

An abstract painting with a dark, moody atmosphere. The background is a mix of deep reds, blacks, and dark greys. A large, irregular black shape is at the top. Below it, there are splatters and washes of bright yellow and red. The overall texture is rough and layered, suggesting a process of building up and then perhaps erasing or blending colors.

FROM DARKNESS

Tom de Freston

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04/03/2022 - 18/06/2022

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Cover:

Detail of **Fold** (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm



Raft (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm

FROM DARKNESS

Tom de Freston

No 20 Arts is delighted to present *FROM DARKNESS*, a solo exhibition of new works by Tom de Freston. Coinciding with the publication of his book, *Wreck* (Granta), this exhibition presents paintings and sculptures which explore themes of horror and suffering, alongside beauty and melancholy.

Next page:
Tom's studio after the fire (Photo: Peter Mallet)





At the cliff edge (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm



Submergence (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm

For the past four years, I have been collaborating with the Syrian writer Professor Ali Souleman and documentary filmmaker Mark Jones. Ali lost his sight to a bomb blast in Syria in 1997 and we were attempting to translate his experiences of war and displacement into a collection of paintings, and a film. To make the unseen seen. Then, a month before the first lockdown, a fire gutted my studio, destroying twelve years' worth of work in a matter of hours.

Amongst the burnt debris, I had a moment of instinct: this would not be an end, but a new beginning.

Confronting the scale of devastation piece by piece, I embarked on a slow grieving. It was a personal taxonomy, a museum of loss as I identified and ordered the burnt remains. Wet ash gathered into bags. Fragments of stretcher bars arranged by size. Burnt canvases dragged out and organised. A deliberate documentation of what things might have been, or what they now were. I began to see their potential to hold new life, new possibilities. Some paintings had been burnt, but felt transmogrified, turned into skeletal, sculptural things, powerful communicators of loss. Some objects leant themselves to transformation: melted paint pots could be covered in resin, made into gleaming sculptures, as if dredged from a wreck. There were objects that could be photographed as research material for new work. Then finally were the materials that could be repurposed: ash and charcoal, book pages to be incorporated into paintings.

The paintings in *FROM DARKNESS* are the result of an entirely new approach. Ash and debris have been mixed into paint, embedded into resin covered surfaces. Photographic prints have been layered into canvases. Unstretched canvases have been covered in pools of paint, folded, left to weather and gather new marks. The works hold a record of their creation: nothing is truly erased, only buried. Works are imprinted with hands and feet, outlined absences which speak of a past presence. Elsewhere mouths and limbs are magnified, fragments of body float against tender hues, overscale. Grids are laid down, stencilled, sprayed to form cumulative spaces and suggestions of architectural interiors. Power washers have been taken to the surface, revealing hidden passages of paint. It's an approach to mark-making akin to exploration, to looking to map new terrains.

Most of all it's an attempt to work beyond design, to move away from the certainty, noise and violence of my previous work. To strip everything back, from overt displays of horror towards beauty and melancholy. To think of paint as poetry, a language of associations, a medium capable of holding multiple metaphors at once. To paint into feeling.



Wreckage I (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm



Still 1 from feature length documentary *INSIGHT*, directed by Mark Jones



This exhibition is the culmination of this journey. The paintings on display exist across a spectrum, from the seemingly abstract through to the more obviously figurative. They are in conversation with each other, in terms of how space, surface, colour and imagery work. They have emerged from the collaboration with Ali, from the aftermath of the fire, and as such they often make direct reference to the unseen world these journeys have explored. Ali speaks of the bomb as being thrown the other side of the mirror. The drowned spaces of self run through a number of the canvases – limbs and figures floating, rising and vanishing. We have both always been drawn to the cliff scene in King Lear, to the moment Poor Tom leads a blind Gloucester to an imaginary edge. These paintings are full of imaginary cliff edges, vertiginous thresholds, dizzying heights where spaces seem to collapse together. They pass through exploded spaces: the bomb, the war, the fire. Elsewhere, land, sea and sky seem to implode, storms enter interior spaces, and perspective constantly shifts, as if inside a kaleidoscope. The body is present in many forms: in fragments, in the suggestion of opening and wounds, nostrils, mouths and caves, the micro becoming the macro. They explore the space of blindness through biomedical imagining of the eye or the interior landscapes of a body. They are paintings which invite us to enter them, to step inside the canvas, or at the least to occupy the gap between.

But above all of the iconography is a desire to make images and surfaces which invite us into feeling, not into narrative or concept. Through Ali, through the fire, through connections explicit and otherwise, they are hands reaching out to you, investigations of touch, time and distance. An attempt at empathy over spectacle. As such they are invitations into psychological hinterlands, awaiting your arrival.

Tom de Freston

Mirror 1 (side 1) (2020), Mixed media in bespoke birchwood ply box, double sided, 120 x 120 cm



Rupture (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm



Cave (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm

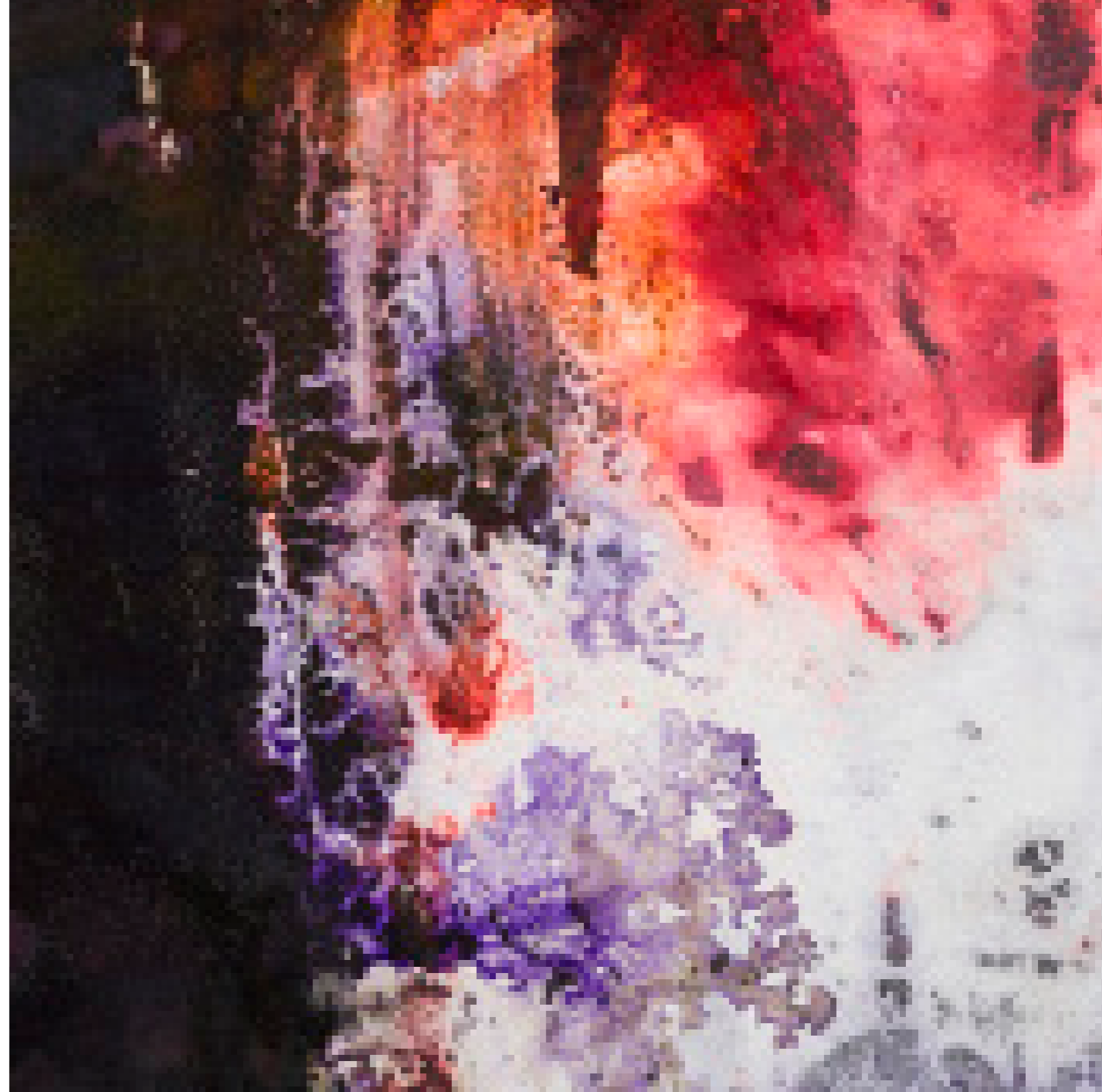
About Tom de Freston

Tom de Freston is dedicated to the construction of multimedia worlds, combining paintings, film and performance into immersive visceral narratives. His work is exhibited widely. He has held various residencies and fellowships, including the inaugural Creative Fellowship at Birmingham University, the Levy Plumb Artist in Residence at Cambridge University, and a Leverhulme Artistic Residency. He is currently Artistic Director of Medicine Unboxed. *Julia and the Shark*, his collaboration with his wife, the novelist Kiran Millwood Hargrave, was shortlisted for Waterstones Book of the Year. His debut narrative non-fiction book, *Wreck* is published by Granta in March 2022. Previous publications include graphic novels with Bloomsbury and Gatehouse Press.

'De Freston's paintings are confirmation that contemporary art is still able to offer a new and engaging reflection on themes that have fascinated artists for centuries.'

- Sir Nicholas Serota

Detail of **Wound** (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm





Still 2 from feature length documentary *INSIGHT*, directed by Mark Jones



Gravity (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm

Wreck

Tom de Freston has long had an obsession with Gericault's painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819), and the troubling story behind its creation. *Wreck* explores the resonance between de Freston's collaboration with Professor Ali Souleman and that of Gericault's work on his masterpiece. Connecting the past masterpiece, and de Freston's contemporary artistic approach, the book is a deeply personal exploration of the transformation of fear and suffering into art. *Wreck* was published by Granta on 3rd March 2022 and is available for purchase now at no20arts.com.

'I've never read a book like Wreck before. it pulled me in, engulfed me, cast me up, left me beached, left me wrecked. There are sudden vivid plunges into historical dreaming, dazzling close-readings of artworks, profoundly courageous passages of memoir, and as one proceeds through it one learns how to read it: by rhymes, echoes, and flashes of lightening.'

- Robert Macfarlane



Still 3 from feature length documentary *INSIGHT*, directed by Mark Jones



Mirror II (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm

Exhibition History Highlights

2019 - *Truth-tellers*, King's College London, UK

2018 - *Lush HQ*, London, UK

- *Demons Land*, Old Fire Station, Oxford, UK

2017 - *Demons Land*, Stowe National Trust, UK

- *Demons Land*, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK

2016 - *Artist Bedrooms* (permanent installation), Battersea Arts Centre, London, UK

- *OE*, 47/49 Tanner Street, London

- *RSC (The Other Place)*, Birmingham University Creative Festival, UK

- *Shakespeare's Dead*, Bodleian Library, Oxford, UK

2014 - *Orpheus and the Minotaur*, Bresse Little, London, UK

- *Frontiers (Medicine Unboxed)*, Parabola Arts Centre, Cheltenham, UK

2013 - *Charnel House*, Bresse Little, London, UK

- *Paintings After Shakespeare*, The Globe Theatre, London, UK

- *Voice (Medicine Unboxed)*, Parabola Arts Centre, Cheltenham, UK

2012 - *Scavengers*, Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, Tokyo

- *On Theatre*, Bresse Little Gallery, London, UK

- *Shakespeare Paintings*, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, UK

- *The Golem*, Centre for Recent Drawing, London, UK

2011 - *On Falling*, Frameless Gallery, London, UK

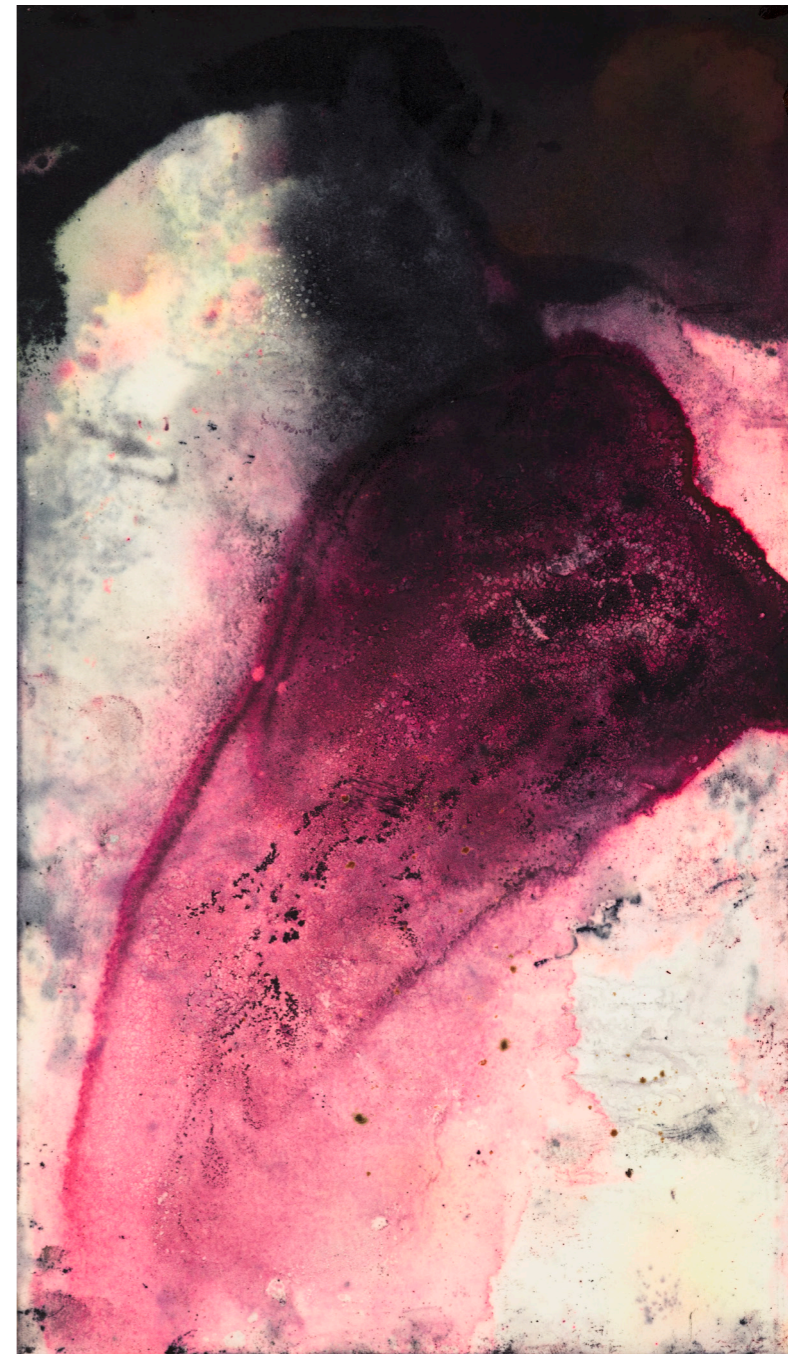
- *Scavengers*, British Shakespeare Association Conference, Cambridge, UK

- *Scavengers*, Birthplace Trust, Stratford-Upon-Avon, UK

- *Deposition* (permanent installation), Christ's College Chapel, Cambridge, UK



Lens (2021), Mixed media on paper, 29.3 x 17 cm



Lens (2021), Mixed media on paper, 29.3 x 17 cm

Awards and Residencies

2013- 2018 - Artistic Director, Medicine Unboxed

2016 - Birmingham University Creative Fellow

- Saboteur Award winner for 'A Fool's Worlds'
- Arts Council GFA for OE exhibition and performances
- AHRC/TORCH funding for Demons Land

2012 - Artist in Residence, The Expansionists, Whitstable

2010 - Leverhulme Artist in Residence, Cambridge University

2008 - Levy Plumb Visual Arts Residency, Christ's College

Detail of **Opening** (2021), Oil on canvas, 200 x 125 cm





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