

*Studio Systems Series*

# **Dominic J. Lopez**

Studio Systems - Painting as Long-Form Inquiry

Artist as Institution

Los Angeles - 2026

## **Executive Abstract**

Dominic J. Lopez Studio Systems outlines a painting practice structured as a long-term studio inquiry. The manuscript articulates how gesture, field, tension, and surface memory operate within the work while establishing the studio itself as the sustaining institution of the practice. Across evolving bodies of work - *Mythic Language* and *Threshold Fields* - the paintings investigate how meaning emerges through the physical process of painting and through attention over time.

## **Studio Thesis**

Painting is often discussed through exhibitions, movements, or markets. Yet the deeper continuity of painting resides in the studio itself. Dominic J. Lopez Studio Systems proposes the studio as a long-form institution: a structure capable of sustaining inquiry across decades through gesture, surface, tension, and attention. The pages that follow describe the internal architecture of that studio - its systems, methods, and bodies of work - so the reader may understand the conditions from which the paintings emerge.

*A painting begins with attention.*



# **Part I - Opening / Orientation**

## **Preface**

This manuscript gathers reflections that emerged alongside the paintings produced in the studio over many years.

Painting remains the center of the practice. Every work begins with the same simple condition: a surface waiting for attention. The painter enters the studio, studies the canvas, and gradually begins to understand what the painting requires.

The act itself is direct. A gesture enters the surface. The field responds. The work moves forward through a sequence of decisions carried across time.

Around this process another structure gradually formed.

Fragments of writing began to appear in notebooks during pauses in the work: short sentences describing tension within a painting, notes on the behavior of color across the surface, observations about the rhythm of returning to the studio day after day.

These fragments were never intended to explain the paintings. They record moments when the act of looking becomes clear enough to articulate.

Over time the notes accumulated. Patterns began to appear within them just as patterns appear across a body of paintings. Certain ideas returned repeatedly: attention, tension, suspension, and the memory held within the surface.

Gradually the studio revealed itself as more than a room where objects are produced.

It became a field of inquiry.

Painting, language, and observation circulate together within that field. Each informs the others without replacing the central act of working on the canvas.

The following pages articulate that structure.

They describe the studio as a physical environment and as a system of attention developing over many years of work.

The paintings remain the primary expression of the practice.

The writing exists beside them, tracing the architecture of the studio from which they emerge.

## **The Studio**

The studio begins as a room.

Light enters slowly through the windows during the morning and moves across the walls throughout the day. Canvases lean against one another in different stages of development. Some surfaces hold the density of many weeks of work. Others remain open, still searching for their structure.

The painter enters and begins with the same action each day: looking.

At first the paintings appear unchanged from the day before. Gradually the eye adjusts to the surface. Relationships within the painting begin to reveal themselves again.

A color that once felt balanced now appears slightly heavy. A line feels too sharp against the surrounding field. A quiet passage of paint suggests the possibility of another gesture.

The painter waits until the surface clarifies its direction.

Then a gesture enters.

Immediately the entire field shifts. The painting becomes unsettled again. Tension returns to the work, opening new possibilities for the next movement.

The painter steps back.

Distance becomes as important as action. From across the room the surface can be seen again as a whole rather than as a collection of marks.

This rhythm continues throughout the day:

looking

responding

stepping back

returning again.

Over time the studio becomes a place where attention accumulates.

Earlier paintings remain present within new works even after they leave the room. Gestures echo across surfaces produced months or years apart. Questions that first appeared in one painting gradually evolve across many others.

Through this slow repetition the practice develops its language.

The studio protects this process.

Outside the studio the paintings circulate through exhibitions and collections. Inside the studio the work continues in its original rhythm, moving forward through the discipline of attention.

## **Studio Orientation**

A painting practice unfolds across several horizons at once.

There is the immediate horizon of the canvas itself - the next gesture, the next decision within the surface.

Beyond that lies the horizon of the body of work. Individual paintings begin to connect with one another across time, forming recognizable structures within the practice.

Beyond that again lies the horizon of the studio as an institution: a sustained field of inquiry that develops over decades.

This manuscript exists to orient the reader within those horizons.

The text does not attempt to interpret the paintings from outside. Instead it describes the internal architecture of the studio: the conditions under which the work emerges and the principles that sustain its development.

Painting remains the center.

Everything else - writing, documentation, reflection - exists to support the clarity of that act.

When the painter enters the studio each morning the system begins again.

The canvas waits.

Attention gathers.

A gesture appears.

The work continues.

## **Part II - Core Thesis**

A studio practice develops slowly.

At the beginning each painting appears as an isolated event: a gesture placed on a surface in search of structure. Over time something else begins to emerge. Movements return across multiple paintings. Relationships between color and field repeat themselves in altered forms. Gradually the work begins to recognize itself.

This recognition marks the beginning of a larger structure.

The studio is no longer simply the place where paintings are produced. It becomes the environment through which the practice sustains its inquiry. Each canvas enters into conversation with those that came before it. Earlier decisions remain active within the painter's memory and within the surfaces of new works.

In this way the studio begins to function as an institution in the deeper sense of the word.

Not an institution defined by administration or scale, but by continuity. A structure capable of sustaining investigation across decades. The work does not depend on the urgency of a single exhibition or moment of attention. Instead it unfolds through a sustained return to the surface.

Painting provides the center of that structure. Every canvas begins again with the same conditions: a surface, a gesture, and a field of tension. Through repetition these conditions accumulate meaning. The painter begins to recognize when the work is moving within its own language rather than searching for direction outside itself.

Over time that language deepens.

A gesture placed on a canvas today may echo a decision made years earlier. A color relationship discovered in one painting may quietly reshape the structure of an entire body of work. What once appeared as isolated experiments reveals itself as part of a continuous field of inquiry.

The studio holds that continuity.

Paintings leave the room and begin their lives in the world - entering exhibitions, collections, and conversations about painting. Yet the structure that produced them remains steady. The painter returns to the studio, and the investigation continues.

## **Studio Systems**

If the studio functions as an institution, it does so through systems.

These systems are rarely designed in advance. They emerge gradually from the daily rhythm of working. Painting remains the central activity, but alongside it other forms of attention begin to accumulate.

Observation forms one system. The painter studies architecture, landscape, and the behavior of light within space. These experiences enter the paintings indirectly, shaping the sense of structure, atmosphere, and spatial tension within the surface.

Writing forms another system.

Fragments appear during pauses in the work. A short sentence describing the tension within a surface. A note about the weight of a color against the surrounding field. These lines do not attempt to interpret the paintings. They record the painter's attention at a specific moment within the process.

Documentation forms another layer.

Photographs of earlier works reveal patterns across time. A gesture that once appeared singular begins to repeat across different canvases. Gradually a vocabulary becomes visible within the work.

Painting, observation, writing, and documentation begin to circulate together.

The studio becomes a system of attention.

Each element strengthens the others without replacing the central act of painting. The painter continues to work directly on the surface, yet the surrounding systems clarify the direction of the practice and preserve its memory across time.

Through these systems the studio becomes capable of sustaining inquiry across decades rather than reacting to the short rhythms of the art world.

The systems protect the work.

## **Positioning the Practice**

A painting practice does not position itself through declaration alone. It becomes legible through time.

At first the work exists almost entirely within the studio. Paintings accumulate quietly while the language of the practice develops. Only gradually do the works begin to circulate outward-through exhibitions, collections, and conversations about painting.

Each encounter reveals a different aspect of the work.

A curator may recognize the structural relationship between several bodies of work. A collector may respond to the atmosphere of a single surface. A writer may notice the continuity of gestures across multiple paintings.

Through these encounters the practice becomes visible within a larger field.

Positioning therefore does not mean forcing the work into a narrative. It means allowing the structure of the practice to become clear through repetition and continuity. The studio remains focused on the development of the paintings while the outside world gradually recognizes the coherence of the work.

This process cannot be rushed.

Practices that attempt to appear everywhere at once often lose the depth that comes from sustained attention. A painting practice must first become clear to itself before it can become legible to others.

The studio provides the conditions for that clarity.

Day after day the painter returns to the surface. The work deepens through repetition, patience, and discipline. Over time the practice begins to carry its own gravity.

Recognition follows continuity.

## **Part III - Mechanics of Painting**

### **Suspension - Form, Field, and the Maintenance of Tension**

Every painting depends on tension.

Without tension the surface resolves too quickly. The painting closes before it has fully discovered its structure. What first appears balanced may simply be static.

In the studio the work develops through the careful maintenance of tension between two conditions: form and field.

Form introduces pressure. A gesture enters the canvas and establishes direction. Lines gather energy. Color compresses space and concentrates weight within the surface. These movements give the painting its structure.

Field performs the opposite function. It allows the painting to breathe. Areas of openness absorb the pressure created by form, preventing the surface from collapsing into a single fixed arrangement.

The work lives between these two forces.

When the tension is sustained the painting remains active. The viewer senses that the surface could continue unfolding even after the painter has stepped away. Energy remains inside the work rather than being released all at once.

Maintaining this condition requires restraint. The painter must recognize when another gesture would resolve the tension too quickly. Often the most decisive act in a painting is the decision not to add another mark.

Suspension emerges from this restraint.

A suspended painting holds its structure without closing it. The surface remains open enough for the eye to move through it while still coherent enough to remain unified.

This balance cannot be forced. It appears gradually through attention, revision, and patience.

### **The Surface**

The surface of a painting carries memory.

Every gesture placed upon it leaves a trace, even when later layers of paint obscure it. Earlier movements remain active within the structure of the work, quietly shaping how the painting continues to develop.

For this reason the surface should never be treated as neutral ground.

It is an environment where decisions accumulate. A line placed early in the process may determine the direction of the painting weeks later. A color relationship discovered at the beginning may quietly establish the atmosphere of the finished work.

The painter learns to read these traces.

Looking becomes a form of listening. Areas of paint begin to suggest their own direction. Some passages require reinforcement. Others ask to be reduced or removed entirely.

Through this process the surface becomes a record of attention.

What the viewer ultimately encounters is not a single gesture but the accumulation of decisions made across time. The painting carries the history of its own formation.

That history remains present even when it is partially concealed.

The surface remembers.

## **Control and Discovery**

Painting moves continuously between control and discovery.

Control provides structure. It allows the painter to guide the work toward coherence and prevents the surface from becoming arbitrary.

Discovery introduces the opposite movement. Unexpected relationships appear between colors. A gesture produces consequences that were not anticipated. The painting begins to reveal possibilities that were not visible at the beginning of the process.

The practice depends on both conditions.

If control dominates completely, the work becomes predictable. The painting simply repeats what the painter already knows how to do.

If discovery dominates, the surface may lose its internal necessity.

The painter therefore learns to move between these two forms of attention. Some passages require deliberate structure. Others require openness to the unforeseen.

The most compelling paintings often emerge when discovery occurs within the framework established by control.

In that moment the painting begins to instruct the painter how it wants to develop.

## **Studio Methodology**

The methodology of the studio is simple but demanding.

A painting develops through cycles of action and distance. Rarely does a work resolve in a single session. Instead the surface evolves through repeated encounters across time.

A gesture enters the painting.

The painter steps away.

Later the surface is seen again under different conditions of light and attention. What once appeared resolved may now require adjustment. Another gesture enters. The process repeats.

Through these cycles the painting gradually clarifies its structure.

Some works advance quickly. Others resist completion for weeks or months. The painter learns to recognize when patience is required and when the work is ready to move forward.

The methodology therefore rests on discipline rather than speed.

Within the studio this discipline becomes possible. The painter can return to the same surface again and again, allowing the work to deepen through sustained attention.

Over time this repetition produces a body of work whose coherence could not have been designed in advance.

It emerges from the process itself.

## **Part IV - Bodies of Work**

### ***Mythic Language***

This body of work emerges from a gradual recognition within the studio: gesture can function as a symbolic fragment without becoming illustration.

In these paintings lines, marks, and figures appear that suggest narrative structures yet resist fixed representation. A gesture may resemble a figure, a letter, or a symbol, but it does not settle into any single identity. Instead it remains suspended between image and abstraction.

The surface accumulates these fragments.

Some gestures are reinforced over time while others are partially buried beneath subsequent passages of paint. Through layering the canvas begins to resemble a field of signs whose meaning remains intentionally open.

This openness is essential to the work.

The paintings do not attempt to depict mythology. Rather they operate within a mythic register - an atmosphere in which gestures carry the weight of symbolic language without closing interpretation.

The viewer encounters traces that feel familiar yet cannot be fully named.

Through this condition the paintings invite sustained looking. Each return to the surface reveals relationships that were not immediately visible. A line that once appeared isolated begins to echo another mark across the canvas. A color passage that seemed atmospheric begins to organize the structure of the painting.

Meaning therefore accumulates through resonance rather than explanation.

This body of work becomes a territory within the studio practice where gesture approaches symbol while remaining anchored in the physical act of painting.

### ***Threshold Fields***

This body of work approaches the surface from a different direction.

Where *Mythic Language* concentrates gesture, *Threshold Fields* opens the painting into spatial atmosphere. Color establishes an environment across the canvas, creating

fields that seem to extend beyond the edges of the work.

Within these fields structure appears only briefly.

Lines emerge, dissolve, and reappear elsewhere. Areas of color compress and expand. The viewer experiences the painting less as a collection of marks and more as a shifting spatial condition.

The work exists at the threshold between structure and dissolution.

A painting may begin with a defined compositional framework, yet as layers accumulate that structure gradually loosens. Edges soften. Color spreads. The field absorbs what once appeared as fixed form.

This condition produces a particular tension.

Form feels possible at every moment, yet the painting resists fully resolving into it. The surface remains suspended between organization and atmosphere.

Through this suspension the painting becomes an environment rather than an image.

This body of work expands the spatial dimension of the practice. The viewer moves through the painting with the eye rather than reading it from a single point of orientation.

## **Trajectory**

*Mythic Language* and *Threshold Fields* represent two territories within the same investigation.

One concentrates gesture into fragments that approach symbolic form. The other dissolves gesture into spatial atmosphere. Both emerge from the same studio conditions and share the same commitments: surface, tension, and sustained attention.

Over time the relationship between these bodies of work becomes visible.

Gestures that first appear within *Mythic Language* occasionally migrate into *Threshold Fields* before dissolving into color. Conversely, spatial structures explored within *Threshold Fields* may later reappear inside the denser surfaces of *Mythic Language*.

This movement produces the trajectory of the practice.

Rather than developing in a straight line, the work expands through cycles of return and transformation. Ideas explored in one body of work re-emerge elsewhere under different conditions.

Through this process the studio builds a field of paintings that remain connected even as they evolve in different directions.

Trajectory therefore does not describe stylistic change.

It describes the gradual unfolding of a single investigation across many surfaces and across time.

Each new painting enters that field, extending the inquiry while remaining in dialogue with the work that came before it.

## **Part V - Painting and Language**

### **Painting and Text**

Painting and language developed alongside one another in the studio, though neither was intended to explain the other.

The paintings emerge through gesture, revision, and the slow accumulation of decisions on the surface. Language appears differently. It arrives during pauses in the work - moments when the painter steps back from the canvas and recognizes something that has been quietly unfolding within the process.

These recognitions often appear as fragments.

A sentence about the tension between form and field. A note describing how a single color alters the atmosphere of the entire surface. An observation about the rhythm of returning to the studio day after day.

The fragments do not function as commentary on the paintings.

Instead they register moments of clarity within the act of looking. Writing becomes another form of attention, one that runs parallel to the physical act of painting without attempting to translate it.

Over time these fragments accumulate in the same way gestures accumulate within the surface.

Patterns begin to appear. Certain ideas return repeatedly - attention, tension, suspension, surface, gesture, field. Together they form a vocabulary that belongs to the studio.

The writing therefore becomes part of the studio system.

It does not replace the paintings, nor does it attempt to interpret them. It simply traces the structure of attention from which the paintings emerge.

### **Studio Fragments**

Fragments appear naturally within a sustained painting practice.

They are rarely written with the intention of forming a finished text. Instead they arrive as brief recognitions - lines recorded quickly before attention returns to the surface of

the canvas.

Many of these fragments describe simple conditions within the work:

The surface holds memory.

Gesture introduces pressure.

Field allows the painting to breathe.

Others register shifts in perception:

A painting resolves not when it is finished, but when it can no longer move. The eye discovers relationships the hand did not intend. Attention changes the structure of the surface.

Taken individually these sentences remain incomplete. Their purpose is not to construct a formal argument.

Yet over time they accumulate into a form of studio language.

When gathered together they begin to outline the conceptual architecture of the practice. The fragments reveal how the painter thinks while working, even when that thinking occurs largely through the body and the eye rather than through formal writing.

In this way the fragments become a parallel record of the studio.

They capture moments when the practice briefly becomes visible to itself.

## **Studio Lexicon**

Every studio gradually develops its own vocabulary.

Certain words return repeatedly because they describe conditions that appear again and again within the work. These words do not function as theoretical terminology. They emerge directly from the experience of painting.

Attention - the sustained act of looking through which the structure of a painting becomes visible.

Surface - the field where gestures accumulate and where the memory of the painting remains present.

Gesture - the movement through which form enters the surface.

Field - the atmospheric condition that allows the painting to breathe.

Tension - the dynamic relationship between elements that prevents the surface from resolving too quickly.

Suspension - the state in which a painting holds its structure while remaining open.

These words form a lexicon that belongs specifically to the studio.

They are simple terms, yet within the practice they carry precise meaning. Each refers to a condition the painter encounters repeatedly while working.

Through this lexicon the language of the studio remains grounded in the act of painting itself.

The words do not interpret the paintings from outside.

They arise from the surface.

## **Part VI - Time and Horizon**

### **Three Horizons of Practice**

A painting practice unfolds across several horizons at once.

The first horizon is immediate. It exists at the level of the canvas: the next gesture, the next decision within the surface. Here the painter works directly with color, line, pressure, and spatial tension. The painting advances through a sequence of adjustments that gradually clarify its internal structure.

The second horizon is the body of work.

Individual paintings begin to recognize one another across time. Gestures echo across different canvases. Color relationships reappear in altered forms. What first seemed like isolated works slowly assemble into a coherent field of investigation.

The third horizon is the studio itself.

Over years the studio becomes more than a place where paintings are produced. It becomes a structure capable of sustaining inquiry. The painter returns to the same questions repeatedly - gesture, field, tension, atmosphere-allowing them to deepen through sustained attention.

These three horizons operate simultaneously.

Every gesture placed upon the surface participates in all three conditions. It advances the individual painting, contributes to the development of the body of work, and extends the longer arc of the studio practice.

### **The Long Horizon of the Studio**

Painting unfolds across time.

The most meaningful developments within a practice rarely appear immediately. They emerge through repetition, revision, and the gradual accumulation of surfaces across years.

The long horizon of the studio allows this process to take place.

A painting made today may reveal its full significance only later, when another work echoes its gesture or transforms its structure. Ideas move through the practice quietly,

reappearing under different conditions of color, scale, and atmosphere.

Because of this movement the painter learns to think beyond the individual canvas.

Each work participates in a longer trajectory. Even when a painting feels complete, it remains part of an investigation that continues elsewhere within the studio.

The long horizon protects the work from the pressure of immediacy.

Instead of responding to the short cycles of attention that often shape the art world, the studio remains oriented toward the slower rhythm through which painting develops depth and coherence.

## **The Work Going Forward**

The future of the work cannot be fully predicted.

Each new painting begins again with the same conditions: a surface, a gesture, and a field of tension. Yet through the accumulated experience of the studio the painter approaches these conditions with increasing clarity.

Certain questions remain central to the practice.

How does gesture establish structure within the field?

How does color transform the spatial atmosphere of the surface?

How does tension remain active without resolving too quickly?

These questions are not problems to be solved once and then abandoned. They form the core of the investigation.

The work moves forward by returning to them under changing conditions.

In this sense the studio does not simply produce paintings.

It sustains an inquiry.

Each new canvas extends that inquiry while remaining connected to the surfaces that came before it.

## **Part VII - Studio Constitution**

### **Studio Constitution**

Every sustained studio practice eventually clarifies the principles that allow it to endure.

These principles rarely appear all at once. They emerge slowly through years of working, looking, revising, and returning to the surface. What begins as instinct gradually becomes structure. What begins as a question gradually becomes method.

The studio constitution does not function as a fixed set of rules imposed upon the work. It articulates the conditions that allow the work to remain alive over time.

First: the studio exists to protect attention.

Painting begins with looking. Before a gesture enters the surface there is a period of sustained observation. The painter studies the canvas until the structure of the painting begins to reveal itself.

Second: the surface carries memory.

Every gesture remains active within the work even when later layers of paint obscure it. The painting becomes a record of decisions made across time.

Third: tension sustains the work.

A painting remains alive when the relationship between gesture, color, field, and space continues to hold pressure. When that tension disappears the painting resolves too quickly.

Fourth: patience governs the process.

The studio moves according to the rhythm of the work rather than the speed of external attention. Some paintings advance quickly while others require weeks or months of revision.

Fifth: the practice unfolds across time.

Individual paintings matter, but the deeper structure of the work emerges through the accumulation of surfaces across years. The studio therefore protects the long horizon of the practice.

These principles do not close the work.

They keep it open.

## **Painting Begins With Attention**

Painting begins with attention.

The painter enters the studio and stands before the surface. Nothing is forced at the beginning. The canvas is observed quietly until its internal structure begins to appear.

Often this moment arrives slowly. A color relationship that seemed balanced yesterday now feels slightly unstable. A gesture that once felt decisive now requires adjustment. The painter waits until the surface clarifies its direction.

Only then does the next gesture enter.

Attention therefore becomes the primary discipline of the practice. Technique, material, and method all depend upon the painter's ability to see the painting clearly as it develops.

Through sustained attention the work reveals possibilities that were not visible at the beginning of the process.

Painting does not begin with action.

It begins with looking.

## **The Surface Remembers**

The surface remembers.

Every painting contains a history of decisions made during its formation. Layers accumulate over time. Some gestures remain visible while others are partially buried beneath later passages of paint.

Even when concealed these earlier movements continue to shape the work.

For this reason the surface cannot be treated as neutral ground. It is a living structure. Each gesture alters the conditions under which the next gesture will appear.

The viewer ultimately encounters the accumulated result of these decisions.

What appears as a finished painting is in fact the visible record of a process unfolding across many moments of attention.

The surface therefore holds the memory of the work.

It remembers the gestures that allowed the painting to arrive where it is.

## **Plates**

Selected paintings from the studio investigation described in this manuscript.

### **List of Plates**

1. *Chalk Against Night*, 2025
2. *Renunciation with Dignity*, 2026
3. *Jackson Hole*, 2025
4. *Presence*, 2025
5. *Ichiban*, 2020
6. *A Songbird's Repertoire*, 2025
7. *Angel*, 2022
8. *Sweet Nectar*, 2022
9. *Soul*, 2019
10. *Legend*, 2020

## *Threshold Fields*



*Chalk Against Night*

2025

Acrylic and oil stick on canvas



*Renunciation with Dignity*

2026

Acrylic, oil stick on canvas

48 x 72 in (122 x 183 cm)

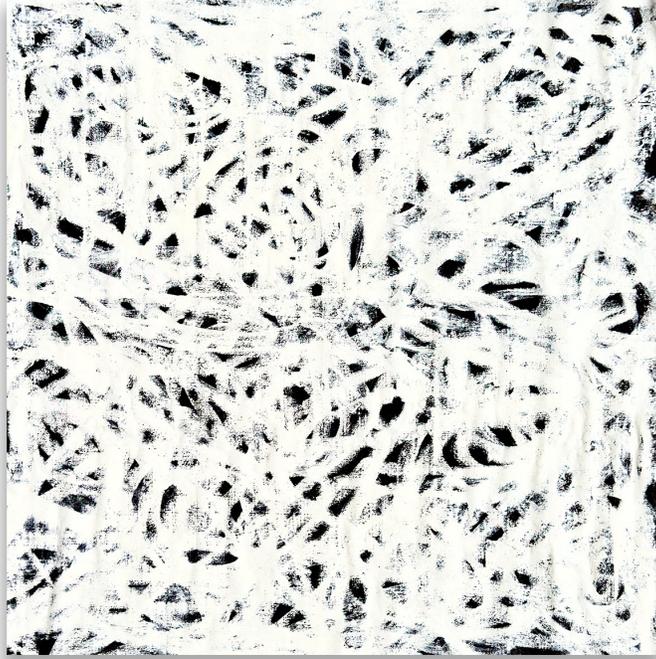


*Jackson Hole*

2025

Acrylic, oil stick on canvas

36 x 48 in (91 x 123 cm)



*Presence*

2025

Acrylic, oil stick on canvas

62 x 54 in (157 x 137 cm)



*Ichiban*

2020

Acrylic on canvas

61 x 73 in (155 x 185 cm)



*A Songbird's Repertoire*

2025

Acrylic, oil on canvas

30 x 24 in (76 x 61 cm)

*Mythic Language*



*Angel*

2022

Acrylic, oil stick, spray paint on canvas

60 x 84 in (152 x 213 cm)



*Sweet Nectar*

2022

Acrylic, oil stick on canvas

30 x 40 in (76 x 102 cm)



*Soul*  
2019

Acrylic, spray paint on canvas  
84 x 60 in (213 x 152 cm)



*Legend*

2020

Acrylic, spray paint on canvas

60 x 84 in (152 x 213 cm)