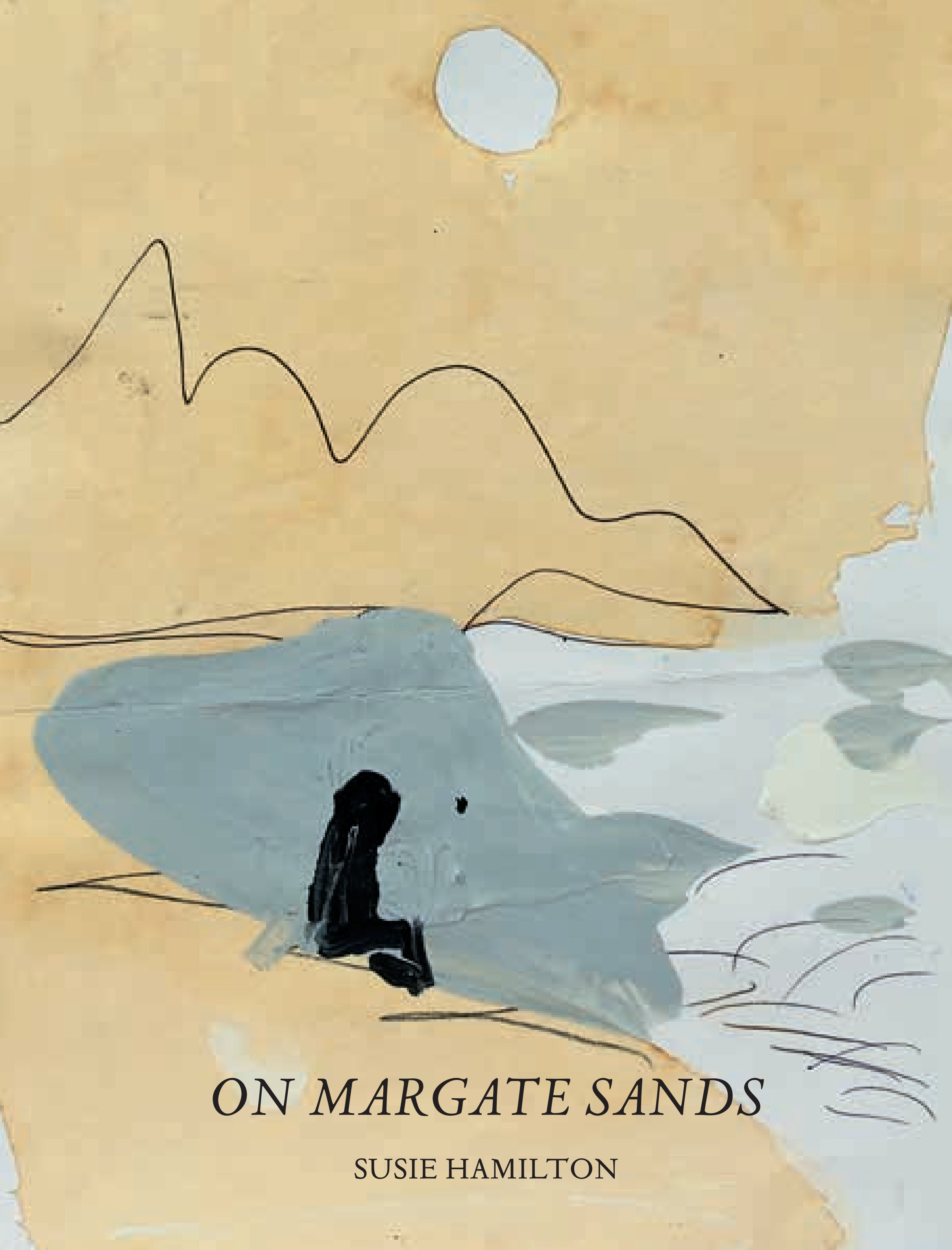

ON MARGATE SANDS

SUSIE HAMILTON

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ON MARGATE SANDS

Paintings & Drawings based on
T.S.Eliot's *The Waste Land*

with an Essay by
CHARLOTTE MULLINS

THE WIND IN THE TREES

ames, run softly, till I end my song.
r bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers
lkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette end
testimony of summer nights. The nymph
arted.
r friends, the loitering heirs irect
l, have left no addresses.
aters of Leman I sat down and wept . . .
hames, run softly till I end my song,
hames, run softly, for I speak not loud or
y back in a cold blast I hear
e of the bones, and chuckle spread from ea

ept softly through the vegetation
its slimy belly on the bank
was fishing in the dull canal
nter evening round behind the gashouse
upon the king my brother's wreck
he king my father's death before him

For
PETER HAMILTON

TENTACULAR ROOTS

SUSIE HAMILTON, APRIL 2018

The Nayland Rock Hotel in Margate is near the bus shelter where Eliot wrote a draft of 'The Fire Sermon', Part III of *The Waste Land*, in October 1921. The hotel was chosen by artist-curators, Chiara Williams and Shaun Stamp for *At the Violet Hour*, an exhibition in 2018 based on Eliot's poem. I was one of twenty-three artists in the show and each of us was given a room in which to install work.

The Waste Land has long been my favourite poem. I have often wanted to paint from it but have always been daunted. Yet when I started to think about this project I realised how much in my paintings had already been inspired by it: solitary figures and figures in wilderness, figures who are neither male nor female, figures with shadows, melancholy figures in spring, polar explorers and figures blanketed in snow, wanderers in mountains, figures on a beach,

Noon Beach, 2014, watercolour and pastel on paper, 20 × 15 cm

paintings of Ferdinand in *The Tempest* [RIGHT], a preference for the colours lilac and violet and an attachment to painterly mess.

Mess was a key to my exhibition and suited the space chosen for it. This large Victorian hotel, built in 1885, was once the pinnacle of elegance. According to its manager, Carol Abou El-Khir, it is likely that Eliot went there for drinks when he was staying in Cliftonville and going every day to the seafront. But it is now only partly used for guests since its upper floors are in considerable disrepair. The top floor, where I was showing, had become a roost for pigeons who were squeezing in through broken windows. My room had a desolate and beautiful sea view, reminiscent of the line from *Tristan und Isolde* in 'The Burial of the Dead', but there were heaps of pigeon droppings on the window sill and in its ensuite bathroom many more droppings gave off a sour, toxic, nauseating smell.

Cleaning up this filth was something of an ordeal, but as I sprayed and scraped and wiped and hoovered I thought how appropriate the neglected ambience was to much of Eliot's work. The hotel made me think of the dilapidated house in 'East Coker' in *Four Quartets* where the wind has broken 'the loosened pane' and where the field-mouse now 'trots'. Then its grime and smell seemed apposite to Eliot's earlier poems and their focus on squalor and chaos. The poet, whose manners and appearance were famously impeccable, was all too aware of the opposite: in *Hysteria* where taking tea in a café is the backdrop to a grotesquely inflated body's uncontrolled laughter, in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* or *Portrait of a Lady* where drawing-room conversation is accompanied by an undertow of monstrous or difficult thoughts, in *Sweeney Erect*'s wildly incongruous images and ugly contortions and in *The Waste Land* with its unruly structure and sordid episodes.

The Waste Land's structural disorder was something that was commented on by Conrad Aiken, contemporary and friend of Eliot's, just after it was published. He wrote in a review in 1923 that 'the poem succeeds — as it brilliantly does — by virtue of its incoherence, not of its plan; by virtue of its ambiguities, not of its explanations.' *The Waste Land* veers from one place to another, from one time to another, from one tone of voice or speaker to

His Arms in This Sad Knot, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 30 × 25 cm

Room 416, Nayland Rock Hotel, 2018

another to the extent that it is sometimes difficult to know who is speaking. It is an 'extremely messy poem' according to Lawrence Rainey (speaking on 'In Our Time' on Radio 4) with its interruptions, quotations and deliberate fragmentations which can be compared to the later device of montage in film or to the discontinuous routines of music hall, a form which Eliot admired.

Then, as its title suggests, much of *The Waste Land*'s subject matter is unforgettably squalid: the scene in the typist's bedsit with the pimply seducer, 'rats' alley', unwashed ears and hands, the brothel madam, dissolute Mr Eugenides, Lil's rotten teeth and botched abortion, the corpse in the garden and other references to human remains, the sweating river and its litter, the sexual detritus of summer encounters and, although deleted from the final poem, the shocking scene with noisome Fresca in the facsimile edition. Like Swift, praised by Eliot as a great writer of disgust, or like Baudelaire, whose *Les Fleurs du mal* influenced *The Waste Land*, Eliot, at this stage of his poetic career, dwells on dirt.

So, although my show contained pictures of figures in blossoming parks, in 'the hyacinth garden', in deserts and in remote mountains, urban mess was very much a part of it in its preparatory drawing and its hang. I sought out derelict areas of London in which to draw and took my sketchbooks to gasometers, canals and parts of the East End that have not been smartened up. I noticed rats in Mile End park, rubbish in the Thames and had another look at my 'Plumper' paintings of sleazy nudes in order to depict the typist or Mrs Porter with her daughter. I then made new works in the studio using sheets of blotting paper, paper glued to paper, paper with footprints on it and torn sheets of old cardboard. For my installation in the hotel I followed the suggestions of Paul Stolper, my gallerist, and painted quotations on the discoloured Artex surface, interspersing them with a mass of contrasting paintings and drawings which I pinned and taped all over the walls. Many were hung as low as possible in keeping with the lines:

> *'White bodies naked on the low damp ground*
> *And bones cast in a little low dry garret*
> *Rattled by the rat's foot only, year to year.'*

Bedsit, 2018, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 77 × 56 cm

'Low', like 'dirty', is a conspicuous word in the poem and it prompted me to paint not just unwholesome images but subterranean scenes of rats in tunnels, roots in the ground and people going down escalators in drawings divided into above and below. However, *The Waste Land*'s lowness is not just naturalistic. My escalators, bearing dark shapes of Eliotic commuters, are descending (as in 'Burnt Norton' in *Four Quartets*) into a netherworld. *The Waste Land* takes us lower than urban realism into a different dimension. It goes down into the underworld of myth and literature in Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Dante and Milton, and the Cumean Sibyl, doorkeeper of this lower world in Roman literature, is fittingly placed at the entrance of the poem in its epigraph from Petronius. Like Odysseus, *The Waste Land* descends into Hades with the words of Tiresias who, as in *The Odyssey*, has 'walked among the lowest of the dead.' The sighing crowd going over London Bridge in 'The Burial of the Dead' is a reference to Cantos III and IV of the *Inferno* when Dante, led by Virgil, passes through the gates of hell and finds souls in limbo. And the ironically named 'sylvan scene' in 'A Game of Chess' is a quotation from Milton's *Paradise Lost* when Satan, fresh from hell, enters the Garden of Eden. Here, in the lady's sepulchral boudoir, it also depicts an act of demonic cruelty: the rape and mutilation of Philomela by Tereus as told in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

'A Game of Chess' is like a scene from a macabre Jacobean drama with its allusions to the plays of Middleton and Webster, its reference to sexual violence and its sinister, candlelit chiaroscuro. The ominous atmosphere of *The Waste Land* is partly due to much of it being in semi-darkness, lit by crimson torchlight, lurid violet or the flickering flames of the candelabra creating shifting, curdling sensations. This candlelit section was one I painted again and again, relating it to my 'Dining Room' paintings of hellish social occasions. Eliot is a wonderful poet of social awkwardness, of acute conversational unease, in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *The Cocktail Party* and in this section of *The Waste Land* with the nervous, choppy exchanges between two voices. I therefore decided to paint this scene as a murky dinner party and paint it not just on paper or on board but on the locked door

Escalator, 2018, acrylic and pastel on paper, 42 × 30 cm

of the ensuite bathroom [LEFT], remembering the lines from 'What The Thunder Said' about psychological imprisonment:

> *'I have heard the key*
> *Turn in the door once and turn once only*
> *We think of the key, each in his prison*
> *Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison*
> *Only at nightfall ...'*

I was imagining diners, like Edward in *The Cocktail Party* or the 'I' in *Portrait of a Lady* or the couple in 'A Game of Chess', as locked inside themselves and trapped with each other in a Stygian dungeon.

The underworld, a powerful presence in *The Waste Land*, is therefore obviously a place of torment. And yet it is ambivalent as a site both of suffering and of initiation, in Eliot as in Dante or Virgil. The underworld, as for Dante guided by Virgil, or Aeneas guided by the Sibyl, or Arnaut Daniel at the end of *The Waste Land*, or Eliot descending into darkness in 'Burnt Norton', is where people can be strengthened, purified or enlightened. They can also be artistically inspired. Eliot's essays in *The Sacred Wood*, published two years before *The Waste Land*, suggest that these chthonic regions are where the writer needs to go and where the reader responds to him/her most intensely as, quoting Psalm 42, 'deep calls unto deep'. In his essay 'Ben Jonson', Eliot is critical of Jonson's work because it is too much of the conscious mind, too much on the surface. In Jonson's writing 'unconscious does not respond to unconscious; no swarms of inarticulate feelings are aroused' and Eliot contrasts the limitations of this bright, metropolitan polish with the works of Shakespeare, Donne, Webster and other Jacobean writers whose words have 'a network of tentacular roots reaching down to the deepest terrors and desires.'

Eliot's metaphor anticipates the tubers and roots at the beginning of *The Waste Land*, buried things that the speaker is frightened to stir up but that the poem, like April, does. Despite all its references to sterility and weariness, the poem triggers excitement and energy, going down into a generative abyss and

Dinner Party, 2018, acrylic on door, 110 × 76 cm

communicating a sense of the boundless with its epic grandeur, its allusiveness (Aiken's 'ambiguities' rather than 'explanations') and its negation: its reluctance to define or to name. To define is to restrict and Eliot follows the *via negativa* of the undefined, the inarticulate and the unnameable to create a feeling of mystery, fear and what Wordsworth in *The Prelude* called 'whatso'er is dim/Or vast in its own being'. Hence the sinister, unseen card in the Tarot reading, the nameless shapes on the walls in 'A Game of Chess' and the series of unanswered questions in 'What the Thunder Said':

'and this card,
Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,
Which I am forbidden to see.'

'And other withered stumps of time
Were told upon the walls; staring forms
Leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.'

'What is that sound high in the air
Murmur of maternal lamentation
Who are those hooded hordes swarming
Over endless plains …'

And apart from these specific examples of obscurity, the poem as a whole, as with the sense of increasing tension at the approach of thunder at the end, produces a feeling of pent-up force, of something not declared, what Lyndall Gordon in *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* calls 'an unspoken confession beating with violence against sealed lips.'

This use of the unrevealed and the unsaid is one of the things I love most about Eliot's poetry, not just in *The Waste Land* but in *Prufrock*, where Prufrock cannot begin to express himself, or in 'East Coker' where negation is religious and apophatic. And it is another aspect of his work that has, I think, inspired my paintings. It has, for example, influenced the way in which I depict

Nothing, 2018, acrylic on paper, 42 × 30 cm

figures that are in some way hidden. They are reduced to silhouettes, are painted without faces, are concealed by darkness or disappear into dazzling light. Then it has also influenced the way in which I like to abstract or disrupt images, turning them into blots, marks and shapes. This is partly to keep the image in an unfinished state, to suggest possibility and potential that completeness would shut down. It is also to pull the recognisable towards uncertainty and to exchange the known for the unknown. For me representational images morphing into abstraction contrast two ways of seeing: seeing things as named objects or as nameless shapes. Such transformations therefore threaten the everyday world of labels and nouns with the unnamed and unnameable. In Eliot's terms they get beneath the upper world of familiarity to a shadowy one of the inarticulate and tentacular.

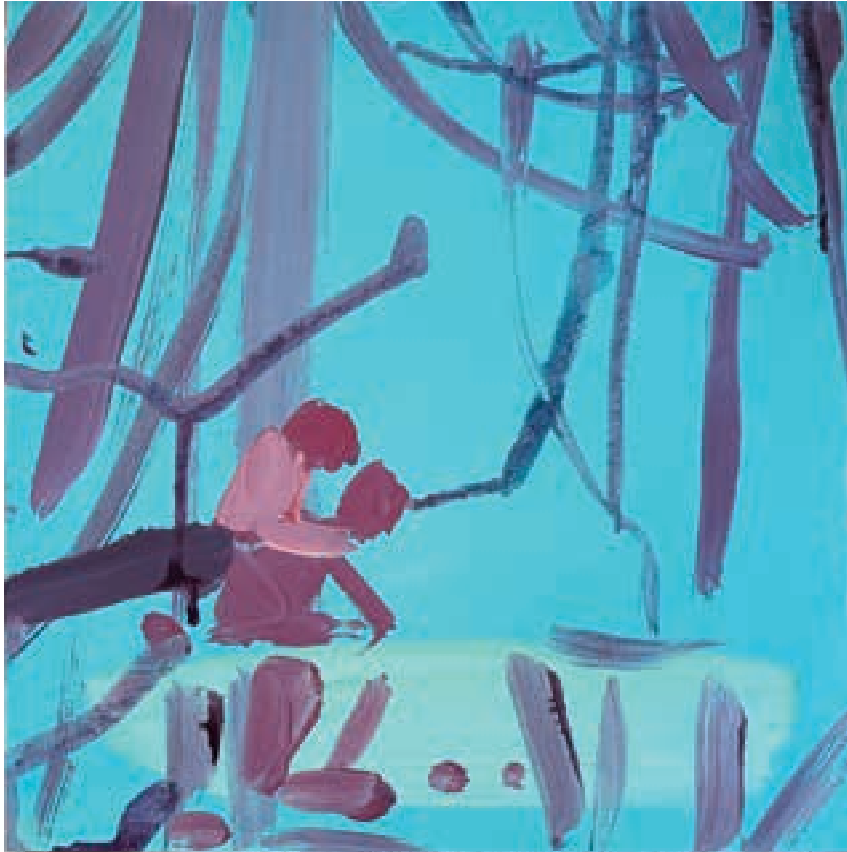
And because my abstraction involves spots, blurs, scars and smears, it seems to me that it relates even more closely to Eliot's credo of reaching that lower world and to the poems that, for me, express that belief most intensely. As I touched on before, his alarming earlier poems, *Sweeney Erect*, *Sweeney Among the Nightingales*, *Whispers of Immortality*, as well as parts of *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*, leave the upper world of rarefied conversation or comprehensible narrative to plunge down into an insane amalgam of scrambled horror, swerving away from comprehension in half-formed, mangled images of violent and anguished disorder, the kind of writing that led poet and critic Randall Jarrell to call Eliot one of the most 'daemonic poets who ever lived'. And such works of chaotic abjection have influenced my understanding of my own painting and my use of what I call mess. I do not just mean the choice of downmarket subjects (dirty canals, junk in the Thames, defunct gasometers) or my use of old bits of paper to paint them on. I mean the messy metamorphosis of images that tears up cohesion, pollutes decorum, lays waste finish in order to open things out into terror and complexity. For me only mess can do justice to this crucial aspect of Eliot's poetry and its indelible stain.

LEFT: *Garden*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 77 × 56 cm

FOLLOWING PAGES: *Skye*, 2017, acrylic on paper, 12 × 17 cm

Brothel, 2018, acrylic and pastel on paper, 54 × 59 cm

Bedsit 2 (detail), 2018, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 59 × 42 cm



PRECEDING PAGES: *Two Plumpers*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 30 × 42 cm

ABOVE: *Tereus and Philomela*, 2018, acrylic on board, 40 × 40 cm

RIGHT: *Tereus and Philomela 2*, 2018, acrylic and oil on paper, 42 × 30 cm

ABOVE: *Rat*, 2017, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 20 × 15 cm

LEFT: *Underground*, 2018, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 29 × 21 cm

PRECEDING PAGES

LEFT: *Canal* (detail), 2017, acrylic and pencil on paper, 29 × 21 cm

RIGHT: *Gasometer*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 77 × 56 cm

RIGHT: *Diners*, 2017, acrylic on paper, 59 × 41 cm

Candelabrum, 2017, acrylic on board, 40 × 40 cm

Candelabrum 2, 2017, acrylic on board, 40 × 35 cm

PRECEDING PAGES: *Red Dining Room* (detail), 2008, acrylic on canvas, 182 × 182 cm

LEFT: *Hades*, 2018, acrylic and pastel on paper, 42 × 30 cm

Margate, 2017, acrylic on paper, 59 × 42 cm

Margate 2, 2017, acrylic and pencil on paper, 21 × 15 cm

Bab Doukkala, 2013, watercolour on paper, 15 × 21 cm

Souk el Kebir, 2013, watercolour on paper, 15 × 21 cm

Shadow in Fez 2 (detail), 2018, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 65 × 50 cm

ABOVE: *Sgurr nan Gillean* (detail), 2017, watercolour on paper, 11 × 15 cm

LEFT: *Shadows in the Desert*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 50 × 33 cm

ABOVE: *Bruach na Frìthe* (detail), 2017, watercolour and pencil on paper, 11 × 15 cm

LEFT: *Skye 2*, 2017, acrylic on paper, 59 × 42 cm

ABOVE: *Bat* (detail), 2018, acrylic on paper, 59 × 42 cm

RIGHT: *Moorgate*, 2012, acrylic on board, 31 × 31 cm

PRECEDING PAGES

LEFT: *King William Street 2* (detail), 2017, pen on paper, 29 × 21 cm

RIGHT: *City of London*, 2017, photograph

LEFT: *King William Street*, 2017, acrylic on paper, 42 × 30 cm

THE DEPTHS OF FEELING

CHARLOTTE MULLINS, JUNE 2018

'Why, for all of us, out of all we have heard, seen, felt, in a lifetime, do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others? … Such memories may have symbolic value, but of what we cannot tell, for they come to represent the depths of feeling into which we cannot peer.'
T.S. ELIOT[1]

In February 2018 Susie Hamilton's lifelong fascination with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* culminated in a body of work inspired by the poem. Her work was displayed in a near-derelict hotel above the sweeping sands of Margate Bay as part of an ambitious group exhibition called *At the Violet Hour*. Hamilton's drawings and paintings — eighty-six of them — were densely hung over the four walls and doors of a festering bedroom, room 416. Hastily applied whitewash covered the stained wallpaper and the smell of bleach only partially masked the acrid tang of guano and soiled sheets left by previous occupants. Black rats crawled across drawings and solitary figures crouched and stooped, silhouetted against city skylines or shrunk to nothingness by the sublimity of mountains and seas. Charcoal and chalk conjured seedy encounters and filthy underworlds; canals, beaches, forests and dining rooms were splashed over

1 T.S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) in Craig Raine, 'Memory in Literature', in *Memory: An Anthology*, ed. By Harriet Harvey Wood and A.S. Byatt (London: Chatto & Windus, 2008) pp.28–39 (28)

April, 2018, acrylic on paper, 59 × 42 cm

Philomela, 2018, acrylic and pastel on paper, 54 × 60 cm

paper and cardboard, fragments of a mysterious whole like individual clues in an unsolved murder case. The result was a potent assault on your senses for these works seemed to bypass regular language and communicated on a sensorial level. You felt the weak heat of April sun on gibbous backs and smelt the beeswax dripping down silvered candelabra. You experienced each work rather than simply looked at it: felt a twinge in your spine as figures bent double on the beach; caught the smell of ennui emanating from commuters crossing windswept bridges; sensed the rough touch of skin on frantic skin; gasped for air as the noose tightened around your neck.

Hamilton's personal response to *The Waste Land*, presented now in book form, evokes the poem's fractured narratives, transient moods and mercurial characters. The poem is a fugue, an accumulation of rich visual vignettes countered by near-abstract passages, a poem to be experienced rather than simply read.[2] As if formed in a dream (or nightmare) from half-remembered memories it shimmers like a mirage, refusing to coalesce into anything concrete. It prefers to remain in suggestive liminality, gliding from London's brown fogs and nocturnal habits to the ancient cities of Thebes and Carthage and down into Hades. Even the language Eliot employed is slippery and fluid. It changes nationality, with lines in German, Italian, French and Sanskrit, and even changes tongues, 'Jug Jug' and 'Co co rico' becoming the plaintive cries of birds.[3] As Gabrielle McIntire, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to The Waste Land*, notes: 'This is a poem that invites itself into the very fabric of our being. It addresses so much of what is difficult and important about human experience, while presenting what is tragic in a light that dignifies it and gestures towards redemption.'[4]

[1]

MEMORY AND EXPERIENCE

Hamilton's figures endure rather than enjoy life; they survive against the odds. She describes them as being in flux, mutating, as being 'in the process of becoming unnameable, mysterious phenomena.'[5] They are often solitary and appear isolated even in urban landscapes. Hamilton works from her memories and from bodies seen in passing that she sketches quickly and assertively, single lines capturing the heft of a shopper's calves or the waft of a tunic in a

2 *The Waste Land* is foremost a poem to be heard: Jeremy Irons and Eileen Atkins' reading of it, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 on 30 March 2012, is a particular favourite of Hamilton's.

3 *The Waste Land* (1922) lines 103 and 392. See T.S. Eliot, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot's Contemporary Prose*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp.57–70

4 Gabrielle McIntire, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Waste Land*, ed. by G. McIntire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) pp.1–8 (4)

5 Susie Hamilton, 'Leisure Paintings', in *Susie Hamilton: Riddled with Light*, ex. cat. Paul Stolper, 2006, p.19

Marrakech souk. Consequently, drawings that had their beginnings on a walk across Skye or a seaside trip to Berck-Plage contribute to this body of work. Yet there is nothing literal about the figures she draws and paints, nothing specific. Each figure, she says, is drawn from 'part of my memory and experience'.[6]

Twenty-five years before Eliot wrote *The Waste Land*, Henri Bergson published *Matter and Memory*, an early philosophical exploration of memory. 'Our perceptions are undoubtedly interlaced with memories,' he wrote, 'and, inversely, a memory ... only becomes actual by borrowing the body of some perception into which it slips.'[7] Memory informs everything we see and experience. Its role is vital, as Umberto Eco noted: 'Without memory, there is no survival.'[8] Eliot's poem is riddled with references to the fragmentation of the past and the role of memory, from the early juxtaposition of 'Memory and desire' to his morbid finale, of 'memories draped by the beneficent spider'.[9] His poem is suffused with references to the past, to ancient lands and worlds now only half-remembered, peopled by long-dead Carthaginians and Phoenicians. However, *The Waste Land* necessarily relies on the contemporary reader to activate it, to refract the past through the present.

Hamilton similarly splices together memories and the present day in her work. Her snow-whipped explorers, for example, conjure the larger than life presence (and absence) of her adventurer father, Augustine Courtauld, who died when she was nine. In *Pink Petrol Station* (2003) he is hauled back to life in his Thirties survival gear, reimagined under the harsh electric lights of a modern petrol station; in *Blizzard* (2018) he appears again, little more than a silhouette, a smudged shadow, a distant memory under siege from paint itself.

6 Susie Hamilton interviewed by Paul Stolper in 'in atoms', ex. cat. Paul Stolper 2016, n.p.

7 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1896), transl. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991) p.67

8 Umberto Eco in *Conversations about the end of time*, ed. by Catherine David et al, transl. by I. Maclean and R. Pearson (London: Allen Lane, 1999) p.190

9 *The Waste Land* (1922) lines 3 and 407

PRECEDING PAGES: *Antarctica* (detail), 2014, acrylic on paper, 30 × 30 cm

Her approach to painting calls to mind Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and his protagonist's encounter with a madeleine, his favourite childhood cake. As the novel unfurls he struggles to recall the cake's place in his memory:

> *'Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has travelled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being?'*[10]

Proust's description of a memory that hovers tantalisingly out of reach has affinities with both Hamilton and Eliot's work. Eliot himself later questioned why certain images took on symbolic value and recurred and why others did not; Hamilton's fusion of memories and observation often

10 Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, Volume I: 'Swann's Way' (1913), transl. by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and T. Kilmartin (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992) p.53

Blizzard, 2018, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 15 × 20 cm

coalesce into recurring forms.[11] Yet the memories they both draw on are not straightforward recollections. They are subjective and partial, transient and changeable, as potent as dreams or as fragmentary as a snatch of music in the air, invoking the taste of a childhood treat, the heady smell of a spring garden or the icy aura of the Arctic.

Hamilton draws upon memories and the past to raise existential questions as to what it is to be present, to be alive now. This is embodied in her growing preoccupation with shadows, as in *Shadows in the Desert* (2018). Each shadow tethers her figures to a particular moment in the day. For this reason, she says, shadows can be stifling:

> *'It* [the sun] *shows us our lack of freedom, our imprisonment in this place. We are made conspicuous here and now, in this flat at ten in the morning, on this street at four in the afternoon ... We are pinned to this spot and aware of limitations and finitude wherever we are and whatever we do.'*[12]

In *The Waste Land* Eliot eloquently observed the passage of time through the rise and fall of the shadow —

> *'Your shadow at morning striding behind you*
> *Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you'*[13]

Hamilton has drawn inspiration from this as well as Giorgio de Chirico's attenuated shadows that stretch across deserted town squares in *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914) and the ominous black forms in Edward Hopper's *Night Shadows* (1921). Often Hamilton's figures cast long shadows, as in *April* (2018) or *Souk* (2014), suggesting she too is drawn to particular times that

11 See opening quote by Eliot from *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) p.28
12 Susie Hamilton, 'The Triangular Hour', ARTY magazine, issue 37, Autumn/winter 2016, p.11
13 *The Waste Land* (1922) lines 28–29

Shadow in Fez, 2014, acrylic on paper, 21 × 15 cm

bookend the day. In some paintings the figures themselves appear as shadows, as in *From the Mountain* (2002) and *Death Alone* (2002), a questioning of reality, or existence, that casts an eye back to the shadows on the walls of Plato's allegorical cave.

The shadows and darkness in Hamilton's work are often countered by a white-hot corrosive light, one that illuminates to the point of blindness, as in *Garden* (2018). Throughout her career Hamilton has wielded what Eliot called 'the heart of light'[14] as much as a destroyer as creator, turning riders into wraiths, scorching the skins of sunbathers, bombarding those caught in blizzards and shining relentlessly through unblinking Arctic summers. Paint assaults them and it assaults us: Hamilton speaks of the 'migraine-inducing brightness' of her 'Dining Room' paintings, of 'discordant' colours with a 'disquieting undertow'.[15] Her figures can be in danger of dissolving into abstraction as the paint tilts, curdles, drips and blazes across the surface. 'I like metamorphic things,' says Hamilton, 'a thing eating into another thing, bleeding, blurring paint; it's loaded with desire.'[16] At times the figure is completely obscured, as in *Purple Garden* (2018). All that is left in this painting is the dazzling lemony whiteness of early sun — casting flowers and trees in mauve and turquoise shadows — and the sickly scent of lolling hyacinths lingering in the morning air.

[2]

PARADISE ALONE

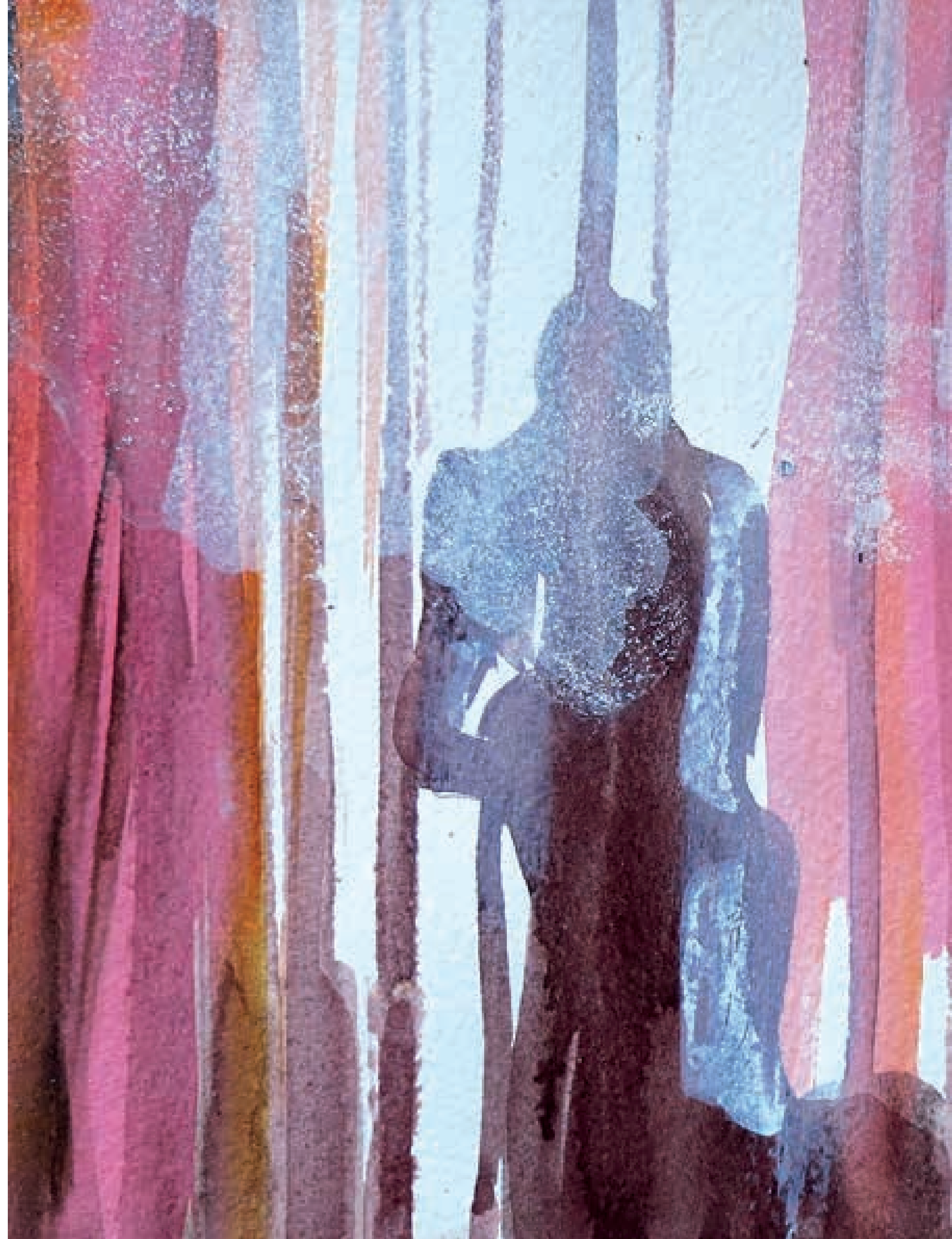
Hamilton's series often pivot around recurring themes — solitary figures, burning light — and there's always a sense of latent transformative energy in her work. This energy edged towards violence in her 'Mutilates' (1999–2000)

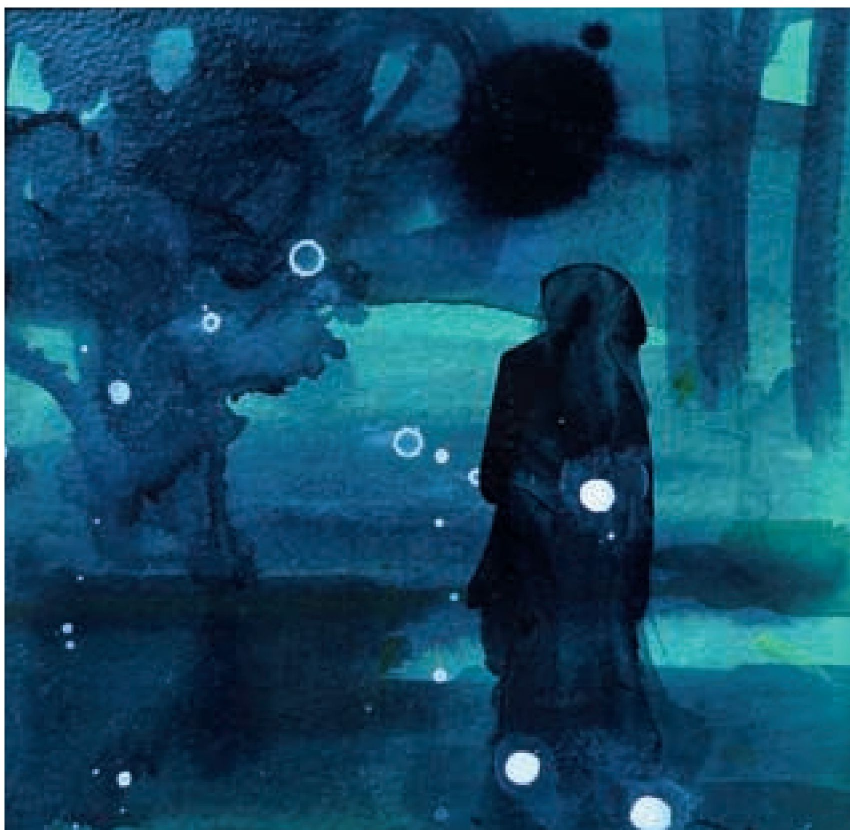
14 *The Waste Land* (1922) line 41

15 Susie Hamilton in conversation with Nick Fudge in Turps Banana, issue 18 (Autumn 2017)

16 Susie Hamilton in Charlotte Mullins, 'Consumed by Light', Art Review, September 2000, pp.32–33 (33)

Scorching Beams (detail), 2001, acrylic on paper, 28 × 28 cm





and 'Monkeys' (2003) and infected the skies in her 'Beach' paintings (2005). In her 'Dining Rooms' (2004–2008), the tables stretched on and on, a nightmarish inflation of diner insecurities and small talk. However, Hamilton's most consistent theme has been literature, and in particular poetry. In 'Paradise Alone' at the Ferens Art Gallery in Hull, 2002, for example, she drew inspiration from the work of seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell [ABOVE AND PRECEDING PAGE]. Her 2016 exhibition at Paul Stolper was titled 'in atoms', a line from Samuel Beckett's radio play *All That Fall*, and in 2011 she completed a series based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. (Given

Death Alone, 2002, acrylic on paper, 30 × 30 cm

she completed a PhD on the themes of negation, play and identity in the works of Shakespeare before returning to art school in 1989, perhaps this is not so surprising.)

Poetry first captured her imagination at school when her English teacher pointed her in the direction of *The Waste Land*. 'I love the impact and compression of lines of poetry,' Hamilton says, 'a few words that can hit you and stay with you.'[17] Eliot annotated *The Waste Land* to explain many of his own literary influences, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *The Golden Bough* to Shakespeare, Marvell and Grail literature. *The Waste Land* was drawn together from fragments of his earlier poems, and there seems something fitting in Hamilton's Salon-style presentation of her work made in response to it.[18] As with the poem, the juxtapositions that occur between paintings and drawings can be as illuminating as the individual works (or verses) themselves.

[3]

THE FILTHY PATH

The wilful jump-cuts within *The Waste Land* evoke the experience of modernity: a barrage of transient experiences, newness and imagery. As McIntire explains:

> '[The poem] *insisted unequivocally on the fractured nature of modern subjectivities by exerting pains to expose the complex and sometimes disordered nature of the human mind.*'[19]

The experience of modernity had been explored in poetry as early as 1857 by Charles Baudelaire in *Les Fleurs du mal*, in which sensation and the passing moment took centre stage. Baudelaire's forward to *Les Fleurs du mal*

17 Susie Hamilton interviewed by Paul Stolper in *in atoms*, ex. cat. Paul Stolper 2016, n.p.
18 John Worthen, *T. S. Eliot: A Short Biography* (London: Haus Publications, 2011), p.89
19 McIntire 2015, p.1

took the form of a poem addressed to the reader. Eliot quoted the final line from this at the end of Part I of *The Waste Land*, and Baudelaire's sentiments in this poem connect to both Eliot's and Hamilton's work:

> *'He willingly would make rubbish of the earth*
> *And with a yawn swallow the world;*
>
> *'He is Ennui! His eye filled with an unwished-for tear,*
> *He dreams of scaffolds while puffing at his hookah.*
> *You know him, reader, this exquisite monster,*
> *— Hypocrite reader, — my likeness, — my brother!'*[20]

Baudelaire personifies boredom — ennui, the great fear of the modern age — as a death-seeking drug-taking monster, hell-bent on laying waste to our world. The poet lambasts our human weaknesses: our insistent sins and cowardly repentings, our willingness to take the 'filthy path', to grab 'furtive pleasure' when we can.[21] He writes:

> *'Each day we take one more step towards Hell —*
> *Without being horrified — across darknesses that stink.'*[22]

Stinking darknesses also plague *The Waste Land* and Hamilton's work, where nocturnal creatures creep through the undergrowth and blackness

20 Charles Baudelaire, 'Au Lecteur', in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) (Orphée / La Différence, 1989) pp. 23–24: *'Il ferais volontiers de la terre un debris / Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde; // C'est l'Ennui! – l'oeil chargé d'un pleur involontaire, / Il rêve d'echafauds en fumant son houka. / Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monster délicat, / – Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!'.* 'Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!' appeared as the last line in Part III, 'The Burial of the Dead', in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922)

21 *'le chemin bourbeux'*; *'un Plaisir clandestin'*. Charles Baudelaire, 'Au Lecteur', in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857)

22 *'Chaque jour vers l'Enfer nous descendons d'un pas, / Sans horreur, à travers des ténèbres qui puent.'* Charles Baudelaire, 'Au Lecteur', in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857)

Interior, 2018, acrylic on paper, 42 × 30 cm

threatens to engulf the world. Eliot wrote part of his poem (Part III, 'The Fire Sermon') in Margate in October 1921, where he felt compelled to write:

> *'I can connect*
> *Nothing with nothing.'*[23]

He was flat-out exhausted from the demands of work and family expectations and 'The Fire Sermon' skitters with rats and bones, with grubby sex, death and a contemplation of the underworld. Hamilton herself has long been fascinated by Hades; in her series of 'Riders' (2002) shrouded figures pass like Charon into the abyss. Her latest body of work is haunted by anonymous souls who populate the land of the dead, hooded figures who walk towards it and hanged corpses who are about to embark on their own dark journeys. Even the city they have left behind seems to have aided their passage, filled with snaking escalators that transport endless figures down into the depths of the earth.

Those left above ground are isolated, dwarfed by gas cylinders that raise restrictive armatures like prison bars around them. The abyss calls to them through dirty reflections in stagnant canals or claustrophobic skies that threaten the entropic city. In *The Waste Land* Eliot suggests London's decline is inevitable. He links the city to former powerhouses that have seen their influence wane over millennia: Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna. Hamilton shows us, nearly a century later, how the same city is still unpicking itself, its casinos and supermarkets and restaurants gaudy temples to consumerism not community. Away from such public places humanity takes a squalid turn and Hamilton's private figures embody a physical urgency, a raw sexuality. In these there's something of the casual anonymity of Walter Sickert's nudes who twist and loll on cheap single beds, always in danger of rolling off sheets rumpled from past sexual encounters. We feel their visceral exposure just as we respond to the naked woman pushed down on the bed in Hamilton's *Bedsit* (2018) or her fleshy supine counterpart who masturbates nearby.

23 *The Waste Land*, 1922, lines 301–302

London Bridge (detail), 2018, charcoal and acrylic on cardboard, 34 × 38 cm

Eliot's own account of sexual encounter in *The Waste Land* is all violent assault, the woman exhaling 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over'[24] as her lover creeps down the stairs in the dark, groping for his way out. The whole poem has a sexual undercurrent, from the gender-fluid narrators to the parched land with its 'dry sterile thunder' and the wished-for springs, pools and storms.[25] Fertility of man and land are spliced together through Eliot's repeated allusion to the Grail legend and in particular to the ailing Fisher King, wounded in the groin, who resides over a barren waste land. Eliot cited Jessie Weston's exploration of the Grail story, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920), as the key inspiration for *The Waste Land* in his accompanying notes to the poem.[26] In her book Weston quotes a medieval account of the Grail legend, *Sone de Nansai*, to illuminate the intimate connection between man and land in the story:

> *'For here no fertile seed is sown,*
> *Neither peas nor grain are grown,*
> *Never a child of man is born,*
> *Mateless maidens sadly mourn'*[27]

Hamilton's figures similarly exist in isolation in barren lands, 'loaded with desire' but unfulfilled and under attack.[28] Her men and women are sexless and cast adrift, representative of every man and woman who knows the loneliness of the city, the bleakness of the wilderness or the dark depths of the human soul.

24 *The Waste Land* (1922) line 252

25 *The Waste Land* (1922) line 342

26 Eliot states: 'Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance*.' See *The Annotated Waste Land*, 2006, pp.71–74 (71)

27 *Sone de Nansai* in Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) (New York: Doubleday, 1957) p.22

28 Susie Hamilton in 'Consumed by Light', 2000, p.33

[4]

THE GREAT ABEYANCE

In 2004 Hamilton started spending time in Berck-Plage in northern France. The town's wide sandy beaches are packed with French holidaymakers in summer and Hamilton was fascinated by their uninhibited flesh and bulk. This interest developed into a series of 'Beach' paintings as Hamilton was drawn not only to the figures but also to the liquid edge of the land. Sylvia Plath's poem 'Berck-Plage' opens: 'This is the sea, then, this great abeyance.'[29] The sea has always been a place of liminality, of suspension, of transition. Solid earth meets fluid water in perpetual flux at its edges allowing for sublimity as well as despair, something Hamilton hints at in *Moonlit Beach* (2018). As she says, 'I see my figures as part of a world of power and dynamism but they themselves are struggling in that world, vulnerable to things that are more powerful than they are.'[30] Hamilton's beaches stretch under blooms of paint that grow in pitch-black or blood-red skies, suggesting both molecular disease and planetary constellations and reflecting the insignificance of humanity's small dramas acted out below.

In her latest beach works the amber sands of Margate stretch out under candy-floss skies, a smear of violet a possible horizon behind figures who sit in isolation on the dirty sand. Solitary figures appear in further beach drawings, their shuffling forms reflected in surface pools of sea water. These reflections, in *Margate* and *Margate 2* (2017), operate like shadows, pinning the figure to a time, a place. Eliot must surely have walked along the same tidal edge as Hamilton when he retreated to Margate's Hotel Albermarle on doctor's orders, instructed to see nobody, do no work and read for a maximum of two hours a day.[31] Clearly his nerve specialist was disobeyed as much of Part III of *The Waste Land* was written while gazing out over this mutable division between

29 Sylvia Plath, 'Berck-Plage', 1962 in *Ariel* (London: Faber, 1965)

30 Susie Hamilton in *in atoms*, 2016, ex. cat., n.p.

31 Worthen 2011, p.102

England and the sea, between being and nothingness. His thoughts then turned to water and death —

'A current under sea
Picked his bones in whispers.'[32]

— and he let his mind go, enshrining Margate and the ocean currents in *The Waste Land*.

[5]

TIME'S ARROW, TIME'S CYCLE

At the heart of *The Waste Land*, according to Eliot, is the Grail legend.[33] A hero (variously Gawain, Perceval or Galahad) sets out on a quest to restore fecundity to a barren land that lies ailing under the rule of the wounded Fisher King. The king cannot return to full health until the quest is complete and fertility is restored to his realm. He therefore exists in a living hell, only able to fish, neither alive nor dead. Despite the bleakness of his situation hope remains while the quest is ongoing. Eliot perhaps saw parallels between the Fisher King's fabled land and the very real world he found himself in for the desolation of contemporary London drives the poem but the hope of redemption is never fully abandoned.

Hamilton's figures seem to take up the quest, crossing into Eliot's desolate world as they search for meaning. Throughout her career Hamilton has sent many of her figures and riders across the expansive plains of history and myth. In *Sunset Rider* (2002) the featureless land burns lava-red under a livid yellow sky, the figure urging the horse ever onwards across the primordial wilderness. This hinterland Hamilton paints is both literal and metaphorical: 'both serve

32 *The Waste Land* (1922) lines 315–316

33 See his notes in *The Annotated Waste Land*, 2006, pp.71–74 (71)

PRECEDING PAGES: *Dark Beach* (detail), 2017, acrylic on canvas, 60 × 60 cm

as arenas for my transformation of the figure to the point of dissolution,' she explains.[34] Her own initial interest in such barren landscapes may stem from her father's travels to remote deserts in the 1930s, from the Sahara to the Arctic tundra. However, Hamilton's wildernesses are of her own imagining, the essence of what it means to be alone in the world. In *Sunset Rider* the horse, figure and landscape have fused together, blood-orange and crimson paint burning over the purple shadows of the horse's flanks and mane, nature engorging man and beast. They exist out of time, essential in their urgency. Horse and rider speak of an ancient world that lies buried under the rubble of contemporary life.

34 Susie Hamilton, 'Leisure Paintings' 2006, p.19

Siberia 2, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 100 × 100 cm

They speak of profound truths and sensations, of natural forces and unity and of an innate connection to deep time.

In *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle*, evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould proposes that a dichotomy exists between cyclical time and linear time. 'We live embedded in the passage of time,' he writes:

> *'At one end of the dichotomy — I shall call it time's arrow — history is an irreversible sequence of unrepeatable events. … At the other end — I shall call it time's cycle — events have no meaning as distinct episodes with causal impact upon a contingent history. Fundamental states are immanent in time, always present and never changing.'*[35]

If modern human history is linear — progressive and propulsive, driving ever-forwards — then the natural cycles of the earth stand as a transcendent counterpoint. Time's cycle is accepting of ebb and flow, of circularity and ongoing transformation. Eliot and Hamilton could be seen to connect their figures to deep time, to a similar understanding of cyclical rhythms, the opposite of Western progress and evolution. The enormity of time's deep past underpins Hamilton's resilient yet corroded figures and is reflected in Eliot's lines:

> *'Who are those hooded hordes swarming*
> *Over endless plains …'*[36]

As modernity took hold in the nineteenth century such connections to deep cyclical time were increasingly overlooked in favour of newness, speed and fragmentary moments, the wow of 'now'. Eliot's poem could be seen as countering aspects of this while embracing a modernist structure to reflect the conflicting demands and subjectivities of the modern mind. For Hamilton, a century on, modernism and post-modernism — irony! Spectacle! — have been

35 Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle* (London: Penguin, 1987), pp.10–11
36 *The Waste Land* (1922) lines 68–69

Forest of Frost (detail), 2001, acrylic on board, 22 × 20 cm

and gone. The digital age may now appear to reconnect us to the vastness of our collective past via the internet, but, like Jorge Luis Borges' infinite library of knowledge, this is an illusion, a hall of mirrors, promising much and delivering little.[37] Consequently now, more than ever, there's a thirst for art that sends its exploratory roots deep down to tap into time's cycle once more.

The Waste Land and Hamilton's associated body of work find much to lament in the dirty squalor of real life, the loneliness of existence in the contemporary world, but they also express something of the essence of humanity, probing the depths of feeling and the ancient heart of the land itself. Using the sounds of language and the visual immediacy of paint they connect with us viscerally, bypassing knowledge and speaking to sensation and feeling itself. For Proust, only taste and smell had the power to speak so directly:

> *'When from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.'*[38]

Eliot and Hamilton expand this sensorial legacy and through their marks — words and brushstrokes, pen on paper — the vast structure of recollection has been activated once more and scented lilacs and hyacinths bloom among the ruins. Despite the desolation, the landscapes they have conjured are not completely without hope; the lilting repetition of 'Shantih', the Sanskrit word for peace, offers promise at the close of *The Waste Land*. There's a sense that a sunbeam may yet break through the storm clouds, riddling the barren land below with coruscating light, even reaching the fisherman on the banks of the unkempt canal.

37 Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Library of Babel', in *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin, 1964) pp.78–86
38 Proust, 1992, Volume I, p.54

RIGHT: *Gasometer 2*, 2018, acrylic on paper, 77 × 56 cm

FOLLOWING PAGES: *Sands*, 2018, acrylic, pastel and charcoal on paper, 33 × 38 cm

Susie Hamilton 2018

SUSIE HAMILTON
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FRONT COVER: *Moonlit Beach*, 2018, pen and acrylic on paper, 20 × 15 cm

RIGHT: Margate bus shelter, photograph by Hettie Judah

BACK COVER: *Hanging*, 2018, acrylic and charcoal on paper, 77 × 56 cm

the wind in the trees