

Sojourn Through Ambient Spaces



MATTHEW BOYLE

In this series of paintings I ponder the intersection of self, city, and community, and the ways our environment can become intertwined in our identities. Situated in the foreground of these works are creatures carrying cities on their backs, which seem to morph into musical instruments, furniture, and other architectural elements. I painted this body of work after a trip to Europe in May 2024 - visiting Berlin, Gdansk, Warsaw, Krakow and Prague. Traveling by train and carrying a suitcase, wandering through pre-industrial old towns (stare miasto), and visiting museums housing collections of artists - some of which I'd discover for the first time - made a huge impact and temporarily changed my painting practice from a more abstract expression to the illustrative, surrealist vignettes on display here. I have long been fascinated by the mid-twentieth century Situationist International, a movement drawn from Dada, Surrealism, and other literary philosophies - which called for "a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and a game of events." Their concept of Derive describes an experimental mode of navigating through urban spaces in order to break the façade of commodity/consumption-based activities.

This very art show is a perfect example - authentic gatherings of people based on art, poetry, and community. This body of work contains portraits of mobile city-walkers as they pause in this ambience, like traveling theater troupes or moving musical instruments.

In addition, I was inspired by a few novels portraying migratory individuals within their environment and society, and I fixated on the idea of a moving city embodied by a large animal. In *The Inverted World* (Christopher Priest), a curious society seemingly out of time travels across dangerous terrain in a city on tracks in search of "resources". *Dhalgren* (Samuel Delaney) features an unreliable narrator whose perspective shifts time, space, and structure in a mysterious, perpetually burning city, while its inhabitants don glowing animal avatars. *Station Eleven* (Emily St. John Mandel) follows a travelling theater troupe performing Shakespeare for small clusters of humanity after a pandemic wreaks havoc on society.

Growing up here in St. Petersburg, and returning after living in New York City for 20 years, I often find myself walking through my own memories, and searching for the exact location of places long replaced by new construction. In this way, I carry those old places and the communities they once supported in the little ghost town of my memory. Thank you for taking your own sojourn through these works, my hope is that they might bring colorful wonder to your eyes, and give you an opportunity to think about what your own wandering city looks like.

Part I Saccharines



Spoiled Rotten, 2024, 30"x 40" oil on canvas

Some of the later works I made in this series are perhaps the first chronologically. The Saccharines are three 30" x 40" oil on canvas paintings I refer to as "day zero" pieces, and only two out of three are featured in this exhibit. Here you can see the missing piece *Spoiled Rotten* (2024, 30"x 40" oil on canvas), in which a body is stripped of its flesh by a mysterious volcanic/nuclear energy. Under this figure is an overripe garden of contemporary humanity dripping with excess and on the brink of collapse.

In *Container, Choir*, a city begins dismantling itself, and preparing for travel. The composition that permeates all of these works - an animal carrying a city - is not quite formed in this piece despite the elements being present. People and spirits appear to carry their own homes, or perhaps they are merged with their identity of home, as animal figures curl around the bottom of the canvas.



Container, Choir, 2024, 30"x 40" oil on canvas



Meat Wagon, 2024, 30"x 40" oil on canvas

Meat Wagon depicts an equine creature carrying figures through a snowy landscape, burdened by seedling hexagonal basalt plates amidst a warm glowing light. Perhaps they are loading the wagon with supplies, or societal archives, for the journey.

Part II The Guides

The Guides are focused more on the creatures that give cities their mobility. These works depict a period of time in this micro-mythology in which cities begin moving. The hexagonal basalt forms found throughout this show start to appear here, growing like a cultivated piece of geometry saved from a lost world.

In *Lava Falls*, a large creature appears to have a connection with the land via green grasses and flowers that match its fur. In this exchange, perhaps the creature has picked up these grasses for future planting, or it could be seeding the barren hillside with its own photosynthetic grassy fur. *Iron, Emerald* (not in this show) feels like more of a prototype for this series and is as of yet incomplete. An equine beast pausing in a misty bog is approached by four skeletal figures wearing strange headgear.

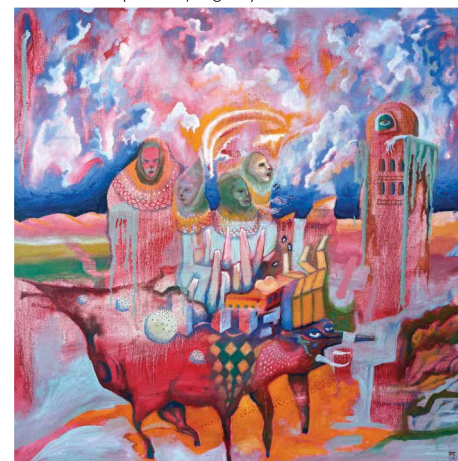
Sages and the Tower formally links this sub-series to the next, in that the beast appears to be less of a literal creature with a city saddled to its back. Instead, it becomes the city, and examples of its inhabitants grow out of it as they contemplate an ominous tower with an eye and arms. In the distant horizon, the sea and its fishes are suspended in mid-air, perhaps evaporating into the sky before our eyes.



Lava Falls, 2024, 36"x 36" oil on canvas



Iron, Emerald (work in progress), 36"x 36" oil on canvas



Sages and the Tower, 2024, 36"x 36" oil on canvas



The Listeners, Acoustic Spring Piano, 2024 12'' x 12'' oil on canvas

Part III The Listeners

These nine pieces feature smaller portraits of mobile cities in the field. Moving across deserts and ambient landscapes, each creature has piano keys, vast empty halls and porticos like the tone holes of a flute, and some are carrying people in seats - communities preserving/sharing their music, architecture, and cultural histories.



The Listeners, Mantis Piano, 2024 12'' x 12'' oil on canvas

At this point in the series the animal nature of the objects begins to give way to building elements - staircases, porticos, towers, halls, windows and occupiable spaces. We begin to see small people, and most of these works have a piano keyboard. I imagine the vast halls and windows conduct air like the tone holes of a flute, and make their own drones.



Cavern for Wind Piano, 2024 12'' x 12'' oil on canvas

Painted just after the Basalts, these works feature the dominant color scheme of the show - everything was painted on a wash of glowing pinks and reds. Slowly bringing cool colors in, I overlaid a deep blue horizon giving way to a cloudy sky.



Theater for Lizards, 2024 12'' x 12'' oil on canvas



Cathedral for the Damaged, 2024 12'' x 12'' oil on canvas



The Listeners, Tusk Piano, 2024 12'' x 12'' oil on canvas

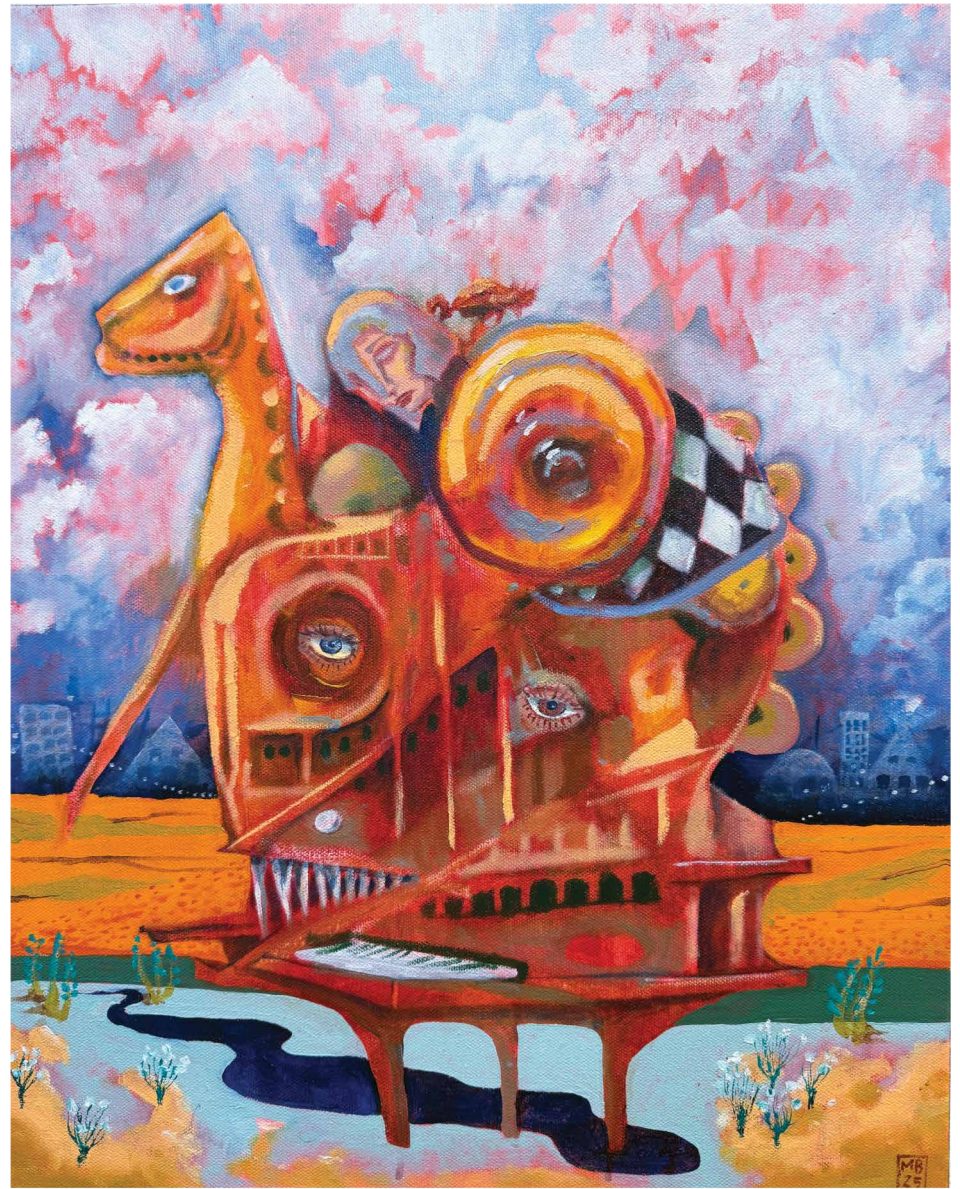


Galleon's Perch, 2025 16" x 20" oil on canvas



Garden Town, 2025 16" x 20" oil on canvas

In looking at the next three paintings, I'd like to point out a recurring theme in my work in which the foreground objects are all uplifted on legs or columns. This has a multitude of meanings for me, ranging from architectural form, the way a sculpture sits in space, to our own bodies and bodies on the move through spaces. A standing object has a certain elegance, and even more so a resistance to gravity and the elements (houses on stilts/columns). Every single painting in this show depicts subjects elevated on legs, if not literally, then in a faint gestural nod. Resistance is the stuff of life, and rather than planting deep weighted roots into these landscapes, my subjects remain nimble, if only by the muscle memory of catastrophe. I begin to wonder if I prefer them to find what they are looking for and dwell, or remain in a state of motion. I think of youth vs old age, of the restless energy of change vs the meditative peace of stasis, and of living in lightweight mobile tents vs caves carved out of timeless mountains. I think of the current state of geopolitical unrest, migratory populations of people seeking refuge from unstable or crumbling communities, and the longing that drives people to keep moving in search of a better way of life.



Wake Me Upon Arrival, 2025 16" x 20" oil on canvas



Cervus with Basalts, 2024, 30"x 40" oil on canvas



Canvus with Basalts, 2024, 30"x 40" oil on canvas



Rattus with Basalts, 2024, 30"x 40" oil on canvas

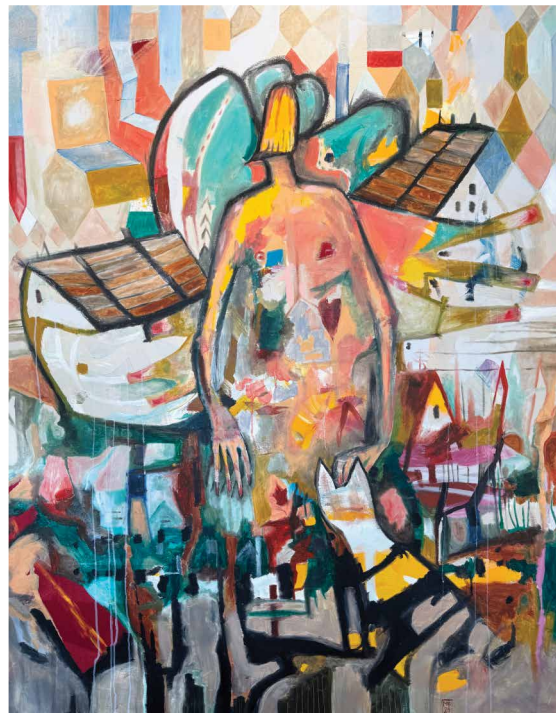
Part IV The Basalts

These three works are the first I created, started in June just after I returned from Europe. However, they are technically last in the narrative of the series. Painted on glowing red washes, each piece features a creature carrying a large urban/geologic fountain that appears to glow and emit jubilant light into the atmosphere. Ghostly figures line a deep blue horizon, and bouquets of Jasmine adorn the hexagonal geodes. Perhaps these wanderers have found their destination. The Giant's Causeway is a significant collection of volcanic basalt prisms on the coast of Northern Ireland, and I use their imagery in these works to signify a metamorphosis of the mobile city-creatures, having found a place to rest.

Just above the deep copper phthalocyanine horizon, ghosts of civilizations past watch our travelers unpack amidst the cooling architecture of a fallen empire.

Epilogue Stare Miasto

The final two paintings in this show are the largest - and the outliers in terms of color and form. However, there are still formal similarities, like elevated legs and central figures that seem to blend into cities. Stare Miasto refers to the old towns of Polish cities. Krakow survived the bombardments of WWII because they became bases for the Nazis. Others, like Gdansk and Warsaw's old town, were torn apart by bombs and reconstructed to



Stare Miasto I, 2024, 48"x 60" oil on canvas

resemble their pre WWII states. In these paintings I wanted to break from the detailed, small brushwork of my previous pieces and settle into a more abstract expressionist approach to the canvas. I see these large format pieces as a bridge from this show to where I am now, working at Sixstar on more abstract, gestural, poetic works in oil and other mixed mediums. After a couple of interesting conversations with Wasil about the curation of this exhibit,

these large works emerged in their capacity to represent rebuilding - of homes, communities, relationships, and routines. In these two pieces, I can see the past and future of these worlds, and perhaps the wandering souls of every other painting finally ends their sojourns and plants fertile roots once more.

-Matthew Boyle 2025

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Stare Miasto II, 2024, 48"x 60" oil on canvas

