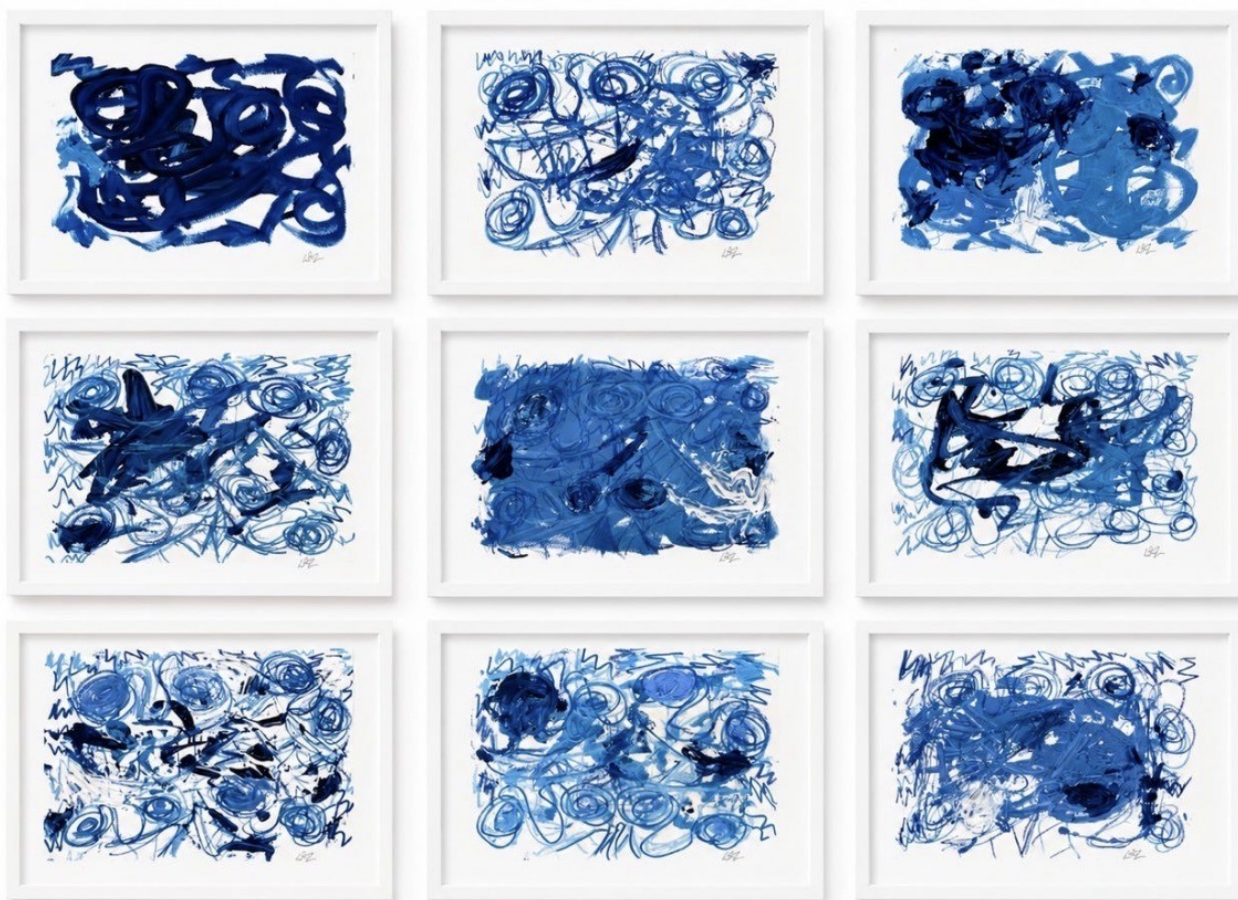


What Remains

On the Path

DOMINIC J. LOPEZ | 2026



Works on paper from the Lisbon residency.

I have been thinking about two versions of the same life. In one, you are trying to build something without knowing whether it will hold. In the other, much of what you once wanted has begun to arrive.

The work finds people. Doors open. The scenery changes. What existed for years only in your imagination slowly becomes the life around you.

Most of us spend a great deal of time trying to move from the first version to the second. We believe there is a point somewhere ahead where uncertainty will ease and something inside us will finally settle.

Recognition, love, money, access, security - we imagine these things will not only change the conditions of our lives, but change us. We will become more present, more generous, less afraid. We will finally know what to do with ourselves.

I am no longer sure life works that way.

Before leaving Los Angeles, I locked my West Hollywood studio and stood there for a moment longer than I needed to. The room had high ceilings, finished paintings, years of work, and the particular feeling of a place I had fought to make mine. I was leaving for months with no guarantee that the work waiting for me in Europe would become anything. I packed lightly, closed the door, and carried with me the same questions I had been carrying for years.

In Palermo, Barcelona, and Lisbon, the scale of my life kept changing. Some nights were spent in beautiful hotels where every detail had been considered. Other days I worked from temporary apartments with barely enough room to step back from the paper. I moved between grand lobbies and small tables, between rooms designed to make a person feel important and rooms where no one knew my name. The surroundings changed. I was still there.

There were moments when the life I had imagined seemed to arrive almost exactly as I had imagined it.

A collector wrote to tell me to ship the painting as soon as I returned. Another said it would be perfect in the room where it was going. The paintings were being spoken about and purchased while I was thousands of miles from home. I had spent years wondering whether anyone would care, and now there was evidence in front of me that people did.

I thought the evidence might quiet something in me. It did not. It gave me gratitude. It gave the work a destination. It created movement and possibility. But it did not turn me into someone else. I could sit in the lobby of a five-star hotel, read a message from a collector, order a coffee, and realize I had simply brought myself with me. The room was beautiful. My questions were the same.

That was not disappointment. It was recognition.

We spend so much of our lives believing the next condition will release us from the person we are. When there is no money, we imagine money will end the fear. When no one knows the work, we imagine recognition will create peace. When the room is small, we imagine the larger room will make us more certain. Sometimes those things do improve our lives. Comfort matters. Opportunity matters. Being able to continue matters. But none of it exempts us from ourselves.

The person who has very little can become consumed by what is missing. The person who has everything becomes consumed by protecting it. One lives in anticipation. The other can begin living in fear of loss. From the outside, these appear to be opposite conditions. Inside the human being, they can produce the same restlessness.

This is why I no longer believe scarcity is automatically noble or abundance automatically empty. I have seen people with very little become cruel under the pressure of not having enough. I have seen people surrounded by success remain generous, curious, and fully available to others. I have also seen the reverse.

Circumstances apply pressure. What they reveal is personal.

The studio has always made this difficult to avoid. A painting has no awareness of the conditions surrounding it. It does not know whether the last work sold, whether a museum has called, or whether anyone is paying attention. It is not impressed by Los Angeles, Palermo, Barcelona, or Lisbon. It does not care whether I am working beneath twenty-foot ceilings or leaning over paper on a table beside a window. The surface is simply there, waiting to see whether I can meet it honestly.

In Lisbon, some of the strongest works on paper I made during the residency came from a room that was never meant to be a studio. The materials were gathered wherever I could find them. Finished sheets dried beside one another while the rest of the apartment continued around them. There was no mythology to it. There was only the work and the need to return the next morning.

The work asked the same things of me there that it had asked in Los Angeles: attention, patience, instinct, and the willingness to stay long enough for something true to emerge. It asked when I had very little proof that any of it would lead somewhere. It asked again when the proof began to arrive. The circumstances around the work changed. The work did not.



Works on paper from the Lisbon residency.

Life seems to operate in much the same way. We treat the years of uncertainty as a waiting room and imagine our real life will begin once enough things fall into place. The apartment is temporary. The city changes. The struggle feels temporary. Even the people around us can begin to feel connected to a chapter we are impatient to outgrow.

Then time passes, and you understand those years were not rehearsal. They were your life. The unfinished paintings, the people who believed before there was anything visible to believe in, the mornings you returned to the same problem without knowing whether you would solve it - none of it was preliminary.

Meaning was not waiting at the end of the struggle. It was already there, often hidden inside the very days you were trying to escape.

Success creates its own version of postponement. You can spend so much time protecting what has arrived that you stop inhabiting it. You become careful where you were once instinctive. You become aware of the room, the audience, the price, the impression. The danger is no longer that you will quit because nobody is watching. It is that you will become too aware that they are.

I have felt that pressure. I know what it is to want the right galleries, the right collectors, the right institutions, and the capital to keep the work moving at the level I believe it deserves. Those ambitions are real. I do not pretend to be above them. I want the paintings to enter serious institutions and endure long after the current moment has passed. But ambition can become another way of leaving the life directly in front of me.

While I was moving through Europe, my parents continued getting older. Friends continued living lives I could not fully witness from a distance. Some relationships deepened. Others disappeared without a dramatic ending. There were calls I almost did not answer because I was working, traveling, or trying to solve the next problem. No sale, hotel, exhibition, or city could change the fact that time was moving through the people I loved just as surely as it was moving through me.

That may be the most difficult thing to admit about ambition. The future asks for everything, and then one day you realize the present was asking too. The things that matter most rarely announce themselves. They are built through decisions no one sees and days no one will remember. They are found in our ability to love people without turning every relationship into an exchange, to remain curious after we have learned enough to sound certain, and to keep showing up after the excitement has worn off. They live in the humility to let the world surprise us and the willingness to sit with someone we love without needing to be somewhere else.

Money cannot create those things, and losing money does not necessarily erase them. Recognition cannot preserve them. Failure cannot prevent them. They are formed in how we treat people when nothing is required of us, how we carry disappointment, how we behave when life gives us more than we expected, and whether we remain awake to the life directly in front of us.

Careers change. Money comes and goes. Bodies age in ways we never expect. Friendships deepen or disappear. Parents grow older. Entire seasons end without announcing themselves. The rooms we once hoped to enter eventually become rooms we leave, and even the versions of ourselves that once felt permanent become difficult to recognize. Life is always rearranging the scenery.

What remains is usually less visible: a way of seeing the world, a few people who know us beyond what we have accomplished, the desire to make something that did not exist yesterday, and the ability to begin again without turning the beginning into a spectacle. What remains is the private understanding of what we will and will not trade for a more impressive life.

Perhaps that is why I keep returning to the studio. Painting interrupts the illusion that meaning exists somewhere beyond the present. Every time I step in front of a blank surface, yesterday loses most of its importance and tomorrow becomes impossible to control. There is only the work in front of me and whether I am willing to give it my full attention.

The studio has followed me through cities and through different versions of myself. Sometimes it has been a large room with enough space to step far away from the painting. Other times it has

been a table in a temporary apartment, with works on paper drying beside a window. The scale changes. The light changes. The world outside changes. The need to make something does not.

That need has taught me more about being human than it has about being an artist. We are always beginning again, whether we acknowledge it or not. We wake inside lives that are already changing, surrounded by people and circumstances we cannot keep forever. We make plans. We become attached.

We lose things. We continue trying to understand what any of it means.

Somewhere between having nothing and having everything, most of our lives unfold. Not in the dramatic moments we imagine will define us, but in ordinary days that pass without ceremony: the mornings when we return to our work, the meals shared with people we love, the calls we almost do not answer, the hours spent trying to understand something that may never fully explain itself.

I still want the rooms. I still want the paintings to travel farther than I have. I still believe in building something durable enough to outlive the conditions that produced it. But I no longer expect arrival to save me from uncertainty. I no longer believe another city, another sale, or another level of recognition will relieve me of the responsibility to be present for my own life.

The scenery will keep changing. The questions may not.

What remains is the same person standing in front of the work, the same person answering the phone, the same person trying to love well, remain open, and recognize what is meaningful before life rearranges itself again.

LISBON, PORTUGAL · 2026