



Tammy Nguyen

Chickens of the
Torrís Summer

NORWALK COMMUNITY COLLEGE ART GALLERY
SEPTEMBER 2 - OCTOBER 24, 2014



Norwalk Community College
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Curator's Statement

Tammy Nguyen has ensorcelled me from the first time we met, over a year ago.

Her work is not easily categorized; there is no easy, single narrative - everything she creates is imbued with her personal history, her vivid imagination, her visual curiosity, and her creative expression.

When I visited Tammy in her studio we talked (a lot) about her background, her family, her studies, her travels; she showed me the books she had constructed, the working plans she had drawn, her prints in progress, and the large paintings, many still “evolving”. When I left, I knew NCC had to have a Tammy Nguyen exhibition – and there she was the next week measuring the art gallery!

- Susan Hardesty, Curator
Norwalk Community College Art Gallery

Tammy was born and raised in San Francisco, California. She received her BFA from the Cooper Union School of Art and her MFA from the Yale School of Art. In 2007 she received a Fulbright Fellowship to study lacquer painting in Vietnam. She has shown her work in the United States at El Ricon Gallery, Houston, TX; Lehman College Art Gallery, Bronx, NY and Industry City, Brooklyn, NY, as well as in Vietnam at San-Art.

Nguyen now resides in the Bronx, New York, and works in Westport, Connecticut, where she is the art instructor at Pierrepont School. She is currently a 2014 Van Lier Fellow at Wave Hill and will participating in the Bronx Museum AIM Biennial in 2015. She was recently awarded a Scholarship for Advanced Studies in Book Arts from the Center for Book Arts, New York, NY.

Chicken

There is a frenetic pace to Tammy Nguyen's new body of work, and because a central theme is chickens, a popular saying comes to mind—like a _____ with its head cut off.

As anyone who has witnessed the source of this expression, the chicken's body continues to run around in all directions without a brain to direct it—blood spurting as it goes. The spattered blood that springs from the still beating heart, in the absence of a head, is part of the expressionistic side of the art works in this visually arresting exhibition; whereas the representational side clearly says 'chicken' loud and clear. In the midst of the blood and the featherless chickens, there are cloudlike wisps of yellowed chicken fat and popping eyeballs that also resemble eggs with visible yolks as the eyes' pupils.

So why chickens?

There are deep and myriad cultural, political, and historical associations and issues we can extract including the domestication of wild animals (chickens were domesticated originally from Asian jungle cocks), the mistreatment of captive animals for our markets and sustenance, and ubiquity of the bird in third world Asia (Nguyen is of Vietnamese ancestry).

Nguyen's first encounter with the chicken in its transition from living animal to food was at her friend's restaurant in Ninh Binh, a northern mountain region of Vietnam. A woman in the kitchen was dipping a freshly killed chicken in hot boiling water. As she gently pulled the feathers off the bird she asked Nguyen if she was hungry. This was a vivid memory for Nguyen—witnessing the process of taking something's life in order to sustain our own. Previously the intermediate steps between live chicken and food had been concealed. Here the continuum was visible. Nguyen began to think of other interstitial processes that lay hidden from our view—in birth and in war—and in her mind still associates them with this initial experience with the chicken.

To her soup of associations surrounding the chicken, both personal and universal, Nguyen adds cutouts from Vietnam War era comic books. They are portraits of chickens arched in a tight composition (as if embryonic) trying to

gasp for air in a jungle where men in camouflage wait to ambush with guns. These soldiers are bearers of blood — an imaginary experience to Nguyen as she is an American-born daughter to Vietnamese refugees. Here, blood is realized through Nguyen's appropriation of sensationalized imagery— like from a blockbuster movie.

Put all this in the hands of an accomplished painter and a master printmaker and you have something beautiful, strange, inexplicable, and bold. Each piece seems to strut off its stretcher bars or off the paper, filled with confidence but also agitation and a lot of nervous energy. The chicken is prey—who is waiting to take them out? What shadow is lurking over them? At what precise moment will they be hit or captured, and will feathers fly? As a viewer, personally, I start to feel part feathered cluck-er myself—is this the point? To remind us of the vulnerability of life?

Every viewer will be left to wonder while walking through the exhibition—why the chicken?—and will be left to search for an answer from their own set of experiences. Chances are we've all eaten one, and seen them both alive, racing along the ground or pecking—and dead, laying in shrink wrap or hanging in the market. Maybe we've even been awoken by one at dawn—their crowing marks the new day.

- James Prosek

Artist, writer, naturalist, and Yale graduate James Prosek made his authorial debut at nineteen years of age with *Trout: an Illustrated History* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), which featured seventy of his watercolor paintings of the trout of North America. Prosek's work have been shown The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, CT, The Addison Gallery of American Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, DC among others. Prosek has written for *The New York Times* and *National Geographic Magazine* and won a Peabody Award in 2003 for his documentary about traveling through England in the footsteps of Izaak Walton, the seventeenth-century author of *The Compleat Angler*.

Artist's Statement

I have eaten chicken my entire life, in many different ways— as drumsticks, nuggets, and cutlets; but also as stews where the ovaries, liver, and feet are delicacies. Consumers all have different spectrums of what they intake. There are audiences that have eaten all of it, and others that have eaten a selection. This spectrum of poultry consumption can also be an analogy (with flexibility) to a multitude of topics: like death.

I have experienced death in a few ways — and this is diversifying as I get older: my grandmother died at ninety-seven, an uncle had a heart attack, an aunt passed away with cancer. However, there is another version of death that remains sensational to me, and that is death through war, terror, and diaspora. As a daughter of Vietnamese refugees and thus war survivors, the memory of war seems to be inherent in the way I was raised. War— and its sacrifices— gave specific urgency to my wellbeing, so that I could perhaps live a life void of trauma.

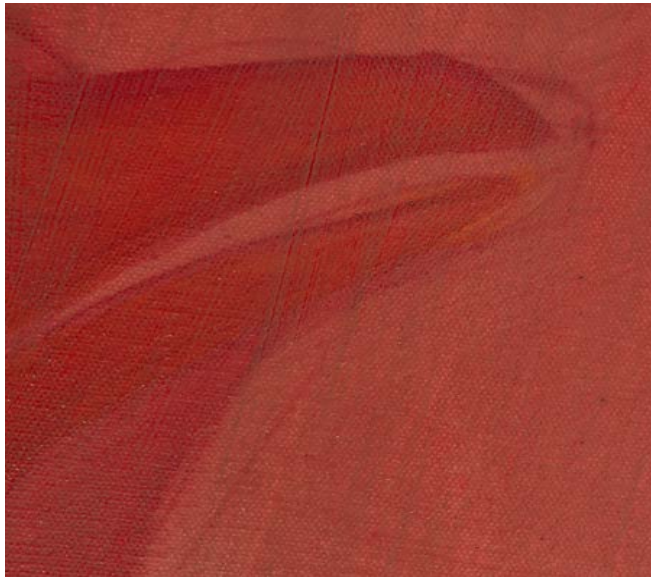
My mother makes an amazing chicken soup. It always takes her days because she freezes it so that she can scoop out the fat. It is a clear broth made with so much care and patience. When I watch her make it, a recurring thought occurs, “How did you cook like that when there were missiles flying around outside?” It is certain that I do not have memories of the Vietnam War, but I try to imagine what it could have been like. My understanding of it is constructed by literature, history, and oral stories. The memory void is engrained with pop culture: movies and comic books that speak of that era and the battlefield in general.

This show is the imagination of that epic fantasy. Here, the war heroes, the fallen, the boy and his brother, the mothers and their children, are realized through the common chicken that I have painted from observation. But, through my process of creation, you see the fowl's eyes roll back as death emerges, egg yolks push forward to look at you, testicles and breasts waver between what they are and are not, so that life can start all over again.

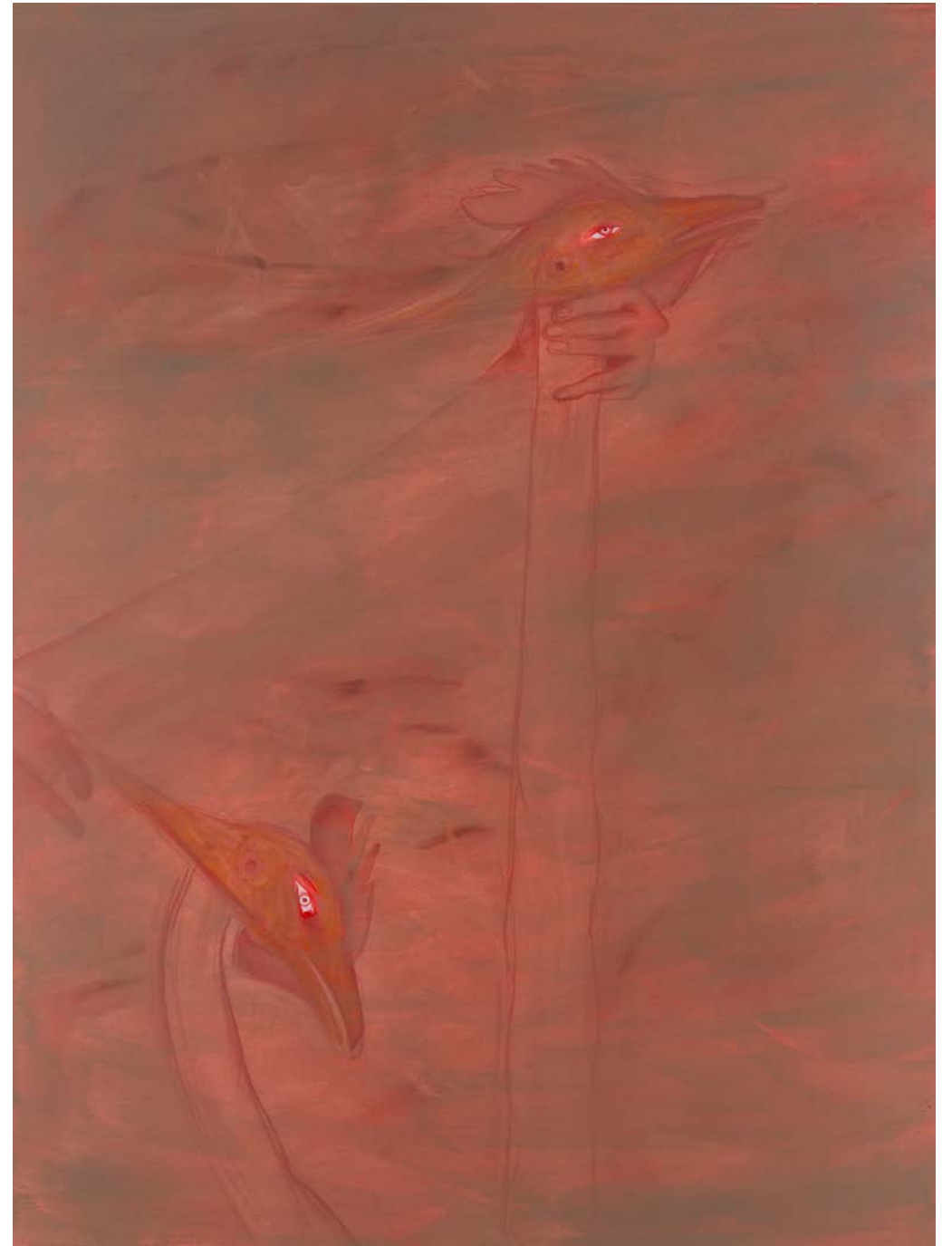
- Tammy Nguyen



detail



detail



One After the Other, Act 1 Scene 1
Watercolor, acrylic, and oil paint on canvas
48" x 36"
2014



detail



detail



One After the Other, Act 1 Scene 2
Watercolor, acrylic, and oil paint on canvas
48" x 36"
2014



detail



detail



One After the Other, Intermission
Watercolor, acrylic, and oil paint on canvas
48" x 72"
2014



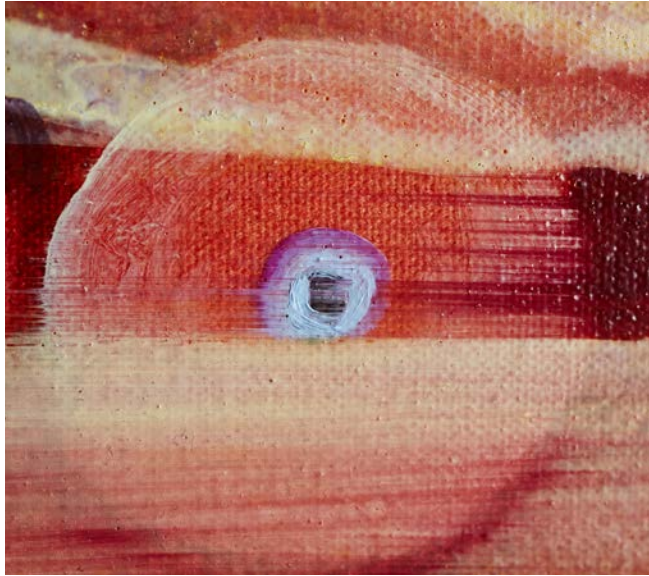
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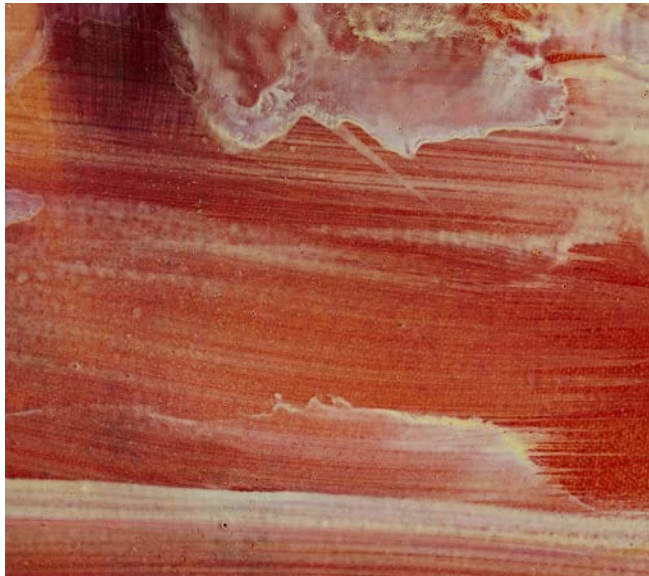
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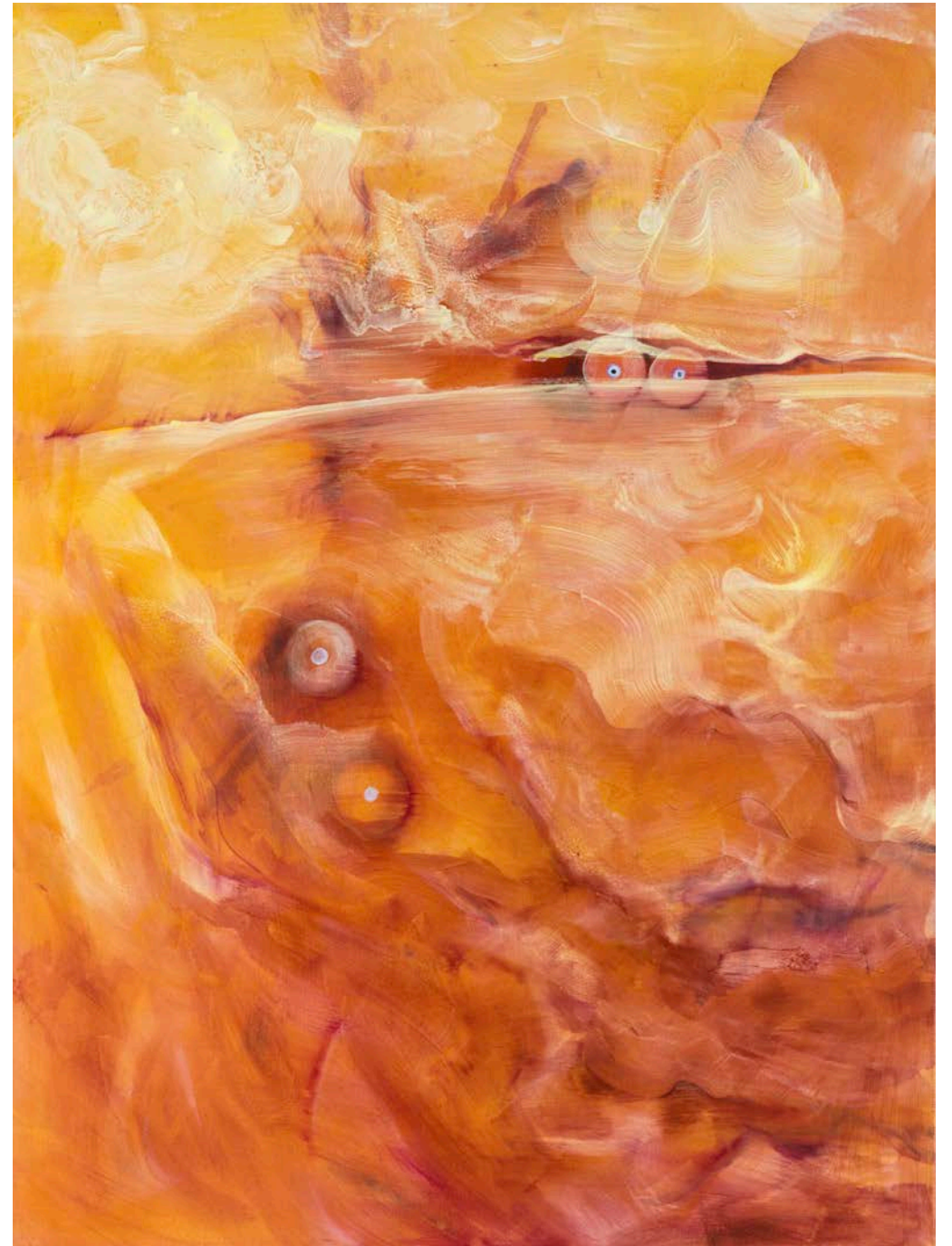
One After the Other, Act 2 Scene 1
Watercolor, acrylic, and oil paint on canvas
48" x 36"
2014



detail



detail



One After the Other, Act 2 Scene 2
Watercolor, acrylic, and oil paint on canvas
48" x 36"
2014



detail

Something's wrong with the mother when you find a double-yolked egg.

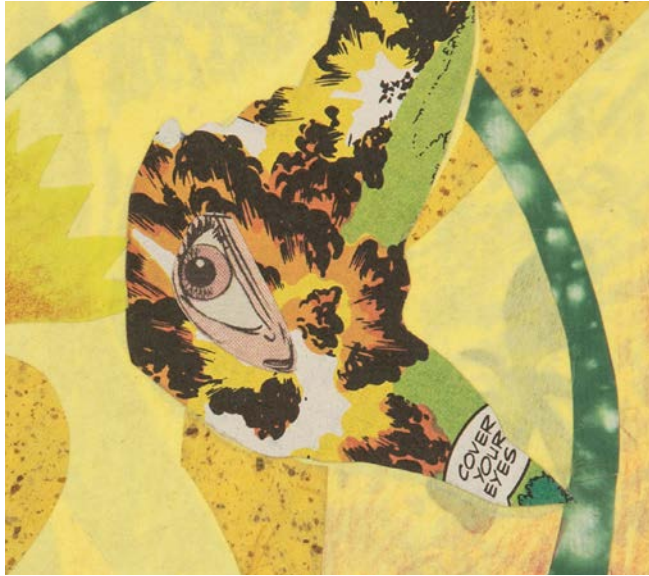
You thought you've found twins, but no, there probably wasn't a father. Even without the roosters, hens just keep laying eggs. One egg a day, following the sun cycle over 24 hours.



detail

The Double Yolked Egg, Part 1
Waterbased printed woodblock with collage and colored pencil
16 5/8" x 10 1/8"
2014





detail

Something's wrong with the mother when you find a double-yolked egg.

These eggs are usually produced by a hen who is too young, or too old. The egg-forming organs are not fully synchronized causing two yolks to drop before the shell formation.



detail

The Double Yolkeg, Part 2
Waterbased printed woodblock with collage and colored pencil
16 5/8" x 10 1/8"
2014





detail



detail

The Double Yolkeg Egg, Intermisison 1
Waterbased printed woodblock with collllage
and colored pencil
21" x 16"
2014





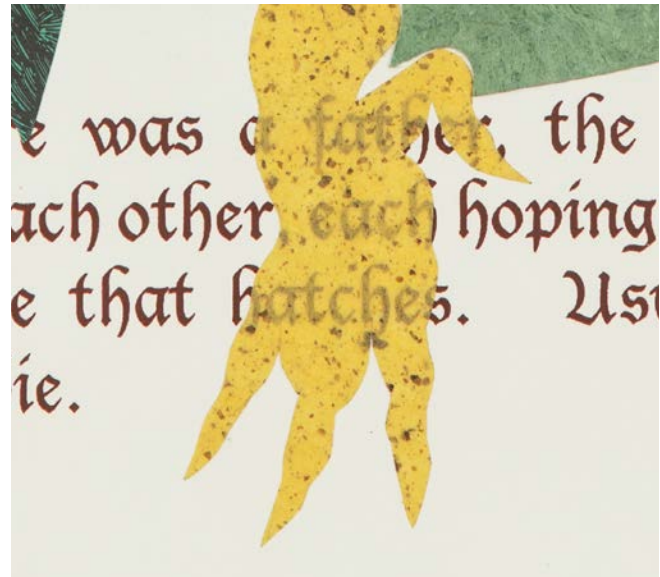
detail



detail

The Double Yolkeg, Intermisssion 2
Waterbased printed woodblock with collllage
and colored pencil
21" x 16"
2014





detail



detail

Something's wrong with the mother when you find a double-yolked egg.

If there was a father, the two embryos fight each other, each hoping that it will be the one that hatches. Usually, both of them die.



The Double Yolkeg Egg, Part 3

Waterbased printed woodblock with collage and colored pencil
16 ⁵/₈" x 10 ¹/₈"
2014



detail



detail

Something's wrong with the mother when you find a double-yolked egg.

But they are perfectly fine to eat. In some cultures, finding a double-yolked egg means that there is a good fortune coming.



But they are perfectly fine to eat. In some cultures, finding a double-yolked egg means that there is a good fortune coming.

The Double Yolkeg Egg, Part 4

Waterbased printed woodblock with collage and colored pencil
16 5/8" x 10 1/8"
2014



detail



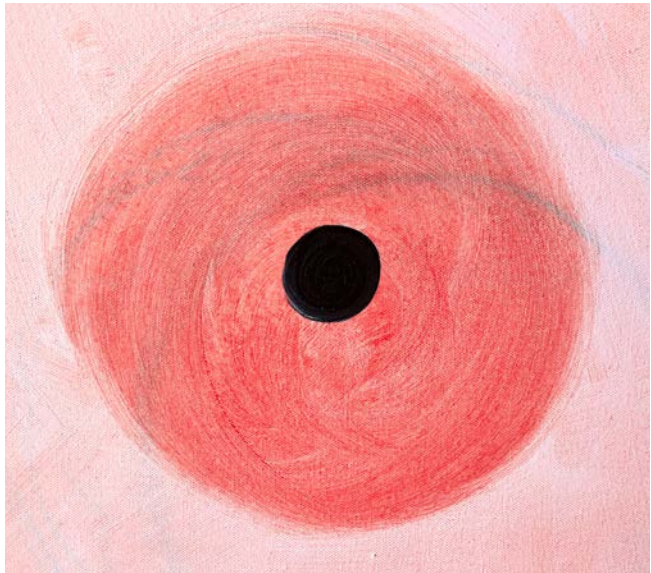
detail



The Last Champion
Watercolor, acrylic, and oil paint on canvas
72" x 60"
2014



detail



detail



New Champions
Watercolor, acrylic, and oil paint on canvas
72" x 84"
2014

All photography by Argenis Apolinario
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Fonts used are Adobe Caslon Pro Regular, Adobe Caslon Pro Italics,
and Lucida Blackletter, all in various sizes.

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