

JONATHAN SILVERMAN

SEARCHING FOR
AN ELECTRIC PEANUT

[part II]

MICHAELIS

GALLERIES

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AN ELECTRIC PEANUT*

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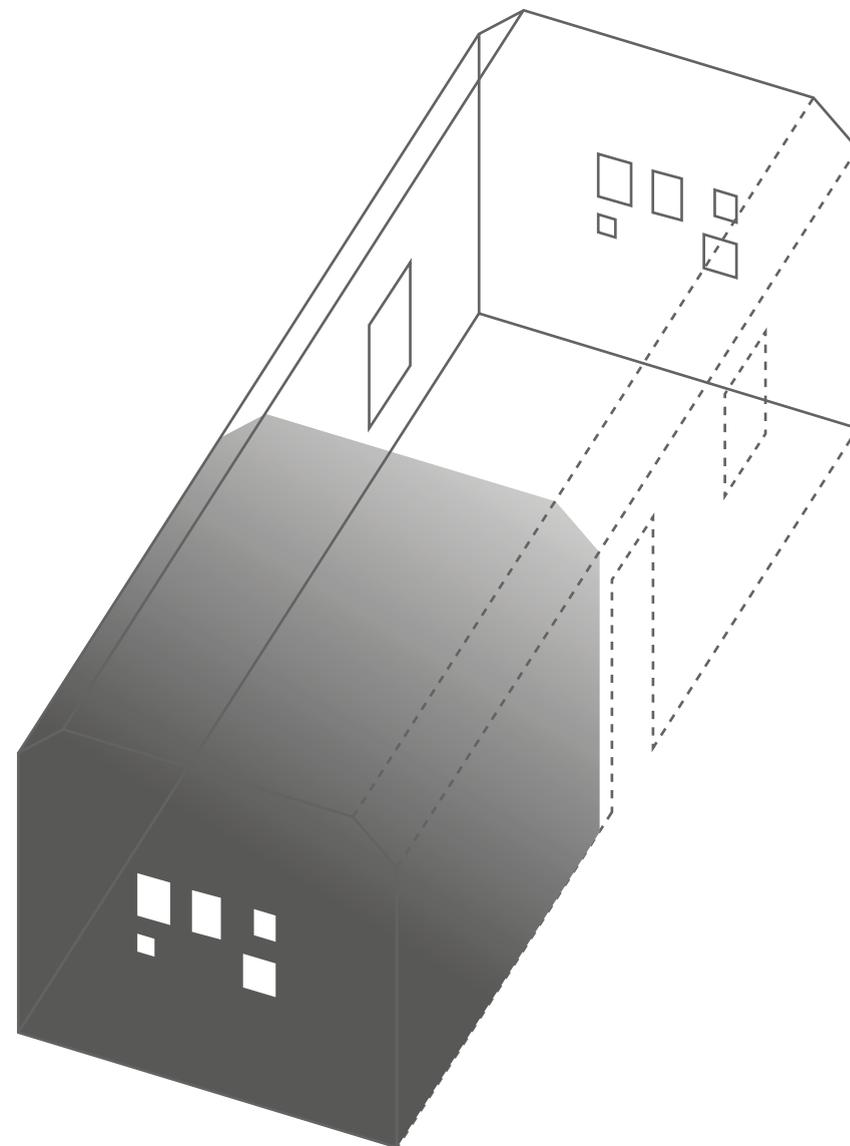
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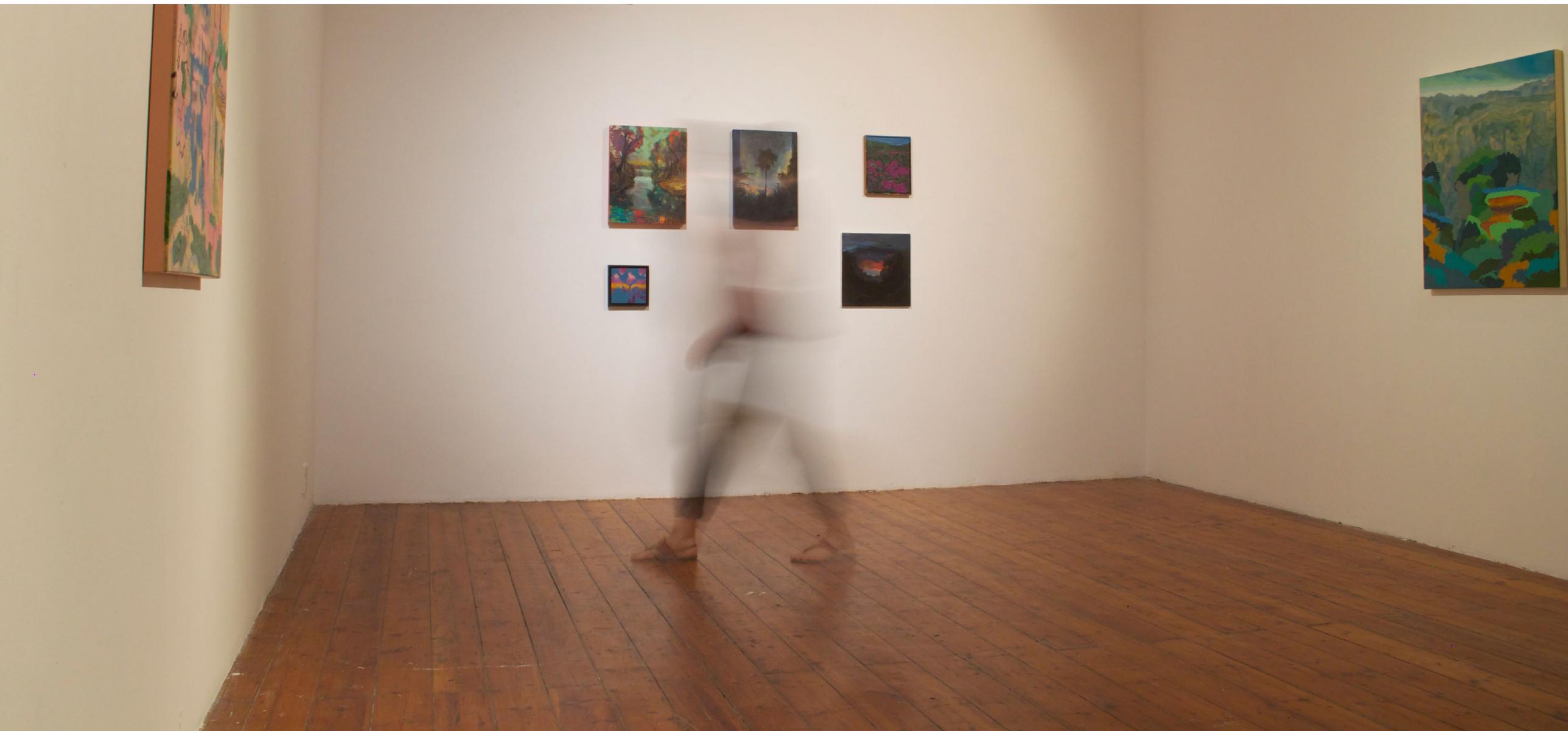
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installation view, 2019, Michaelis Galleries



installation view, 2019, Michaelis Galleries



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Jonathan Silverman

Searching For An Electric Peanut [part II]

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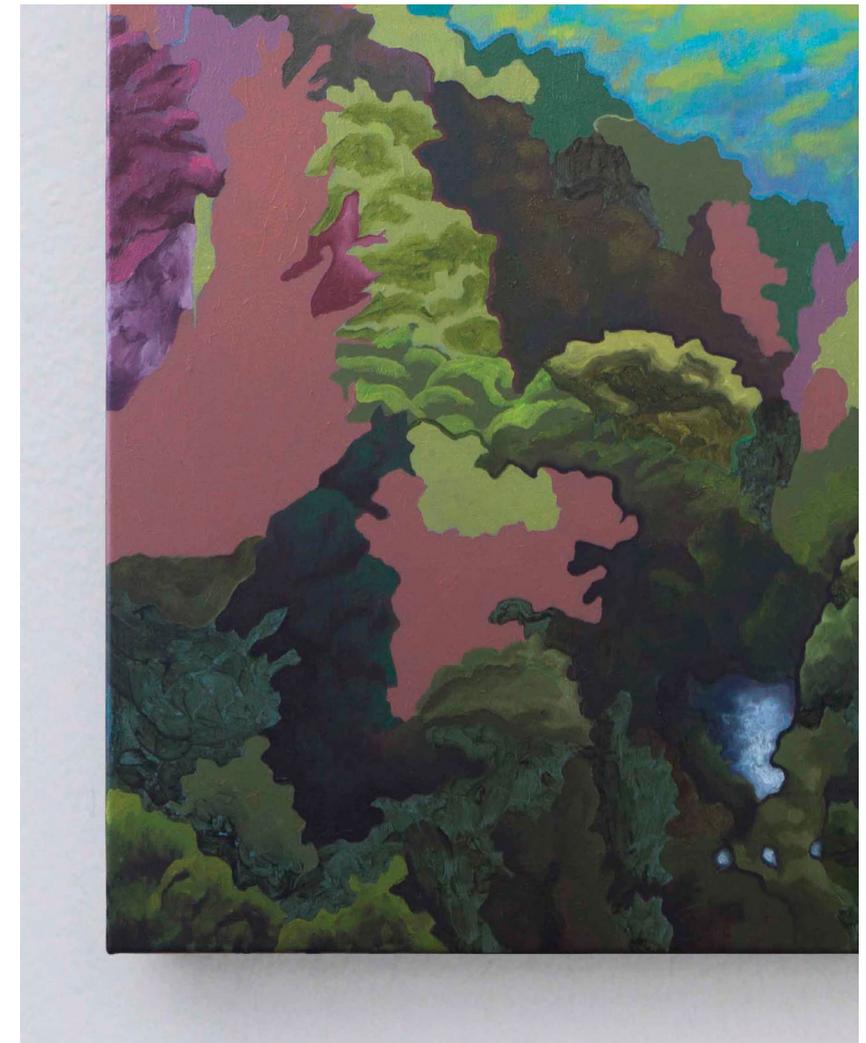
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Introduction

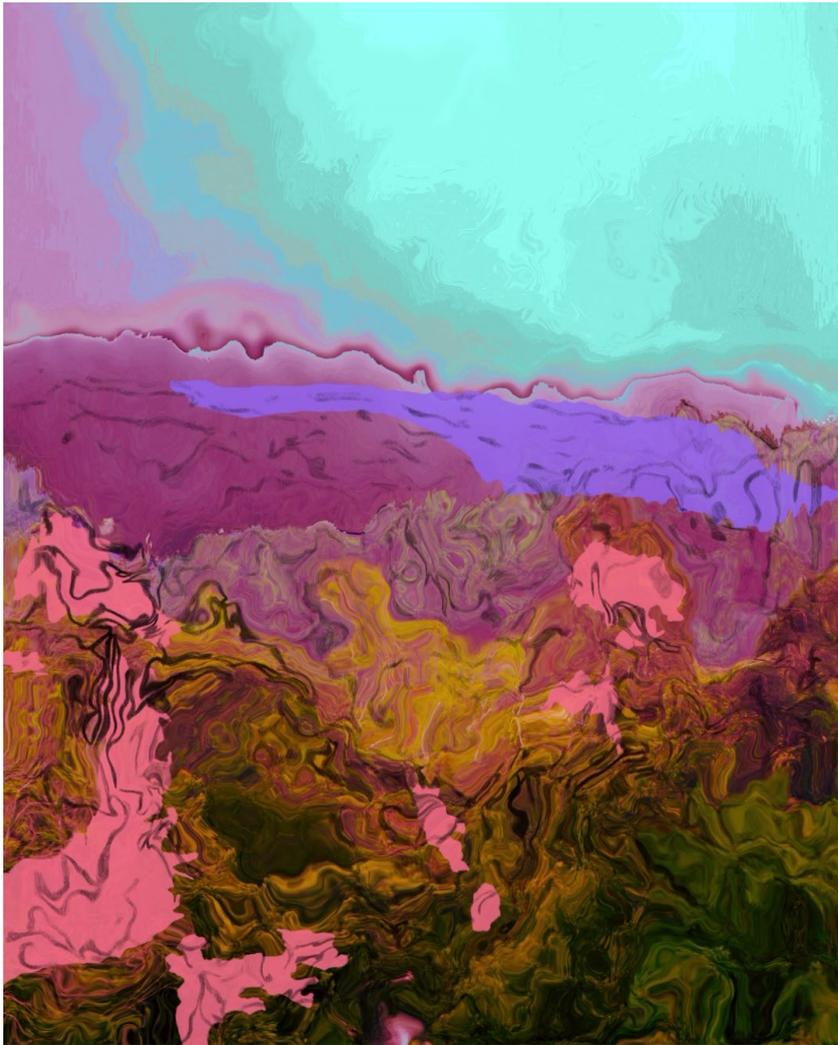
In *Searching for an Electric Peanut* Jonathan Silverman reconstructs the lost experience of encountering nature as landscape. In the age of the screen and real time technologies, the lost tradition of artist and easel on a bucolic hilltop sketching the expanse seems tragically outdated. However this is not what lays at stake here, rather it is the encounter and its hidden potential to render life to the material and the digital.

Silverman attests that his diasporic Jewish background is fundamental to his wandering gaze. Instead of being drawn to the stability of cultural identity, he chose to develop his artistic practice first in Italy and the UK, and for the past 4 years in South Africa. "Electric peanut" is a term that Silverman encountered in one of his many digital wanderings, denoting the bright flickering stain left on the retina after gazing at the sun. The reconstructed imageries of the exhibit resonate in the effect of this quickly dissipating echo of the sun. For Silverman's search is after the most elusive aspect of human experience, that which stubbornly evades us, the experience of leaving the present behind as an unknown.

Polyphonic Dive (detail) / oil on canvas / 130 x 90 cm / 2018



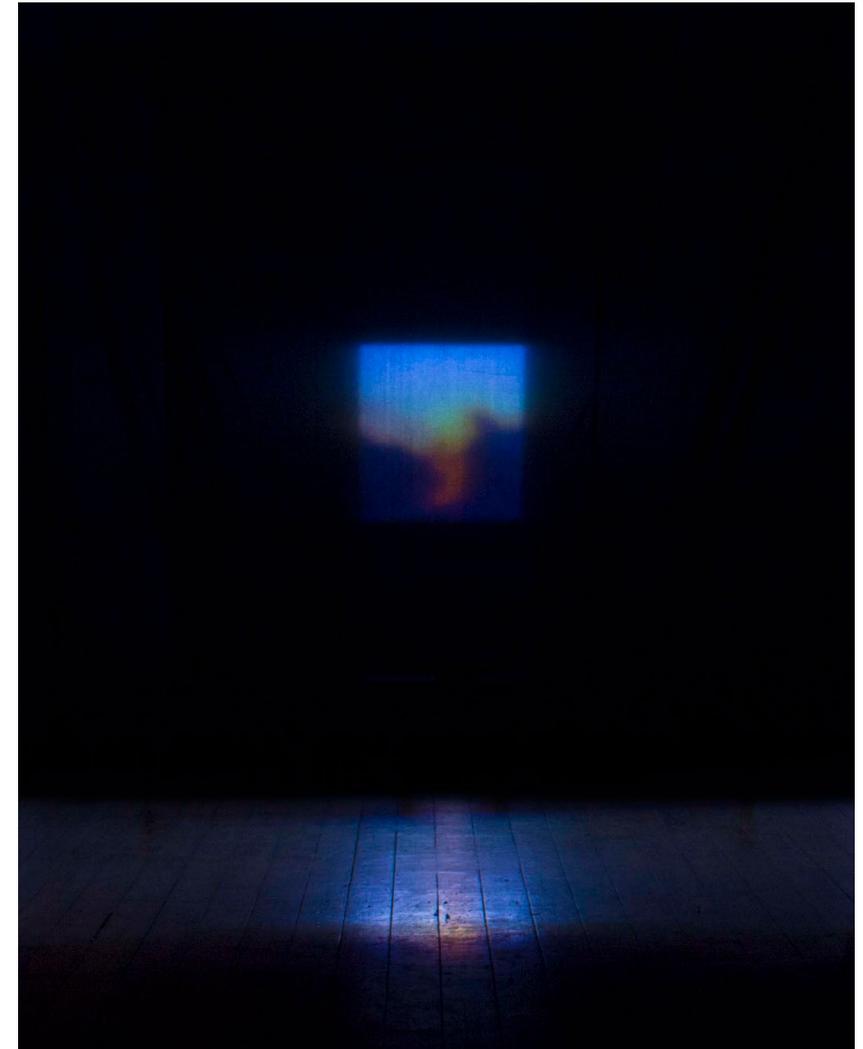
Through a cyclical process that goes back and forth between the analogue and the digital, between the handwielded and the digitally augmented, and between the flattened and that which has depth, Silverman deconstructs and reconstructs the representation of nature. The paintings range in the intensity of their abstraction, with enumerable layers complicating the flat surface of the canvas. The observer is hit by a longing that is confused with the suspension of clarity. However the blurred boundaries and the contamination of shape into stain and back again, allow for comfort. Thus flatness is supplanted for depth.



S.E.P. (still detail) / 2018 / 11' / FULL HD video

Depth supplanted for flatness is experienced in the video-art projected in the darkened room. A slow succession of gaseous, unstable spherical images appear, endowed with autonomous reverberation. An eerie encounter, nature now is a recognizable unfamiliarity. Their slow movement evokes a form of primal sentience and the three dimensional immerses into time removed. Something is missing. Where is humanity? It is as though nature is being rebooted without us.

video installation view, 2019, Michaelis Galleries



In the present exhibition Jonathan Silverman disturbs the longing for a natural nature. In the hyperreal of the Age of the Human Silverman's paintings reconstruct the comfort of observing nature while his video defuses the loss of its innocence. He reminds us of the necessary comfort we find in nature while drawing us into the discomfort of our lost presence. Where is humanity when the digital predominates the real?

Bert Olivier

Jonathan Silverman's Liminal Art

Liminality is a strange phenomenon: The Encarta dictionary online defines it as 'belonging to the point of conscious awareness below which something cannot be experienced or felt', which is only one of the ways the term is used, but nevertheless gives a good idea of what is involved when you call something 'liminal'. The point is that it marks a kind of threshold between domains, which can be of various kinds, and thinkers, writers and artists who explore it are engaging in an unpredictable activity, where both domains in question have an impact on their investigations.

South African artist – I should really say 'cosmopolitan artist', given his astonishing international peregrinations – Jonathan Silverman's art is of such a liminal kind, as anyone who is receptive to the meaning of images would notice in this exhibition, titled 'Searching for an Electric Peanut (part II)'. The oxymoron in the title already intimates its liminality.

But that would be mere conceptual prestidigitation, had it not been for the artist's traditional, painted images, on the one hand, juxtaposed, and interacting with his video-work on the other. It is the interaction that makes the show so interesting. Succinctly put, viewers are confronted with the fact that they move from one domain (the world of physicality) to the other (that of the digital/virtual) and back while viewing the artworks, and by implication – this should ideally strike everyone – this is an experience that is paradigmatic of our lives in the early 21st century.

Who can deny that such ambivalence — 'ontological' ambivalence, to give it its proper name – characterises life in the realm of the 'network society' (Castells), or the era of Empire (Hardt and Negri), and that it is part and parcel of living in an 'accelerated' world (Virilio)? Only those who are blind to the difference, and in a sense the irreconcilability, between the two qualitatively divergent experiences alluded to here, would be oblivious of this ambivalence.

video installation view, 2019, Michaelis Galleries



Other artists are aware of this too, of course, and it is not surprising to discover in their work similarities with Silverman's. One such artist, Joy Garnett, sees her work as being provoked by Virilio's notion of 'grey ecology' — the 'ecology of distances' where distance is being overcome by contemporary modes of communication, which tend to diminish time unbearably, so that Virilio perceives a shrinking world, anticipating that it will become uninhabitable because of its lack of spatial 'distance'. Garnett's strategy as a painter is to intervene in the virtualisation of the world, which, like Virilio, she sees as something that alienates us from our originally embodied experience of the world.

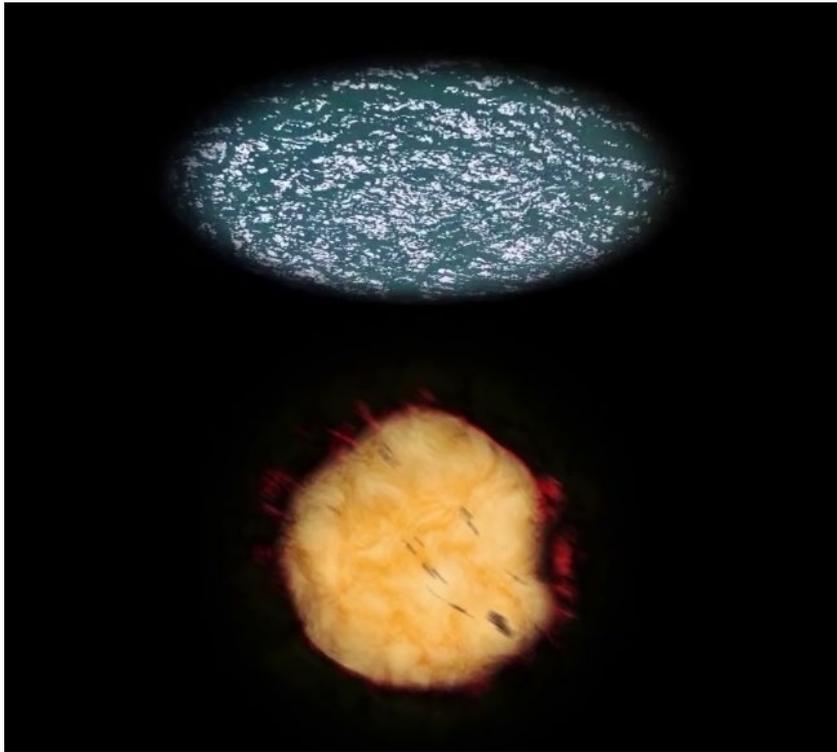
Just how this resonates with Jonathan Silverman's artistic self-understanding is immediately evident from what he observes: 'Our lives are shaped by our connection to physical objects and our digital experiences. Beyond what we are consciously aware of, our interaction with the digital and virtual has a profound effect on our psyche. With its negative and positive implications, it is our inevitable reality.'

To be sure, it would be disingenuous to deny that the 'virtual' domain, comprising the more valorised aspect of human social experience today, has 'positive implications, and is our inevitable reality', nor that it 'has a profound effect on our psyche', as Silverman points out (witness the hegemony of social networking sites and applications such as Facebook and Twitter). However, 'Searching for an Electric Peanut' has the virtue of making one aware of this effect, and although Silverman affirms its 'positive' effects, he generously leaves it up to the visitor to discover for themselves what the virtual's effects are.

The opening image of the video installation has a 'liquid-smoky' feel about it, and resembles the tip of a giant cigarette, minus the cigarette. What makes it unmistakably digital in appearance is the way it contracts and expands – undulates; a light blue, pinkish-orange space, partly surrounded by a dark, predominantly black, cloud-like border, the whole thing pulsating like an electronic planet or sun struggling to be born. This is what digital technology allows the video maker:

video installation view, 2019, Michaelis Galleries





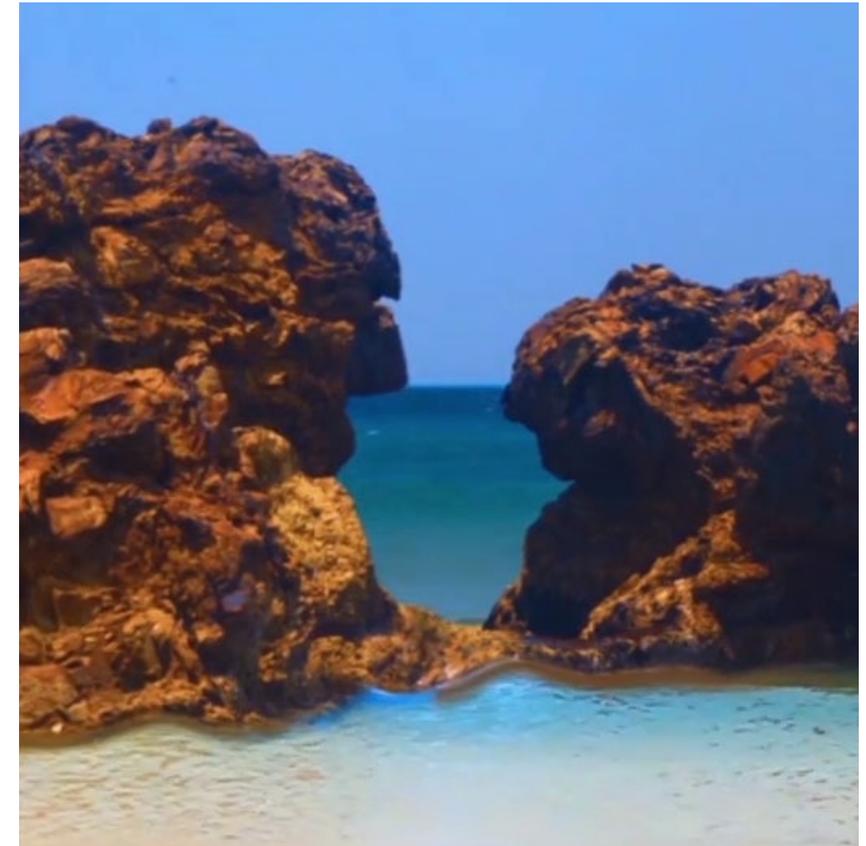
S.E.P. (still detail) / 2018 / 11' / FULL HD video

to manipulate images as they want to, which Silverman has done in exemplary fashion here.

There are several images where this becomes particularly apparent. One is based on a still cinematic shot of two familiar, facing rocks on a Port Elizabeth beach, through the opening between which one can see the ocean, except...in the video the rocks move in a palpitating, tectonic manner. This might seem to be an innocent, visual digital experiment, but in fact it is one of the instances of this liminal artistic space where Silverman manages to cross the divide, as it were, between the digital/virtual and the earthy, physical domain indexed by the painted images.

By manipulating the rock-and-sea image, making it palpitate like a rocky heart, it serves as an irresistible reminder of what it is not – it transcends its own ontological character as digital video-art from within, as it were – namely the earth, which is our originary home, Gaia, and her fundamental geological, tectonic structure, visually incarnated in the pulsating, digital rocks.

S.E.P. (still detail) / 2018 / 11' / FULL HD video



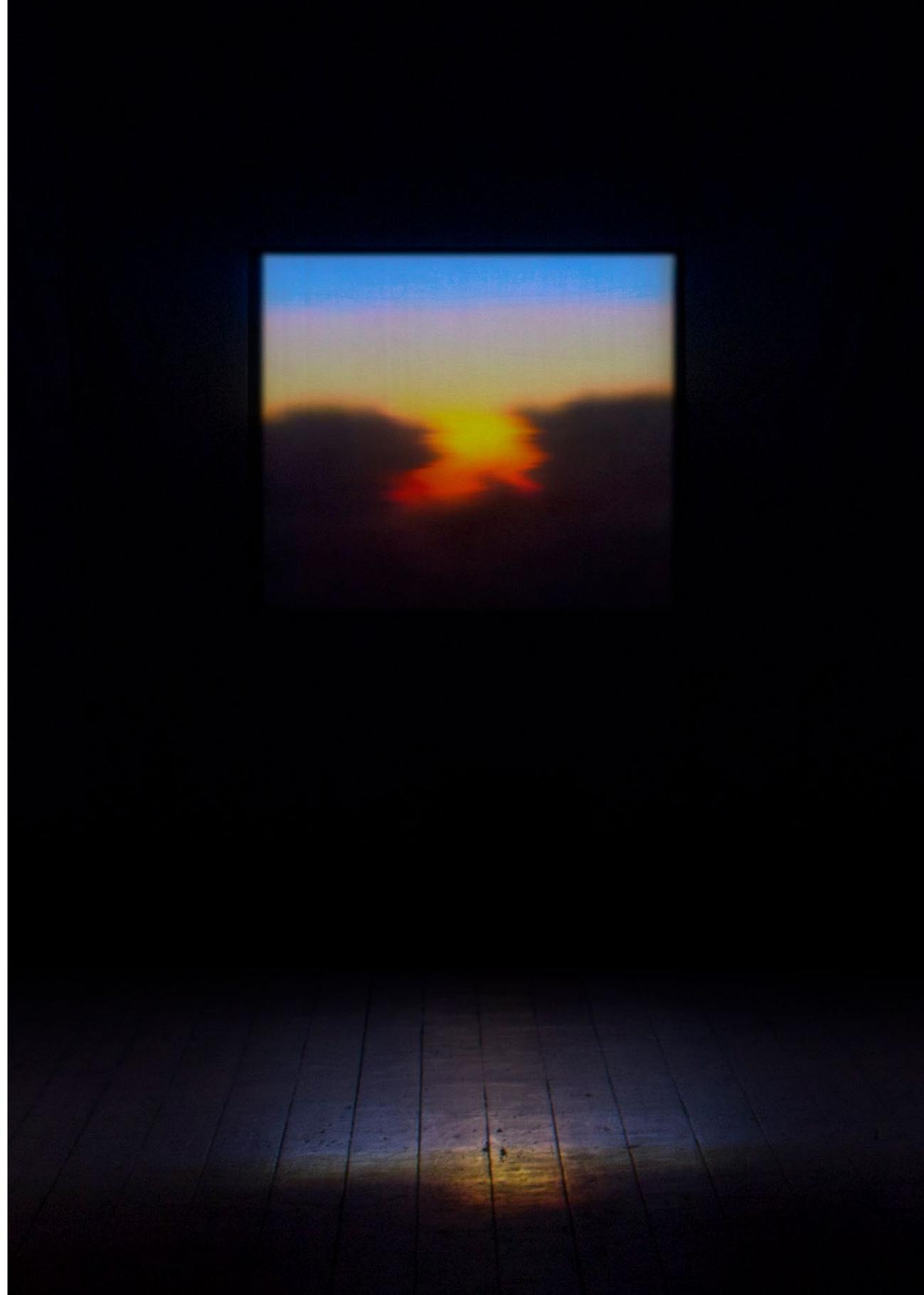
As one transfers one's gaze from one image to the other, it is impossible not to become aware of the textural differences between the video images and the images of oil paintings and mixed media works – the latter have a tactile quality about them which the video images and stills lack. This contrast serves as a telling reminder of the irreducible differences between the digital, virtual domain and the human life-world, where tactility and other markers of our inalienable physicality invite us – as Merleau-Ponty (the phenomenologist of perception) would say – to approach and touch the things that comprise our perceptual horizon.

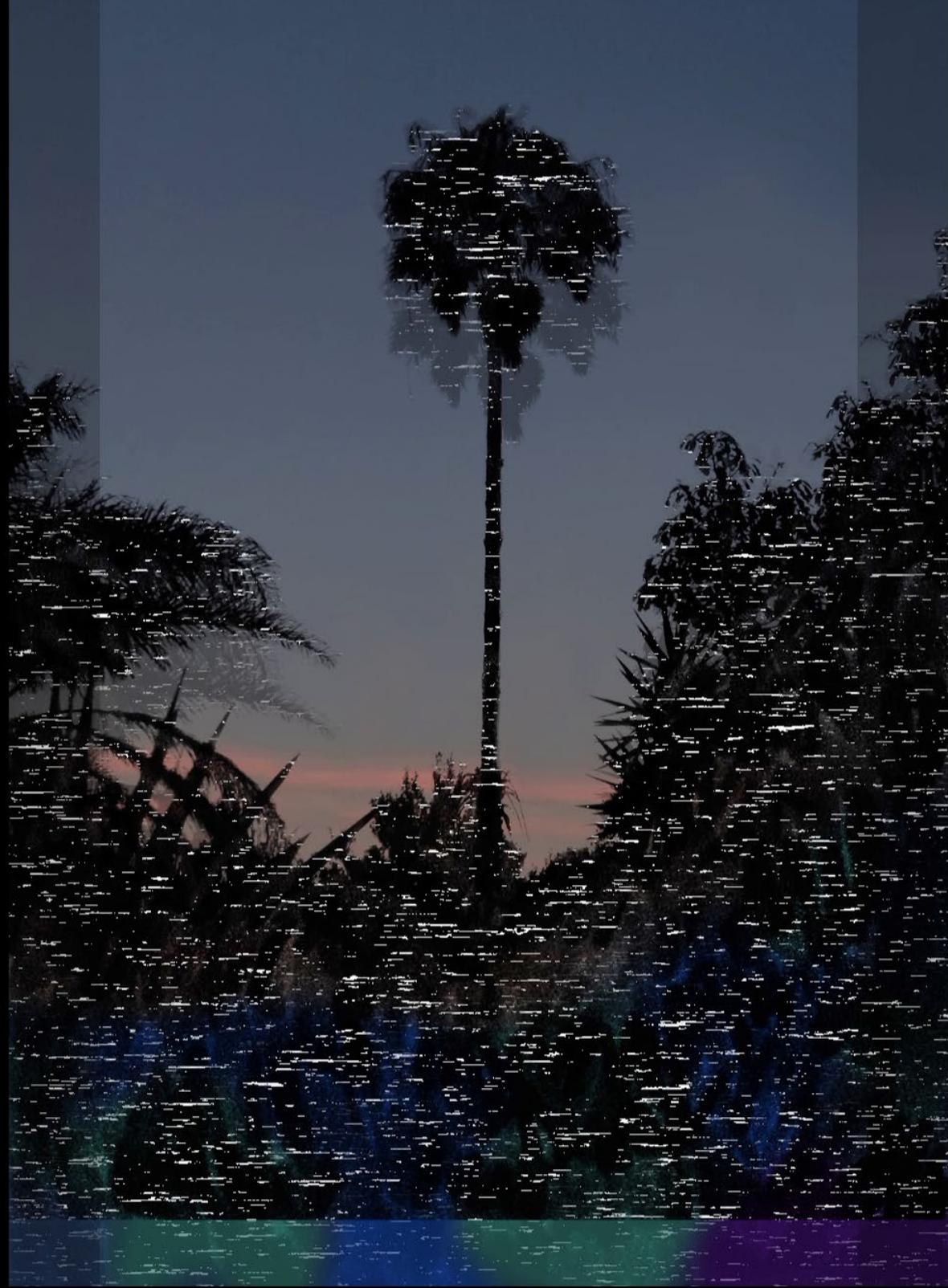
As a result, in this exhibition one confronts the divergent spaces of the earthly and the digital, respectively, which are here cannily juxtaposed in an unusual liminal space.



Bert Olivier speaking in the exhibition space, 2019, Michaelis Galleries

video installation view, 2019, Michaelis Galleries







(prev. page) **Nocturnal #Palm** (stills) / 3'20" / FULL HD video / 2017

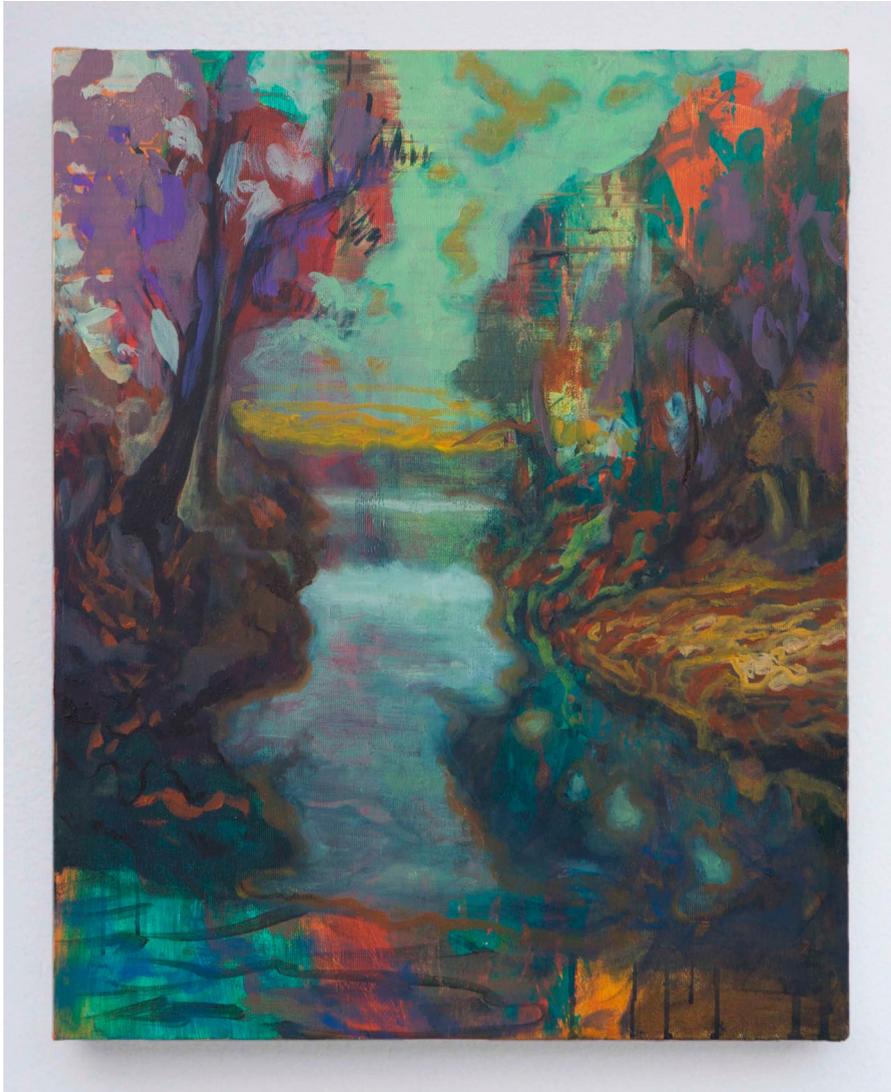
Nocturnal #Palm / oil on canvas / 51 x 35 cm / 2017



Torrent_Stream / oil on canvas / 90 x 70 cm / 2018



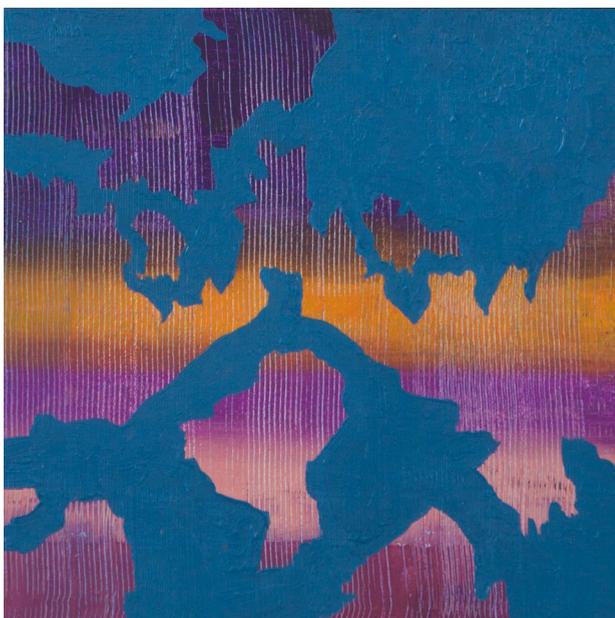
Honeymoon with Sophia / oil on canvas / 90 x 70 cm / 2018



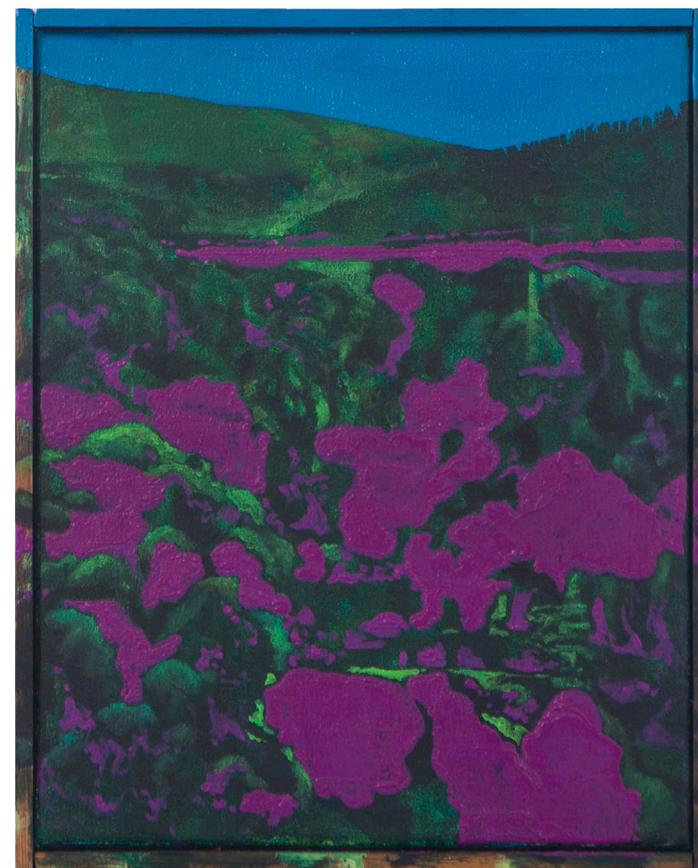
Tropic_Stream / oil on canvas / 50 x 40 cm / 2018



Searching For an Electric Peanut_01 / mixed media on canvas / 40 x 40 cm / 2016

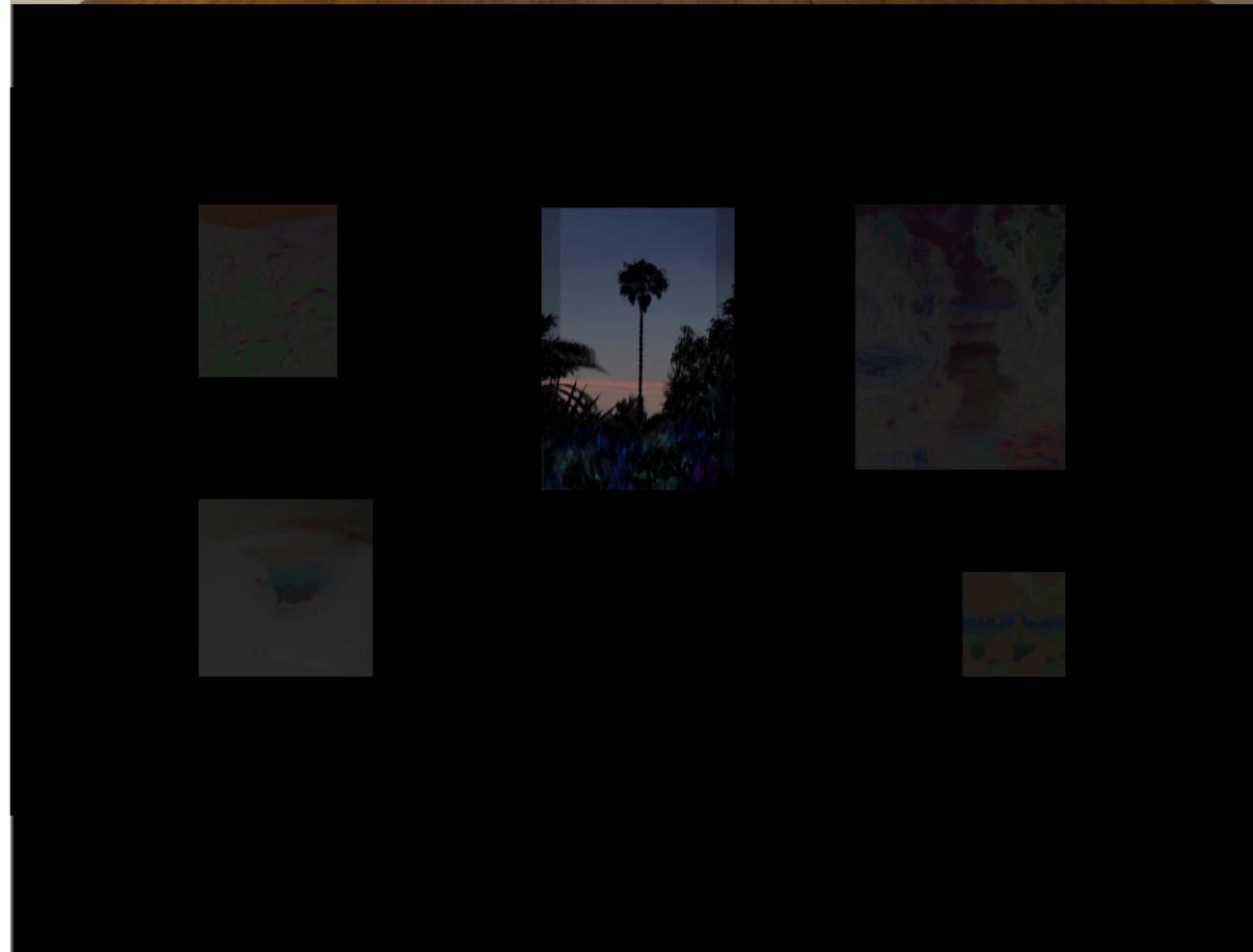
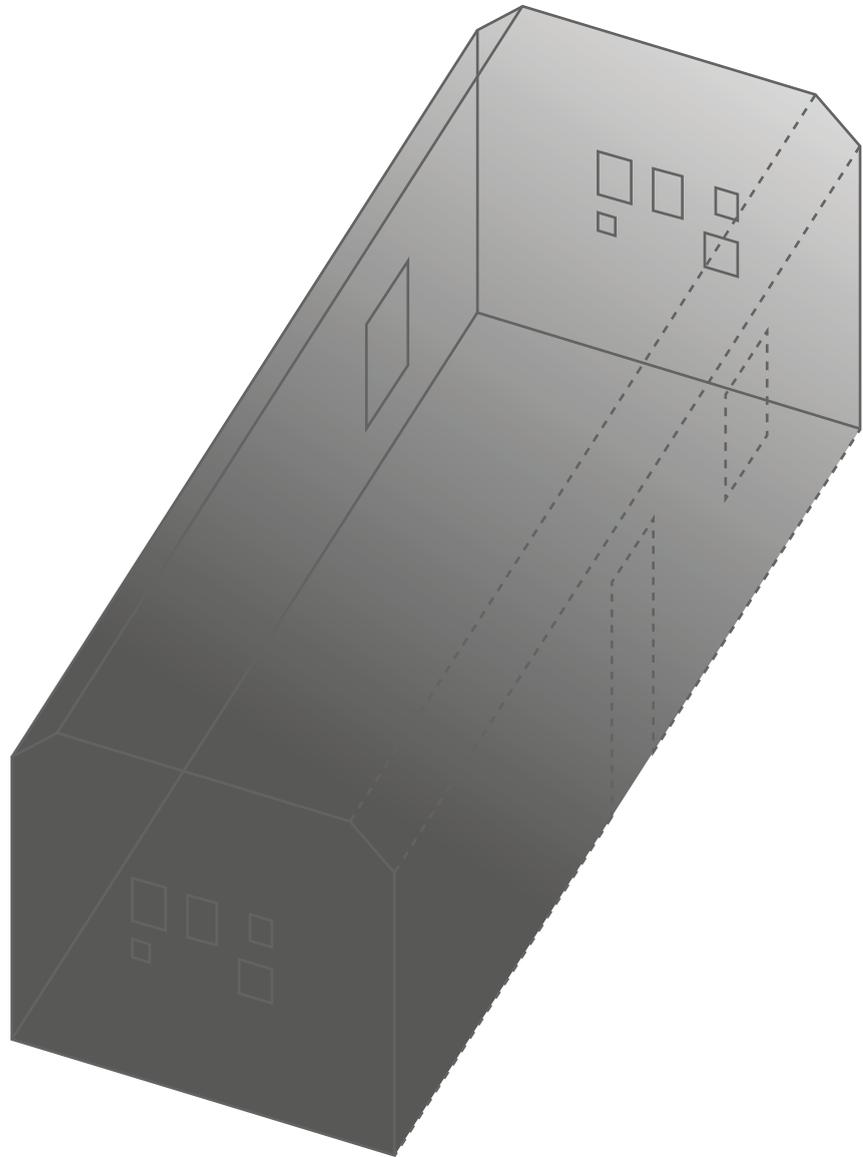


Interruption_01 / oil on board / 18 x 18 cm / 2018



Germination / oil on canvas / 32.5 x 26.5 cm / 2018

Jonathan Silverman received a BFA from the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, Italy, in 2006, and completed an MA in drawing at The Royal Drawing School in 2011. In 2012 was artist in residence at the Sanskriti Foundation in New Delhi, while also teaching at IIFA in Modinagar, India. In 2015 he was invited to be part of the BoCs Artist's residency in Cosenza, Italy. Over the last 8 years he has taught at the Royal Drawing School's Public Programme (London), and as visiting lecturer at Rhodes University and NMU (South Africa). Silverman has exhibited internationally (Italy, UK, Israel, Portugal, India and South Africa), and has work in various private collections as well as the Royal Collection. Jonathan Silverman currently lives and works in the Eastern Cape of South Africa.





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