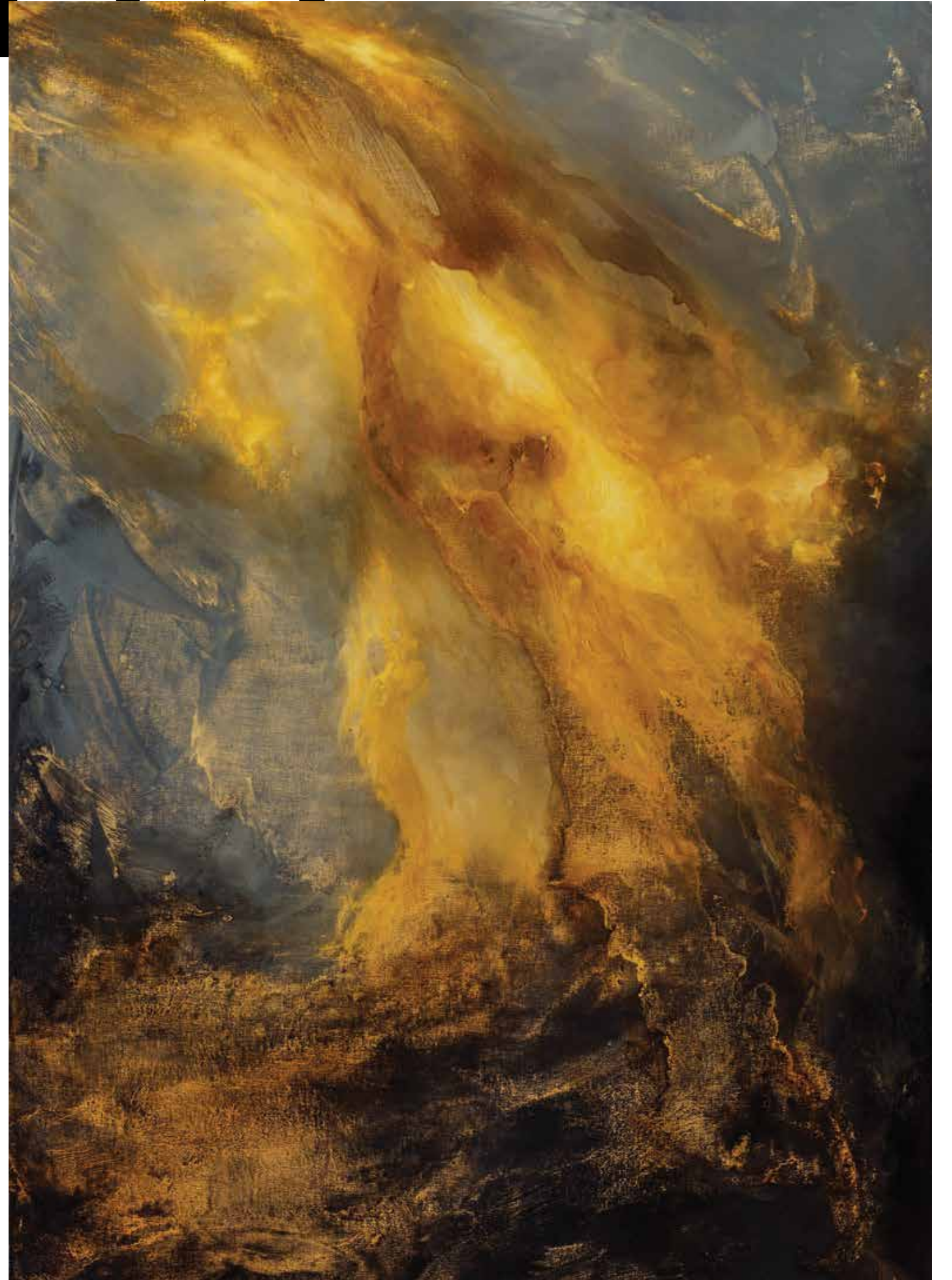


SAMANTHA KEELY SMITH

PREMONITION 1 42" x 30", oil on canvas with varnish, 2016.



WORDS PAUL BEKAVAC
PHOTOS MATT LICARI

Samantha Keely Smith is an American painter born in England who currently lives and works in Brooklyn. She has exhibited at Gavin Spanierman, Westwood, and ACA galleries in Manhattan, as well as being featured in shows like “All Tomorrow’s Parties,” at Hathaway in Atlanta. Her works could also be seen at the De Re Gallery of Los Angeles’ booth at 2016’s Miami Art Fair.

I interviewed Samantha Keely Smith at her Dumbo studio. A massive red-bricked historic commercial loft building hedged by the profile of the Manhattan Bridge, its lower levels house architecture firms and coffee bars. High up on the 7th floor, Smith’s studio is tucked in an out-of-the-way corner reachable by a series of tight, unfinished corridors and turns. The space itself gave the impression of a stowaway within a modern industrial Googleplex.

“THEY’RE ABOUT BASIC, VERY BASIC HUMAN EMOTIONS AND TENDENCIES, AND HOPES AND FEARS”



YIELD 54" x 72", oil on canvas with varnish, 2014.



ISSUE 60" x 72", oil on canvas with varnish, 2015.

CONSORT
52" x 62", oil on canvas with varnish, 2016.



What openings have you seen recently? Do you get to any shows of artists, friends, anything like that?

I go to openings for friends' stuff. Mostly that seems to be in the Lower East Side and Bushwick these days. Once in a while, I'll have a friend who'll have a show in Chelsea. A lot of the lower, mid-tier galleries seem to be leaving Chelsea, because they can't afford it. I don't know many really successful artists so I don't get there much (laughter).

What are your views on the art world in New York right now?

It's like the backdrop of a movie. I think that there are a lot of strong trends happening especially in the art world in New York, and then everywhere else seems to copy that, and again my work never fits in with those. So I think eventually that will be a really good thing—that my work is its own thing. But it makes it really hard to get going, as far as a career goes. I don't know. But I'm certainly not going to change the work to fit into a slot. That doesn't make sense.

Where do the images in your paintings come from?

The work is inspired by dreams that I have. That's just the very, very first thing. But they're extremely personal so they're like psychological portraits in a way. And although I continue always to experiment with the actual technique and materials, at the end of the day it's a very personal vision that I'm hoping for. They're about basic, very basic human emotions and tendencies, and hopes and fears and all of that. This constant idea of shifting, and everything changing always, so you can't count on any one thing to stay the same, no matter what it is. So there's also this idea of trying to find some sort of order in the chaos, and I think that every painting has that. Like there's this shifting and movement, and then, there's a sort of calm. My paintings are inspired by dreams. Lately, they've been really more than dreams, there's a lot of turmoil in them. Things seem to be getting more and more out of hand, with the environment, with politics, with everything. Maybe it's my age too... having a different view of things.

My mother died of cancer when I was a teenager, so I had to confront the mortality thing and how fragile life is pretty early on in life, which I think informed my work right away. Because some people would ask, why is your work so troubled? Well, you know life is an awesome time (laughter). Then, you know I went through a time when I was also very sick when I was around 21.

Really, physically sick?

Yeah I was in the hospital for around 4 months. I was in and out of the hospital, and that's why I paint pretty much 7 days a week. Unfortunately, I feel like if I don't get to the studio and get the work done that I'm wasting time... because it could be over tomorrow. I might not be able to keep doing it, I could get sick again. But because I've been spurred on by these dream images that I want to get out and things that I want to express, I feel really guilty if I'm not doing the work.

That time when you get here in the studio—having these images in your head—is there a period of gestation before you begin to paint where you're processing these images, or does it happen another way?

The dreams that the paintings are based on don't happen very often. I have dreams every night, but they're more normal dreams about people you know or whatever, or things that are happening in your life. These dreams are completely different and they're really intense like watching a movie. A lot of people tell me they don't remember vivid colors from their dreams, but that's a lot of what I remember

from these ones. It's what I take away from it—the color, the light and the dark, the constant shifting, the fact that there's no safe place to stand; it's a world without people. I say that it's like an inner world, because it's more about emotional and a psychological state than an actual landscape. But I always feel like it's a place, so that's where the landscape relates. The dreams only happen every couple months or something, and they're very vivid.

Yet much of your work is process-oriented?

Right. The paintings develop partially, because I'm working with solvents and things. Some of it is an accident that I build on, and shapes that I create accidentally, and the layers build up that way. But mainly, I'm always trying to recapture that feeling from the dream.

How have your priorities changed as you've matured as an artist?

I didn't start painting till I was 17 so there's that (laughter). I'm 48; I've gotten a little more confident because of that. I really felt like a lot of things I wanted to do, I was just simply held back by not having the confidence to do them. When I was doing figurative art, it came easy to me. Not saying that I was an amazing figurative painter... but then it was about, you know, capturing the image of whatever it was you were trying to paint. One of the reasons I think someone like Rembrandt was so exceptional was that aside from being a great technical painter his work is so powerful emotionally. I think some of his landscapes are amazing. Maybe for me it's the light in his work, because it seems to have this... spiritual power? Almost as if the soul of the person shines from him. You probably noticed but there seems to be light that was coming from the background, sort of like getting in through the cracks and the gaps. To me that is like the hope, the calm. It's the place we're trying to get to through all the struggle. It's always somewhere in the work.

What's going on in your studio at the moment?

I work on usually 4 or 5 paintings at once, and while one is drying I'm working on a layer of another one. However I just started this series where I'm actually using acrylic for the first time. It's new material for me, so it's all experimental. I'm not sure where it's going to go, but I'm hoping it's going to save me a lot of time because a lot of those things, let's say 4 or 5 layers—if I do them in oil—that's 5 weeks of drying time until I can get a new layer going. It ends up taking a couple months to do, because things take so long to dry. I love that process, however, the way it adds this luminosity. I could use dryers, but that could change the texture of the painting. There's this big learning curve with acrylic where you really can't work that way at all. You really have to plan ahead. You can't just pre-mix a bunch of colors or they dry out. It's been interesting. I'm hoping it will continue to be, because I need to produce the work faster.

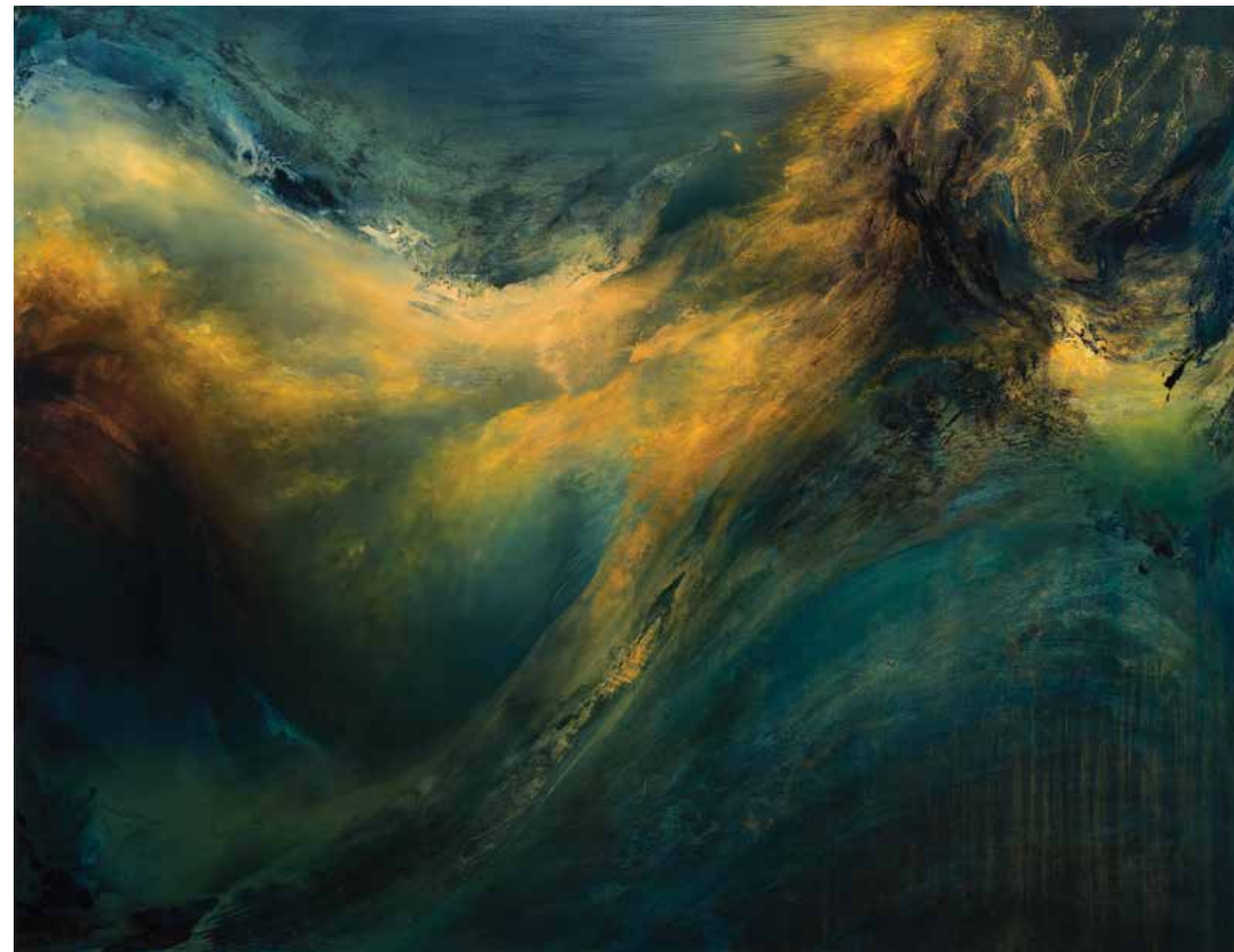
What's one of the hardest or greatest lessons you've learned in your time painting?

It's very important to trust your gut. I know there are certain things that I can do with paint that are beautiful, but that doesn't mean it has to be in every painting. So I'm hoping to have more confidence, and stop comparing every painting to one I did in the past. I've done paintings where it was such a huge change or leap from the painting I did right before it—and it made a big change going forward. And I have a few pieces that I compare everything to, thinking... "is it as good as that one? Am I ever going to make anything as good as that one again?" But that's not how you make the best work. I make the best work by being fed up with what I was doing and taking some risks.



RIFT
54" x 72", oil on canvas with varnish, 2016.

SIREN 60" x 72", oil on canvas with varnish, 2017.



BEGET 40" x 52", oil on canvas with varnish, 2016.

STRAND
30" x 46", oil on canvas with varnish, 2016.

