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BORDERCROSSINGS

A M A G A Z I N E O F T H E A R T S

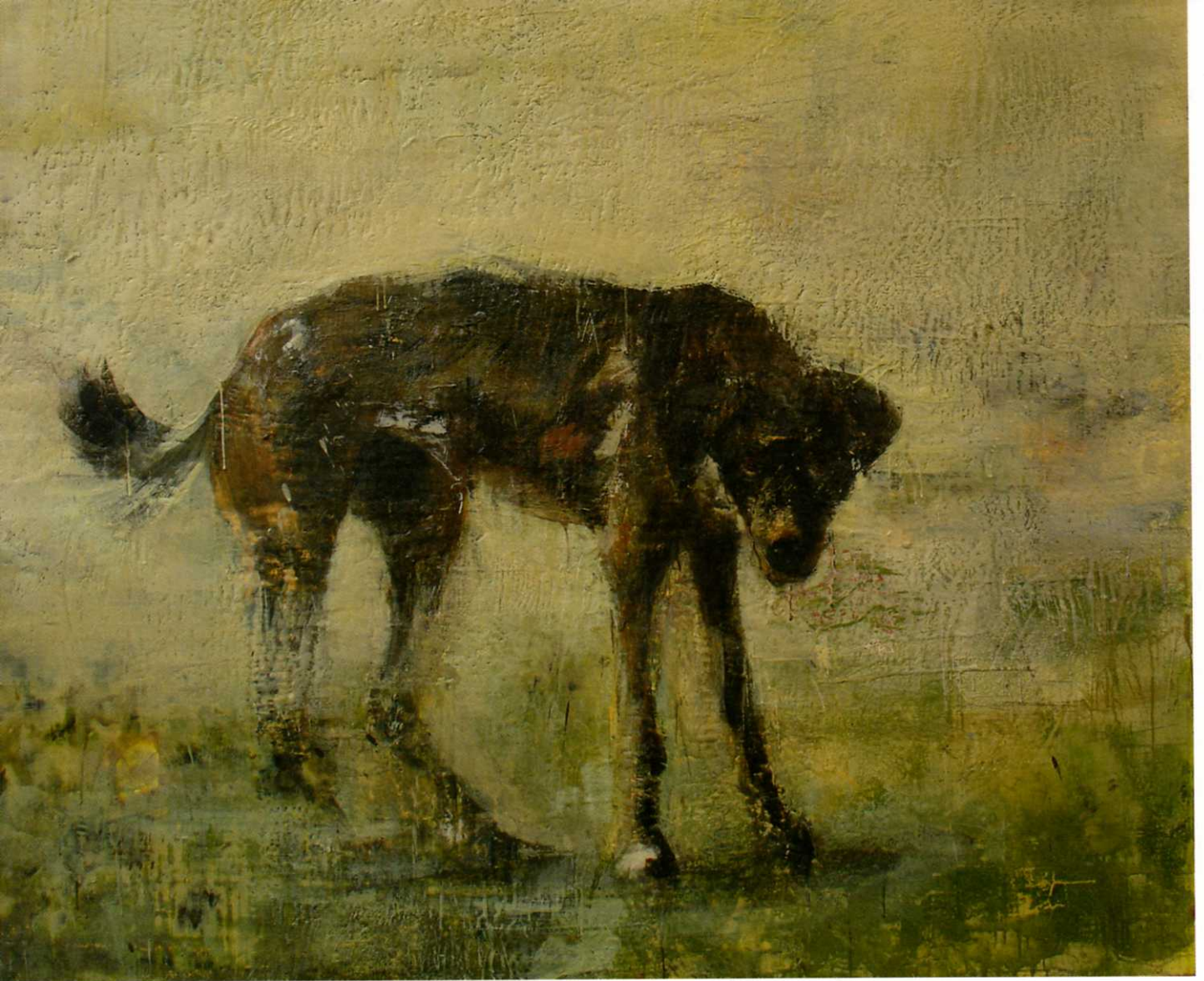


THE ART OF DOWNSIDE NARRATIVE

An Interview with TONY SCHERMAN

by Robert Enright

Among the 17 large encaustic paintings from "About 1865," Tony Scherman's grave and beautiful meditation on the American Civil War, is a canvas called *God's Work*. It shows a pair of legs and feet, cut off below the knee and suspended in a scratched and mottled space. The title is deeply ironic, since the body has clearly been hanged and no less obviously brutalized in other ways, a casualty not of God's work but of man's monstrous industry. The medium of encaustic, which Scherman decided to use exclusively over 30 years ago, is the ideal material to carry the weight of meaning embodied in the painting. To say the surface is distressed



Georgia, 2004–06, encaustic and cornmeal on canvas, 60 x 72"

preceding page, left: *Lincoln's Evil Twin*, 2004–06, encaustic and cornmeal on canvas, 60 x 72"

right: *The Dreams of Robert E. Lee*, 2005–06, encaustic and cornmeal on canvas, 48 x 54". All photographs courtesy Georgia Scherman Projects, Toronto.

is only to implicate the art of painting into the act of remembering. Inescapably, you are reminded of Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit," an anguished song about murderous racism. "Southern trees bear strange fruit, / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root, / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze, / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." The third stanza picks up on the metaphor of grotesque growth—"here is the fruit for the sun to rot"—a sensation that Scherman's painting generates with equal tenacity. He remarks in the following interview that he has a "natural tendency towards over-ripening that is deep down," and I can think of no more appropriate place for that tendency to come to the surface—more accurately, to become the surface—than in a painting on the subject of racially motivated lynching. It should come as no surprise that the other painting in the series named *God's Work* shows the occluded eye of a hooded Klansman; the work done in the name of god finds a shape as both victim and victimizer.

The paintings in "About 1865" concentrate on pain and desire. Scherman locates their origin in his attempts to understand the particular sense of pain experienced by a class of disenfranchised blue-collar white southerners and in his tendency "to libidinize everything I paint." The results of these divergent motivations are startling; this is a world of unrepentant darkness (consider the lethal coldness in the eyes of *Lincoln's Evil Twin*, a portrait that has some residual likeness to Hannibal Lecter) and a world of unmediated sensuality (consider equally the knowing look in the eyes of the voluptuous black girl that Robert E. Lee dreams up out of his deflected desire). The fact that Scherman's portraits fill the entire space of the composition makes them read as much like a topography as a physiognomy; in his art, figure and ground are in a constant state of painterly interpenetration.

Scherman denies any virtuosity in his work, a disavowal that seems preposterous. His painting of a side

of beef, while it replicates a subject that has been brilliantly painted by artists as different as Soutine and Rembrandt, is entirely his own; his rendering of a pair of shrimp in *Savannah: Better Days* is dazzling. In its way, it is his version (albeit in a radically enlarged scale) of Manet's painting of asparagus, the everyday raised to the level of the monumental. These shrimp are both stately and outrageous, show-off seafood with a touch of class. Scherman has remarked that he needs a condition of paradox as a way into a painted subject, and, in these still lifes, he is able to produce works with an enlivened, treacherous surface. They are visceral evidence of his claim that he nods, from time to time, to the defacement of beauty. Few painters working today are able to sustain that paradoxical achievement. "All I can tell you is that I see beauty everywhere," he states categorically. Giving form to that constant recognition, to assign a term he uses in the following conversation, is his own "real alchemy."

Tony Scherman spoke with Robert Enright from Toronto on June 24, 2007.

BORDER CROSSINGS: *I'm interested in what attracted you to this particular theme. Why was the American Civil War a point of a departure for a body of work?*

TONY SCHERMAN: It started back in England in 1969, where my dad was recording. I used to hang around Abbey Road because he was working with the Beatles. He played the violin and whenever they had sessions with strings, he did them. So we'd known lots of jazz guys and southern white blues musicians from various bands. And I noticed that the slide guitar coming off the white guys was very different from the slide coming off the black guys. It was greasy; the black guys were drier. And I became aware of the pain these white guys had. I didn't know where it came from, I didn't know what it was, I didn't understand that it was a very particular thing. The southern boys had it and the white boys from the north didn't. Many decades later, I was touring my Napoleon show to a museum in the south and, from the moment I landed, I suddenly understood where that pain came from. These guys, the likes of Jerry Lee Lewis and the Allman Brothers, came from the disenfranchised blue-collar class. Their great-great-grandfathers were non-slave-owning white trash before the war. They go and fight and after the war they get ground down into the dust.



General Bob at Cold Harbour,
2004–06, encaustic and
cornmeal on canvas, 60 x 60"

Even today, if you hear a southern accent in New York, this awful mythology suddenly pours out. I discovered two very distinct Americas. Basically, I picked up on a certain kind of pain. I wanted to make paintings about it but I didn't know how. Most of my series percolate until I find a paradox that allows me to move in.

BC: *That's your way in: find a paradox?*

TS: Always, it's a deconstructive method. I find a gap between what is said and what is done, between something said and the tone it's said in, and I move in. It's very Derridean. The first thing that piqued my interest was the character of Robert E. Lee because he is Mr. Fucking Perfect. It's unbelievable. I'm reading biographies and I cannot find a transgression anywhere in this character. It's quite something. I've never come across an historical figure who was quite like this one.

BC: *I'm immediately skeptical.*

TS: Trust me, I do good research. I'm a heat-seeking missile for trash because that's what I like painting: downside narrative. There's an intense narcissism with this man but it's not narcissism at the expense of how he behaves or how he looks after his troops. Clearly, he's immaculate. So I'm totally aware of his mythology.



At the end, he knows the war is lost and he and Grant are flanking each in the Wilderness Campaign. It was the last campaign of the war and it was especially brutal, particularly a battle called Cold Harbor, which left massive carnage and bodies piled deep in the field. Lee and Grant spend two days exchanging letters of protocol to remove the wounded. What's actually happening is that Grant is demanding a surrender and Lee is demanding a white flag, a truce. He knows he's lost the war because he's writing letters to his wife saying, "I fear the end." So here's the only moment I can find where this guy displays any callousness; it's a moment that is very dark. Grant, I understand. They called him The Butcher, which wasn't really fair, since he was a brilliant and extraordinary character. But he was out for total war; he understood that he had to crush this completely. Whereas, Lee, in this moment, betrays something that was one of my entry points. From that I painted a series within a series called "The Dreams of Robert E. Lee," which show moments in his subconscious that betray various things.

BC: *So one of his dreams is the erotic presence of the black girl with the luscious mouth?*

TS: Exactly, she's clearly black, and then in another one of the dream paintings I nod to Darwin. *The Origin of Species* was published around this time and it was really freaking people out.

BC: *When you paint him in Cold Harbor, one of the most noteworthy things is that his left cheek is like a bruise. The texture of the encaustic seems to reveal a man who is recognizing and embodying a certain degree of damage. There's also something about the veiled eye that suggests some ambiguity.*

TS: There are two portraits; if you block off the right side, you have a very different face again.

BC: *I have always sensed that all major historical figures are their own evil doppelgänger.*

TS: That's why I painted *Lincoln's Evil Twin*. So Robert E. Lee was one entry. The other entry, and it was actually the major one, was my realization that it was a white man's war. When people mention the Civil War, they make references to Lee and Grant, Lincoln, the battles and then the slaves. But they refer to the universal slave; they're not particularized; they don't even have a number. If you go to Washington and look around, you won't find a Monument to the Unknown Slave. And I thought, why shouldn't there be?

BC: *Which is where Simone, the girl you found in the video store, comes in?*

TS: Yes. I asked this lovely, vivacious-looking girl to come and model and, of course, she thought it was porno. So she checked me out and she came with a chaperone. It was very funny. I got her to stand with a towel over her and the amazing thing is, the moment she took the pose, all her ebullient self melted away. I swear to you she suddenly took on the whole weight of being black in America. It was the weirdest and most extraordinary thing. That's what I painted in *Simone as Slave*.

BC: *At one point, the white highlighting in her portrait follows her upper lip and curls across the side of her nose. But on the forehead, the white paint is dabbed on in a manner that seems arbitrary or capricious.*

TS: What's happening in the painting in general, and what is now happening more consciously than it did

If you look at Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, you'll see the guy is painting wrong so that it looks right. This is the level of painting to which I really aspire.

before is a very particular thing that goes straight to the hub of what I'm about. In the early work, what you might see as capricious, is capricious. Either I was drunk and stoned or my impatience in handling the medium was showing.

BC: *And was some of it self-sabotage, in that you wanted to mess up beauty?*

TS: In the early work, I was more aware of "the problem" of beauty. I say "the problem" in inverted commas because it was never my problem. So I was aware of it and there were nods to its defacing from time to time, but in my work the natural tendency towards overripening is something that is deep down.

BC: *You talked earlier about there being no virtuoso painting because nobody really knows how to paint. But it seems to me that in the last 10 years, you've learned a fair amount about painting. Was there a bit of false humility operating in your initial criticism?*

TS: No, there's no false humility. Let me tell you something. I have a tremendous amount of God-given talent,

facing page: *God's Work*,
2004-06, encaustic
and cornmeal on
canvas, 45 x 36"



Savannah: *Better Days*, 2006, encaustic and cornmeal on canvas, 48 x 48"

facing page: *Army Beef*, 2005, encaustic and cornmeal on canvas, 60 x 60"

a very good eye, a good head and a very coordinated body. But I have no facility and I never had any. I didn't get into art school because of that deficiency and I had to talk my way in. I remember being with people in my first year who could really draw. These kids could just knock it down. I had to struggle and struggle and it's always been a struggle. What I've managed to achieve is to make it look as though I have facility. To me, the greatest painter who ever lived is Velázquez.

BC: *You have talked about his fabulous balance, what you call "the presence of paint as structure and mimesis" in his work.*

TS: Right, but I want to go one step further. One of the things that Velázquez does that no other painter has ever done—John Singer Sargent is the only other painter to have seen it—is that the later Velázquez is the first impressionist. He has two subjects: not just what he sees, but how he sees what he sees. He does it by scanning all the time. If I observe how I see, my eye is not going around contours, it's constantly jumping. It does not focus on one thing. So what Velázquez starts to do is to paint incorrectly in order to paint how he sees. You can see it very clearly in *Las Meninas*. If you look

at the painting of the Infanta's head, you'll see that it's a fucking mess. The hair doesn't work, the neck doesn't work, nothing is aligned. The mouth and the top lip going up to the nose are absolutely in the wrong place. But it's intentionally wrong. The guy is painting wrong so that it looks right. This is the level of painting to which I really aspire. I'm starting to do it. When I was painting *Simone as Slave*, I would work a passage where the brush mark is the light bouncing off a particular form, like the lips, and the mark follows the structure. You might say it's lying on a notional structure. On the forehead, the paint is not following the structure, it's dancing. And it's not dancing according to the laws of anatomy. The work it's doing is not the same kind of work that it was doing around the lips. This is something I'm very aware of now, which I wasn't aware of before. I've become truly ambitious.

BC: *What's interesting is that the way the highlighting works on Simone's lips is so different from the slightly muted highlighting on the lips of the woman in The Dreams of Robert E. Lee.*

TS: Sure. This is all very intuitive. I can point to moments in these pictures where there is abstraction going on, but when you look at the whole, it is how things look. This is the kind of paradox that I love, this is the real alchemy.

BC: *In the gorilla painting, which is one of Robert E. Lee's dreams, the white lines look like scratches that seem to violate the surface.*

TS: I don't do anything consciously in the painting that would represent something like violation. If it appears to you as a violation, then that's how it appears, but it was not intentional on my part. That line is just drawing with the cheapest crayon that money can buy. My formal error is that I tend to use brushes until I realize I'm not painting properly. It's like a surgeon with a dull scalpel. I also use the cheapest paper money can buy.

BC: *You've said that when you look at a painting, you are always seduced first. I'm intrigued by your sense of where you locate the seduction in this body of work. I assume that a strategy of seduction is one that you wouldn't resist or deny?*

TS: The idea of any strategy in painting, or in art making, is totally outdated. It's just a poor understanding of post-structuralism to suggest that everything has an intellectual agenda.

BC: *Well, we can put aside an intellectual genesis, since seduction tends to be visceral in its effect.*



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TS: That's why I object to the term "strategy" because there are no unconscious strategies. There are desires that may be followed through in some way. Here's the thing: I'm certainly interested in seduction and betrayal, which can be a metaphor for "what you see isn't what you get." And sex is a big component in my work. It's huge; it's almost as if I libidinize everything I paint.

BC: *Certainly your material plays into that. Encaustic is an especially seductive surface, isn't it?*

TS: One of the things I did in this life is to restrict myself to paint with encaustic and that has been a self-imposed restriction. It's what I would call very catholic painting. This is sensual painting, this is painting that acknowledges the world of the flesh and the senses, things that are present in my life. So their presence in the painting is not a strategy because it's exactly how I live. I mean, if you're going to make a work of art and this is the way you see the relationship between art and life, you'd have to work awfully hard not to have it appear. If I'm out on the street or I'm in the subway and my eyes gaze over people, I can tell you that there is no period of time when my eye does not rest on something I find absolutely beautiful.

I can tell you that there is no period of time when my eye does not rest on something I find absolutely beautiful. It could be somebody's tie, a hand, a view, it could be a woman's face.

facing page: *Simone As Slave*, 2005-06, encaustic and cornmeal on canvas, 48 x 45"

It could be somebody's tie, a hand, a view, it could be a woman's face.

BC: *Then is your desire to recreate that apprehension of beauty on a surface? Is that why you go into the studio?*

TS: I don't know why I go to the studio. All I can tell you is that I see beauty everywhere.

BC: *When you do a side of beef, you know that Rembrandt and Soutine and Atilla Richard Lukacs have also rendered that subject. Does that play into your work in any way?*

TS: I don't know. I'm aware of two things: I am aware

that it is within a tradition and I'm also aware that the paintings I've painted are different.

BC: *I'm interested in the sources of your work. One of the ways you think is filmically and you also think like a novelist. You often play off major narratives—Shakespeare, the French Revolution, the Holocaust—although you construct alternatives to the readings we get from these sources.*

TS: Absolutely. I've managed to channel the filmic and the literary impulses. But could I have been a filmmaker? No question. Did I have stories to tell? Absolutely. With the Civil War, the thing that really interests me is what's going on off-screen. One of the great moments in my life as a painter was seeing David's *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. What was extraordinary was the realization that everybody in that painting was in a vital, absolutely intense moment. The reality is that half the people would be walking around between moments where nothing's going on. That interests me, but how do you get there in painting?

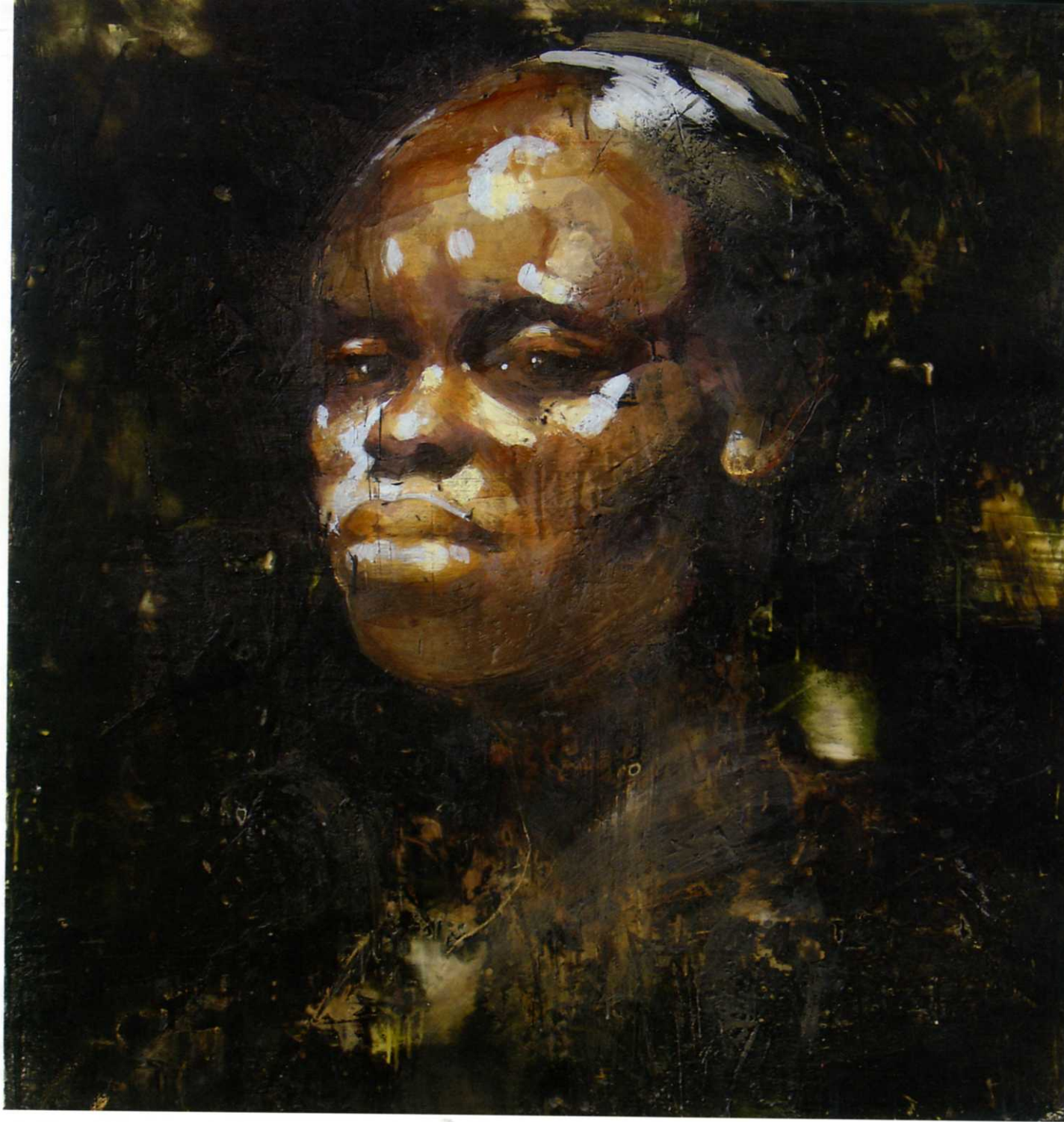
BC: *You're still dealing with the portrait as a topographic space in which the figure is the ground, aren't you?*

TS: Exactly. Going back to the filmic, the only possible way I could ever see a face as close as I do is in a film close-up. This has been of great interest for many decades. But because I have more control now, it's getting more interesting. There are two things going on: you're looking at something whose technology goes back centuries, and, at the same time, you're looking at filmic space, which reminds you of the present. So there's a conflation in the big portraits between the history of painting and the perception of cinema.

BC: *When I look at the painted areas under the nose in the Lincoln portraits, it's as if you've gone into J.M.W. Turner territory. The portrait disappears into something quite remarkable that has little to do with the literal. It's about pure painting.*

TS: When I'm painting, I don't really even think about painting. Every painting is a kind of desperate act. Somebody said, "How do you finish your painting?" and I said, "I don't, I abandon them at a point where I think I can live with them." Stanley Kubrick was asked how he set up a shot and he said, "I walk into the room, and out of all the shots I take, I settle for the one I can live with." In the end, that's it.

BC: *Is there satisfaction, then, in painting? Do you feel good about it or does something itch at you because you're not content with what you've done?*



TS: It's a question I've asked myself. What propels me to the next painting? Sometimes I pass the room in which I have the paintings that I'm going to do, all stretched and ready to go, maybe as many as 30 in different sizes lined up. Sometimes I pass that room and my heart stops. I say, how the fuck am I going to paint all these paintings? It's terrifying. Then, of course, you recalibrate and you drive on, woefully ignorant of the terror. I don't know why, but there's something in me that wants to imitate. I play the

guitar, so if I'm listening to music, or I see a rock video, or something in the studio, then that's enough. When I get home, the first thing I do is get out the guitar to try to play what I've heard. Or, if I see a cooking show on TV, I'll want to make the recipe that night. But I don't know what propels me to the next painting. I still paint paintings that are tricky. And I still paint exactly what I want to paint. Let's put it this way: I don't paint for the man, I paint for me, and that's a great privilege. ■