignited questions around passing responsibility, uncertainty and personal achievement. One specific question: “do you ever think there will be a time when people in Nigeria can actualize their dreams and live to their full potential?” is foundational to the conceptualization of his paintings. For Igwe, this question is ultimately unanswerable and has been a topic of discussion for decades. Nevertheless, *As the Sparks Fly Upward* is an aspirational statement encouraging a deliberate fight against life's constants, which have no remedy, and a reflection on what is important. He hopes these works will allow people to find common ground through the diversity of the human experience. Igwe's Los Angeles debut follows his most recent exhibition at The Armory Show in New York.



I was only a child, Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 56in, 2022



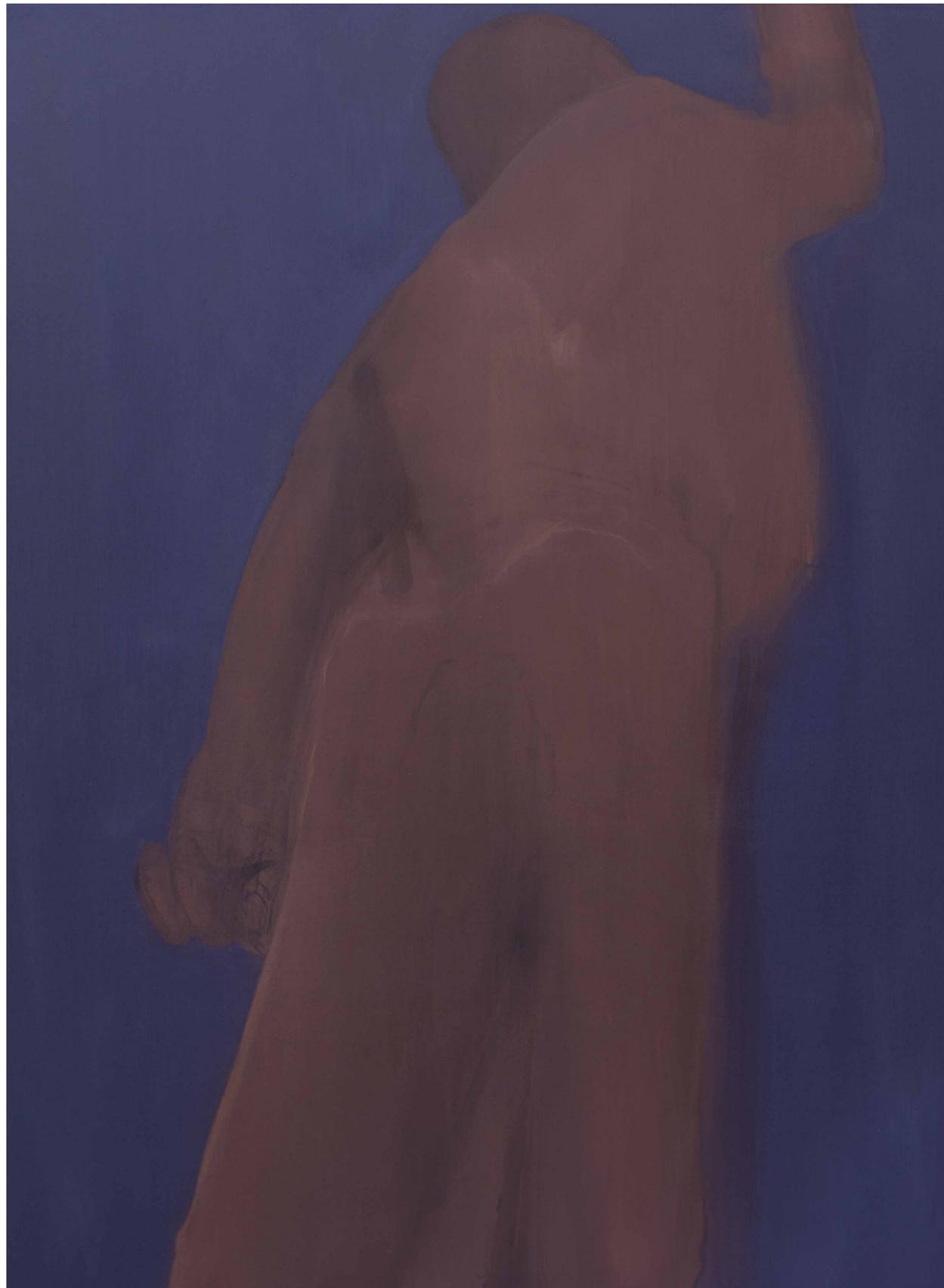
I can't complain (I), Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 56in, 2022



I can't complain (II), Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 56in, 2022



I can't complain (III), Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 56in , 2022



Man of the house in flattering robe, Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 54in, 2022

Conversation with Michael Igwe

Congratulations on your first solo exhibition as well as a joint presentation at the Armory 2022. It's been quite a journey from Young Contemporaries. How do you feel?

It feels good, although the work process has been overwhelming. It's been a lot of work and I'm filled with a lot of expectations for the works and viewers. I am looking forward to seeing how much the audience brings to the conversation as well as their response. In all, I'm just excited.

This notion of 'response' is interesting because there's always an idea of what you want the audience to experience from viewing your works, but that response can't be always determined. Everybody comes into the reading of a work of art from their own unique experiences. However, what do you imagine the response to your work would be like?

When it comes to the response, I am hoping the viewer comes with an open mind and engages the work however they like. Some people might be interested in my use of material or the way the images are rendered. I'm just hoping to have the works start a conversation and allow us to get to know each other. I also want a situation where people come in contact with the work and feel a sense of familiarity even if they can't entirely describe it. Finding a common ground through our diverse experiences of humanity.

From earlier conversations, you describe your works as not necessarily being driven by a narrative, but there are these different parts and places that you draw from in creating these paintings. Could you just speak a little about the exhibition As The Sparks Fly Upwards and the works you'll be presenting?

I wrote something down yesterday that had to do with what I'm interested in with the body of work which also cuts across my practice as well. With this exhibition, I am interested in compressing a particular time into the work as well as gathering lived experiences of different periods and bringing them together in a body of work. I got the idea for the title last year from a series of personal questions I was asking myself at the time. I like to think of the environment as being responsible for how I live through and navigate a particular time. I live in Nigeria and during that period, the news and feedback on issues like education and security were disheartening. Everything was just happening at once and I remember someone asking me 'do you ever think there'll be a time when people in Nigeria can live out their dreams and achieve their goals? It was a question that got me thinking and I realised that I kept pointing fingers as to why it was impossible. When I eventually pointed the fingers back to myself, I realised the act of passing blame is what you find a lot among our leaders. As seen for instance, in the government's response to the Lekki toll gate shootings in 2020 where the State governor and military kept passing the blame as to who was responsible. You then begin to realise that no one wants to claim responsibility for the state of the country and the earlier question becomes unanswerable.

The title of the exhibition then becomes aspirational, a deliberate fight against a constant without a remedy as well as a reflection on what's important.

Something I find interesting is how you referred to the exhibition title as aspirational. The title also raises the idea of going for something beyond reach which I think speaks to the idea of the Nigerian experience where it feels like we're constantly chasing after something...

Which brings a sense of disillusionment, because people get tired at some point while others may keep pushing their luck, but at the end of the day it's almost like you're in the dark trying to find the light. With a place like this, nothing is guaranteed and we're left trying to find the good in the bad, wondering what wins, the good or the bad?

You mentioned once about trying to capture emotions and states of feeling with your work and something that comes across in your work is a feeling of melancholy. There is an attempt to represent the intangible in tangible form. How do you approach capturing the mood of a moment or an event in your life in physical form?

When I approach the canvas, I don't know if the ideas are going to pour out in the ways I expect them to. An example that comes to mind is the idea of accent and language. If you're familiar with a language and the different ways it's spoken, when you hear someone from a region speak, you don't need anyone to tell you where that accent is from. Someone once wrote about my work as a distillation of the places I've been and the experiences I've had. That's what it feels like when I'm in the studio selecting materials or making compositional choices. When I look at the works, it feels like I'm looking at something that resembles me and has absorbed certain recognisable emotions. I think as an artist when you allow yourself to be led in an honest way, you'll always come into something that captures the mood as best as you want.

I also think the way material is used is very interesting, because they have a life of their own and you're bringing your energy and lived experiences in conversation with the assertions of the material. Regardless of your skill as an artist, there is a chance that you become humbled by the material and when you begin a process of dialogue.

Material and process are two concepts that are integral to your artistic practice. Your work process usually involves a lot of layering and an application of colour multiple times in washes. What role does this process play in your work?

It always intrigues me when people see my finished works and sometimes ask how I get the colours to behave the way they do on my canvases. I am interested in how the material in my work can raise questions on its own and there is this excitement that comes with explaining the 'why' and 'how' when the viewer approaches the work. I like to think of the material as part of the detail in my work because my figures are sort of blurry and almost invisible. While the viewer might not necessarily see all the details in the paintings, I want to create characters that feel like they have lived and experienced life. I want viewers to see the work and feel like they've met someone who has known them for a long time. It is the interaction with material and process that creates these details and seeing how people respond to all of that is very exciting for me.

There's this play with opposites that I think comes across in your work. You speak of wanting people to see the paintings and find a sense of familiarity with your figures but looking at the works you get a sense of distance and invisibility. There is almost a deliberate refusal to recognize. The characters are either turned away from the viewer or have their facial features blurred out. While we look for a sense of familiarity, these figures also exist in their own world, oblivious to our gaze or what we think of them. Could you speak a bit about your approach to form and how you reconcile these opposing elements in your work?

When I started painting, I was intrigued by form and composition. When people meet me, I'm usually guarded and you can't tell if I'm a sensitive person, especially because of the way I look. People always feel like if you're not in the mood to talk, you're 'bad vibes'. I say all of these because while we might all dress up in good clothes and head out for a good time, behind closed doors we usually have to be ourselves. Since I was trying to make a work that tells a story about myself, I was focused on making it as human as possible. The erasure you see in the works isn't something I pay close attention to but I feel the figures just have a way of evoking certain responses from people.

You mentioned earlier how you're interested in capturing genuine responses from the human body. In what ways does the concept of the unobserved, unposed body influence your compositions?

We talked about process and material earlier and the body is also a material that I try to use in the most honest way possible. The way I might use paint and other materials so they answer to a genuine need in my work is the way I also explore the body. The combination of both body and material is a process of searching for what works and what doesn't. I am focused on making the paintings feel unmanufactured. So the question becomes, 'how do I create a painting that feels organic, and what sort of body would do that for me? At the height of emotion, from excitement to sadness, the individual isn't too concerned about the way their body is posed or positioned and it is that genuineness that I hope to capture in my work.

Speaking of the figures in your work, I am interested in how you gather references for your paintings. In planning your compositions and imagining the various poses your figures assume, how do you go about capturing genuine bodily responses and emotions given the obvious performance people put on when faced with a camera?

I steal them. I follow myself a lot, and by this I mean I try to pay attention to myself a lot. I remember this body of work I did in Port-Harcourt that had me sitting in front of a mirror and trying to understand who I was looking at. What was I confronting and what emotions did I feel? I did that then so no one would be able to use my emotions against me. I wanted to be conscious and have control over myself. What that helped me do was to pay attention, observe and be comfortable in being a lot of different things. I can't make someone pose to convey an emotion, but because I experience myself and soak up everything I feel as a person, I use that as a starting point to think about other people's experiences of things.

There was a time I was in Yaba to get art materials and I saw this woman who seemed really guarded because it was rush hour and you had to pay close attention to your things or else they go missing. It was very interesting to see the way her body and facial features responded to the situation she was in. When I see images like that, I pay attention to their facial expressions and begin to imagine what goes on in their head and what my response would be if I was in that position. So when I start making sketches, I draw from the mental images of that experience and also search online to see similar images that convey those feelings. With that I don't have to stage a particular feeling or experience, I just go out to look for existing images and repurpose them with the images I have in my head.

Another important element in your work is colour which might not come across immediately to the viewer because a lot of your paintings look monochromatic. However, your process usually involves mixing a wide range of hues over and over again until you get to the final result. Could you please speak a bit about your relationship with colour and how you use them in your work?

I have always been interested in colour. When I started out working someone asked me what I was interested in to which I replied 'beauty'. I started using the colours I use now out of necessity which prompted a genuine response to the material. Early on in my practice, I was exploring watercolours and during that time, exhausted all the vibrant colours in my palette and was stuck with browns, yellow ochres, and reds. I was unable to replace them because I couldn't afford to at the time so I began to use the hues I had left even though I had initially hated them. Using them felt very honest because they were all I had and were indicative of my situation at that time, which is how I have approached my work ever since. The colours I use now, speak to certain conditions that I explore with my work.

I also like the idea of the painting being a calm space for myself and possibly the viewer. Out of the chaos going on around me, I want the paintings to be able to stop and calm me.

Following your work from before your YC days up till this moment and seeing the different ways it has evolved, what has the journey been like for you?

I can't wait to see how other materials come into my practice or how else I can use a medium in such a way that it all comes down to establishing my identity. While that is not a particularly a need because I'm not a fan of 'style', I am driven by the idea of making 'watercolours'. I started using watercolours immediately after school because I knew studio space was going to be a challenge and I couldn't mess up the house, so the medium became something I could practice with till I got my own space. While doing that, I realised I wanted my colours to do my bidding and that was a bit difficult to do because watercolour flows and drips. How do you control something that is almost impossible to control? In doing that, I had to renegotiate my handling of material, learning where to push and where to respond to the medium.

This experience prompted my current practice and the realization that I have to pay attention to whatever medium I'm working with. It's not a one-way thing, the material has its part to play while I play mine. This helped me build a visual language that I liked because it felt honest. Sometimes I have plans for a painting to go a certain way and then at some point, I'll give up the control and handle what I can. This experience is very interesting because that is what life is about.

When I moved to my own space, I was also trying to push the scale of my work and see what other medium would give the experimental feel that watercolour has. Acrylic came naturally because I've also enjoyed working with it. I wanted to also push the feel that watercolours gave to me and it's been quite a journey looking for that fluidity with acrylic. I also looking to see how I am able to expand the scope of my practice; possibly into sculpture or film. I'm interested in how each material can seamlessly flow into the other and allow me to create things that allow for dialogue with the medium.

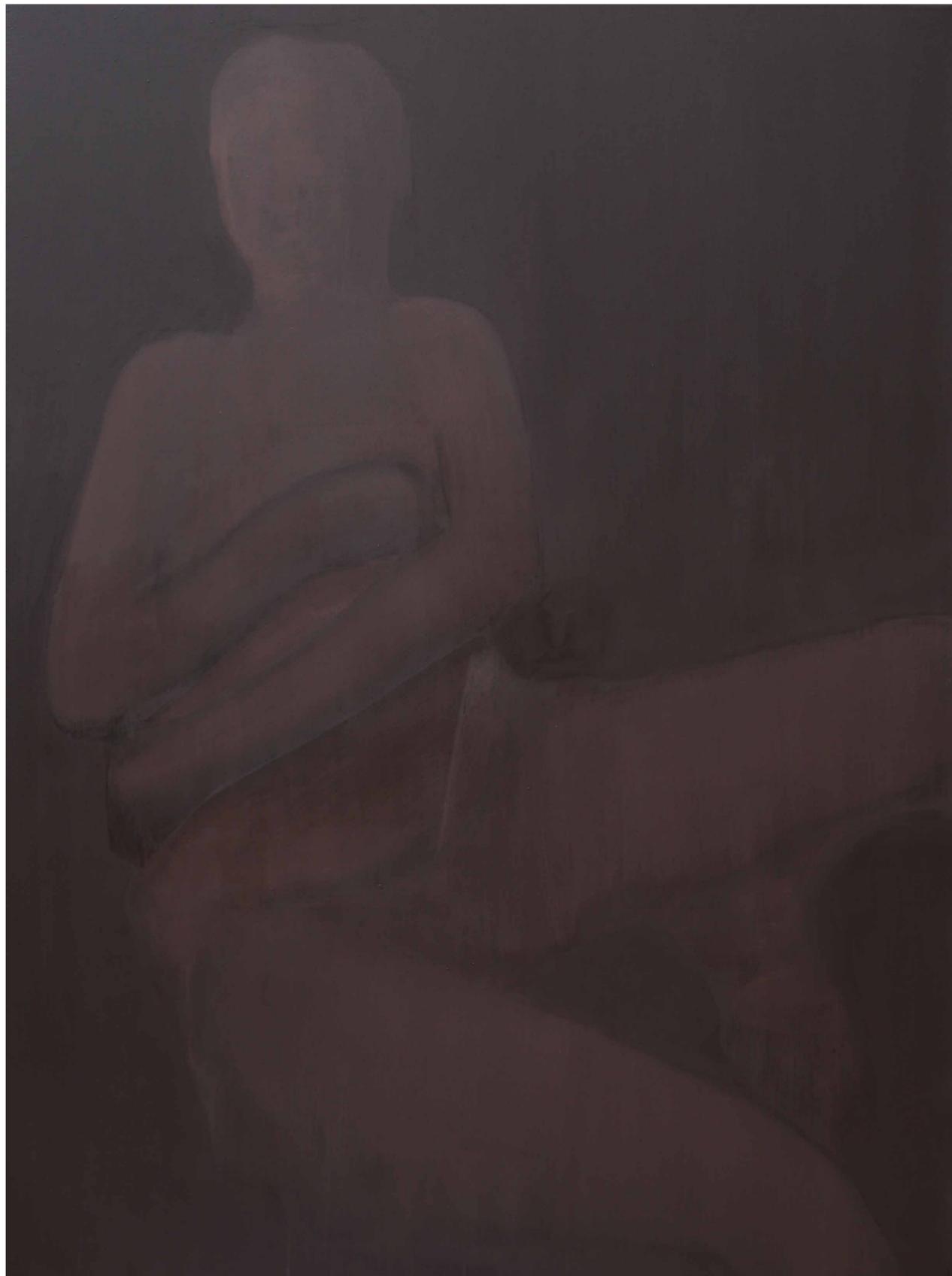
You say you aren't a big fan of style and that presents as somewhat ironic considering the kind of work you do that seems blatantly stylistic.

I think what I'm not really big on is 'style for style sake'; the thought that I would continue making work in a certain way because I feel comfortable in it. That is what I call style. Just because I make work for two to five years in a particular way, doesn't mean I want to have to keep with that appearance for visual quality. It was a bit scary making the works for this exhibition because I wanted to stretch a certain colour scheme and was a bit unsure of starting out with it. There were just so many questions I needed to answer. While people might say 'oh that is a style' to refer to something prompting your making process, all of these are not because I want to arrive at a known stylistic destination. If you call excellence a style, then yeah that's my style. I just want to make really good, honest paintings.

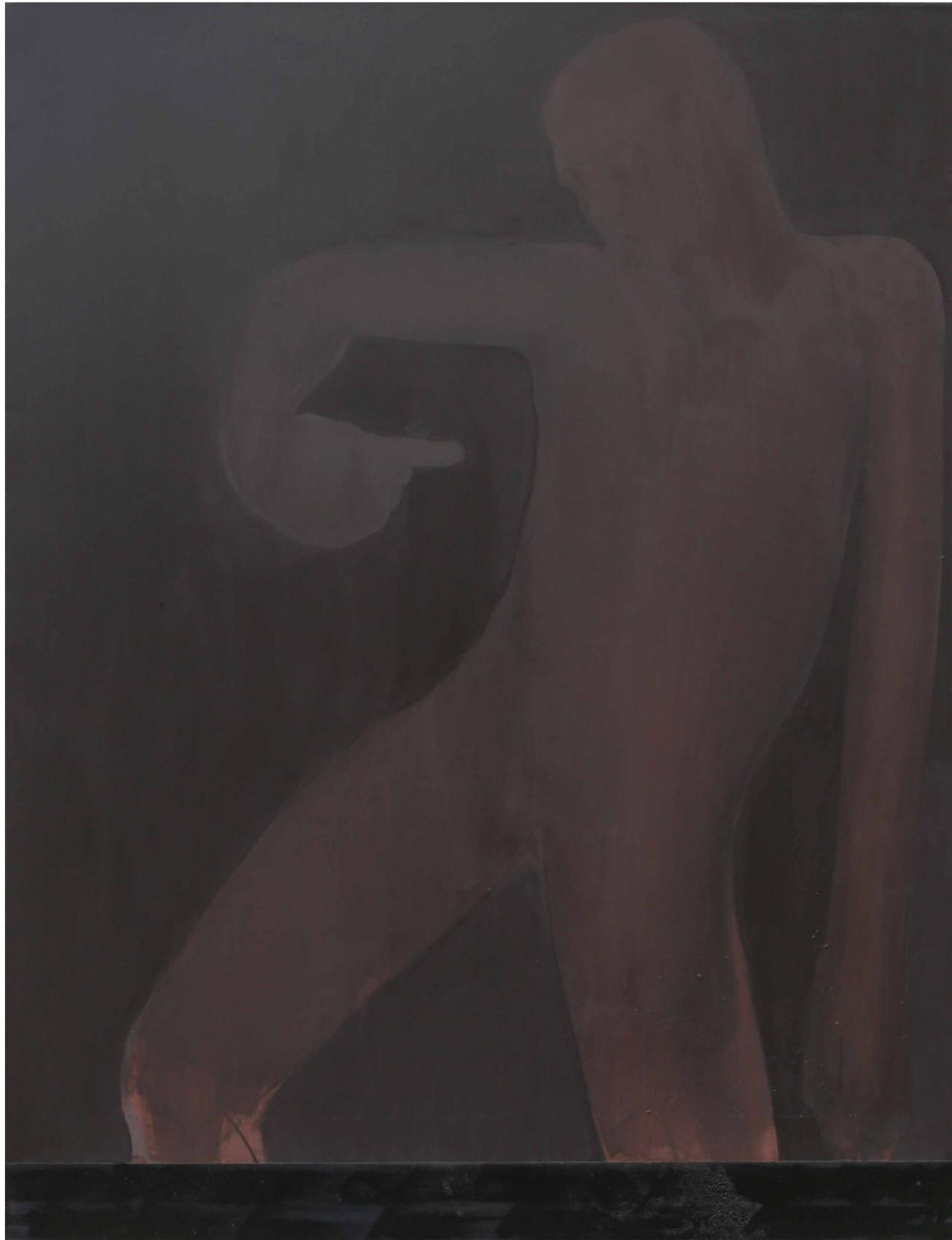
You mentioned earlier that you were interested in beauty and it seems like your work upsets the traditional idea of beauty. Are there other modes of exploring beauty that you are more aligned with?

Yeah. When I started making work this way, I made it very clear that it was not because I was protesting any formal way of painting. I had just come to a point where I realised that there were certain things that were no longer serving me; like hiding behind a certain 'aesthetic' because I thought that is what people would appreciate. Right now, I'm going to the paintings on my own terms, I'm approaching the work the way I think it should be.

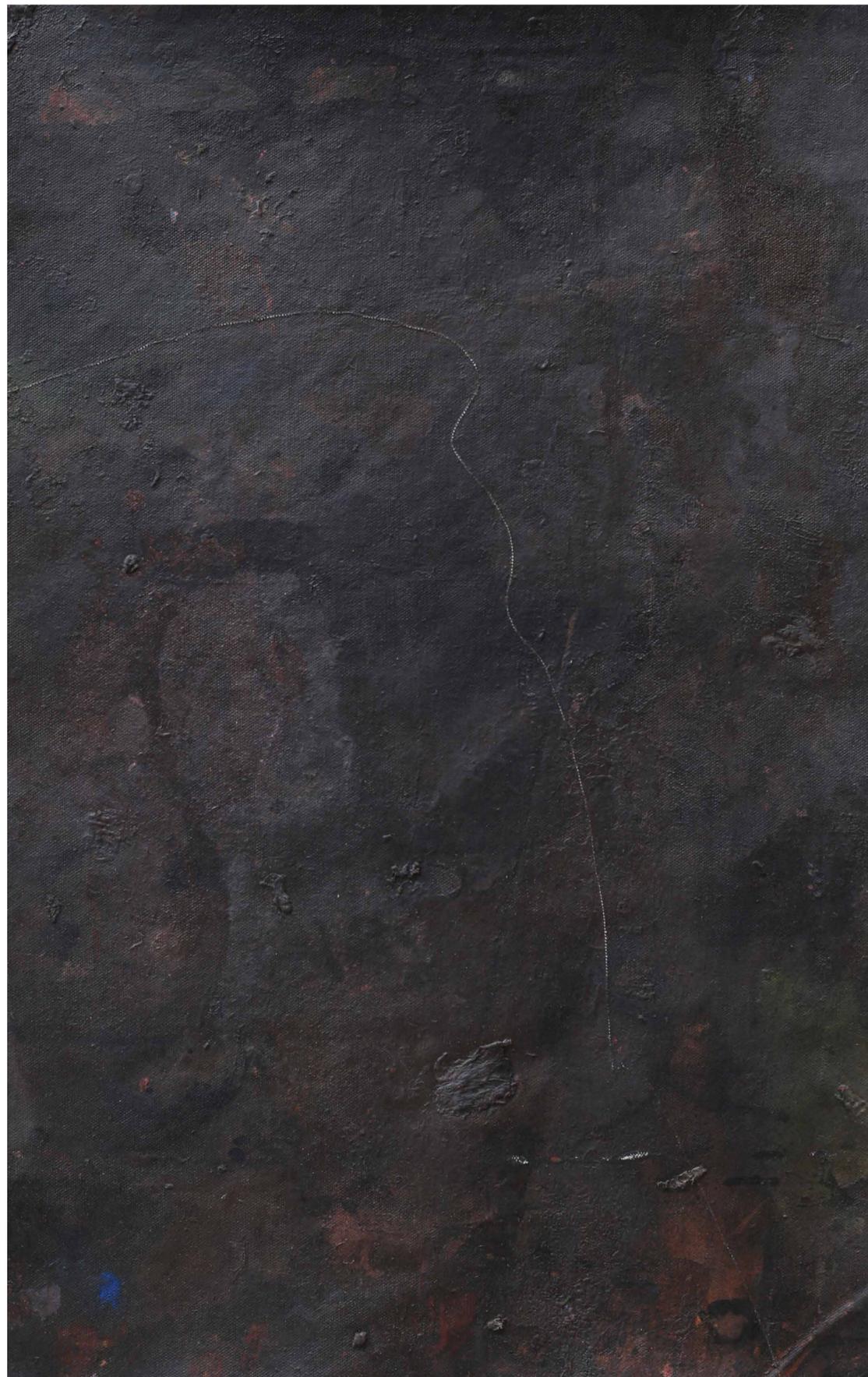
People think about beauty and they attach a certain look to it, but it is never fixed. Approaching the work the way I do right now is me saying 'this is how best I know how to be a human being, this is where my experiences push the aesthetics to'. When you come to the works, they lead us to talk about ourselves. At the end of the day, what you realise is that you can never go wrong in listening to yourself.



Wrestle, Acrylic on canvas, 42 x 56in, 2022



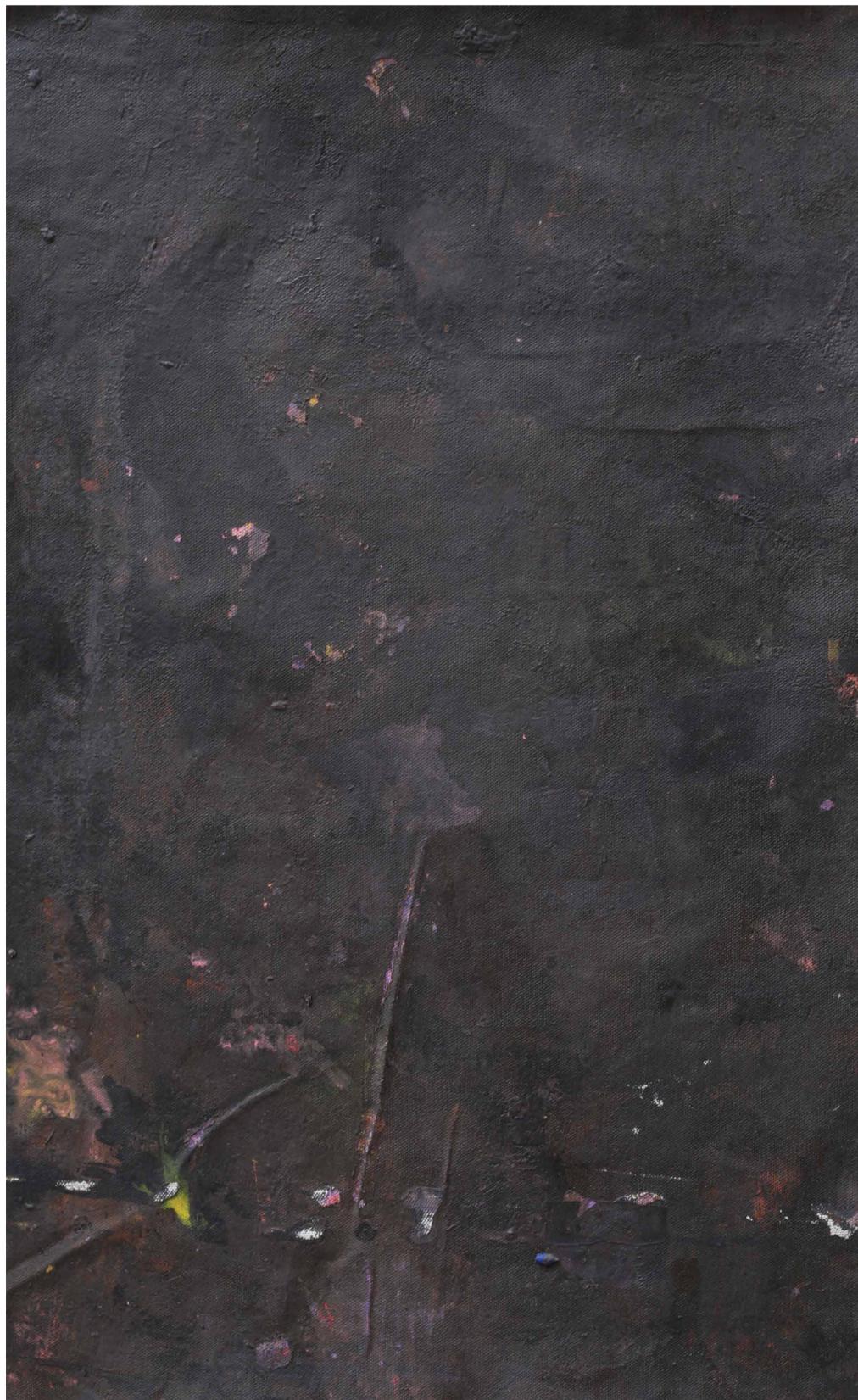
I can_t complain (IV), Acrylic on canvas, 42 X 56in, 2022



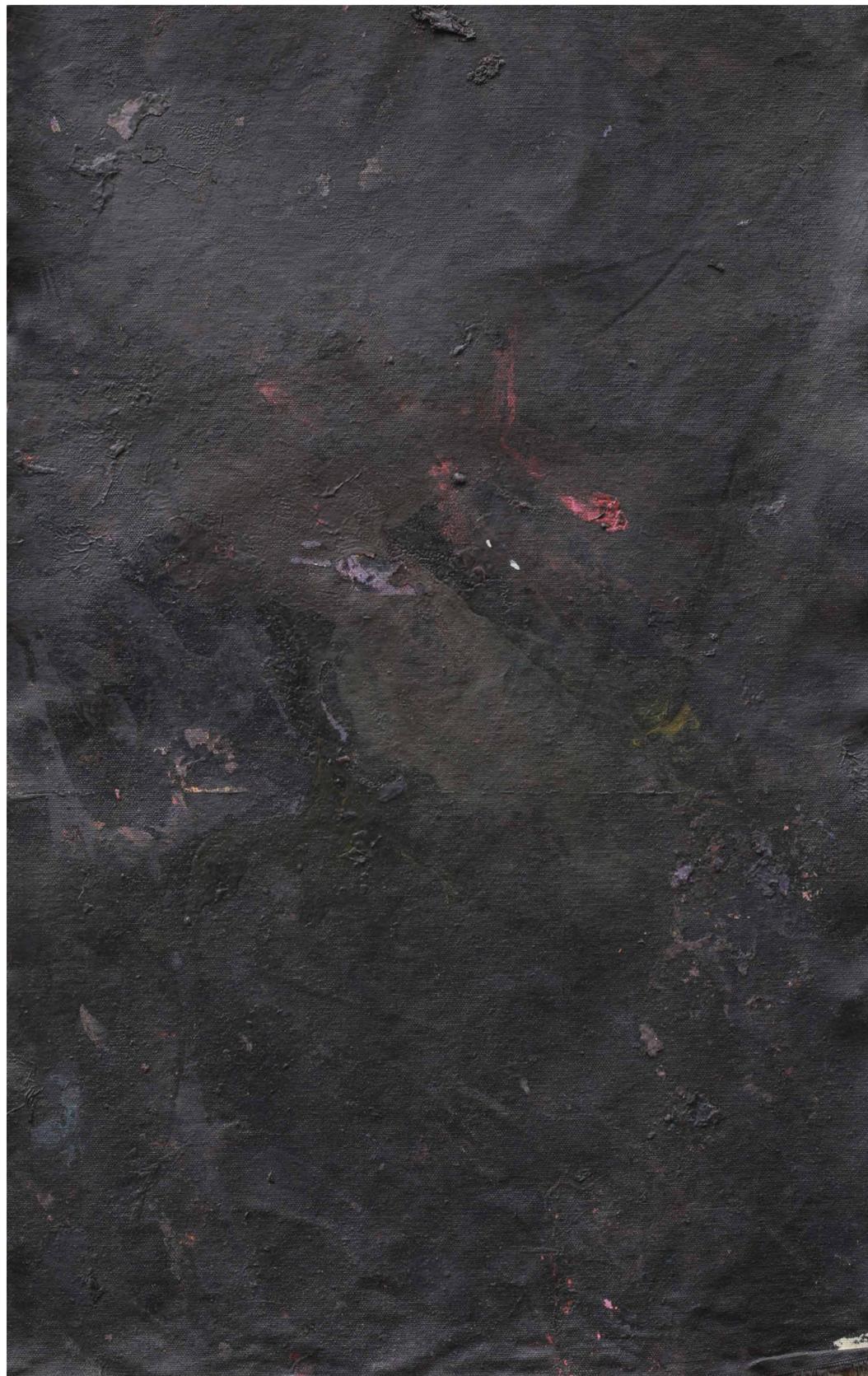
I can_t complain (10), Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 23.5in, 2022



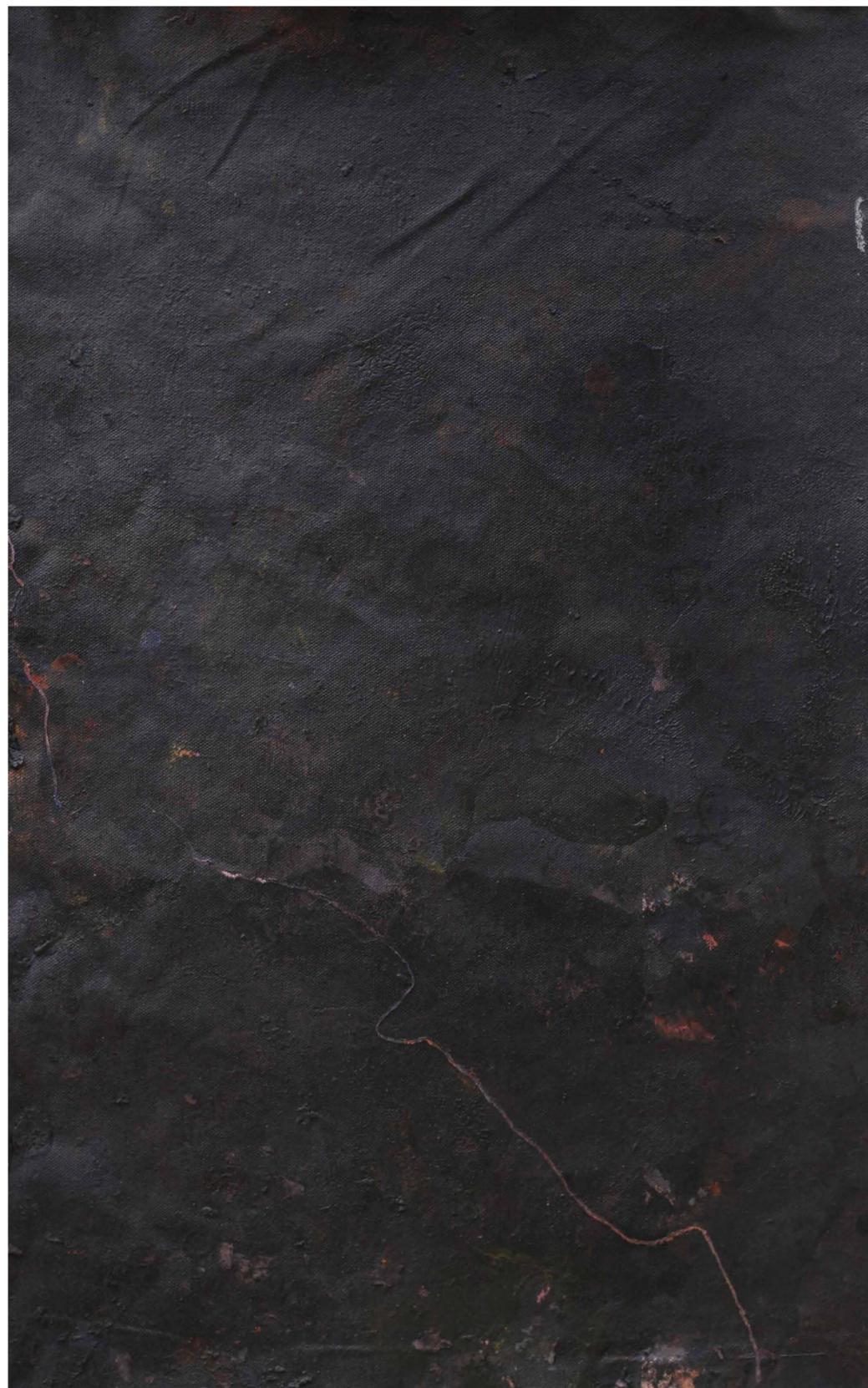
I can't complain (8), Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 23.5in, 2022



I can't complain (9), Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 23.5 x in, 2022



I can_t complain (7), Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 23.5in, 2022



I can't complain (11), Acrylic on canvas, 15 x 23.5in, 2022

Michael Igwe

Michael Igwe (b.1994) is an experimental artist working primarily with painting. By treating art as a critical exploration of the personal, Michael's practice engenders the image with complex narrative and fluid forms that is more attuned to the seamless and unsteady nature of human experience and memory. He received his BFA from the University of Benin, in 2018.

In 2021, Igwe was selected as part of the Rele Arts Foundation Young Contemporaries. Select group exhibitions include *Superzoom Grand Opening Group Show* (2022), Superzoom Gallery, Paris, *It's A Wrap* (2021), Rele Gallery, Lagos, *Sublime; Between Solid and Vapor* (2020), Rele Gallery, Lagos. His work was also presented at Art Basel OVR in 2021 and at The Armory Show in 2022.

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