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Cornelius Tittle, "Emma Webster: Believable Depth," *BLAU*, June 1, 2023.

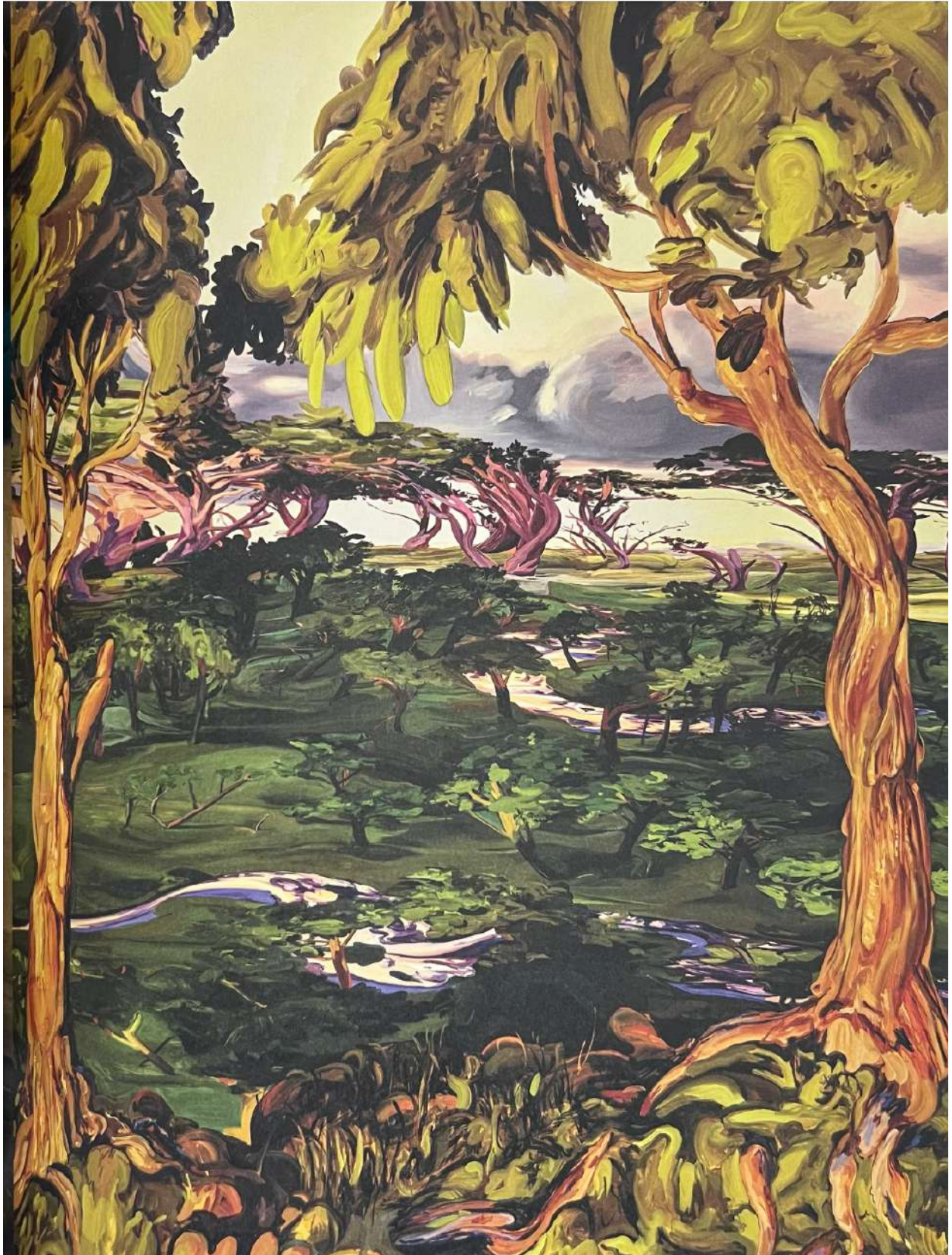


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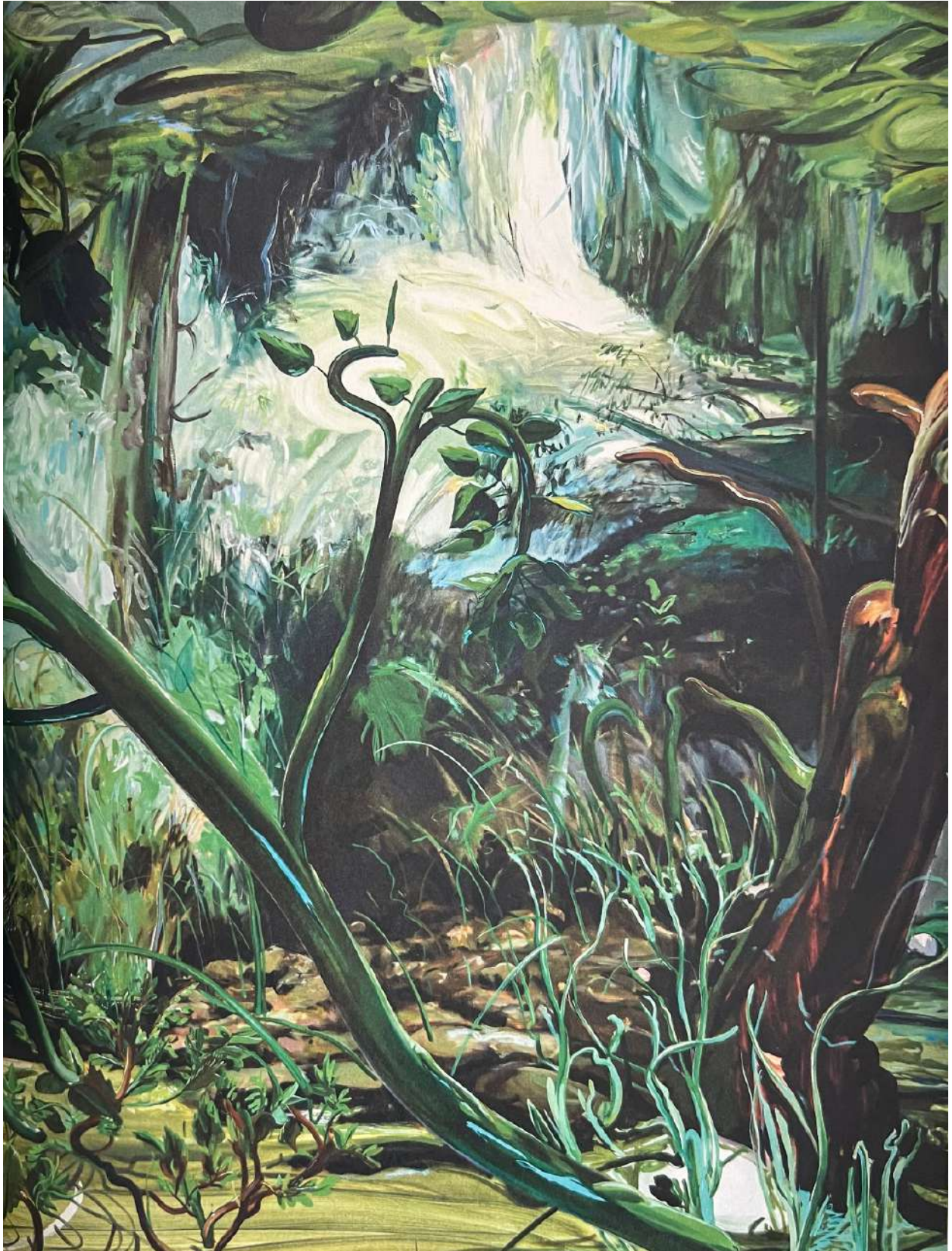
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REVUE

Sculpting trees in VR sounds like peculiar prep work for a painter. Unless, that is, you’re re-inventing the most academic of genres. **EMMA WEBSTER** talks landscape with *Cornelius Tittel*

Right:
GREAT TURF (CASPAR), 2023
Oil on linen, 213 × 152 cm

WISP, 2022
Oil on linen, 213 × 152 cm



Only a few minutes ago, we had been talking about the mind-bending perspective in Mantegna’s most famous painting (“It’s really as if we’re looking down on this divine figure”), the frame within a frame in John Currin’s recent work (“insane”), and the overall genius of Caspar David Friedrich (“He has this sandwich light, it’s just phenomenal”). Now, I was looking through Oculus VR glasses, while Emma Webster was trying to explain the more techy aspects of her painting practice.

Without question, Caspar David Friedrich, the foremost Romantic landscape painter of the 19th century, would have been overtly envious, watching Webster in her south Los Angeles studio isolate, then replicate, a tree, and within moments turning it into a forest—all the while swiping and swooshing in the air like a pantomime.

But no matter how tech-averse Friedrich might have been, of the recently finished canvas leaning against the wall—a lush green composition with a strangely bent tree in the foreground—he would surely have approved. Not least because Webster is clearly giving the genre a much-needed booster shot.

“Let’s face it: landscape painting is considered the most boring thing in the world,” Webster said, omitting the fact that her personal brand has recently enjoyed support by major galleries and trending collectors. But still, it rang strangely true: “The thing about painting trees is no one is invested. It doesn’t have agency. In a weird way, I almost wish that people cared more about landscape and came at me like, ‘How dare you depict it in these certain ways!’”

CORNELIUS TITTEL: Emma, one of my more cynical art world friends, upon hearing that I would meet you, said, “Oh, the tree girl that everybody is dying to show.”

—EMMA WEBSTER: Oh, well, I think this “tree girl” thing is a misconception. My project isn’t about loyalty to the subject. It’s much more about still life, sculpture, space, how things bend, how light moves. And I think if you’re going to talk about space, you have to talk about how it’s been depicted—which is as landscape. I mean, I do care deeply about the environment. But what interests me is much more about sculpture, and how sculpture relates to how we twist and bend the natural world, how we sculpt landscape.

*Opening spread left: EMMA WEBSTER in her LA studio. Right: GOLDEN HOUR, 2020, oil on linen, 244 × 183 cm
Previous spread: NATURAL HISTORY, 2020, oil on linen, 170 × 280 cm*

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A VIPER IN MY HOUSE, 2023
Oil on linen, 152 × 213 cm

You call your process "sculpting." That sounds confusing, coming from a painter.

—Yeah, I don't know what that type of sculpture is. In the same way that we have plein-air painting, or painting from a photograph, you have painting from still life. We have all these ways of categorizing the source. Being within an artwork, that source—I don't know what that is.

You, using virtual reality, are within the artwork.

—Yes, it's literally building a house while inside of a house. It's a completely different philosophical proposition. You are a part of the thing that you are designing.

For anyone unfamiliar with the realities of VR, how do you start?

—It's not that different from Photoshop. You use the exact same tools. The only thing that's different is the relationship to the object: no longer is it something removed from you,

apart from you. It's suddenly something that encapsulates you.

To back up, I do a drawing that's either on an iPad, or maybe it's just on a piece of paper, or maybe it's a photograph, and I bring the sketch into virtual reality. You export the object...

And put your glasses on to start the actual process...

—Right.

But the drawing is still more like a sketch?

—I am roughly laying out concerns—formal concerns, like, "I want a tree here and something here." Then you can have different layers. I can take out things, I can isolate things, I can replicate things.

You can tweak certain aspects. Add or subtract volume, cut out things. That's why you call it sculpting.

—Totally, and while you are at it, you get to be in this whole world. It's like you're in your own

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Emma Webster

little cage, with the difference being that it has no size. It's only when you export it that you determine how many centimeters you want something to be.

Do you paint what you've sculpted in the same software?

—Yes. For lighting, I bring these objects into a program and do different sorts of tests. You can have multiple times of day in one painting. You don't have to listen to the logic of plein-air. You can have sunset over there, and sunrise over here. All of these things that you couldn't have in the natural world, you can put in computer models.

You just said that being a part of the thing that you are designing is a whole different philosophical proposition. Did you have any major epiphanies on your way to making this proposition your practice?

—It started with realizing that I had been deceived. In graduate school, I started studying Claude Lorrain, and I realized I had never—it's such an obvious thing—but I had never realized that all the landscapes in his paintings didn't exist. For some reason, I just thought that the 1600s looked like that, these pastoral, beautiful landscapes and these giant trees.

But the more I read about Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, the more I realized they went out and took little bits of trees and put them together, and they recreated a landscape to look how they wanted it to look. Because the point was not the trees. The point was what the humans were doing and the allegories, the little tales.

That realization—that almost every depiction that I could think of as landscape was actually a set or some sort of a study that had been pieced together—it changed a lot for me. Because then I had no guilt in recreating landscapes. I almost felt like it was more honest to show people the level of artifice.

That was at Yale. Did you already connect the dots back then? Did you start to bring in the technology to let your ideas take shape?

—I didn't really take up a lot of the technology stuff while I was in graduate school, because you had to produce so many ideas and so many paintings—I felt like I didn't have time to learn a whole new skillsct. It wasn't until I left that I started doing my own research and reading, and began thinking, "Well, why not try and make the models out of something other than clay or wood?"

"The realization that almost every depiction of a landscape was a set that had been pieced together—it changed a lot for me"

At that time, you were painting but also making sculptures in a more classical sense.

—I was making little ceramics. I thought of them maybe as props, maybe not yet as sophisticated as sculpture, but as a tool to an image. Then, once I graduated and had a show, I went to a residency in Colorado where I was in a winter wonderland surrounded by beautiful trees. That was the first time I started thinking, "Well, what are my expectations around nature?" That kind of made me realize that I glorify the European landscape, that whether or not I know it, I want everything to look sort of like the Black Forest—all of that lush green, which does not look anything like the California landscape.

When we look at your paintings now...

—... you are looking at mashups. There's something just innately pastiche about painting a green space that you can never get to. They're strange, because they're not entirely European, but they're also not entirely, say, Japanese. They're landscape without place. There's space and not place.

Sometimes you are not even sure if it's a rock or a tree that you're looking at.

—I know, it's very confusing. I'm thinking about Georgia O'Keeffe. She had the same problem, where the volume is realistic but we don't understand the object we're looking at. For me, it's almost that you have this tree, this cathedral, this crystal thing that resembles something in the natural world, but then we're like: "That's not a tree. I don't really know." It's complicated because if you don't give viewers enough to hold on to, they will be like: "Where am I? What's going on?" And I still want to talk realistically about landscape. It's about walking that fine line of how much fantasy is acceptable.

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How did you finally get into the tech aspect of your work?

—My friend gave me an Oculus and said: "Just mess around with it. Just try it out." Then I downloaded an app on my phone, Polycam, which you should get as well. You take a lot of pictures of an object, and it'll give you a 3D file. Starting to work with these things felt like the wild, wild West.

In which sense?

—There's a double metaphor of this new frontier that's changing and adapting. The people who are building all these programs are not artists, and so there are things that I can do with this technology that maybe haven't come to light yet. I've figured out ways of using reflected light that maybe aren't as interesting to gamers.

Are you following that world?

—In gaming, we're reaching this threshold where we're almost able to have a mimetic reality. Some games are getting so realistic that they can begin to fool us. That is a very curious thing, because what happens when we can replicate reality perfectly? Then there's this question of, "Well, what next?" I don't think we need another reality. I think we need something different than reality.

Like your paintings?

—At least I can say that I don't want to compete with reality. These places I create should be better or worse or different. I don't know if mine are utopic landscapes or dysfunctional landscapes, but they're sort of places that are not for us, and not about us.

That's why there are no people in them?

—Exactly.

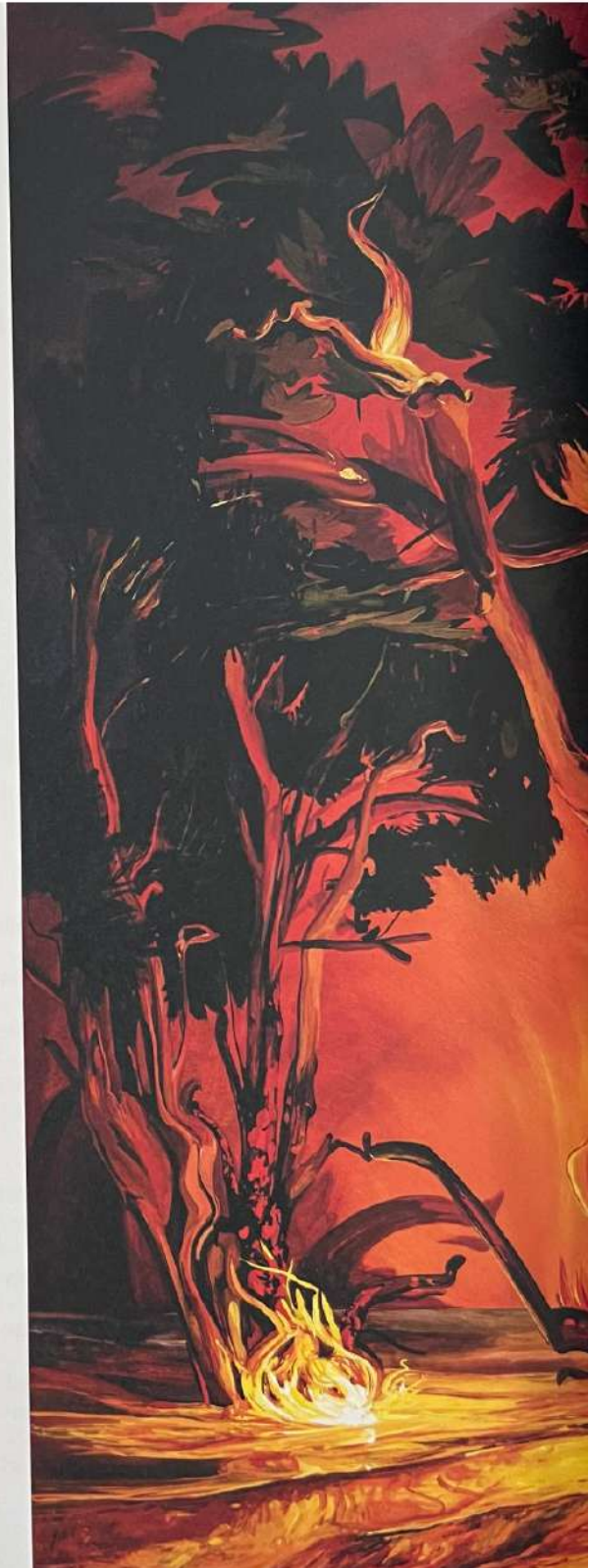
How long did it take you to master the technique of painting in VR?

—It seems advanced, but I learned it from YouTube in about six months, not even working that hard. Anyone who sees these files will realize that I don't actually know that much. It just looks very impressive.

The mastery in your paintings, so to say, does it still lie in your skill as a painter, and less in your tech abilities?

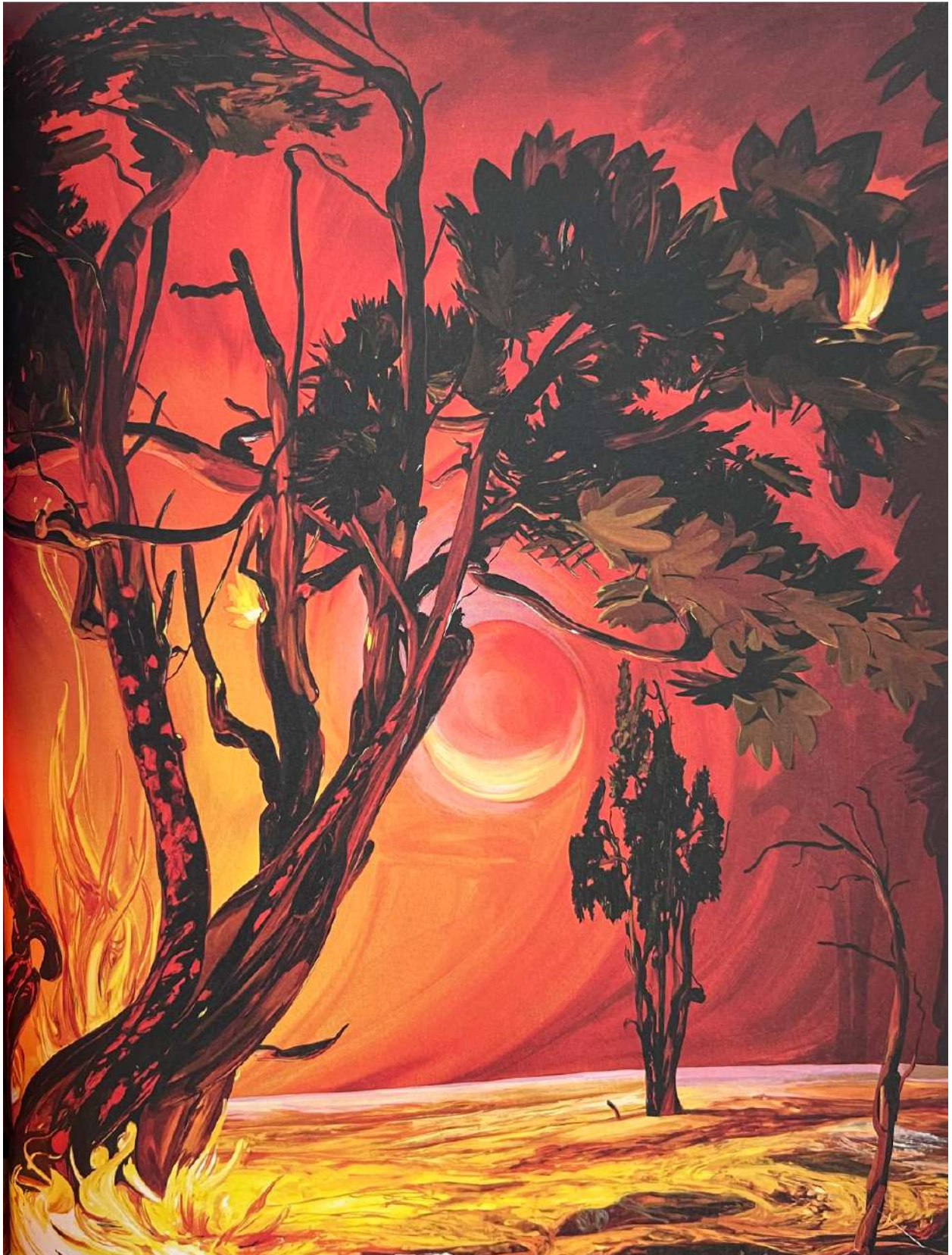
—Knowing that I didn't have to be an expert in technology, but that I could rely on my chops as a painter, gave me a lot of confidence—I could

BURNING TREE, 2020, oil on linen, 193 x 244 cm



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relax into it. If I were trying to learn how to do both at once, it would be impossible. VR is helping me to get the composition, but there is still a lot to making a good painting.

Once you are done in VR—to round out the explanation of your process—you project the image onto the canvas?

—I use the projector to make a drawing on the canvas. But the thing is, a projector is terrible with color. You'll get more confused if you try and use technology to make the painting after tracing. So once the outline is up, there's no projector—I don't ever want to be a photorealistic painter. That's not interesting to me, because painting is also about magic and trickery and illusion, in the same way that the computer is about trickery.

Not only the computer, but Hollywood, too, is about magic and trickery. I don't mean this offensively, but if a Disney dwarf were to stroll through one of your landscapes whistling a song, the viewer would not be surprised.

—Well, at Disney they're definitely using VR to sculpt things. Animators are using the very same programs that I am using. For a while, I resisted

comparisons to *Fantasia* or other fantastical cartoons, but now I understand they're coming from the same places. Those Disney artists are all studying landscape painting.

They are?

—They absolutely are. If you go to the Disney studios, you see Claude Lorrain on their boards on how to create interesting light conditions.

Fascinating!

—So, when my work resembles Disney, I kind of feel like we're talking to the same source. We're not necessarily speaking to each other, but it doesn't matter. If you're at Disney or if you're a painter, you're trying to create a believable depth.

A very Hollywood thing to say.

—I mean, Hollywood and its history of set design and fabrication—I didn't mean to make work that seems Hollywood, but it does have a relationship to it for sure. It's a great place to be making big artificial paintings like this.

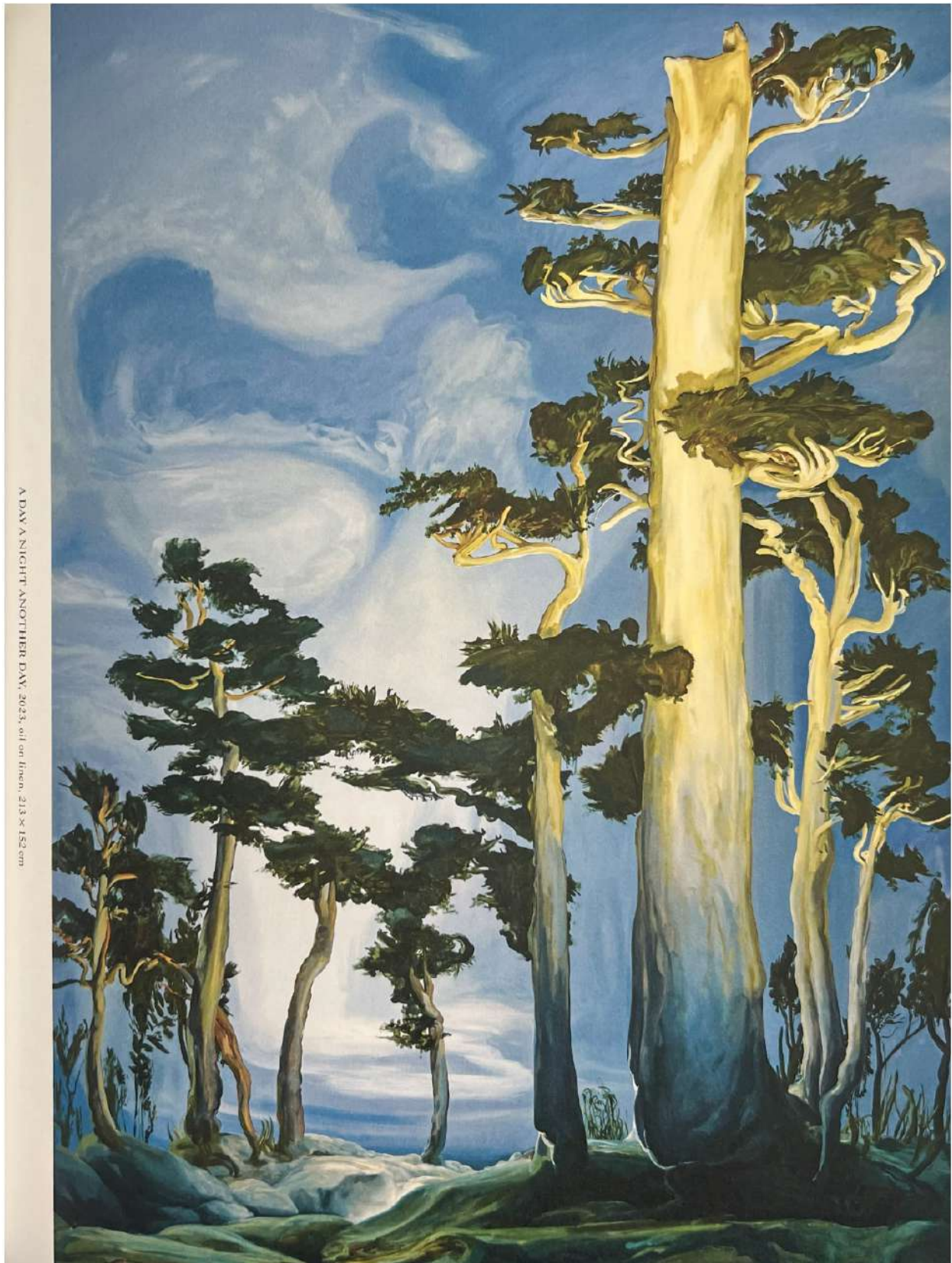
Emma Webster's solo show at Jeffrey Deitch, LA, opens this fall.

TWICE BURIED, 2023
Oil on linen, 76 × 102 cm



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A DAY A NIGHT ANOTHER DAY, 2023, oil on linen, 213 x 152 cm