

ROMA

Maureen O'Leary



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ROMA: an exhibition of paintings by Maureen O’Leary presented by the gallery Cristin Tierney at the Dallas Art Fair, Dallas, Texas, April 4-7, 2024

The works in *ROMA* were completed during and after O’Leary’s recent residency at the American Academy in Rome. Taking the city and its inhabitants as her subject, the artist’s paintings are a tribute to the blend of past and present permeating Roman life. Central themes in the series include *macchine, alberi, monumenti, donne, e vita* (cars, trees, monuments, women, and life).

The *ROMA* series represents the culmination of O’Leary’s experiments with flattened and distorted perspectives, lyrical and gestural brushwork, non-local color, and complementary colors (such as green and red or orange and blue). The artist distills her compositions into major shapes and essential elements with idiosyncratic details. At times, she creates two or more vantage points forcing irregular perspective. These works fit squarely in the legacy of Fauvist and German Expressionist practices, emphasizing transient feelings or emotions over a verbatim reproduction of everyday life.

The Janiculum illustrates the view O’Leary had from the window at the American Academy in Rome. This vantage point, from one of the tallest hills in the city, allowed the artist to see the whole of Rome. The artist was fascinated by the many priests and nuns—shown in her paintings moving through their day-to-day activities of shopping, eating, walking, and socializing—and the city’s status as the seat of the Catholic Church. Nuns interest the artist the most because they do not have rights equal to priests in the Church, making their sacrifice seem greater. In *The Janiculum* she imagines that the nuns have developed secret lives, and they conspire together as they walk along the hill.

Traffic Island, Monteverde, Rome depicts a tiny traffic circle on a steep hill outside of the Aurelian Walls. It looks south from the Monteverde neighborhood towards the EUR—a district built by Benito Mussolini—the St. Peter and Paul Basilica, and the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana. Other details come to the fore the longer one looks. Shadows are exaggerated or removed, adding to the playful effect. Red, purple, blue, and orange trees dot the landscape. The windows of the surrounding homes look organic as if they had grown into the buildings. Cars are parked so tightly they clutch each other like beads on a necklace.

Tiber Sun, 2022

oil on linen, 16 x 12 inches (41 x 30 cm)



When in Rome, or a Visit to Paint the Eternal City: An Interview with Maureen O'Leary by Jane Ursula Harris

JUH: Recently, I was thinking about the *Lupa Capitolina* (Capitoline She-Wolf) sculpture, and the founding myth of Rome, which is a pretty violent tale of dynastic rivalry and would-be infanticide. When Romulus needs to fill his newly created city he invites runaway slaves, exiles, criminals, outcasts, and citizens from other tribes to live there. He even gives them land rights. There's something redeeming and appealing about this story when one thinks about generations of Romans being descendants of these early inhabitants. Of course the women who came were abducted (the infamous Rape of the Sabines). Anyway, it reminded me how much these ancient myths course through the city's veins, and I wondered how you were impacted by this as a newcomer and an artist?

MOL: What really captivated me about early Rome more than anything else was, by far, the Etruscans and their art. Particularly the small metal sculptures, some of which you could hold in your hand; especially the effigies of stomachs, breasts or uteruses. We don't, of course, know why they made these human-scale, simplified renditions of real organs, which look so lovingly hand-made. They seemed to be vessels for wishes and pain that I could not get enough of. And Rome certainly inspires reflection on the passage of time over millennia. The city is infused with a sense of mortality as if the dead are present as invisible souls all around. As my friend the poet Jennifer Maier (a fellow visiting artist in the Academy) said - just going out for a walk you feel you might run into an archetype or mythic creature. This mood permeated my thinking when composing these paintings and almost all the pieces speak in one way or another to the layering of civilizations in Rome - the ancient, the Catholic Church, and the contemporary - each on top of the other in lively disorder. That said, the mythology of early Rome and biblical stories did not find their way into my work in a direct fashion, as a motif, the way they did historically for other American painters in Rome like Bob Thompson. He literally repurposed the compositions of Renaissance works.

JUH: I can see that given most of the paintings you made reflect street scenes; what you saw in your daily travels. But speaking of Bob Thompson, there's a shared sensibility when it comes to color and figuration; this kind of anti-naturalistic approach where primary colors are used symbolically for psychological effect, and irregular perspectives that feel vertiginous and idiosyncratic prevail. Was his Rome work a touchstone for you?

MOL: Yes, I thought about his pilgrimage to Rome, which is where he died in the 1960s, and was especially drawn to this kind of compositional blocking-in that occurs in Thompson's work,

almost a form of erasure of detail by color. I just find his choices of what to leave out particularly exquisite because the more succinctly something can be painted the better. And his shapes are always doing double duty shifting between the abstract and figurative.

JUH: Yours do the same.

MOL: Yes, and while Thompson's motifs and compositions are almost wholly symbolic, mine typically focus on the here and now. Still, I'm very interested in the concept of an answer song in visual art, which I think his Renaissance-based paintings are.

But circling back to his compositions themselves, like his painting *Lovers* (1959), there he paints trees as circles, squares and triangles. That work is so playful. It almost deliberately rebels against teachers in children's art classes who pressure their pupils to start learning and practicing naturalism when the pupil might be inclined, even early on, to metaphor and abstraction. Thompson unleashes his colorist skills within his abstract-figurative idiom and, in the end, de-naturalizes classical works that represent the acme of naturalism. He just gleefully paints right over the Renaissance. It's beautiful.

JUH: You also use color symbolically, and are masterful at it. There's something expressionist/fauvist about your approach. The scenes you paint are inspired by the real and the quotidian but they're transformed through this visionary lens where color becomes almost hallucinatory in effect. So much so that the viewer can't always place themselves in space.

MOL: I'm curious which of the works strikes you as most symbolist?

JUH: Well I'm thinking of the use of color for affective rather than descriptive purposes in works like *Trastevere*, *Broken Moon*, *Tomb*, and *Tiber Sun*. There's an Ernst Kirchner vibe to them with their wiggly shapes, vivid colors, and vertiginous sense of space, Marianne von Werefkin comes to mind too, but only in terms of style, obviously these artists were making work that was much moodier and existential in intent. Your work has an exuberance and sly sense of humor that makes it more playful.

MOL: Both of those painters are outstanding and I am always learning from them. My process often has an element of reactivity that starts with that primal response to light-on-form that we all feel from the sun or even from an artificial light or the moon. Such a response often motivates me to make a painting. And as the work develops decisions get made through



the hand and the brush, and sometimes a very unnatural green or a chemical blue or a bitter red gets incorporated. As a rhythm develops, a beat, a color will come to me in the way a composer might call for drums in a piece of music or a chef for more salt. In the rhythm of creation you fall back on your intuition trained by a legion of influences and passions to arrive at what you think constitutes balance.

JUH: Well there's this great mix of the surreal and the quotidian that avoids the overtly grand or sensational in your work that is deliciously enticing. There's all these paintings of ordinary street scenes, for example, that depict wild boars, fuchsia clouds, and long spindly trees with hot-hued trunks. Even statues like Saint Cecilia feel fantastical in your hands.

MOL: Yes, you could say I'm drawn to the spectacular in the everyday. I am also interested in a point of view that embodies the democratization of beauty and pleasure, which are often rarefied as a luxury. I love artists that notice beauty in unexpected places like the directors Ermanno Olmi and Pedro Almodovar. Olmi has a keen sense of romance in the mundane and Almodovar finds glamor in quotidian design that we might have previously overlooked as scenery. He pulls out these amazing color contrasts and shows them to us afresh such that they become new art themselves. I think when the subject matter itself is a sensation, for example, the Grand Canyon, it can be hard to make it yours. The subject itself is so spectacular, it feels hubristic to compete with it. At least in the era of photography.

JUH: And yet there you are in Rome with all of this iconic classical architecture!

MOL: Exactly! And as a beloved friend and artist, the late Theresa Duncan, used to tell me, what's the point of having rules if you can't break them. So one day I decided perhaps to channel the spirit of Theresa to paint the Colosseum knowing full well that it was quite spectacular on its own.

JUH: And you did it in such a whimsically cartoonish way! It almost looks like it could be an animation cel for a vacation episode of *The Flintstones*.

MOL: (laughs) I love that!

JUH: *Forum Boarium* on the other hand, another landmark, though not as famous, is depicted more straightforwardly. One of my favorite paintings is *The Ambassador's house, Monteverde Rome*. Tell me about it!

MOL: So across from the Academy on the *Gianicolo* in Rome are a number of other academies and embassies. It's a beautiful area since historically a lot of institutions and countries established a grand spot there for ceremonial purposes. This building happened to be the main view out of my window and I was told it was the residency of the United States Ambassador to the Holy See. A small motorcade would come and go daily with weak sirens (sirens that sounded to me like a toy car compared to the blaring blasts of NYC ambulances!), which seemed charming given that the *Gianicolo* is a pretty sleepy place (what was the need for any siren?). I noticed that the day tended to conclude around two or three (laughs). I liked to stare at the building, and loved the way it was offset by the umbrella pines. It is the same building in *Janiculum Trees*.

But *Forum Boarium* that's a different story. As you can see it is a more staid composition than most of the *ROMA* body of work. And that was intentional. This painting came later. There are days when you want to touch back to your training, which for me included naturalism. I don't mean to overplay the comparisons between painting and music, but there are days when I am in the mood to work that way, to clear my head, to mentally touch base with teachers or other artists in my training, the way a musician might sit down to play scales.

JUH: I think sometimes artists these days, especially painters, often feel like they have to engage contemporary references like mass media and digital technology, but I love that your work clearly embraces the sensual pleasures of the medium through more expressionist and colorist sensibilities. And of course being in Rome, the history of the medium is centuries old.

MOL: Right, and learning to paint in the late 20th century - as I did - your historical perspective is shaped not just by naturalism but fauvism, expressionism, abstraction, etc. And because painting, and art in general, is not a *scala naturae* of advancement, one doesn't have to pass through the early stages to reach the later. You have to ask yourself where you want to jump into the stream. No one historical style amounts to the highest form of the art. There are different ways to use color.

JUH: Certainly the 1980s ushered in that sense of borrowing from anywhere and everywhere all at once, but I think all smart artists have been doing this forever. In retrospect, would you say your early education as a painter was formative to your style today?

MOL: The painting teachers that I connected with early on were engaged with Matisse and Diebenkorn, light was crucial to these painters, at least in their earlier, foundational work before each became more abstract. Vuillard too, with his making of pattern



into tone. “Pushing” color is a phrase painters often use to talk about this. You haven’t cut the ties to the real world as full abstraction does but you have broken from it, color breaking free of its “mortal envelope,” to use Elif Batuman’s lovely phrase, and to become something else that is hard to put into words.

JUH: “Mortal envelope” - I love that! Did you grow up looking at art?

MOL: I grew up in Washington, DC where many museums are funded by the federal government and charge no admission, so, yes, I saw a lot of art. And as a young adult, there was an exhibition in 1990 at the Hirshhorn of the California Bay Area figurative artists – Diebenkorn, Park, Brown, Oliveira - that show left a huge impression. I saw it many times – my copy of the catalog is stained and dog-eared!

JUH: What was its main appeal?

MOL: Overall, it was just very important to me to know that this kind of painting was being made. Not only for its formal strengths but also because there was less irony in it than was widespread in the art world - especially at that time - and that appealed a lot. The use of light and dark and the powerful force of opposites; obviously color is a phenomenon that is built around juxtaposing and tempering opposites; blues and yellows, and, for me, especially red and green. And I love clashing patterns too, like what one sees in West African textiles.

JUH: *My Macelleria* is a perfect example of that cacophonous sense of pattern, *Family at Seven Fishes, Rome*, too. And *Pinetum, The Janiculum* and *Tunnel under Rome* with their respective red-green and purple-yellow combinations. They highlight the power of complementary colors working so well together. Speaking of the latter two paintings, some of the motifs you shared that appear in this series are what you describe as “women, nuns, secretive old women and martyrs.” As a feminist and someone who was also raised Catholic, I was instantly intrigued by this and your approach to these themes, which feels somewhat furtive or indirect. *Saint Cecilia* is, of course, an exception as the title is more overt.

MOL: *Santa Cecelia* depicts the patron saint of music, thus her martyrdom speaks not only to religion but to the repression of art creation by women in general. Within the church depicted is a very beautiful but extremely morbid marble statue of her corpse by Stefano Maderno. It records, with slashes to her neck, how her execution was botched such that it took her three days to die. As if this was not enough, myth has it that she was at one time exhumed and was found not to have decomposed. This story impacted me

such that I could not pass that church without thinking of what this young woman endured. Although she is famous for her Catholicism, to me she stands out for her making of art. Thus, in the painting she became emblazoned on the outside of the church, as she has become imprinted in my mind’s eye, a spirit and a reminder of what women endure for their art and beliefs.

Other works like *The Conversation, Trastevere*, were more the product of my imagination. The composition in this painting derives from the view of a house door I passed regularly that was always open exposing what felt like ominous intrigue inside. There was always an old woman, somewhat secretive, alone with a much younger man. The room was dark with a table that was the fulcrum of household activity near a television that was always on but never being watched. What was their relationship? Son? Landlord? I imagined that the woman that lived there was being visited by someone sinister or even a spirit.

JUH: It’s almost like you’re creating your own myths out of a city built from myths, which brings us full circle since we started out talking about the Capitoline She-Wolf, and the Romulus-Remus story of the founding of Rome. There’s also so much mythos embedded in the actual landscape of the city. The Janiculum, the second-highest hill in ancient Rome, for example, was believed to be the center for the cult of the god Janus. And the city’s distinctive stone pine trees, those epic parasol-shaped trees that I’m told can grow as high as 80 feet, were long revered as symbols of immortality. Now these literal emblems of the Eternal City, there for thousands of years, are facing extinction. The knowledge of this impending loss gives these trees a celestial, almost alien, presence in your work.

MOL: I adore those trees, I feel lucky to have been able to spend time with them. It is so tragic, the degradation of nature unfolding in the Anthropocene. And it is interesting that you mention the Roman god Janus in this context, the one with two faces, the god of transitions, beginnings and endings, war and peace. It is this sense of death within life that is unmistakable when experiencing the 3,000 years of history in Rome. I think I have always been drawn to that as both myth and reality and I think that sensibility, brought out from this period making work in Rome, will stay with me for quite some time.





macchine

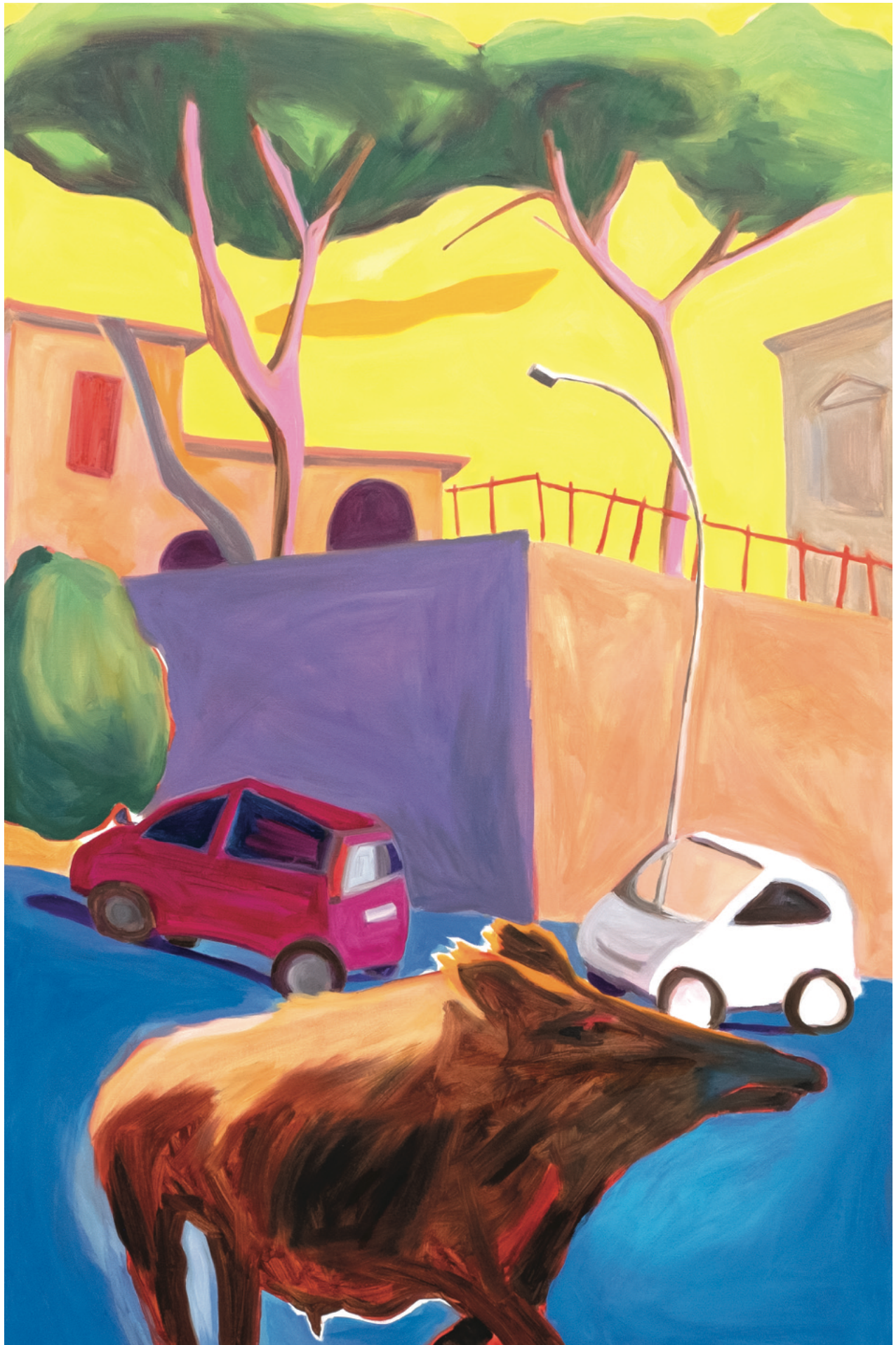
***Aurelian Wall*, 2022**

oil on linen, 46 x 46 inches (117 x 117 cm)



Cinghiale, 2022

oil on linen, 48 x 32 inches (122 x 81 cm)



Janiculum Trees, 2022

oil on linen, 48 x 32 inches (122 x 81 cm)



***Broken Moon*, 2022**

oil on linen, 16 x 12 inches (41 x 30 cm)



Monteverde Nuovo, 2022
oil on linen, 16 x 12 inches (41 x 30 cm)



Traffic Island, Monteverde, Rome, 2023
oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches (152 x 122 cm)





alberi

Tiber Bank, December, 2022

oil on linen, 16 x 12 inches (41 x 30 cm)



Rome Trees (Janiculum), 2022
12 x 16 inches, (30 x 41 cm)



Plane Trees, 2022

oil on linen, 16 x 12 inches (41 x 30 cm)



Plane Trees and Wall, Janiculum, 2022
oil on linen, 16 x 12 inches (41 x 30 cm)



Pinetum, 2022

oil on linen, 20 x 20 inches (51 x 51 cm)



Rome Hill, 2024

oil on linen, 30 x 10 inches (76 x 25 cm)





monumenti

***Spanish Steps*, 2022**

oil on linen, 20 x 20 inches (51 x 51 cm)



Tomb, 2022

oil on linen, 48 x 32 inches (122 x 81 cm)



Aqueduct, 2022

oil on linen, 20 x 20 inches (51 x 51 cm)



***Green Tiber*, 2022**

oil on linen, 16 x 12 inches (41 x 30 cm)



***Forum Boarium*, 2023**

14 x 14 inches (36 x 36 cm)



***Souls*, 2022**

oil on linen, 46 x 46 inches (117 x 117 cm), private collection



Janiculum Fountain, 2023

oil on linen, 48 x 32 inches (122 x 81 cm)









donne

The Janiculum, 2022

oil on linen, 46 x 46 inches, (117 x 117 cm)



Night Walk Amidst the Oranges, Janiculum Hill, 2022
oil on linen, 46 x 46 inches, (117 x 117 cm)



Martyr, 2022

oil on linen, 46 x 46 inches, (117 x 117 cm)



Rome, 2022

oil on linen, 48 x 32 inches (122 x 81 cm)



***Tunnel Under Rome*, 2023**

oil on linen, 60 x 48 inches (152 x 122 cm), private collection



Family at Seven Fishes, Rome, 2023-2024
oil on linen, 46 x 46 inches (117 x 117 cm)





vita

***Trastevere*, 2022**

oil on linen, 20 x 20 inches (51 x 51 cm)



***My Macelleria*, 2023**

oil on linen, 46 x 46 inches, (117 x 117 cm)



The Enoteca (Goffredo), 2022

oil on linen, 48 x 32 inches (122 x 81 cm)



The Ambassador's House, Monteverde, Rome, 2023
oil on linen, 48 x 32 inches (122 x 81 cm)



The Conversation, Trastevere, 2023
oil on linen, 46 x 46 inches, (117 x 117 cm)

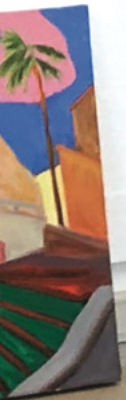


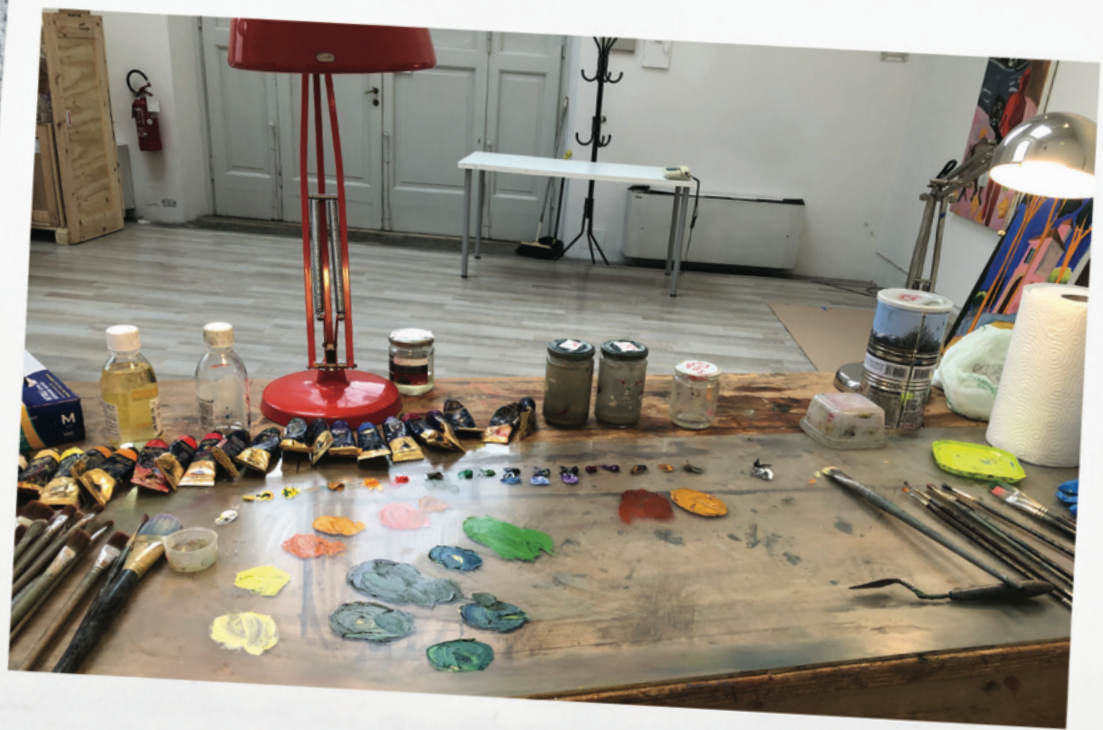
Road by the Tiber, 2023

oil on linen, 32 x 32 inches (81 x 81 cm)











Maureen O'Leary makes paintings that hover between figuration and abstraction. Her mundane scenes become substrates for experimentation with the application of paint and the evolving notion of what is real. The works in this catalog derive from her time as a Visiting Artist at the American Academy in Rome in 2022.

O'Leary's work has been exhibited at the Fondation des États-Unis, Ely Center of Contemporary Art, Art Lab Tokyo, Midwest Center for Photography, Artspace, Power Plant Gallery at Duke University, Valdosta State University Fine Arts Gallery, Staten Island Museum, Meadows Gallery - University of Texas at Tyler, and more. She is the recipient of the Brooklyn Arts Council - Brooklyn Arts Fund Grant and the Harriet Hale Woolley Fellowship from the Fondation des États-Unis. O'Leary has published three books: *By the Same Sea* (2022), *Record* (2021), and *Belle Mort* (2013, Paper Chase Press). Her work is held in the collections of the Fondation des États-Unis and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. She is represented by the gallery Cristin Tierney, New York, New York.

Jane Ursula Harris is a Brooklyn-based writer, art historian, and curator. Her essays have appeared in recent monographs on Jacoby Satterwhite, Werner Buttner, and M. Lamar. In addition to exhibition catalogs, she has written for *Artforum*, *Art in America*, *Art Journal*, *The Believer*, *BOMB*, *Bookforum*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Cultural Politics*, *Cultured Magazine*, *Flash Art*, *frieze*, *GARAGE*, *Paris Review*, *PAJ*, *TDR*, *Time Out New York*, and the *Village Voice*. She is a 2023 recipient of The Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. Harris currently teaches at the School of Visual Arts, and curates *Heretics*, an ongoing performance series at Pioneer Works.

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