

An abstract painting with a complex, layered composition. The background is a mix of light, muted colors like pale green, yellow, and off-white. Overlaid on this are various textures and colors: a large, vibrant red shape on the left side, a dark blue and black area at the top right, and a central area with warm, earthy tones of orange, brown, and yellow. The brushstrokes are visible and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth.

Megan Rooney

BONES ROOTS FRUITS

Thaddaeus Ropac

London Paris Salzburg Seoul

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BONES ROOTS FRUITS

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Dawn's Belly, 2021
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
199.6 x 152.3 x 3.5 cm (78.58 x 59.96 x 1.38 in)

The locust tree in bloom

Emily LaBarge

At Megan Rooney's studio, we talk about form: what it is, where it comes from, how to find it, what it is made of, when it arrives, how do you know? Because Rooney's paintings seem as if they could change at any moment, and do; might never be finished, but then are. Each time I visit the studio – over a series of months, while the works in *BONES ROOTS FRUITS* are underway – the paintings have shifted, morphed, often become unrecognisable to their former selves. *I went back into it*, Rooney tells me, as if it were a portal; *I worked it back*, as if painting is a kind of time travel or excavation. The history of each work and its making – its secret, incipient character – is buried deep within, if you peer closely: layers and layers of paint, worlds of colour, shape, texture, hovering everywhere beneath the surface like a threat, like a promise, like a bright shock, like devotion, which is what making is, for some people.

The dark Rorschach threat of *Up Torso*, with its energetic black scribbles marking the surface closest to us as blues and purples recede behind, flashing orange here and there. A rib cage torn open? A Francis Bacon-esque carnage? A pair of wings with no body? The admonishment of a dusky butterfly, an obsidian angel who calls in strange whispers shot through with ethereal lilac, lapis, powder blue, eggshell, hints of sage and hunter green. The pale, dewy promise of *Mother's Return*, with its pastel background – a sky? – and fiery stain – the sun? – and verdant tangle – a tree? Recognitions that judder and will not stay, undone by the groundlessness of the scene, the smears of white that rise up and flicker, evade referents; the dragging scrawls of orange at the bottom corner that look, to me, like a little ghost walking along the lower edge of the work. Do we wait for Mother's return, or is she already here, in this gentle miasma? The bright chartreuse shock

of 6am, all yellows and greens, peeking pale pink and blue, and finally ruptured by crimson that snarls, presses, draws the eye, wounds. The palimpsest devotion of *Blue departure*, whose depths seem too distant for the eye to wholly grasp: how deep can a painting go? Does it have a past, a memory, a longing, like mine? So many greens, blues, blacks, dove greys, saturated somewhere far off with canary yellow. And throbbing at the centre, crimson again, fiery orange, the slightest indication of single brushstrokes, maybe fingers, moving and scratching fervently across the canvas. The time it took, the devotion, to paint that baby rose pink, that coral, that cornflower blue – only to sand it down, cover it over, render it just about invisible to the naked eye.

Is it right, whatever that means, to think of these works as living, as organic, in motion, quivering? To embrace anthropomorphism (the colour has a mind of its own!), to assume agency or desire (the painting fears and hopes, it wants, just like we do!)? To believe it possible that each painting has grown into an inevitable form or image that was waiting all this time, part of the collective unconscious captured by Rooney here for us to see – a gift, an offering? It is perhaps whimsical, mystical, unmoored, to assume a kind of channeling. But when you're working in and with abstraction, why else make than to make that thing that only you could have made, could have apprehended. Born of an inkling, maybe; a feeling lodged at the back of the throat; a shadow glimpsed on the street; an impression pressing hot against the eye, the skin; an urge.

How else to explain the emotional quality of looking at Rooney's wild, vivid, searching work? How to reckon with the compulsion to say *beautiful*, even if discomfiting? *A visual event may reproduce itself in the realm of touch (as when the seen face incites an ache of longing in the hand, and the hand then presses pencil to paper), which may in turn then reappear in a second visual event, the finished drawing,* writes Elaine Scarry in *On Beauty and Being Just*. Why not a third event? The viewing of the finished drawing by another, say. Or a fourth





event, a fifth, a sixth – 10 paintings, one more, the biggest of all, and a grid of faces – a chain of suffuse sensations. As Wittgenstein said of the beauty of visual events, they prompt not only *an ache of longing in the hand*, but somatic elsewheres, too; a visual experience is a *ghostly subanatomical* event that might reach even the teeth or gums. Maybe this beauty waits inside of us all the time, waiting to be reflected, tense and tangled. Maybe we are looking for an image to meet our insides, those unutterable things, and maybe we say *beautiful* when we see a version of it that consoles and confounds alike. I think of William Carlos Williams, who posed, in Book III of *The Library*, from *Paterson*, the impossible, ever-flowering question:

*I love the locust tree
the sweet white locust
How much?
How much?
How much does it cost
to love the locust tree
in bloom?*

There is a risky, valiant hopefulness in approaching the canvas and asking every day to love the locust tree in bloom, no matter the cost, and to find your own language for it, which Rooney so aptly, singularly does.

Any painting, to an extent, holds the history of painting inside it – the many lineages of line and colour and process and movement, of figuration and abstraction, of verisimilitude and difference, embrace and refusal. I see shades of Monet, Pissarro, Bonnard, Denis; of Basquiat, Frankenthaler, Twombly, Riopelle. Who else? The great Joan Mitchell, the beguiling Prunella Clough, the vivifying Amy Sillman, the visionary Philip Guston, who said of form, *I would like to think that a painting is finished when it feels not new but old, as if its forms had lived a long time in you, even though until it appeared you did not know what it looked like.*



Stand Up Sky, 2021
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
273.5 x 700 x 3.5 cm (107.7 x 275.6 x 1.37 in)

I see these painters, glimmering, darting, emerging, receding in Rooney's paintings, but you will have your own inherited and particular recollections and dovetailings of ghosted forms historical and contemporary. Just as I see, in *BONES ROOTS FRUITS*, a wilted bouquet in late afternoon light; in *Creek Roof Shine*, a city street, energy, bustle, the urban thrill; or in *Gravity's Long Phone Call*, a view from a window, a lamppost, a bright sill, a crush of geometries interior and exterior – but you do not need to see these things too. You need not see anything at all, in particular, but you must see, in general – you must look, look again, keep looking. This is Rooney's real business: fighting for the space between representation and abstraction – a collision, a collusion – and what might happen there.

Stand Up Sky is the artist's largest work on canvas to date and here serves as a kind of primary atmosphere from which all the other paintings have flown, been thrown and excreted, maybe even dreamed onto the surrounding walls. This sky – standing up? lying down? – is at once placid and raucous, pale pinks and blues smeared with bright yellow, ochre, red, the canvas scraped and sanded in places to produce rough, ragged textures that disturb the continuity of the surface. A series of sharp lines, scarlet and tawny, spear and arc across the canvas like stamen or branches, daubs of colour roiling about them like organic matter. The eye stutters against a vertical column of short horizontal lines in blue, green, black, as if they are sutures running up the canvas, stitching to the outer limits of the stand up sky, reminding us how precariously any image is balanced and contained.

Even an abstract painting is an environment. And who else lives here? What are we not seeing? *Old Baggy Root* is an ongoing series of faces and figures, sometimes animal, made from a mix of acrylic, ink, pencil, charcoal and pastel on paper. Some of the faces gaze straight out at you, eyes wide in confrontation or concern; others seem to sleep gently; other still are worried, tearful, lonely. This homely, enigmatic family of fragile, fluid bodies is at once melancholy and heartening,

absurd and solemn. Here, an amorphous figure in washes of grey and black, its head softly inclined to the side where its features dissolve and drift away; there, an emerald green face with tiny, slitted eyes, the briefest red mouth, two small dots for nostrils, a faint white line for a nose. Here a bird, there a dog, growling; here a baby, there a long figure that appears nude and dangling, unearthly. A chorus that bears witness to the vagaries of the everyday, now waiting for you here, at the top of the stairs.

The paper people have always for me been a mixture of looking inward, into the deepest parts of me, and looking outward. Noticing, active looking, looking again, trying to process that looking, Rooney says. *My informal collaborator is the city and all the people and things it contains.* The faces, with their unsteady features and forms that wish to take flight or transform, remind us that we live in abstractions – politics, society, order, law, health, care – and we do well to see ourselves embodied in all other things, no matter how fleeting the recognition. *In the world, everything exists all at the same time when we walk through it,* the artist says, *and somehow you have to try and get the complexity of everything you see into the paint.* Rooney catches hold of this urgency and fastens it to paper and canvas, finds form, pushes and pulls, gropes in the dark, never stops asking what it costs to try to make meaning, to love the locust tree in bloom.



Detail of Stand Up Sky, 2021



Blue departure, 2021
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
199.6 x 152.3 x 3.5 cm (78.58 x 59.96 x 1.38 in)



Mother's Return, 2021
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
199.6 x 152.3 x 3.5 cm (78.58 x 59.96 x 1.38 in)



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6am, 2021
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
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All images:
Untitled (from the series *Old Baggy Root*), 2021
Acrylic, ink, pencil, pastel, charcoal on paper
56 x 38 cm (22.05 x 14.96 in)

*I imagine myself
in flight when I am
painting, hovering
above the surface and
searching for places
to land, touching down
and lifting off. I do this
again and again until
the surface starts to
collect information...
The painting becomes
like a capsule, holding
the weight of time.*

— Megan Rooney



Up Torso, 2021
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
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Works in the Exhibition

Dawn's Belly, 2021

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Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
199.6 x 152.3 x 3.5 cm
(78.58 x 59.96 x 1.38 in)

Up Torso, 2021

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
199.6 x 152.3 x 3.5 cm
(78.58 x 59.96 x 1.38 in)

Hot with shade, 2021

Acrylic, oil and oil stick on canvas
199.6 x 152.3 x 3.5 cm
(78.58 x 59.96 x 1.38 in)

Creek Roof Shine, 2021

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
199.6 x 152.3 x 3.5 cm
(78.58 x 59.96 x 1.38 in)

Gravity's Long Phone Call, 2021

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
199.6 x 152.3 x 3.5 cm
(78.58 x 59.96 x 1.38 in)

Gate-to-Gate, 2021

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
199.6 x 152.3 x 3.5 cm
(78.58 x 59.96 x 1.38 in)

Stand Up Sky, 2021

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas
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Old Baggy Root, 2021

Comprising twenty-four individual works
Acrylic, oil paint, ink, pencil, pastel,
charcoal on paper
60 x 42 cm each
(23.62 x 16.54 in each)

About the Artist

An enigmatic storyteller, Megan Rooney works across a variety of media – including painting, sculpture, installation, performance and language – to develop interwoven, dreamlike narratives. The body is a recurring element in her work, as both the subjective starting point and final site for the sedimentation of experiences she explores. These subjects are often drawn directly from her own life and surroundings, while her references are deeply invested in the present moment. Navigating between abstraction and figuration, her fugitive forms seem to emerge and recede from view, their possible interpretations shifting according to each viewer's physical, personal and cultural vantage points.

Rooney's painted works range from canvases measuring the wingspan of the average woman to immersive murals that she creates in response to the surrounding architectural space, while the 7m-long canvas created for this exhibition marks a new development that bridges her paintings and murals. The changing cast of characters in her ongoing *Old Baggy Root* series on paper seem to be captured in the process of dissolution or becoming, their features morphing before our eyes. Her sculptures, composed from household materials, found objects and fabrics, are tangibly linked to the paintings through their textured palettes and deft brushstrokes. The same is true of the artist's performance works, in which painterly elements assume a life of their own, with dancers moving to the score of her prose poetry.

Based in London, Rooney grew up between South Africa, Brazil and Canada, completing her BA at the University of Toronto followed by an MA in Fine Arts at Goldsmiths College, London in 2011. Her work has recently been shown in solo museum exhibitions, including at the Salzburger Kunstverein, Salzburg (2020–21); Museum of Contemporary Art, Toronto (2020); and Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2019), as well as numerous group exhibitions, including the Ludwig Forum Aachen (2021); Lyon Biennale (2019); Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (2019 and 2017); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2018); and Venice Biennale (2017).

