

MILLENNIAL ELEGY



JACK LEAMY

JACK LEAMY

MILLENNIAL ELEGY

www.jackleamy.com

MILLENNIAL ELEGY

NEW WORK BY JACK LEAMY

In his new body of work, **Millennial Elegy**, Jack Leamy juxtaposes contemporary soldiers with passages from iconic early European modernist paintings to depict a culture of warfare in contrast to the aspirations and hopes implicit at the start of a new era. At times, the paintings evoke a healing force of utopian ideals, and at others, the corruption of those same ideals.

Millennial Elegy, the title of the new work from this Tournesol Painting Prize award-winning artist, layers diverse readings. In one sense, the title invokes the sad echo of optimism devastated by war that traverses the centuries, as well as the artist's canvases. It also refers to the generation that came of age and fought in the wars begun in the early 2000s. The title's resonance with *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* by Robert Motherwell brings to mind the political dimension of art. In yet another vein, the title surfaces late 20th century proclamations of "mourning" for the "death of painting" which his work refutes.

This socially conscious artist believes in a transformative, cultural and political function of art and is part of a growing group of figurative painters who freely comb, incorporate and revitalize neglected trajectories. Leamy draws on the early European modernist as well as the anti-war lineage of *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso and from an even earlier turn of century, Francisco de Goya's *Execution of May Third, 1804*. However, instead of the many-figured tableaux with roots in history painting, Leamy's canvases, with the exception of his piece *Battle*, abandon grand spectacle to zero in on the intimate reactions to war of one or two central figures.

His new body of work links the portrait with the political. It arises from an earlier series of stop animation film grounded in social practice called *American Portrait*. In each film the viewer listens to an individual vet relate his story while watching a stop action animation focused only on the portrait as Leamy paints and witnesses the story. "Lives are destroyed," says the artist, "in warfare and even later at home. There is tremendous collateral damage. By painting these images of soldiers and vets who often find themselves still in the trenches of misery I seek to restore their dignity and to take moral and ethical stock of a culture I find steeped in brutality." While Leamy indicts the economic and political system that dictates who fights in wars, his paintings leave open the possibility of redemption on an individual basis.

In *The Dance*, Leamy portrays a soldier who gazes pensively into the distance while taking a drag from a cigarette. The fighter has shed the uniform emblematic of his military identity and seems to be standing naked on the razor's edge of deciding which way to turn. He exists in an expressively painted space evocative of Henri Matisse's *The Dance*. But here solemn, muted colors form the backdrop and supplant Matisse's joyous and brilliant palette. Perhaps the artist suggests this dance is the ancient ritual of how the powerful sacrifice the young to fight their wars.

Leamy's paintings depict diverse paths of coming to terms with the experience of war. In contrast to his *The Dance* described above, his painting *Firewalker* presents a very different tone, although it also references the same Matisse painting. In *Firewalker*, the soldier

by Michele Foyer

appears ecstatic in the presence of the dancing figures after Matisse. He has shed his uniform and appears naked as does the solitary figure in Leamy's *The Dance*, but this soldier retains some form of identity. Leamy portrays what he describes as a "transformative moment of healing and ecstasy where the soldier has transcended the pain of his experience."

Another painting, *Departure*, features a female soldier and the young boy Pan playing his pipes after *Pan's Flute* by Picasso. The soldier ambiguously is either just buttoning up her body armor in preparation for redeployment or possibly starting to shed it. The purple sea in Leamy's painting is not contained and spills into the foreground unlike the placid sea of the Picasso reference. Does she encounter a friend, a lover, or a place of safety where she can take off her hard shell of war and, like the boy, just let her skin breathe the air? Or do we witness a sad siren song that rumbles through the ages, one that seduces and calls her to war?

In *Don't Go!*, a painted figure reminiscent of Picasso's *Woman in Green*, Dora Maar clasps a female soldier in camouflage fatigues. Dora Maar, muse and lover to Picasso during the war years, was a model for the *Guernica* paintings and appears in several of Leamy's canvases. She caringly holds the soldier as if to assuage the terror and to keep her safe from battle.

Several paintings, including *Don't Go!*, feature pairs of figures that might also be mother and child. Leamy, who has two young children, is very much aware of the abomination of war: every soldier has a mother and father whose child is in danger of death. In his painting *Pieta*, Leamy re-contextualizes Matisse's *Blue Nude* placing her

behind a soldier in a configuration evocative of a pieta. The artist invokes the aspect of mother and child in both its very real and metaphorical meanings.

Leamy's images of contemporary soldiers combined with passages from well-known early European modernist paintings provide a semblance of familiarity and also conversely, incongruity. The re-contextualization of the images makes for uncanny but fresh imagery. Both sets of imagery oddly parallel a history of injury and damage.

The idealistic young who became soldiers after 9 /11 confronted the terrors of a conflict vastly different than originally described. Similarly, idealistic hope for social change, daring risk-taking and freedom provided the impetus for avant-garde social and art movements. Sadly, World War I, the Spanish Civil War and World War II eclipsed the optimism of the *avant-garde*.

The artist creates a painted, imaginary space joining battle-worn soldiers with early European modernist or *avant-garde* imagery. In this re-contextualized and imaginary space of compassion the images might "interact" and "befriend" each other. Here soldiers can open to the possibility of honestly reacting to their experiences as they heal.

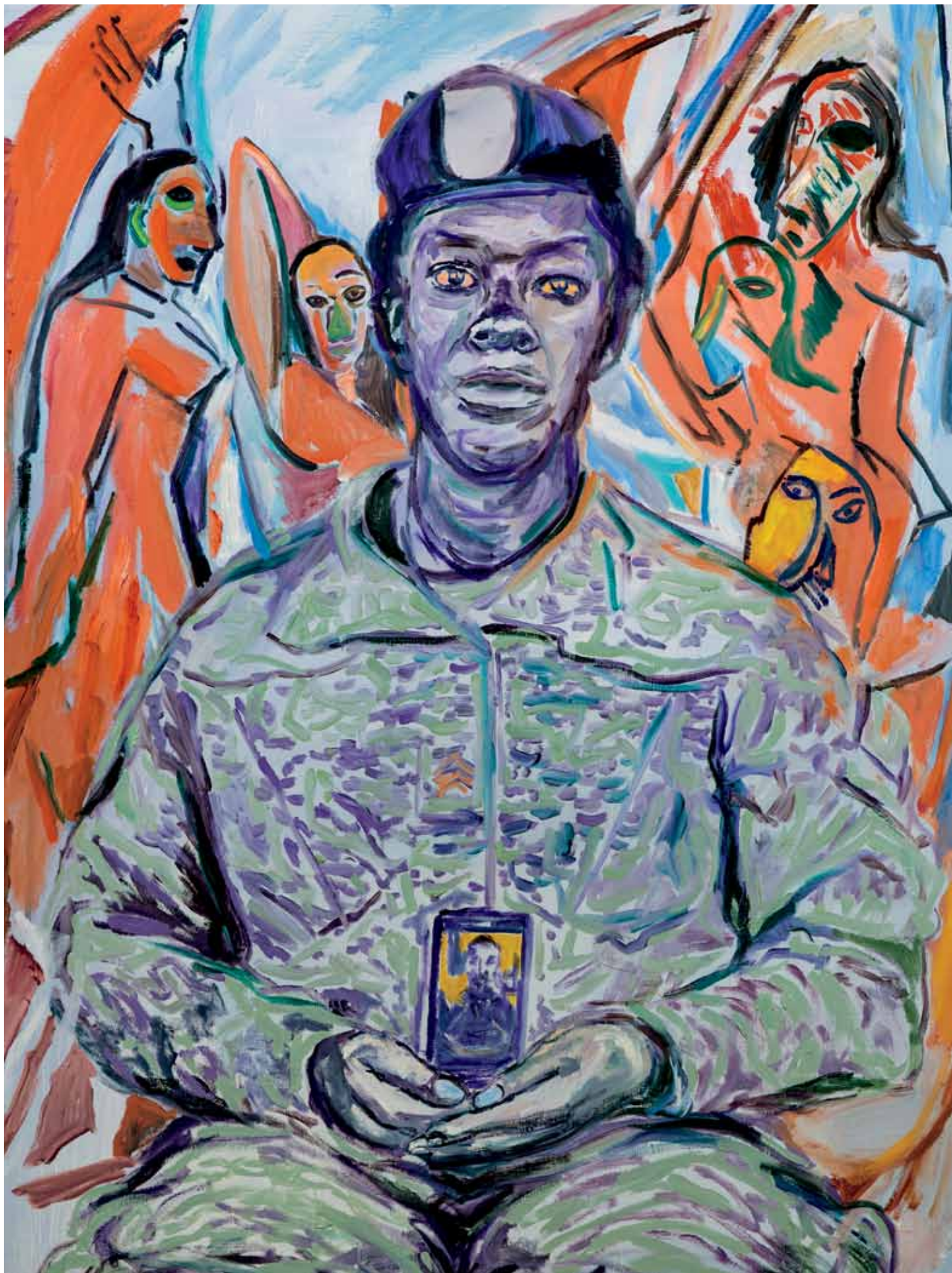
Leamy invites the viewer to ponder and explore how young people fighting the wars of the powerful react to the horrific experiences of war and begin their own individual healing journey through differing emotions of reflection, rage and even ecstasy. The artist suggests that painting also has its own journey of renewal and revitalization.



THE DANCE, 65x48in, oil on canvas, 2016



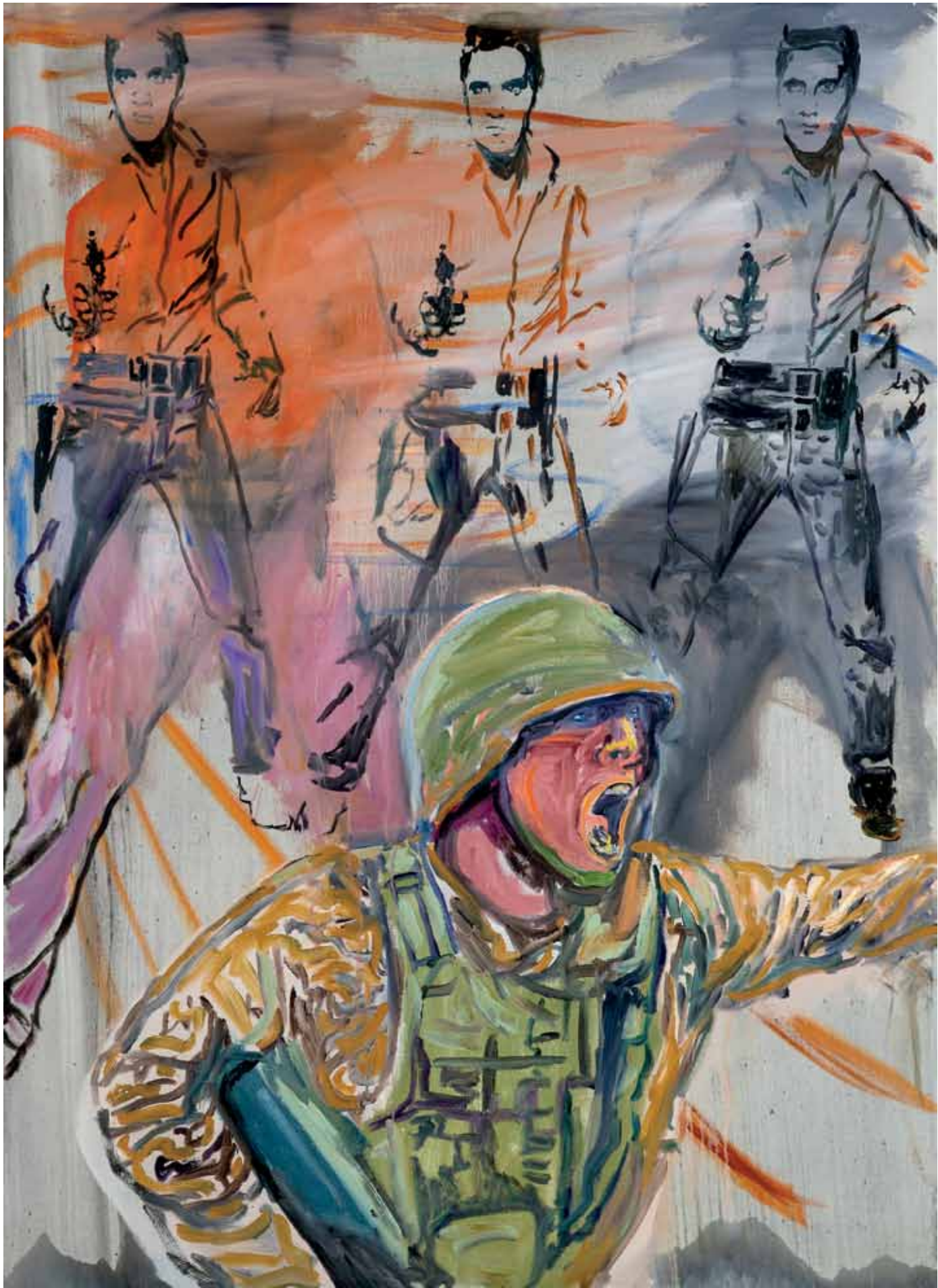
WHERE DOES THIS NOT HAPPEN? , 51x61 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



DAUGHTERS, 65x48in, oil on canvas, 2016



PIETÀ, 62x45in, oil on canvas, 2016



ELVIS ARMY, 62x45 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



ROSE, 58x58in, oil on canvas, 2016



A PAINTING IS A BOMB SHELTER, 62 x45 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



DON'T GO!, 65x48in, oil on canvas, 2016



INTERCESSION, 58x58 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



SOLDIER BOY, 48x54 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



MADONNA, 61x55 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



DEPARTURE, 58x58 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



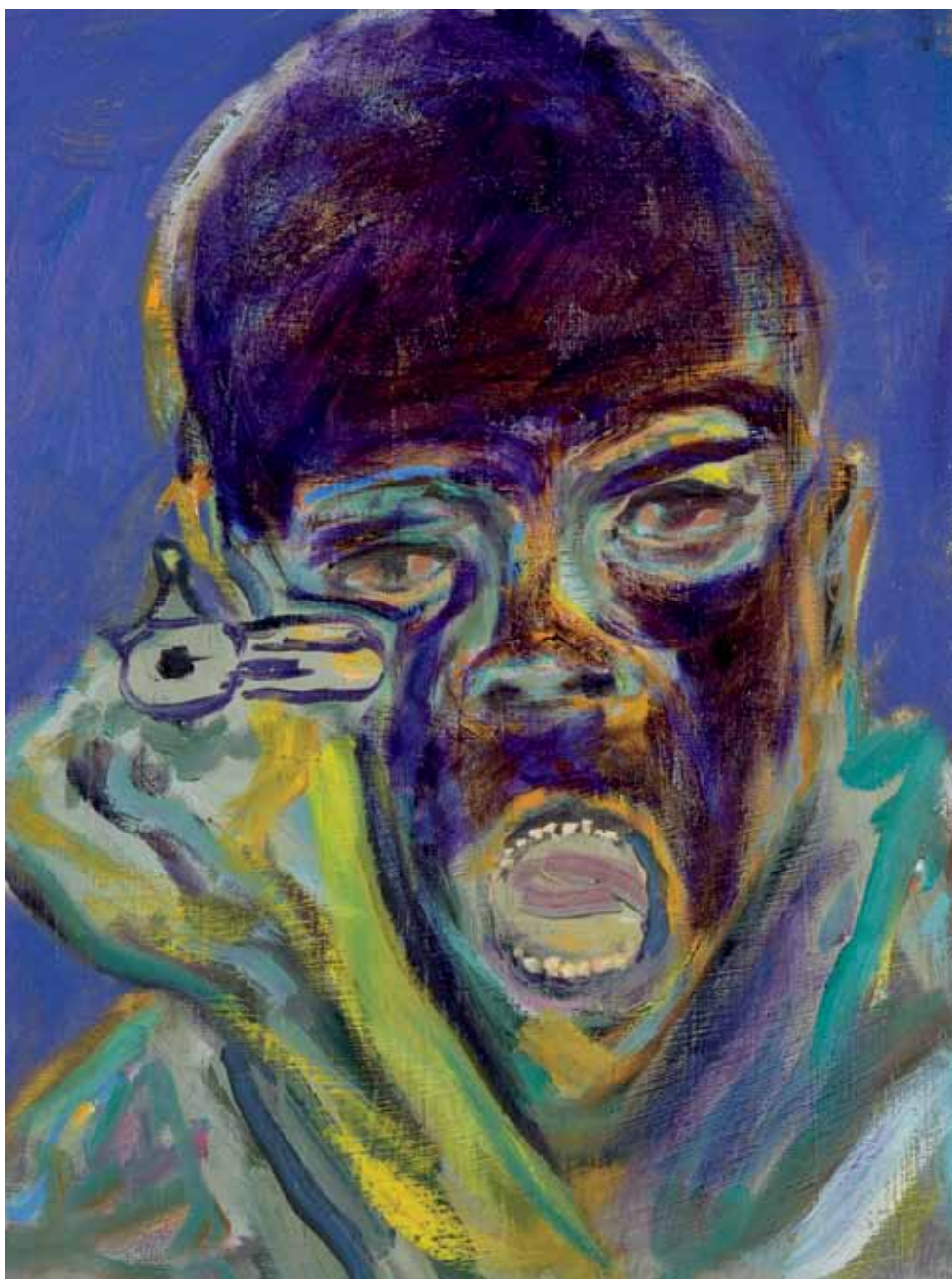
A BATTLE, 40x60 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



FIRE WALKER, 61x50 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



TUMBLER, 65x48 inches, oil on canvas, 2016



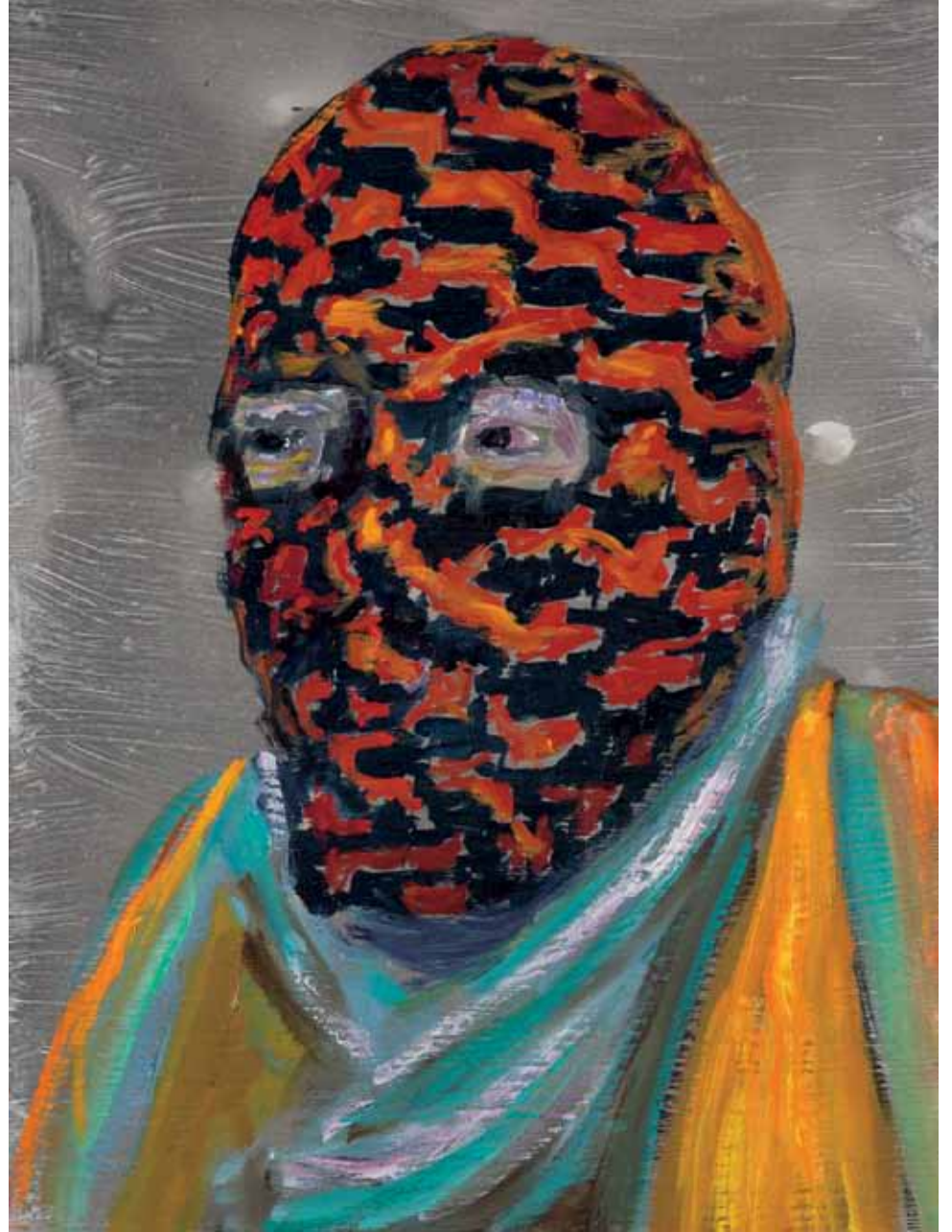
MAN II, 16x12 inches, oil on wood, 2016



FATHER, 16x12 inches, oil on wood, 2016



MAN I, 16x12 inches, oil on wood, 2016



HOOD, 16x12 inches, oil on wood, 2016

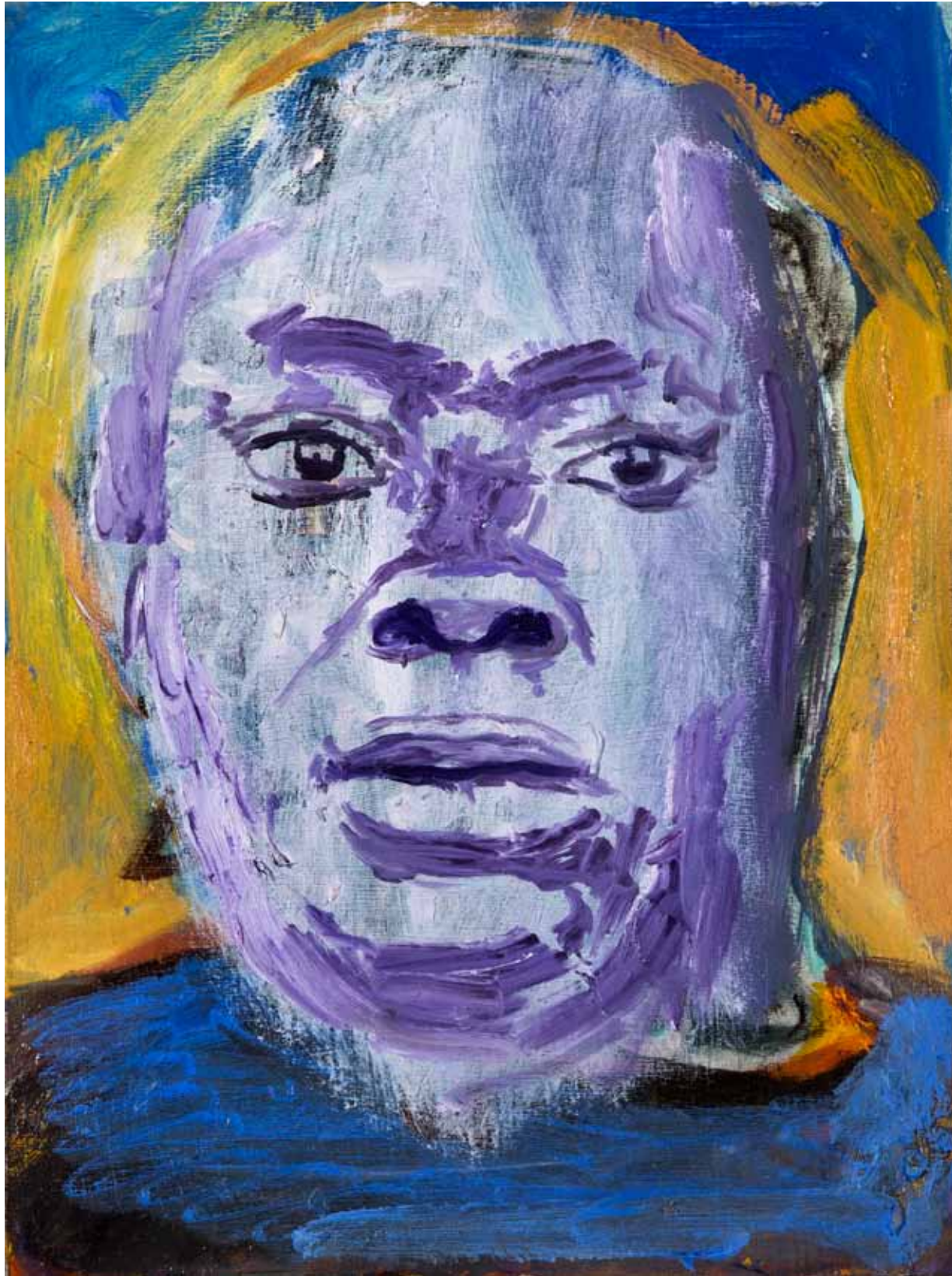
JACK LEAMY made an impression upon the occasion of our first meeting. What was noteworthy was the sense of seriousness and passion he showed toward his practice as painter. He has a natural intellectually enquiring nature and an emotional maturity in combination with intuitive capacities that he employs with intelligence especially as he focuses upon his creative visions. As an artist he is primarily a painter and drawer but has too explored performance and video as valid avenues of experiment and expression. Some of these projects have been collaborative and reflect another important aspect of the artist, which is a generosity of spirit.

Jack has a deep faith rooted in personal belief and in a sense of kinship with Humanity in general. He is rare in my opinion in part because of his real integrity there is a moral and ethical aspect to both the work of an artist and his sense of the wider role of the Arts in society. As a painter he has explored the notion that the physicality of the creative act within the making of a painting is charged, infused and shaped by the otherwise invisible condition of psyche. Painting then is a manifestation of concept, belief, feeling, perhaps too, spirit concretized.

Jack is very well versed in the contemporary and historic traditions of painting and art history in general. Among recent projects has been a reconsidering of the traditions of Portraiture (idealism/ icon) and Portrayal (Symbol) in relation to Icons of culture and politics and also powerful presentations of Warriors. The mythic and the ordinary in proximity in so doing he also reconsiders the notion of History painting which has a very different role in the Digital age.

Jeremy Morgan

2016



WAR WOMAN, 16x12 inches, oil on wood panel, 2016



Designed and Produced in Association
with Studio 459

All contents © Jack Leamy

