



CONSOLATIONS OF A FLOATING MAN WOJCIECH NOWIKOWSKI



RENATA SALECL

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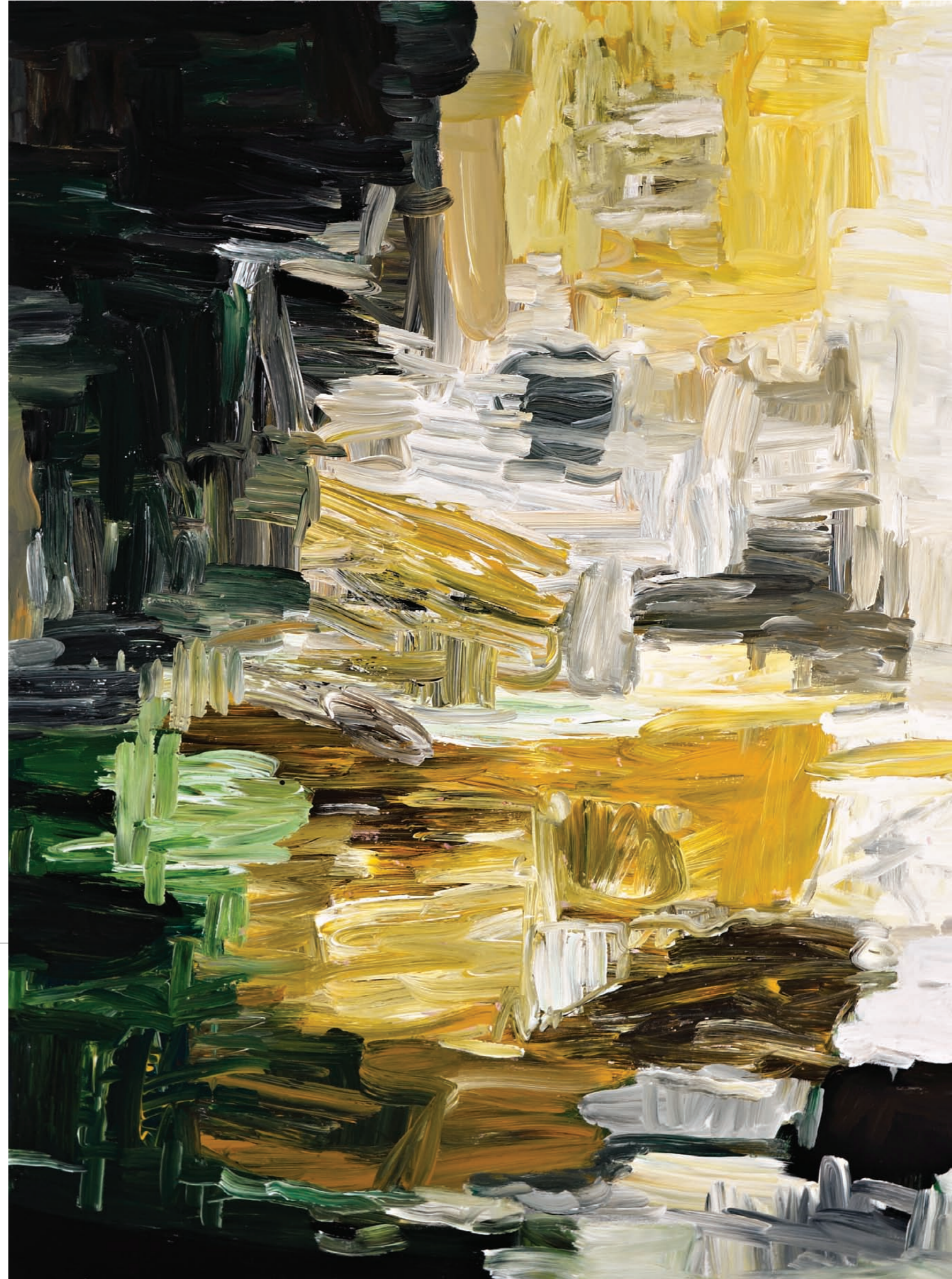
ATRIUM GALLERY UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS LONDON OCTOBER 2009

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For my daughter Hanna

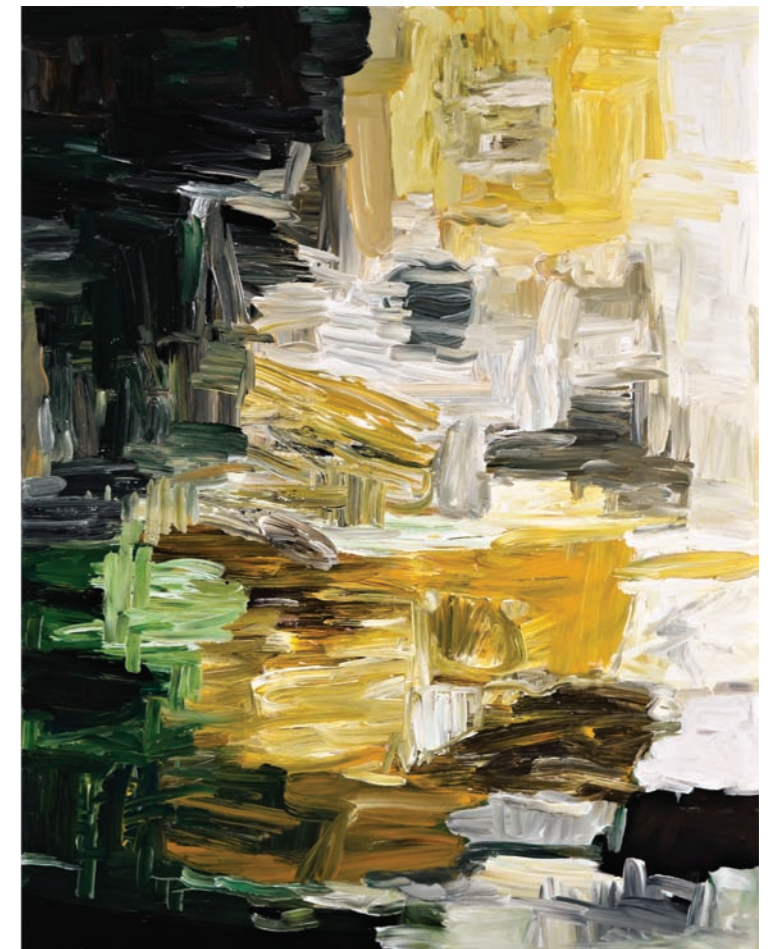
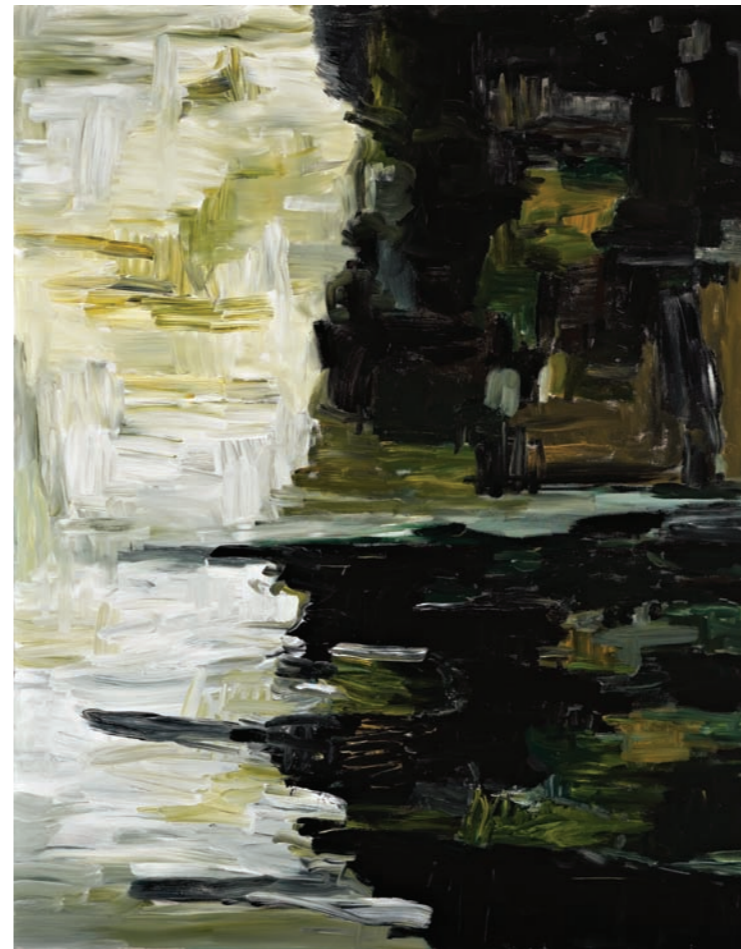
Initially entitled 'Waters, Lands', the series of four large landscapes I painted in May–June 2008. They emerged (were expelled) quickly in succession as if there were still a sort of momentum or need to finish (exhaust) the series of works from the 'Again, Again' exhibition from just four months before. The theme of landscape (and water in particular) was already there in works like *Cenote*, *Drifters* and *Submerged* as well as in some works on paper. The four large, heavy-in-tone, nocturnal paintings felt like building a fortress, a place of solidity and trust. Unknown to me at the time, the scenes related (unsurprisingly perhaps) to places from my youth – happy places; happy times. Surrounded by these massive (in relation to my studio) lands/forests/rocks, I felt sheltered. With hardly any horizon and subdued light, in the middle of the water (an island?), I was safe. The fifth and final work was painted nearly a year later. There, the land opens up and light fills the canvas.

FOREWORD WOJCIECH NOWIKOWSKI

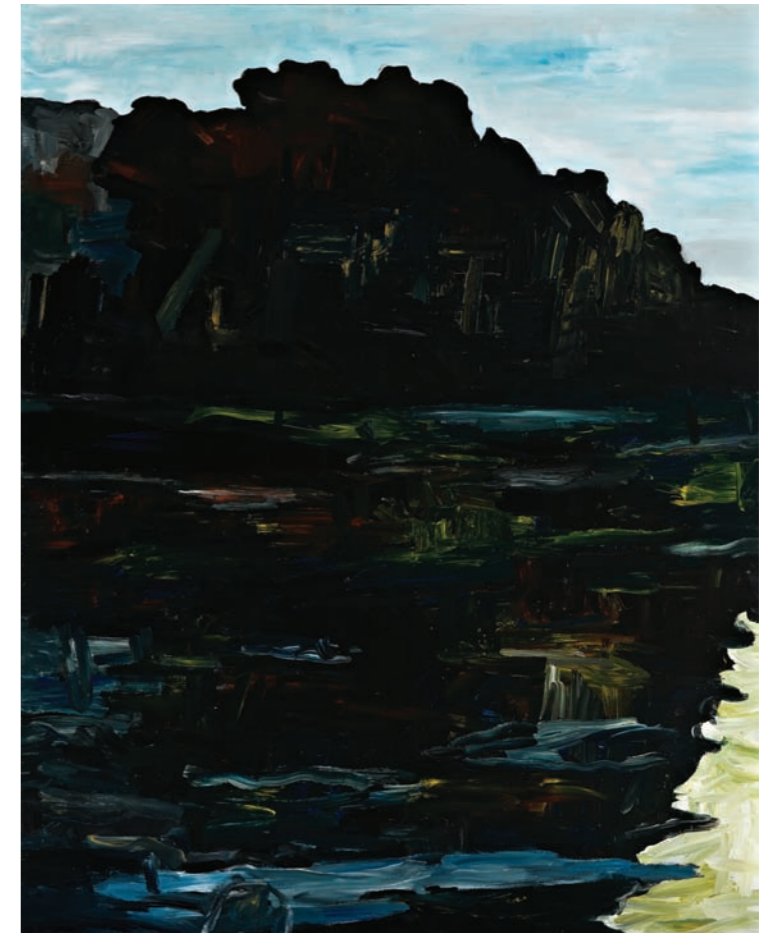
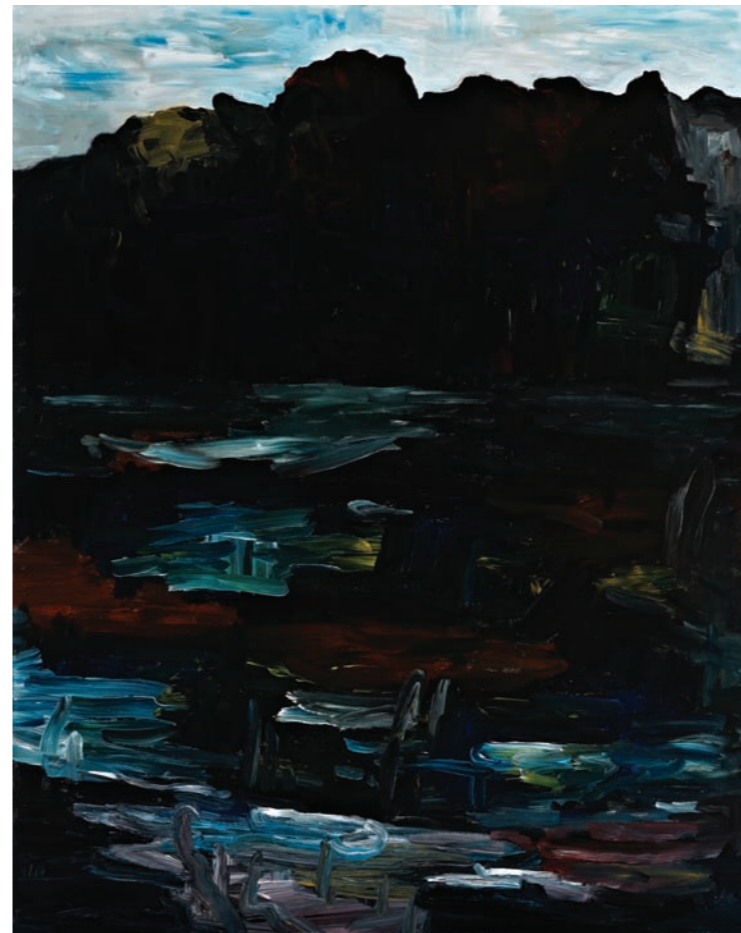


We often observe a landscape in order to find peace, to relax after everyday life, to contemplate harmony, to wonder about the transition of life or simply to take in the smells and voices that nature imposes on us. Sometimes paintings of landscapes themselves offer such solace of calm and harmony to the viewer. Wojciech Nowikowski's landscapes offer no such solace. Their forms and colours do not give a harmonious feeling of peace, they do not intend to bring a dreamlike state of bliss. They rather open up perturbing questions, they let us see the cracks in our perception and they offer an opening into the unknown – both promising and frightening at the same time. | The first canvases show landscapes overburdened with darkness. Layers of paint seem to cover each other in the attempt to create a new landscape, which will hint at a different story. The colours collide as if they are in rivalry, which will tell its story and which will be pushed into the darkness and remain silent. In the end, however, they resolve into a landscape that offers a possibility of structure and a slight opening for the light – a promise of things to come. | In the midst of the passionate competition of colours, one can occasionally see the traces of a human form. Is it a body hidden in the woods? A ghost coming from a place beyond? A body in pain? A possibility of a future being? Nowikowski has used the uncanny organic body-like form in his previous work, and it looks like these forms have returned in the new canvases, but now they seem even more dissolved, less of a threat and more a remnant of life. | As the series progresses the mood changes. It is as if simply piling on the darkness, mixing deep reds, browns and greens in no longer enough to smother the light that lurks in its shadows. The light which at first looks like a river buried beneath dark, ominous woods, suddenly erupts like a fresh stream that brings a promise of the new. The landscape changes, opens up. It is almost as if it starts to split itself – a transformation occurs. | In the last work, light takes over, darkness is pushed away, colours are translucent and forms are broken up. The ominous image of things floating underneath has vanished. The old world is transformed. | It is as if nature gave up on covering itself with layers of masks, and as if it can now expose the cracks and openings which hint at the loss that can never be covered (painted?). Now a new meaning to the loss might surface. | The shifts that occur with the progression of Nowikowski's recent works allow us to reflect on the psychoanalytic idea of melancholy and its relationship to lack and loss. Lacanian psychoanalysis is well known for

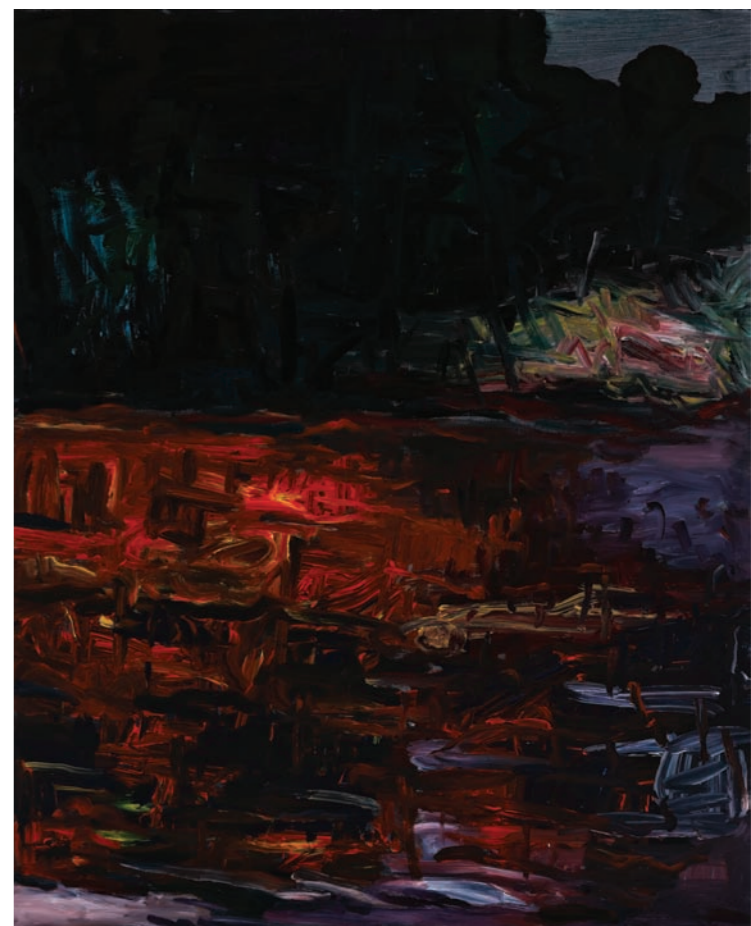
offering a theory that we perceive our world through a fantasy lens. The landscape that we see is very much determined by the unconscious way we cover up the cracks in it, since the lack forever perturbs any coherent picture of that landscape. In order to see the landscape as *landscape* we need first of all to suppress the point from which it might well be imagined that the landscape observes us. The scenario that we create from our surroundings must exclude the eye from which we might feel ourselves to be observed. | The cracks in the world (like the gaps between the split canvases?) can become something threatening and also something promising, something that presents an opportunity for the new, an opening to the unknown, a rebirth, and a new start. The cracks however can also be perceived in a melancholic way as losses that cannot be mourned, as openings that do not offer a possibility of renewal. A melancholic's problem is that he confuses lack with loss. He feels as if the lack is something that can be covered up by a particular object. The landscape of his surroundings he perceives to be without the lack so he thinks that an object can be found to cover the lack and make the picture complete. In his fantasy, however, the melancholic endlessly mourns the fact that the object is not at the place he imagined it to be – he feels that he has gone through a non-recoverable loss, that darkness is all that is left to him and that there is no space for light or a glimpse of a new object emerging. | Wojciech Nowikowski's work at first appears like a melancholic memory of landscapes, which are like layers of stories piled one on top of the other. In the first paintings one gets the feeling that one is observing the artist's struggle with loss. One wonders if it is a loss of the homeland, loss of a person, loss of dreams or an overwhelming anxiety of being thrown into the world he finds alien and whose landscape is never quite right, which is why he constantly needs to repaint it. However, as the paintings progress and when earthy colours give space to cracks filled with light, the melancholic impression vanishes. The observer now senses a surging energy. In the pictures he can observe a struggle over which colour of light will try to define the cracks that open up in the landscape. What he perceived before as a melancholic rumination over loss changes into an existential quest over what lack stands for. At that moment, a feeling of optimism takes over and the observer starts contemplating through the use of which colour loss has ceased to be loss and has become an opening: the colour of light.



CONSOLATION I 2008 acrylic on canvas 142 X 232 cm



CONSOLATION II 2008-09 acrylic on canvas 152 x 252 cm



CONSOLATION III 2008–09 acrylic on canvas 152 x 382 cm





CONSOLATION IV 2008 acrylic on canvas 152 x 252 cm





CONSOLATION V 2009 acrylic on canvas 152 x 244 cm

Wojciech Nowikowski was born in Poland in 1954. Since graduation in 1986 from the Fine Art Academy in Warsaw the artist has shown his work in several solo and group exhibitions including: 1991, 'Galleries of the '80s', Zacheta National Gallery; 1995, 'Drawing', the National Museum; 1999, solo show in the Polish Cultural Institute in London.

In the 1990s the artist, settled in London and not associated with any gallery, continued working on canvas and, increasingly, on paper. The work, exploring a range of media, was abstract, lyrical and intuitive; the forms it employed were often a hybrid of organic and mechanical.

A significant change brought by interest in colour resulted in the 2002 series of 'flags' and minimalist panels of glossy, immaterial surfaces. What followed was a steady increase in physicality of paint and space, and the emergence of the 'object' in the 2007 series 'Offerings, Trophies'. In the next show ('Again, Again') in 2008 the foreboding tranquility of previous works was disturbed by convulsive brush strokes and a tense membrane of paint.

In the present show you are surrounded by a landscape. Hieratic and menacing, this landscape might represent a reality which is too vast and complex to grasp. At times, the views, rather than opening the space, engulf and threaten with suffocation. At times, segmented canvases hide the unknown beyond and offer a shelter. Nowikowski seems to expose the viewer to conflicting emotions of safety and danger, comfort and fear.

Since 2001 Nowikowski has been a lecturer at the University of the Arts London. In 2004 he founded in Warsaw the 'Empty Workshop', a non-profit space devoted to promoting contemporary art.

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Then I felt a need for light and had enough courage to see what lies beyond. The canvases were pushed apart (waters broke, parted). The latest work has light shining through parted land. What was expelled (projected from inside) is outside now. I turned myself inside out (became an image, one among many). Momentarily without the centre I feel hollow, free, floating. I am ec-static (outside myself). **I squirt the paint on the canvas. I throw big lumps of it from open bottles. Farting and splashing I evacuate what feels like a weight/phlegm that needs to be cleared so I can breathe. I smear the paint in anticipation. I don't stop until the whole canvas is covered.** Painting has to be both vulnerable (why was it painted?) and obvious (had to be painted). **Painting is a response (reflex) to loss or lack, an attempt to bring back or find out what is missing, what is not there any more (but demands /deserves/has to be). It is as if part of me is gone.** Painting landscapes takes me the furthest back the mourner can go: the backdrop is set, the loss has not yet occurred. This is the world of future, anticipation and hope, an Edenic world, if only briefly. **What is missing in the painting is what I am grieving. Painting confirms the loss.** Hieratic/gigantic and menacingly/threateningly close, the landscapes represent reality which is too vast and complex to grasp. **Water that separates, reflects, mediates. Reflections turn the world upside-down (contradict, oppose, neutralize).** The views at times, rather than opening the space, engulf and threaten with suffocation. At times, the barricade of segmented canvases hides the unknown beyond and offers a shelter: you are on the water, floating alone, safe, at peace for now. **Transformative experience through the vulnerability, fear, darkness, disembodiment, entrapment.** Absence of people. Without their defining gaze I am uncertain, delusional, (authentic?). **Landscape is where our lives are played out. Pure landscape is not possible – we always invest in the landscape our desires, fears and hopes. In return it offers safety and solace of enclosure or liberating dizziness of abysmal space. In a reversal of optics you can imagine landscape as a projection beaming from our eyes, our inner landscapes being cast out. Landscape is not there if there is no-one looking.** The viewers, allowed (forced) in the place of the artist's eye momentarily lose themselves. **Closeness of distant horizons induces a kind of out-of-body experience. Panic and confusion due to the close physicality of the canvas/paint.** The apparent solidity and scale, clear and reassuring structure are there to replace lost certainties. The world needed to be reinstalled, the void cancelled (overpainted). The presence of painting points to absence and loss. **Consolation III and Giovanni Bellini's The Assassination of St. Peter Martyr (1507). It seems to be about the commonality of evil (crime), about the invisibility of crime and the solitude of the victim.** The narratives that sometimes I see (discover) in my paintings are, I believe, accidental. **The idea of separating the canvases came late (accidentally?) Suddenly 'painting' of a landscape was interrupted: illusion (fear) revealed; image (me) freed.** Small landscape by Giorgione *Il Traumonto (The Sunset)* reminds me of my work *Consolation V*. The same light, silence, admiration. The narrow strip of distant blue in the earthy browns. **A good painting is the one that looks back at you. It has got the face and (so) dialogue/exchange is possible. It is not your face (narcissistic and loving) but the face of the accusing, questioning, denying and incomprehensible other. Perhaps that is what Frank Auerbach meant when he said: 'good paintings are bound to look in some ways actively repellent, disturbing and not right'.** I paint (the face of the other) so I can see myself, so I can face myself. **The need to be seen. Can I see anything that doesn't look back at me? How to recognise 'the face'? Depression as inability to see the face among people, among things. Painting (art) as means of giving/exposing the face.** To accommodate all three: lyrical gesture of Cy Twombly (transience); iconic symbolism of Philip Guston (certainty); rigorous aesthetic of Gerhard Richter (structure). **Recently I am beginning to feel what it means to be painting. As if the image gives me permission to be painted. A feeling of ease, lack of hesitation, of no choice. No choice – the paradox of creativity?**





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