

## Hugo Hamper-Potts: Studio Visit

“I’m really into *mud* at the moment”. I like him instantly. A tall, thin man with tall, thin hair – body and locks alike resembling a stalk of straw. He blows in a whirlwind of imagination and warmth; in a readiness to paint, walk, see, talk, chat, smoke, that is only found in few. And he is into mud.

Hugo Hamper-Potts greets Andrea and me outside his studio just up from Elephant and Castle on a grey Thursday evening in July. Andrea and Hugo are friends already: one a gallerist, the other an artist, the former my boss. Andrea’s arranged this not just to catch up with Hugo but also to introduce me to the artist and his work. Despite the inevitable ‘writer’s procrastination’ which befalls anyone trying to write down their thoughts and not instantly think ‘*ugh, no!*’ I was completely re-energised by this studio visit: Hugo’s work and Andrea’s efforts to inspire have left an impression on me as deep as the thick lashings of oils with which Hugo paints.

“I’ll have a fag now I’m outside.” Rolling one up, opportunistic despite the coming drizzle, Hugo chats with Andrea about a recent group show: names of Freud, Bacon, Marlborough are involved, as is chat about the sensible actions an artist should take to make it. I listen to this alien language, hoping that things will get more familiar to me as we look at artworks and speak about the walks, hikes, swims, and friends which form them. Ciggy smoked, tactics talked, we go inside: a carpeted hall like a primary school foyer, where stairs with dark wood banisters lead up to a corridor, and Hugo’s studio. Later, coming out and having seen all I have, I wonder how Hugo manages to fit not just himself in that small studio, but all his works of huge size, and how he manages to work on them all.

A series of little pots rounded with mounded lids of dried and drying oil paints lines the windowsill like a family of unpacked Russian dolls. Or like ant hills, if ants lived in multicoloured *Playdough* earth. “Ah yes, my paint cakes! I’ve made this one for you, Andrea”, Hugo jokes, holding up a gnome’s hat of paint globs piled upon a floral-patterned ceramic pot. “Buy a painting, get a paint cake for free!” And so we turn to the paintings.

Upon the work wall there seemed to be a small rectangular window, the view through it to a waterfall glimpsed through trees. Hardly the scene of Elephant and Castle I was expecting to see through his studio window. But that’s because this was not a window. It was one of Hugo’s works in progress. This is the immediate effect of Hugo’s works: they transport you, convince you that you are completely and truly in a scene when the reality is quite the opposite. This little rectangle of beige canvas was pinned up on the wall not just as a painting but as a portal.

“But this is small, Hugo!”, Andrea is surprised – as am I. All I’d seen online, and all Andrea had told me in preparation, was the Hugo paints big things, big. He paints Scottish landscapes. He paints full length people. He paints full people in full landscapes. And yet, here is a little painting-in-progress, a fraction of a sight caught on a woodland walk: a small memory.

Bigger memories – bigger paintings – are stacked around us. Leaning-to on our left is a large oil on linen canvas where any sense of ‘canvas’ or ‘a painting’ is obliterated by the convincing presence of thick marshland. This is *Sticks*, one of Hugo’s newest works, exploring his childhood home of Chichester harbour. It is also new terrain for Hugo to work in, his most well-known pieces depicting Scotland. Both are places which make him *him*. Yet his childhood, more distant in time and harbouring more complex relationships to approach than any place we encounter as adults does, Chichester has taken a bit more time to ruminate over – a bit more time to come into his work.



Figure 1: *Sticks*, Oil on linen, 180 x 120 cm

Photo credit: courtesy of the artist

Rickety jetties and walkways stretch out from our standing place on firmer ground, navigating the wet earth-clogged grasses, leading to an estuary dotted with boats of tall masts and hulls of blue and green and pale hues. A feathery grey sky reflects itself in the white water and the whites of the grass stems, blown back black and white by tidal air. You can almost smell it. I mean, you *can* smell the painting: the fuel-like sting of oil paint suffuse the room. But you can for a moment transpose this to the petrol engine smell of passing boats and the tang of rotting seaweed. Everything is flat and broad. The wooden fence in the painting comes right up to you, as does (as promised) the mud. This is your whole vision. Hugo hasn't just presented us with a painting of the Wittering coast. He has presented *us* to *it*.

This immersive, eye-full vision appears in all his works. Just behind *Sticks*, *Gorge* is propped at ninety-degrees the wrong angle. Flipped upright, we are again presented to a tangled landscape: the Isle of Wight's shore seen through a break in the trees as we walk a coastal path. Brambles, fallen branches, and new green growth frame a sandy bog and its estuary. Nothing can frame the sea, however. This sweeps across our horizon like an unremitting spill of grey-blue ink.





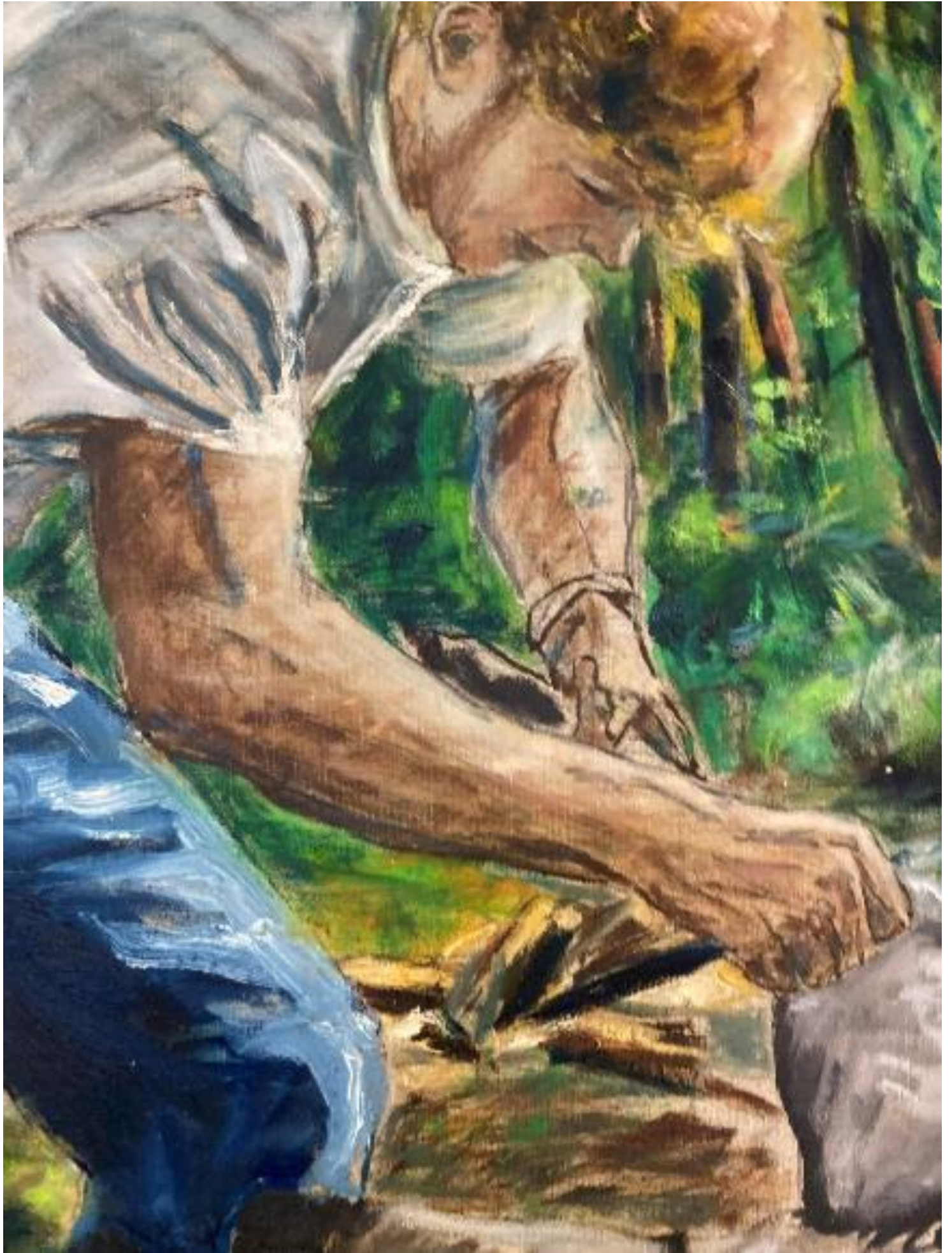
Figure 2: *Gorge*, Oil on linen, 180 x 120 cm

Photo credit: courtesy of the artist

Nowhere is this presentation of person to scene more graphic than in one of Hugo's earliest landscape paintings, subject observed and work made during his stay at his parents' over lockdown: that sudden plunge of an entire nation (an entire world) into an introspective stasis where nature was remembered and desperately sought.

Hugo launches this painting onto the wall for Andrea and me to see with as much fluid vigour as is depicted within. A gruesome pastoral scene of three men – Hugo's friends and the titular *Brothers* – skinning slaughtered pigs. The brothers' butch forearms glisten with sweat in the sun-shaded woodland, and the little pink arsehole of a pig stares us ugly and comic in the face. Stanley Spencer has met Thomas Hardy, and this collision has been written about by Stella Gibbons, whose account has been painted here by Hugo. No pretty nature, no quaint countryside. This was raw, rough, aggressive, true – much like Hugo's practical approach: messy, quick, deliberate, adept, painting the pig shaving with as quick and tough a hand as the pig shaver himself. Form always marries content in Hugo's works.





*Figure 3: Brothers, Oil on canvas, 100 x 160 cm (detail)*

Photo credit: courtesy of the writer and the artist



This is best seen in what Hugo does not paint. In what he calls 'anti-painting': flashes of canvas caught between brushstrokes, the unprimed canvas coming through like unprimed earth. So well does this colour and texture of the linen canvas fit in the scene, that you do not at first notice this 'mistake', this 'unfinished' aspect. A footpath beneath dappled shade, Monet-like, as picnickers stroll ahead on the path. But there is no path. Hugo did not paint it. In *Photo*, he has painted the vegetable world around it, his friends walking ahead, and the abstraction of shade across the way. But the path itself is the pale beige of the canvas. "You've got to let the material do its thing", Hugo declared, cracking open a rather retro looking can of Guinness and – much to my delight – rolling and lighting another cigarette *inside his studio*. My mother would have a fit. This non-path is not a void in the work, the figures are in no danger of falling out of or off it through the supposed 'gaps'. This is a holistic approach to the painting – and the world. Canvas and paint work in harmony to create the vision, just as tree, plant, mud, rock, and light work together in all their varying forms and textures to make up the world. Hence Hugo's non-scientific, or rather, impressionistic, rendition of natural forms and flora: he never makes it clear what *type* of grass, flower, or tree we're looking at. All you need to know is that it's there, fresh, alive, and blowing in the wind.

Below: *Figure 4: Photo*, Oil on linen, 140 x 140 cm

Photo credit: courtesy of the artist



Opposite page: *Figure 5: Photo* (detail)

Courtesy of the artist







Hugo's use of 'anti-painting' and combining components to make up a whole is subtly referenced in the naming of one of his Scottish mountain scenes. Flung up onto the wall for our viewing, *Road* shows a valley of interlocking spurs receding into the unknown depths of the background, with bouldery shapes and violet-tipped plants punctuating the foreground. A road meanders storybook-like along the valley floor, past a group of trees and away. Except it doesn't. As in *Photo*, there is no path painted. This sun-bleached sandy pale track is in fact the unpainted linen. This work takes its name from a feature which traditionalists would not consider present: the anti-painted road. But, as the painting's namesake, Hugo puts this anti-painted road at the centre of our focus, stating its importance alongside all other materials and features to make up the scene.



Figure 6: *Road*, Oil on Linen, 140 x 140 cm

Photo credit: courtesy of the artist



Hugo's irreverence to traditional ways of painting may come as a surprise when the inspiration for his artist's life is learnt. His 'anti-painting' is just the start: there's a school-boyish tendency of neglect, letting his canvases go from taught to floppy in his hot studio; he paints with exuberantly loose brushstrokes, and pats and swings the works with an affectionate nonchalance as he manoeuvres them about for Andrea and me to see. But Hugo had initially wanted to be an Old Master, today. He had wanted thickness of flesh, wisps of white hair; he had wanted intricacies in



*Figure 7: Road (detail)*

Photo credit: courtesy of the artist



silk lace and the glow of the fairer sex's skin. He had wanted soft light and dark, velvety shadows. He wanted people poised, elegant, at their best angle. Hugo even went to Florence for a bit. But, he found everything there "A-Bit-Too-Old-Mastery". He swung to Vorticism. It was not long before he took off again, but not without taking something of both modes for himself.

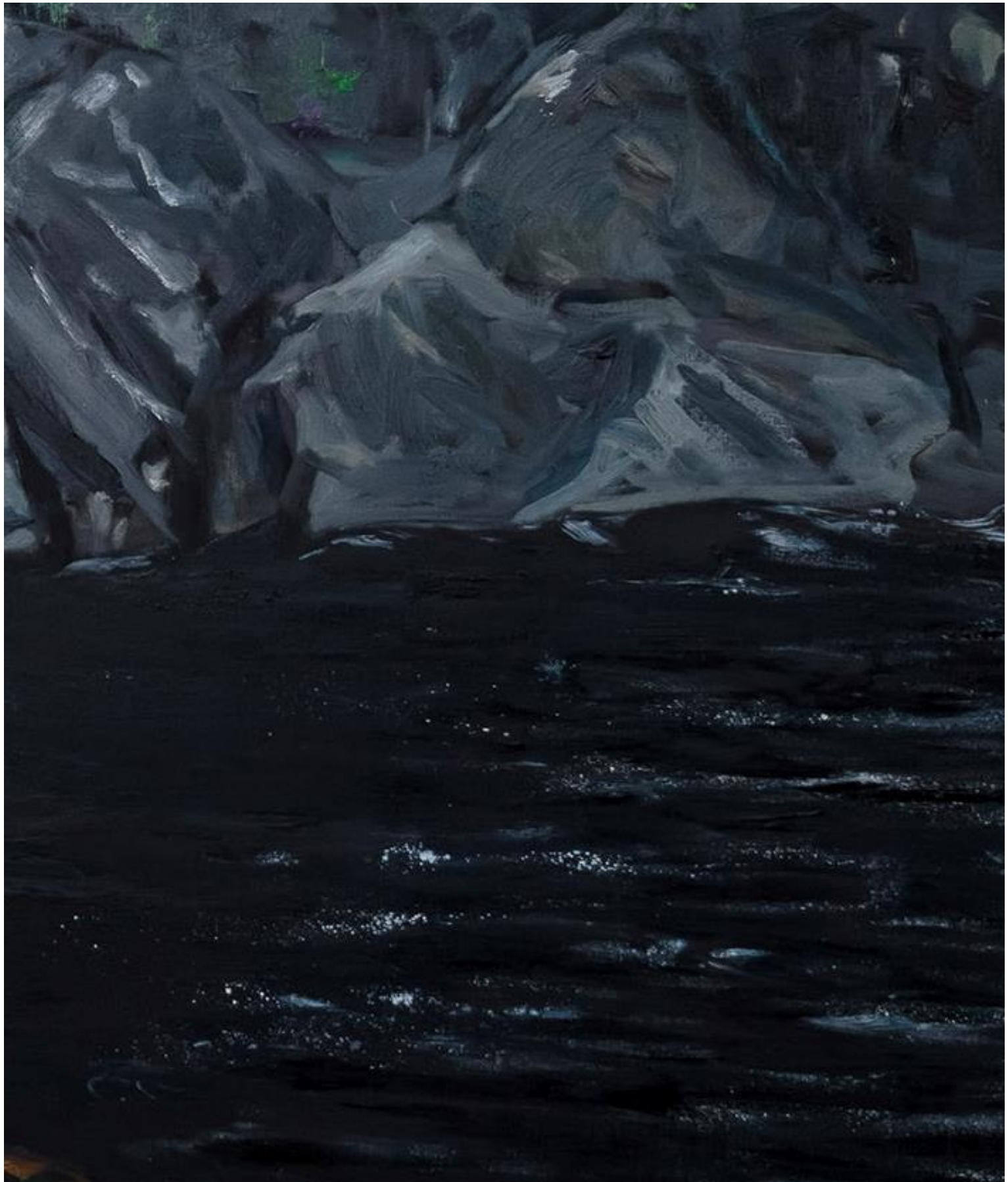
References to and influences from these various styles, genres, and canonical artists repeat and appear throughout Hugo's work. But not in a sycophantic or derivative manner. In fact, Hugo does not *agree* with the artists and styles which inspire him. This is what's at the core of the moment of inspiration, he says. If he agreed completely, there would be no need for him to paint. Instead, he admires *and* critiques. He sees a space for exploration, and dives right in. As does his swimmer into the blackwaters of Mel's Pool in Scotland; as, in painting this, Hugo did into a moment of inspiration and departure from Michael Andrews' *Melanie and Me Swimming* (1978-9). Hugo's black waters glint with caught sunlight; flicks of white paint from a hand as free as the artist's mind.



Figure 8: *The Deep*, Oil on linen, 200 x 155 cm

Photo credit: courtesy of the artist





*Figure 9: The Deep (detail)*

Photo credit: courtesy of the artist



Hugo even gives Mantegna's *Lamentation of Christ* (1480) a run for its money as he captures his friend mid-summer-afternoon-nap, seemingly levitating from our awkward perspective. Subject, style, method: all are updated but the reference is unmissable, even if some of the reverence may be harder to see.



Figure 30: *Lazarus*, Oil on linen, 120 x 180 cm

Photo credit: courtesy of the artist



This is not to say that Hugo turns away from styles which at one moment absorb and interest him. He is not fickle. Instead, Hugo turns out from them. He learns from, but does not lean on; he empathises, but does not repeat. He combines, toys, recalls, and alters. He is hugely independent.

When we leave, it is raining. Hard. It is gone 8 o'clock. I have to walk a couple of miles home in this torrent, hungry. But I don't mind. I don't, in fact, notice. I am filled up by something bright and exciting. A viewing of paintings and the memory of landscapes and artworks I'd also seen and loved, perhaps. A sense of exclusivity of having done a studio visit, maybe. But I know what it is. It is having listened to a person who also cares. Who cares about what they see and how they urge others to see. A person who knows Scottish water is black, not blue. A person who sees beauty in harshness and the harshness in beauty. Who doesn't allow 'pretty scenes' to be pretty, but lived. Who allows the unpristine a place in art as it has in nature.

There are some things which are beyond our control. The shift in the weather as we walk across an exposed glen, the slippery and happenstance placement of boulders on our entrance into a cool pool, the collapse and decay of a tree trunk, the slow yet corrosive force of sea-mud on plank, the drying speed of oil paint and the imperfect mixing of paint colours. These are wonderful messes and Hugo allows them all. It is refreshing that he does this. It is good that they are beyond our control.