

Anne Magill

A Sense of Someone

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17 October – 9 November

John Martin Gallery
38 Albemarle Street
London W1S 4JG



Interior, 2019
charcoal on paper
7½ x 7½ inches, 19 x 19 cms

ANNE MAGILL, A SENSE OF SOMEONE

In the weeks leading up to her exhibition Anne Magill works with few breaks. She paints in oil by night, charcoals and acrylics by day. Ten or more pictures surround her studio walls, waiting for their moment on the easel. Since childhood her painting and drawing was done at this same tireless pace – hour after hour spent bringing a picture to its conclusion. And yet to a casual visitor, those ten paintings would probably appear finished: each image seems complete with no visible underpainting or drawing. Anne remains unsatisfied, revisiting each picture as soon as the previous adjustment has dried, deepening shadows, raising highlights or altering the angles of light as it strikes a figure. Her paintings can take an age and some never get beyond what she calls a “technical exercise” leaving no options for her to explore. By the same token she knows when a painting is working and when the end is in sight: “It is so elusive, but you can feel it coming,” she says. The next layer of paint might generate the spark she is looking for, something indefinable: an element which ties everything together and brings the image to life.

After a lifetime spent developing her art, Anne has reached a level of skill in drawing and painting where technical perfection no longer holds much interest. Nor is it something she wants us to notice. Her paintings are made to be read like photographs, like a found image in a flea market, anonymous portraits, family outings with a picnic and an old Kodak, informal, homespun pictures, with something that holds our attention. The apparent spontaneity of her work masks paintings that are meticulously composed from multiple sources and which adopt the textures and physical appearance of old photographs to create an image that convinces us that its existence is there for a reason. Something significant happened, or is about to happen. They are paintings that intrigue and which seem to take on the aspect of memories: this is the point where the poetry happens, that elusive bit of painting where the work comes to life, our imagination takes the reins, and stories begin to suggest themselves.

Anne Magill was born on the Ards Peninsula in County

Down in 1962. Her family were farmers, her uncles each with a house close by and everyone with a role to play throughout the farming year. It was an insular, happy childhood set within a deeply patriarchal family, the nucleus of which was her enigmatic Grandfather, a successful businessman who had bought the land, and who spent half the year in America. During the war his house had sheltered child refugees arriving in Britain through the Kinder Transport and the top floor, where the children stayed, remained untouched, with mementoes charting their harrowing journey and their hopes for the future. Anne remembered seeing the room as a child though warned to not mention it at school. It was the ‘Troubles’, and best not to say too much, about anything.

The family were strong, modest, hard-working Presbyterians. The farm employed workers across the religious divide and so needed to keep silent about anything which could be misinterpreted or might serve to form a suggestion of disloyalty. Strength and silence was an attempt to protect the family from the menaces of the ‘Troubles’ and visits from men in balaclavas. In later life she likened the men in her family to the ancient dolmens which stand sentinel along the coast. Fifty years later, those same men, wrapped in thick coats, keep their powerful protective presence in her paintings, a memory of this time of silence.

There were no photographs from her childhood. Even formal family photographs were seen as slightly immodest and so kept in drawers. Nonetheless, Anne’s precocious skill as an artist was encouraged and she drew constantly. Her bedroom window faced the sea and she could see the Scottish coast thirty miles away – she recalls most of her childhood pictures being filled with sea and sky. Drawing and farm work filled her days and her skill and confidence flourished both at home and at school, spurred on by inspirational teachers. The art department at her secondary school under the painter, William Bogle, saw the artists Mark Francis, Mark Shields and Anne brought together in the same year. It was a remarkable, self-contained year group, but Bogle urged his students of the need to leave Northern Ireland if they were going to make it as artists.

At the age of eighteen she left by ferry to Liverpool, her father and uncles standing on the docks to see her off: that image which is so familiar to us from her paintings. There is no photograph to mark that departure, but the memory and emotion was real enough and echoes through so much of her later work. The poignancy and pain of lives separated and the memories and people left behind were emotions only considered years later. Her immediate thoughts were about life as a foundation student in Liverpool. Talking to her, one can understand the sense of relief, as well as optimism that the opportunity presented. She recalled an evening out with three fellow students from Belfast, one an ex-RUC man, two who had been members of the IRA, and how they could sit together and joke about that other life. Already Anne had an ability to see beyond affiliations and loyalties, a skill that set her on a course as an artist of supreme neutrality, the artist-observer par excellence.

Fearless, Anne was quick to take every opportunity where she could immerse herself in situations that might fuel this interest. She returned to Belfast, this time as an artist invited to accompany the army; then spent three weeks living with the Greenham Common protestors before setting off for a week at the Conservative Party Conference. An early commission for a magazine article about the rise of the skinhead movement in London gave her three weeks in the East End with a gang. She was interested in the normality of their lives, meeting their mums, disarming any hostility towards ‘the Paddy’ with a bag of sweets, and her obvious, mesmerising skill as an artist. Her art broke the ice and Anne used it as a way to build trust and to get a deeper insight into their lives.

Even as a student at St Martin’s School of Art, commercial demand for her work had reached such a level that she needed time out from her degree to complete commissions from newspapers, magazines and advertising agencies. Her raw, reportage drawings, often in charcoal captured the atmosphere and immediacy of a situation without the extraneous details of a photograph. She could create astonishing, cinematic effects in her charcoals loved by picture editors. Her career blossomed, winning awards and recognition for her exceptional technical skill.

Throughout these years, Anne never stopped painting for herself. Working at home in the evenings required a different mindset, one demanding she think beyond the brief and beyond technical virtuosity; it meant looking for something still and timeless, the poetry of an image rather than the instant response to an action. No less demanding, her work now relied on the insights she had amassed as an observer of people’s lives and of the processes by which personal memories can trigger a deep response to photographs, even those whose subjects are unknown. Anne saw how the physical photograph, the paper itself, was as powerful as the event it recorded. The important question to ask was why that photo survived at all, and what did it mean to someone? Anne’s work as an artist has grown out of this deep empathy with the lives of people and her ability to share that tenderness through her paintings. The completeness of Magill’s finished paintings might suggest that each subject was fixed in her mind from the outset and then committed to canvas, but every painting evolves differently, imposing its own demands and directions, over months and, occasionally years, until something convincing begins to emerge and Anne sees the end in sight. Its resolution is that moment when Anne can harness the world she has created within the painting, to the imagined lives of the subjects she depicts. She remains a neutral observer, watching on unseen, unnoticed, but always thinking how an image can elicit meaning. When all these forces coalesce, and the painting provokes its own set of questions, then it is finished.

John Martin



RIGHT Murmur, 2017
charcoal and paper laid on board
24 x 24 inches, 61 x 61 cms



Cadence 2019
oil on canvas
27½ x 67 inches, 70 x 170 cms



Haze, 2019
oil on canvas
16 x 19½ inches, 40 x 50 cms



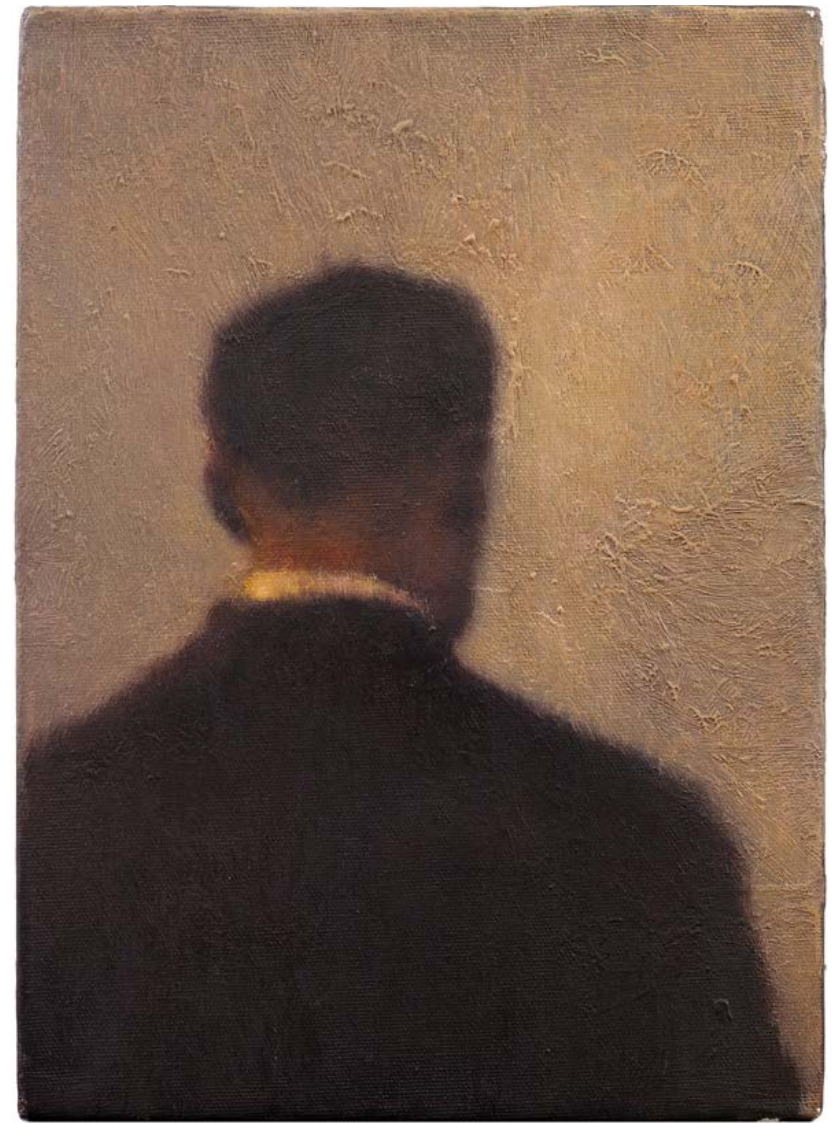
On the Breeze 2019
acrylic on panel
16 x 19½ inches, 40 x 50 cms



Shore, 2017
acrylic and pastel on canvas
22 x 22 inches, 56 x 56 cms



A Sense of Someone, 2019
charcoal on paper
15¾ x 10¼ inches, 40 x 26 cms



By the Window, 2019
acrylic on canvas
11¾ x 8¾ inches, 30 x 21 cms



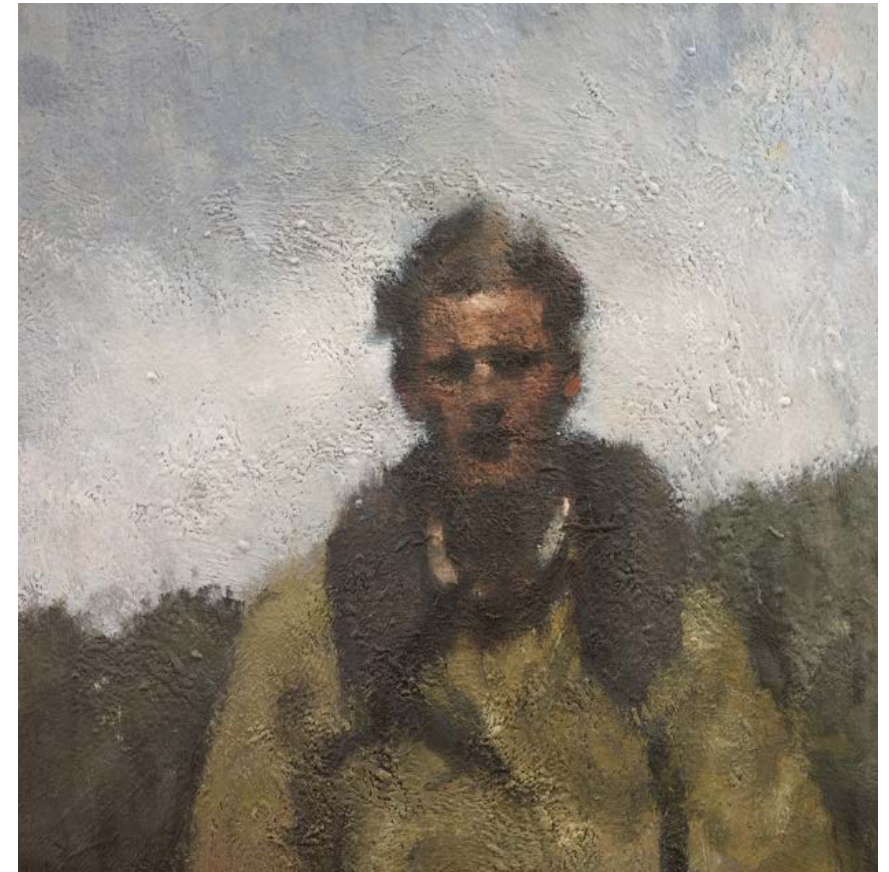
A Gentle Tide 2019
acrylic on board
36½ x 48½ inches, 92 x 123 cms



Longing 2019
acrylic on canvas
39½ x 39½ inches, 100 x 100 cms



Homeward, 2019
charcoal on panel
19¾ x 19¾ inches,, 50 x 50 cms



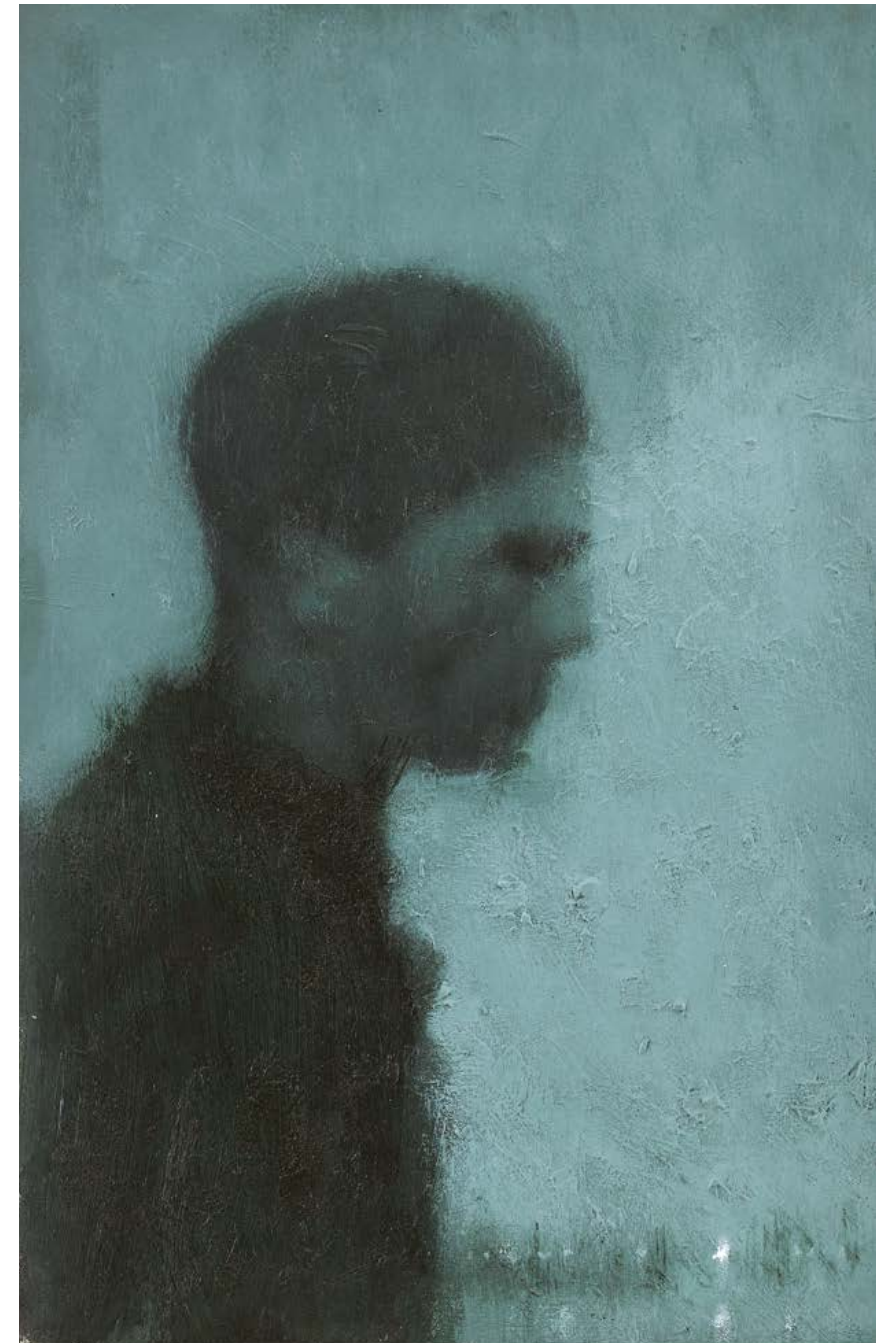
And There You Are 2019
acrylic on paper laid on canvas
12½ x 12½ inches, 31 x 31 cms



Night, 2019
oil on canvas
15¾ x 11¾ inches, 40 x 30 cms



On The Journey Home 2016
charcoal on paper
47½ x 70 inches, 121 x 178 cms



Vigil, 2019
acrylic on paper
8¼ x 5½ inches, 21 x 14 cms



Gathering, 2019
charcoal on paper
23 x 32½ inches, 58 x 82 cms



Unsaid, 2019
charcoal on paper
6¾ x 7½ inches, 17 x 18.5 cms



Summer 2019
oil on canvas
30 x 40 inches, 76 x 101 cms

Haar, 2019
acrylic on panel
19¾ x 15¾ inches, 50 x 40 cms





Figures at Dusk, 2019
acrylic on paper
5 x 8 inches, 12 x 20 cms



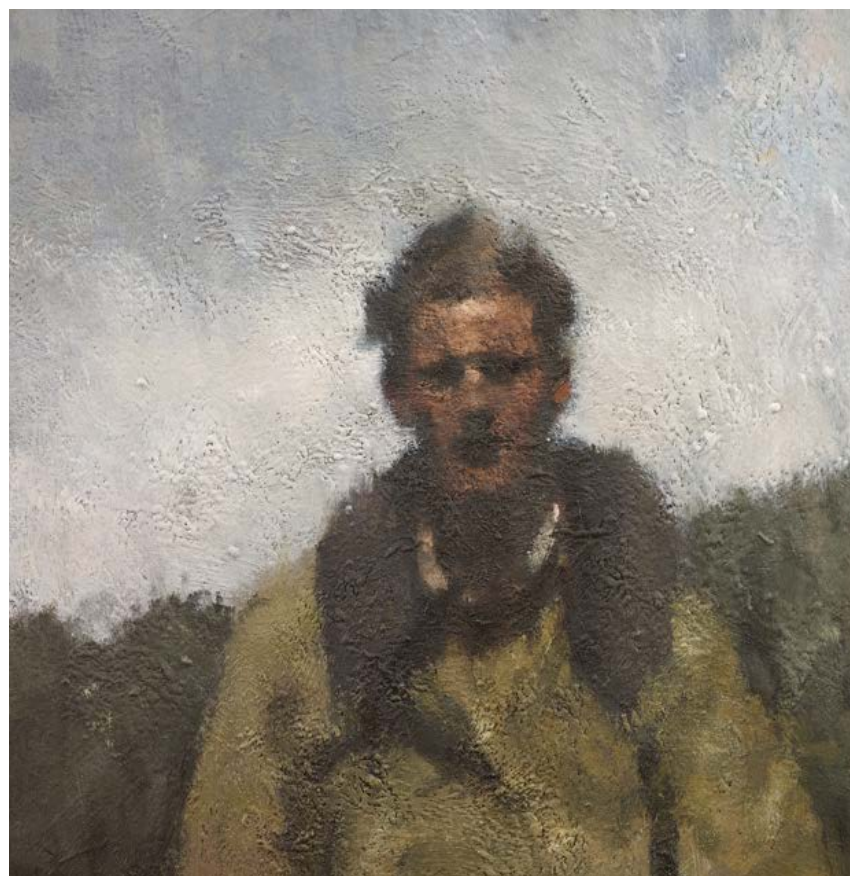
In The Studio, 2019
charcoal on paper
7 x 11 inches, 18 x 28 cms



Wild, 2019
acrylic on panel
8 x 11 inches, 20 x 28 cms



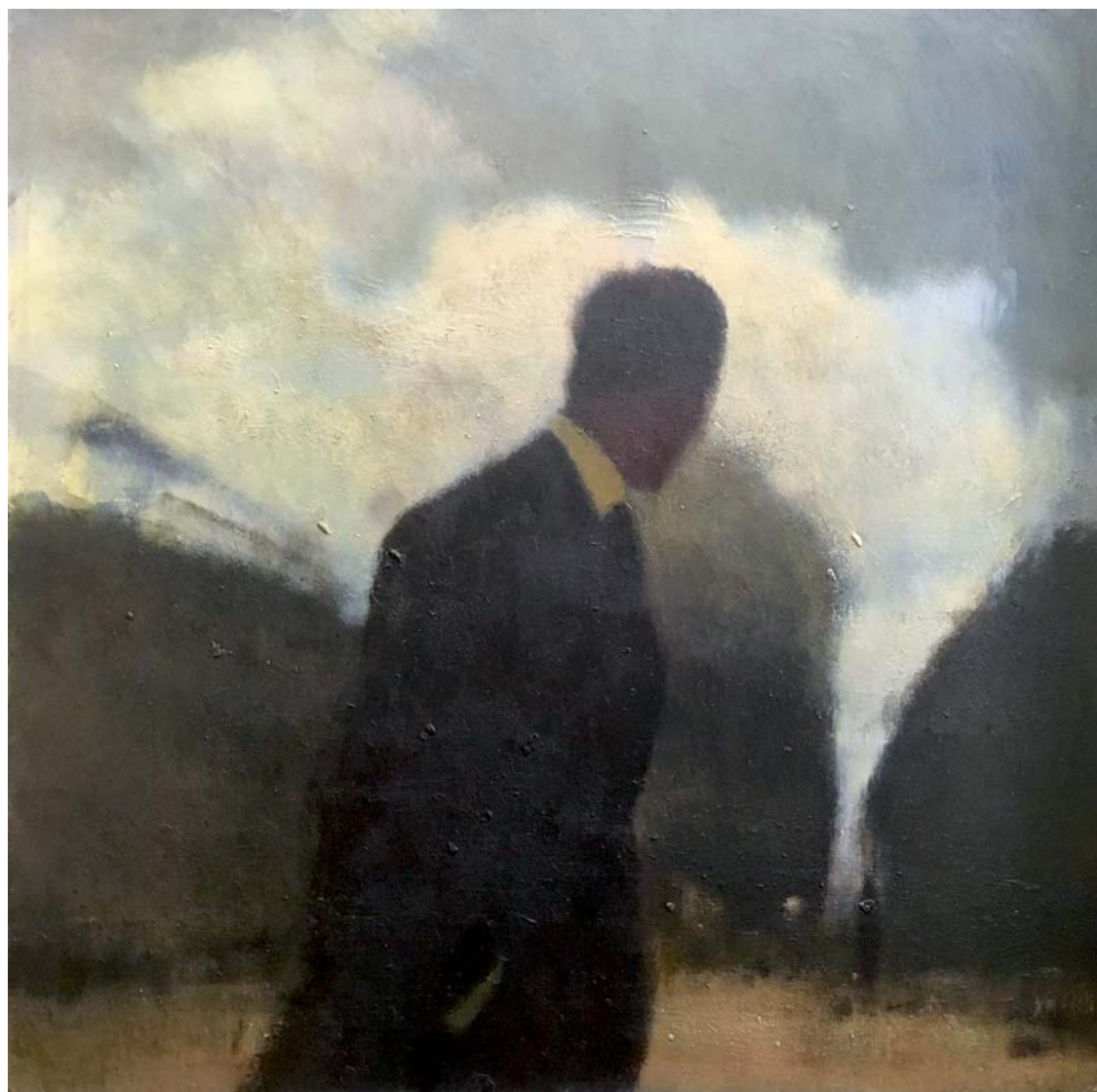
North Star, 2019
acrylic on panel
19¼ x 15¼ inches, 50 x 40 cms



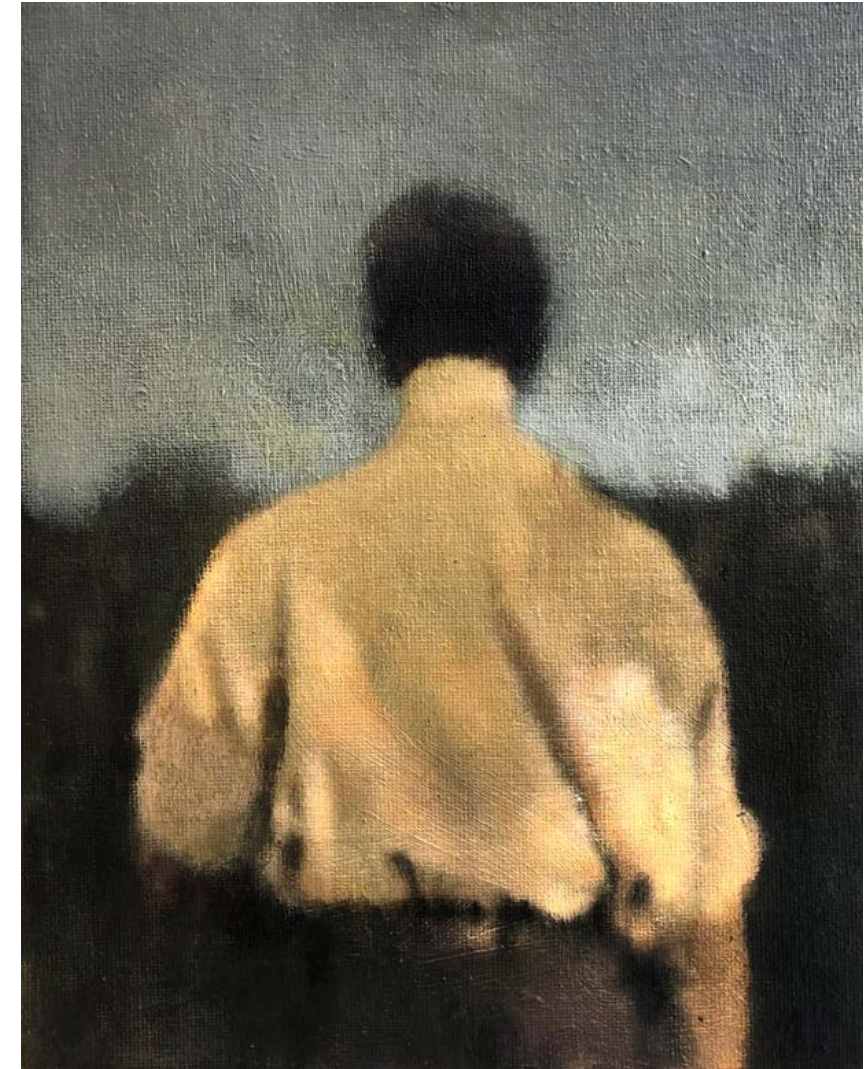
And there you are 2019
acrylic on paper laid on canvas
12½ x 12½ inches, 31 x 31 cms



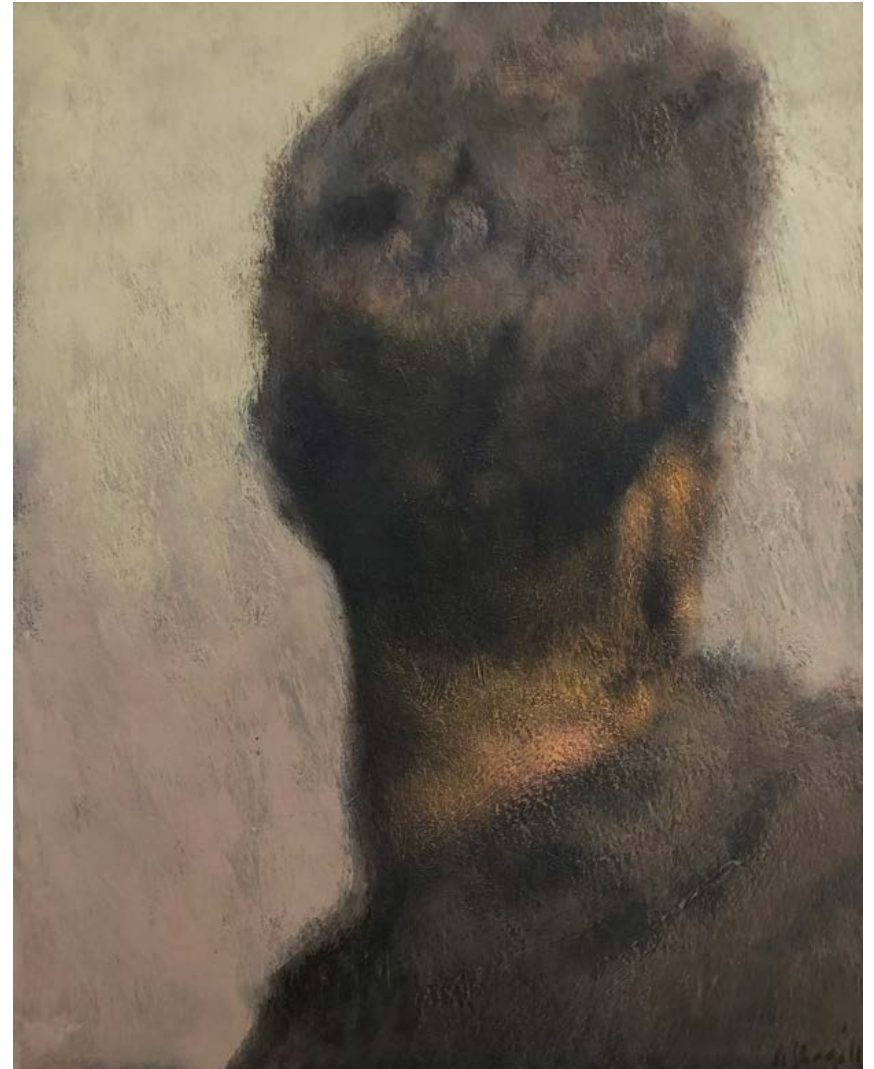
Late Summer, 2019
acrylic on canvas
32¾ x 39¼ inches, 83 x 100 cms



Last Glance, 2019
acrylic on board
23½ x 23½ inches, 60 x 60 cms



Long Off, 2019
acrylic on board
9¾ x 7¾ inches, 25 x 20 cms



A Yearning, 2019
acrylic on board
19¾ x 16 inches, 50 x 40 cms



Setting Off, 2019
acrylic on board
10 x 14 inches, 25 x 35 cms



Close of Day, 2019
acrylic on board
10 x 12 inches, 25 x 30 cms



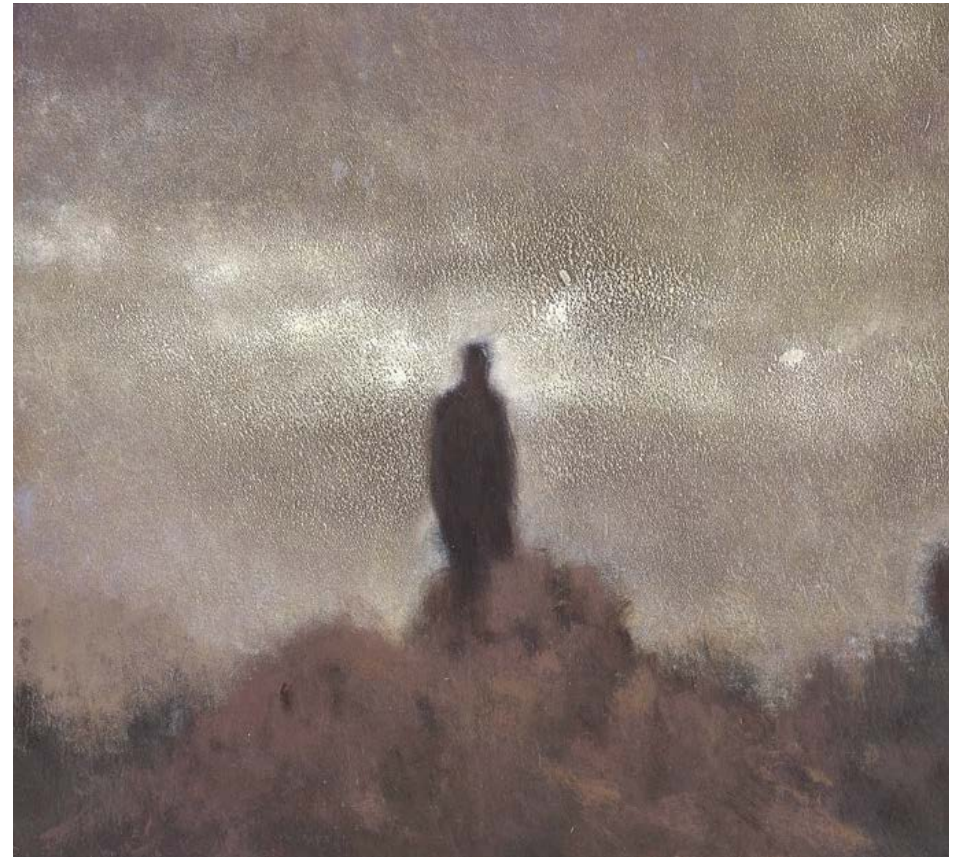
Over the Lough, 2019
acrylic on board
7¼ x 11 inches, 20 x 28 cms



A Pause, 2019
acrylic on canvas
8 x 8 inches, 20 x 20 cms

To You, 2019
acrylic on gesso panel
7¼ x 9½ inches, 18 x 24 cms





Sea Mist, 2019
acrylic on board
8 x 8½ inches, 20 x 21 cms



To You (Study), 2019
acrylic on board
8 x 11 inches, 20 x 28 cms



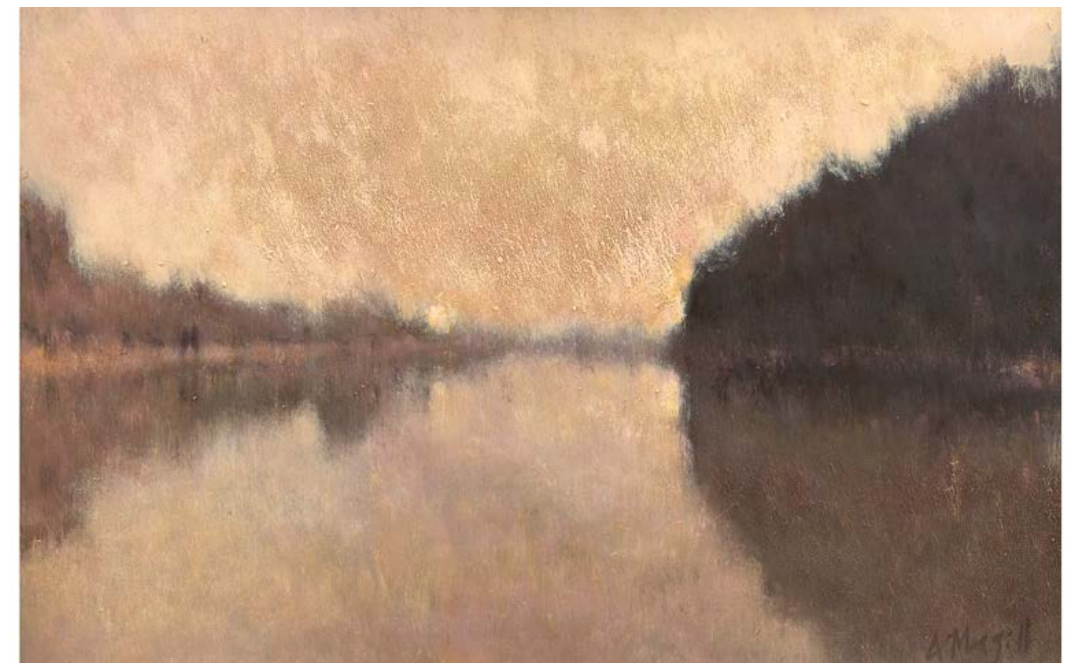
Motorcyclist, 2019
acrylic on paper laid on board
8 x 5½ inches, 20 x 13 cms



A Gentle Tide, 2019
 acrylic on paper laid on board
 5 x 8 inches, 12 x 20 cms



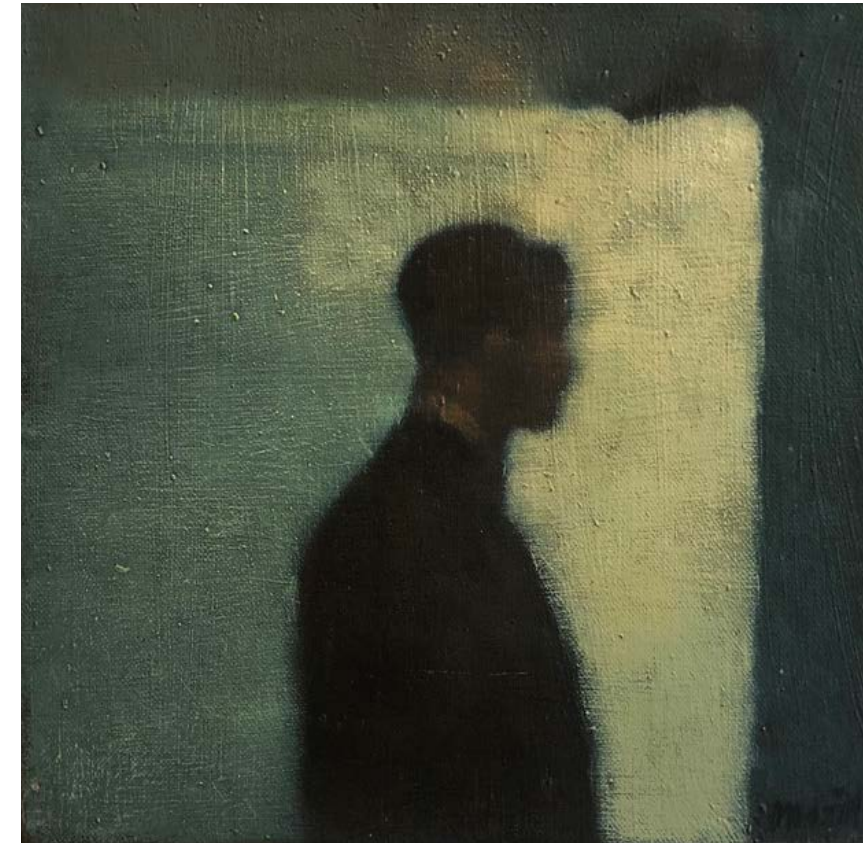
Walking the Daylight, 2019
 acrylic on paper laid on board
 5 x 8 inches, 13 x 20 cms



We Are Here, 2019
acrylic on board
7½ x 12 inches, 19 x 32 cms



Under Stars, 2019
acrylic on paper laid on board
8 x 5 inches, 21 x 14 cms



Into the Light II, 2019
acrylic on paper laid on board
10 x 10 inches, 25 x 25 cms



Silver Morning, 2019
acrylic on board
8 x 11 inches, 20 x 28 cms

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