

An abstract painting with a dark, textured background of deep blues, blacks, and browns. Several vertical, textured forms, resembling columns or figures, are rendered in vibrant colors like green, yellow, and orange, set against the dark background. The overall style is expressive and textured.

FEELING BLUE, SEEKING SOLACE

Sabrina Coleman-Pinheiro

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Ask and it shall be given,
Seek and ye shall find,
But I have sought and have not found
A treatment for what ails my mind.

I mourn religion's retreat
Unable to be saved by the Son of Man;
Its impact a morsel of what I need
To repair my mind.
As I stay battling my medications' decline,
the side effect of pills – a worsened mind?

Heavier body, weaker spirit
dependence on this man made healing.
The spirits of joy do randomly whisper,
as I reach to grab they slip through my fingers.
“we are not here to stay” they say
“enjoy us while you can, for we must drift away”

Who am I?
if not fragmented versions of myself,
seeking freedom from chaos
some semblance of wholeness
refuge from intrusive thoughts
with a weary mind,
and a labored sigh,

if solace exists, when shall mine come by?
—Sabrina Coleman-Pinheiro

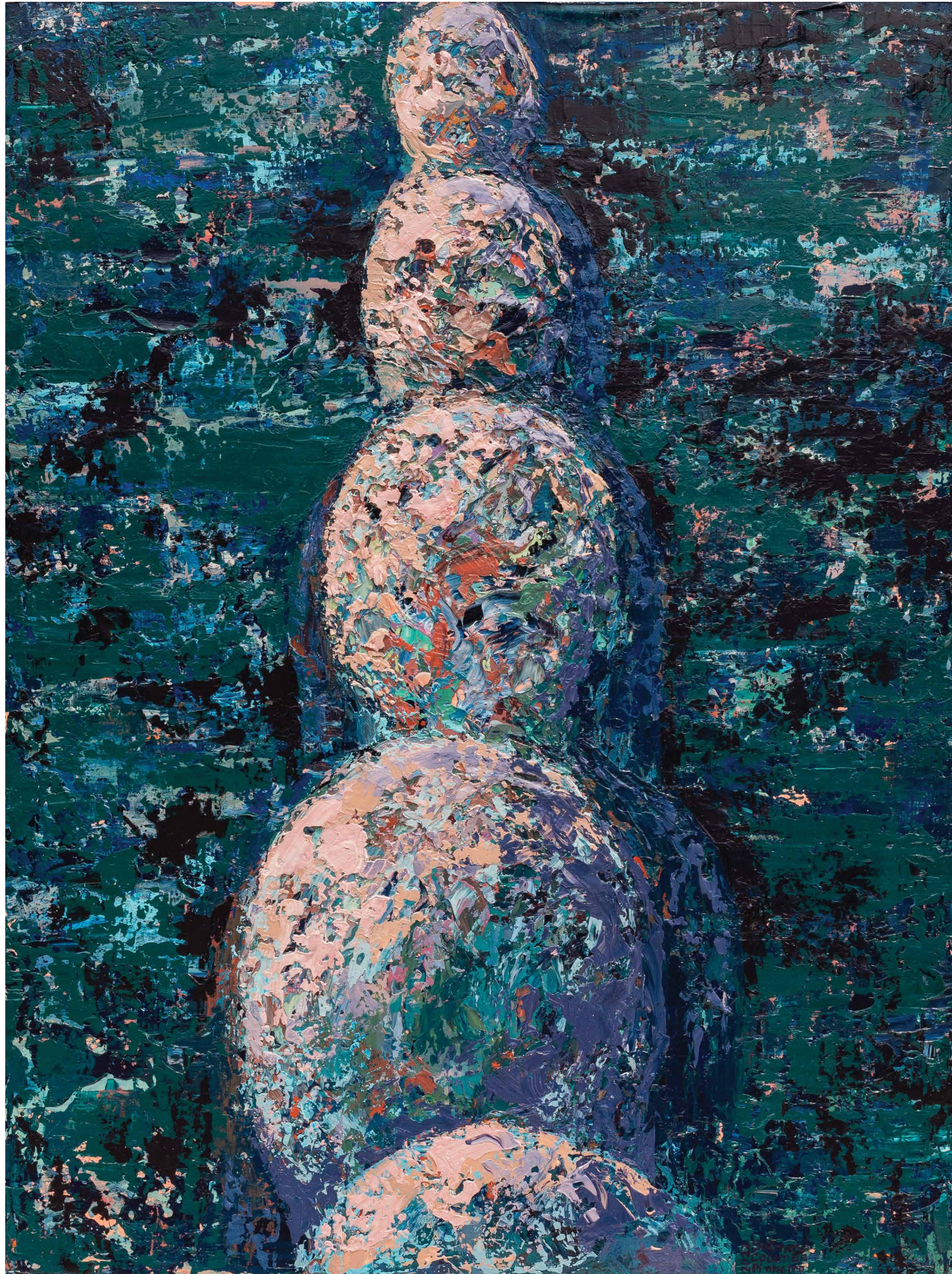
Gallery Statement

Rele Gallery, Lagos is pleased to present *Feeling Blue, Seeking Solace*, the debut solo exhibition of Sabrina Coleman-Pinheiro. The works presented exist as part of an ongoing dialogue on mental health and mental health issues in contemporary society. Built up with thick layers of paint, Coleman-Pinheiro's shroud-like figures emerge and recede into shadowy, formless landscapes, silent inhabitants of an unknowable world. These conjured figures, expressionist in their otherworldliness usher us into the unfathomable depths of the human mind, through emotional experiences and murky landscapes.

Echoing the indeterminate, vast nature of the human mind, Coleman-Pinheiro's textured canvases exist as 'snapshots' of an expanding, complex world, one that overwhelms and detaches, offering new depths and realities. In this exhibition, the artist contemplates what it means to find healing and respite from mental trauma. Done primarily in acrylic, the paintings record and communicate fragmented parts of unfolding emotional responses. They offer moments from an ongoing search for relief, presenting solace as a continuous, non-linear process rather than an imagined final state.

The body of work presented here comes at a time when conversations around mental health and wellness are increasingly being had. We find ourselves investigating the storied history and affective relationship between trauma, interpersonal relationships and the environment. How then do we construct processes and spaces of respite from mental trauma? In engaging with the complexly theorised sphere of the mind, how do we imagine procedures of care and destigmatisation?

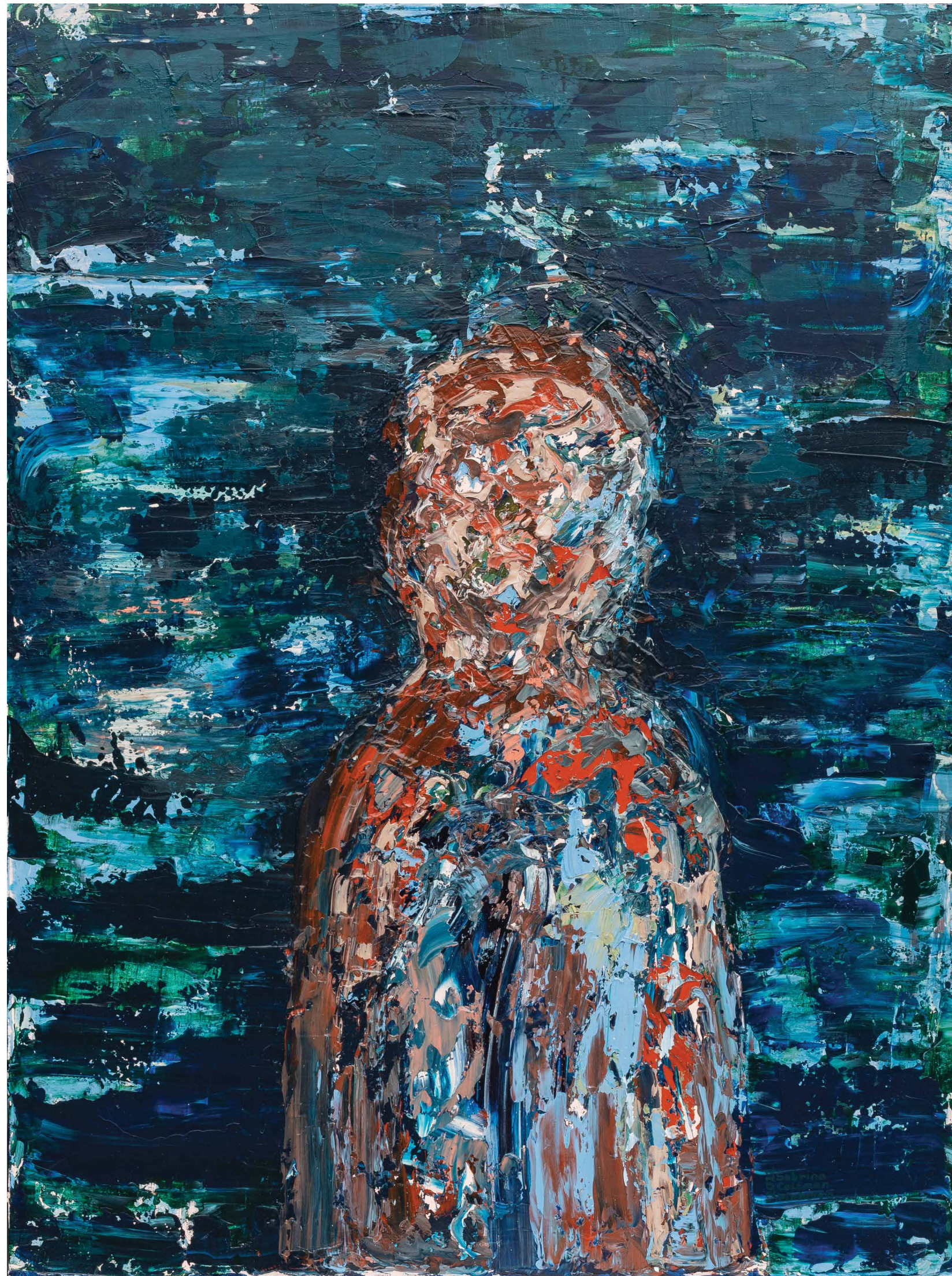
Coleman-Pinheiro's scenes are compositionally and texturally chaotic, from images of singular characters to closely packed figures. Yet, they present us with stillness, one prompted by an encounter with the intimate but unfamiliar. We recognise them in form, we might even find ourselves reflected in their silhouetted bodies, but the journey into their experiences and realities has only just begun. The paintings exist as pieces of a larger vista to which we must return in teasing out emotional experiences and responses from bodies going through a journey of healing.



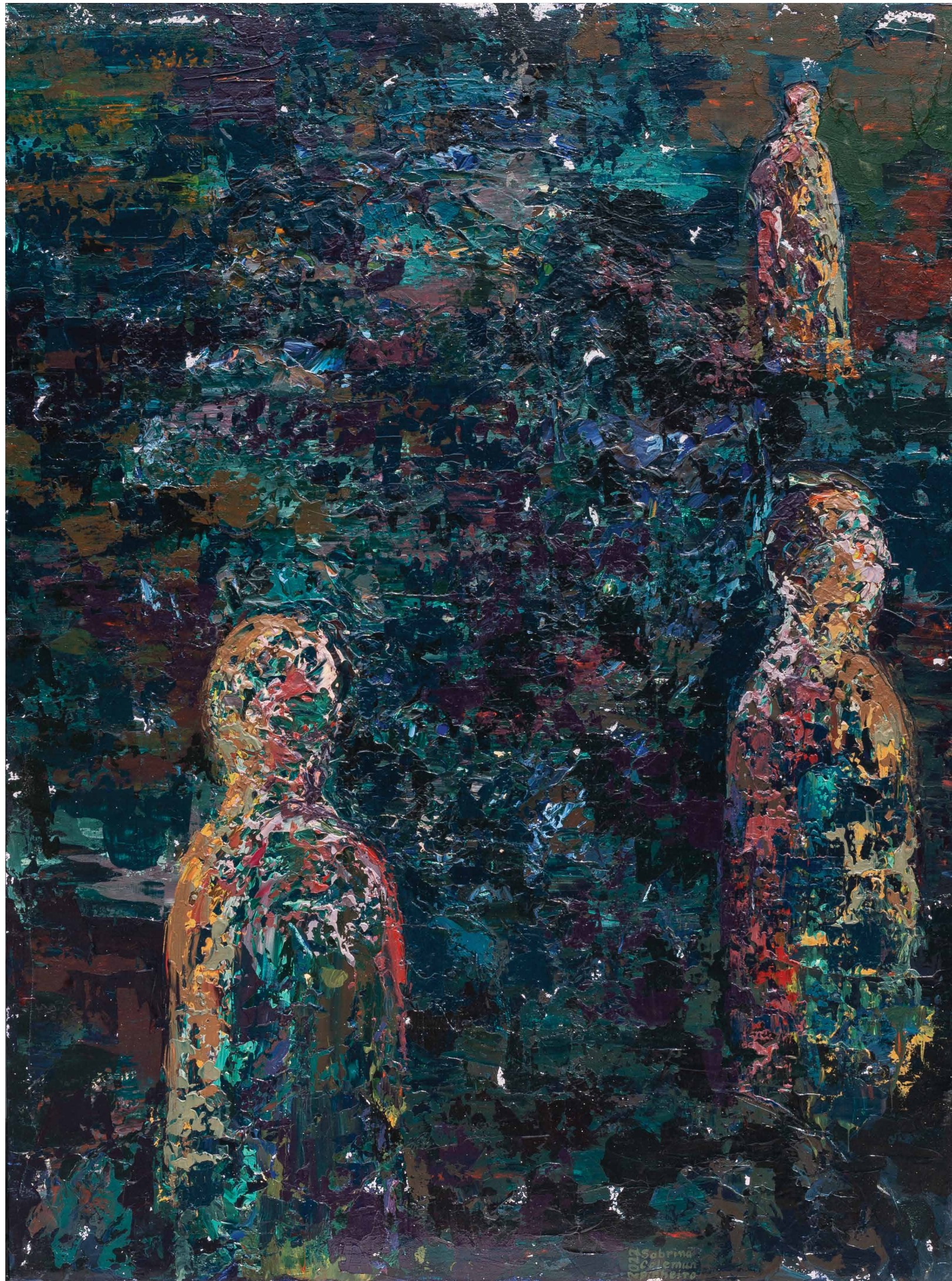
Dormant selves | Acrylic on canvas | 36 x 48inches | 2022



Navigating chaos | Acrylic on canvas | 36 x 48inches | 2022



Self-portrait | Acrylic on canvas | 36 x 48inches | 2022



Unresolved realities | Acrylic on canvas | 36 x 48 inches | 2022

Conversation with Sabrina Coleman-Pinheiro

Congratulations on your first solo exhibition. How do you feel and what has the journey been like so far?

It's a bit surreal because while I am involved in the process of creating the work it almost feels like an out-of-body experience, especially when I step back and watch myself and my art grow and progress. It's a really surreal and interesting feeling.

It's been quite interesting to see the way you've progressed from your early residency and YC works as well as all the group shows you've participated in since then and now finally your solo exhibition. While you've explored different angles, there's been a very broad narrative you've been working on. Could you tell me a bit about this exhibition and the works you'll be presenting?

This exhibition follows my thread of speaking on mental health and mental health issues. Early on I realised that my work tackles an issue that is broad, and with this exhibition I wanted to move forward with my breakdown of mental health and its challenges. I decided that I was going to pick a little part of it that is universal to people who have struggled with mental trauma; which is the act of seeking solace and reprieve.

Exploring what it means to be constantly in search of something. As human beings, we are always in search of something; happiness, love sex... because we assume that what we are looking for is going to fix whatever gap we have within us. I thought it would be interesting to explore a situation that isn't just particular to me but is also a very broad human experience. In a way, my goal with speaking on mental health is not only to open people's eyes to the challenges mentally ill people go through, but also to normalise the fact that these feelings, emotions and trials are things we all go through. Even if you are not mentally ill, you can connect with it. There's a universality to this pain and I hope that by opening that up and having people discuss it then we reduce stigma. I think when something is normalised, it's less hush and we're more open to talking about it and people don't feel shame about it.

There's a particular body of work you did 'Fragmented Versions of Self' where you explored this voyeuristic role that society plays in its engagement with mental illness. Considering your work draws from personal experiences dealing with mental health issues, how do you navigate a state of being observed through your work, knowing what to offer to the audience and what to hold back?

It's really hard because creating is such a raw process for me where I'm essentially laying everything on the line and I realise that to keep some parts of myself within, I have to edit in the final process. At the start of my process, there is a rawness of emotion and sometimes when I feel too exposed, I go back and edit. That editing process is almost like waking up and deciding to wear makeup. I work with multiple layers both to hide parts that I think are too raw and exposed and also to force the audience to look deeper. I found that when speaking about some of these mental health issues, I want people to spend time with the pieces like they would a friend going through something. I want the audience to explore and investigate my use of colours as well as how the forms interact with each other within the canvas.

However, there's still that voyeuristic aspect to engaging with my work and I can't take that away. I am still being watched by whoever sees the painting so I want to give them some work and put them through the process of trying to understand.

Speaking of being exposed, the figures in your works oscillate between visibility and a recession into the background. This for me raises questions on the shifting relationship between body and landscape; two distinct elements in your work. Could you speak a little bit about your exploration of this relationship?

I enjoy the push and pull, not just within the pieces but also within the series. That's why a lot of times I vary how the forms interact with the backgrounds. It also stems from my strong belief that my environment has really affected how my mental health has either declined or progressed. I go through periods where I'm dealing with a lot, where I feel swallowed and completely overwhelmed, almost like sinking. At some point, I find some sort of hope and become removed in a way even though I still exist within the space. A lot of times in my current work, there is a strong similarity in colour between the forms and background because I realise that there cannot be any true separation.

In my previous series 'Fragmented Versions of Self,' the figures were in front of this strong, peach-coloured background and looked like they existed outside of that space even though they were still within it. With these newer forms, they are part of the space, they can step out for a second, but in the end, they cannot escape it just the way I cannot escape my mental challenges. I may step out of it and be able to put up a strong front once in a while, people might see me and say 'she doesn't look like she's dealing with anything,' but in the end, I still exist in that space and that's what happens with these forms, they cannot get away from it. They are part of it and it is part of them, there's oneness within the chaos.

Apart from this relationship between the body and landscape, another relationship I find interesting is the idea of trying to represent the intangible. In your subject matter, there's the idea of the physical body and the more intangible aspects of the mind. In dialoguing with the idea of body and space, how do you consider this relationship to the more intangible sphere of the mind?

It is interesting that I have chosen to represent something intangible with a physical, almost humanoid form and I moved towards that because it was what was easily recognisable to me at that point. I'm putting these forms that really aren't people — they don't have any discernable identity, almost ghostlike — and I use them to represent emotions, feelings and sentiments. A lot of times, I feel like even when I'm going through certain emotions, I can think of a physical look for what that emotion would be.

I find using landscape and form very interesting. I am very intrigued by space and humans as tiny figments in this vast cosmos which I think forces us to take ourselves less seriously. Due to my fascination with space, land and vastness and how that correlates with being one person among this vastness, I end up associating that feeling with different mental states. My work started off with pure abstraction and moved into having forms because I wanted something to link my human experience to the environment. I wanted to also force the viewer to exist in that space, I want them to see that there's something that is experiencing all of this and whatever is going on around this form is also affecting the way it exists. There's a lot of chaos and turmoil internally and externally and a battle between trying to contain whatever chaos you're going through internally while also managing what's happening in your environment. I hope in the future I'm able to integrate my audience into the forms and environments I create.

You mention that your work started off with abstraction and now you're experimenting with forms. Can you tell me a bit about what the journey has been like and what ways has your work evolved, both stylistically and in the way you think about art?

One way my journey has evolved is that I am slower now. When I first started off, I was trying to do a lot and say a lot with each piece. I was trying to throw a lot of information into each piece and as I've grown as an artist, I've realised that depicting whatever topic I want to discuss piece by piece and creating depth with that is a lot more interesting for me. My process has become slower and also more detailed. I now focus on things being denser. Instead of looking at width, I am focused on depth. The more I have created, the more I have learnt what I like and don't like, what serves me as well as the ability to destroy that which isn't serving me. I was always scared of destruction because you create something and get attached to it and even though it is not what you need it's difficult to let it go. I had to learn to destroy to create, to break down a piece and in breaking it down realise that there are parts that I need to move forward, so I pick those facets and continue until I get to where I want.

I have also learned that there's always going to be a mismatch between what is in my head and what is on the canvas because a lot of times, vision is usually faster than skill set. I am also okay with that because vision should be ahead. You have to have something that you are working towards. I have become okay with that and that also encourages me to keep on pushing myself. I found that in my earlier days, I kept on trying to force things, but as I have matured as an artist I've realised that it really is a conversation between me and my materials. My understanding of how to use colours has also improved the more I was able to try out stuff. A large part of the painting process is just constantly working and experimenting.

Colour forms an important element in your work and you spoke a bit about how your approach to colour has evolved over time. Thinking about your approach to colour now, first as representing emotions as well as a tool of design and creating images, how do you navigate its use in your work?

For this exhibition, it's been constantly trying to find a balance between colour as an emotional, exploratory tool as well as a design tool. When I try to depict a difficult period in my life, I am usually focused on looking for a colour that puts my forms and the audience within that mood. I am also interested in the theoretical role of colour, for instance when light is shone on an object, how do you see the highlights and shadows? With my forms, I am always very curious about where light is coming from and always trying to figure out how to show these highlights in a non-traditional way. For a lot of my forms, the highlights are not a lighter version of what the actual form is but are mostly a complement of what colour the form is. This body of work has really pushed my understanding of colour theory and how to use colour in a more expansive way. Yes, colour as an emotion but when you move past that, how does colour in itself interact between form and background as well as within the forms themselves? How do I depict the abnormality of the form in itself through colour?

Your work has generally gone back and forth between depicting singular and multiple forms. What informs the compositions in your works and what is the relationship between these different figures, especially the ones that occupy the same space?

My approach came from an inquisitive angle. I like trying to understand the interaction between form and background as well as with the four sides of the canvas which a painting is usually limited to. While some of my forms are usually singular and contained within the space, I find it more interesting to have them cut off, almost like you're getting a snapshot of whatever is happening in that frame. It started with the series 'Fragmented Version of Self' where I started exploring different angles on how forms exist within space. With this series, the forms move around the four corners of the canvas and in some cases, out of the sight of the viewer. The question of whether or not they still exist out of sight is something I don't have an answer to. I think they do. In a painting that just has one form, there's a big probability that other forms exist as well, they are just not depicted on that one canvas.

The way I see it, all these forms exist in an expanse of space and I am taking snapshots from different angles and using those snapshots to depict whatever emotion I am going through. Even when I talk about my emotions and discuss my mental health issues, it's never truly the full picture, it is hard to explain every single thing that has brought me to where I am. Which is the same way I think that it's hard to look at a painting and see it all. I see my forms as existing in this space and the viewers are getting pieces of the information. With this process, I am also picking which moments to share with the public.

To go back to our earlier conversation on trying to express an emotion, one that usually transcends language, artists over the years have grappled with this idea of trying to convey an emotional experience. A lot of artists have also dealt with ideas of mental health, From Edvard Munch to Sylvia Plath. One thing I have noticed is the increasingly thin line between the romantic notions of the genius artist as 'troubled and 'insane' and centring these issues so we are able to create conversations that would prioritise mental health. What connections do you make between your artistic practice and your personal struggles, especially on this journey to solace?

The whole idea of the struggling artist is a very common trope, this focus on creating from ‘madness’. I’ve found that for me to truly create, I need to be able to take care of myself mentally because when I go through these struggles, it’s difficult to create. When people talk about artists and mental health, they assume that you’re in your studio, pulling out your hair, going mad and painting up and down, but a lot of times, the creative process requires a certain level of organisation. It’s hard toeing the line between speaking seriously about something versus romanticising it. These are real struggles that people go through and to make it fun and exciting is almost like a slap in the face because I go through those struggles and have to fight to get through them to create. It’s very hard to explain how sometimes I just don’t want to get up in the morning and I have to push myself. A lot of times, going into my studio is a bright spot in my day because it’s what helps me work through whatever I am going through.

I think because people do not understand the actual trials of mental illness, it is easy for them to romanticise it. When I was younger, they used to say Van Gogh cut off his ear because he was looking for red paint, but it was most likely because he was having a manic crisis. When you look at the two ends of that conversation, one feels like a very trivial take on mental health. I went to a museum once and they had Van Gogh souvenirs, one of them was a magnet shaped like his ear and I felt that was horrible. We’re sometimes so removed from a lot of these situations, that it’s easy to consider the mental troubles of an artist as a footnote. It’s frustrating that this is romanticised and people think it’s ‘cool’ and ‘different’, but in reality, it’s a lot to deal with. It’s not this cute uniform you can don randomly, it’s a part of people’s lives and seriously affects their ability to show up for themselves.

The title of the exhibition speaks to both a state of feeling and the search for respite from that feeling. While solace comes in various forms to different people and in this exhibition it’s imagined as a continuous search, what would you say solace means to you as an artist and a person in your experience of mental health?

For me solace is acceptance and I found that accepting and understanding where you are is a very strong thing. One thing art has taught me is patience. Each time I paint, I can’t move to the future because it doesn’t exist yet. The only thing I have is what’s in front of me at that time, the past has ceased to exist because I’ve painted over it and the future doesn’t exist yet because I haven’t done anything. All I have is the present and solace for me is the appreciation of that moment. In the paintings, there are sometimes little bits of colour that come through and these are reminiscent of those moments where you sit and realise that ‘this is where I’m at’ and that is okay. I think it’s important to enjoy and appreciate the journey because the journey is made of little moments to getting ‘there’, wherever that may be. ‘There’ might not even exist in the end, but those moments would have made up for the eventual realisation that we constantly have to keep on going through life.

You spoke earlier about the way you want the audience to experience the work, about having them as an actual part of the work. While responses may vary because people read works from their diverse experiences, what do you imagine the response to your work to be like?

I want people to take their time. I don’t want this to be something they just breeze through because that would be a waste of their time. I want people to take their time, either following the flow of the exhibition or jumping from piece to piece. With each piece they’re in front of, I want them to really take the time to look into these forms and try to connect and find themselves within. My work is done in multiple layers and I think one of the interesting things about viewing them is seeing how the different layers interact, following the rhythm of the colours and strokes. I want my audience to just be in the moment with the pieces and absorb as much as possible from them.



Holding onto what matters | Acrylic on canvas | 48 x 48in | 2022



Restless apparitions | Acrylic on canvas | 24 x 24inches | 2022



Communal Agony | Acrylic on canvas | 48 x 48 inches | 2022



Anticipating our release | Acrylic on canvas | 48 x 48inches | 2022



Being alone | Acrylic on canvas | 48 x 48inches | 2022



Obscured paths | Acrylic on canvas | 24 x 24inches | 2022



Fading souls | Acrylic on canvas | 24 x 24inches | 2022



Fractured feelings | Acrylic on canvas | 24 x 24inches | 2022

Sabrina Coleman-Pinheiro

Sabrina Coleman-Pinheiro (b.1990) earned her Bachelor's from Linfield University, Oregon, majoring in Business and Fine Art. Working between the abstract and the figurative, her works catalogue her constant battles with anxiety; with a goal to drive conversation on our understanding and view of mental health in contemporary society.

In 2021, Coleman-Pinheiro was selected as part of the Rele Arts Foundation Young Contemporaries. Select group shows include *Reading Abstraction* (2021), Rele Gallery, LA and *It's A Wrap* (2021), Rele Gallery, Lagos. She lives and works in Canada.

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