

The
GARAGE-ISM
MANIFESTO

Zander Blom



The Origins of Garage-ism

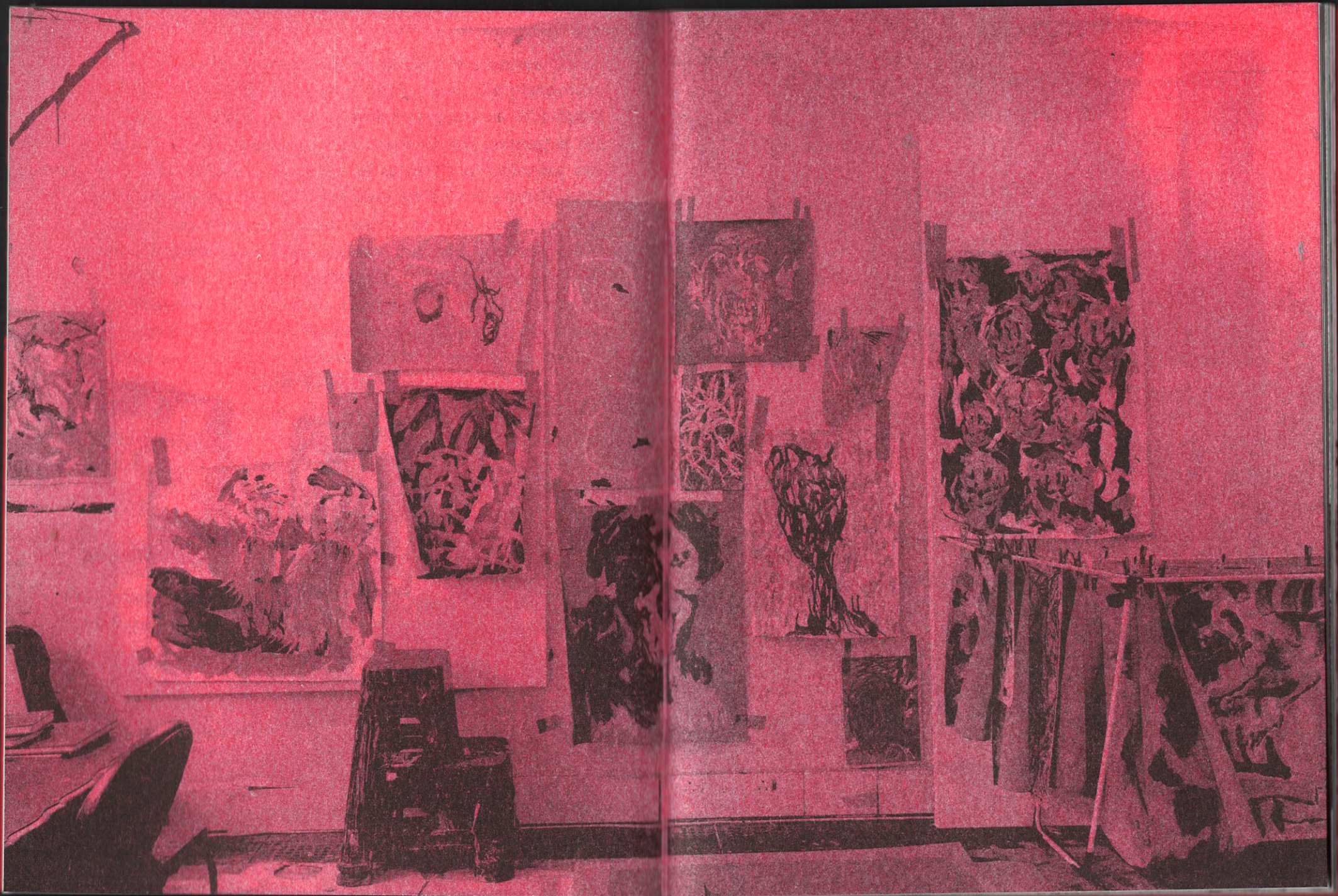
As months go by with little contact from the outside world, work tends to pile up in the studio. When this happens my mind often wanders back to an old face-brick garage that stood at the bottom of the garden of my childhood home. This green-doored semi-storage space was where a large portion of my creative endeavours ended up collecting dust and damp among the spiders and the skinks.

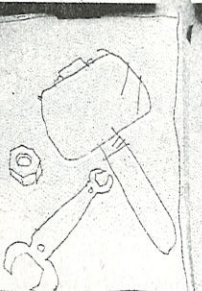
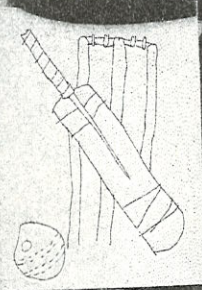
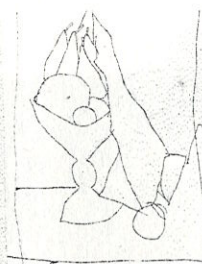
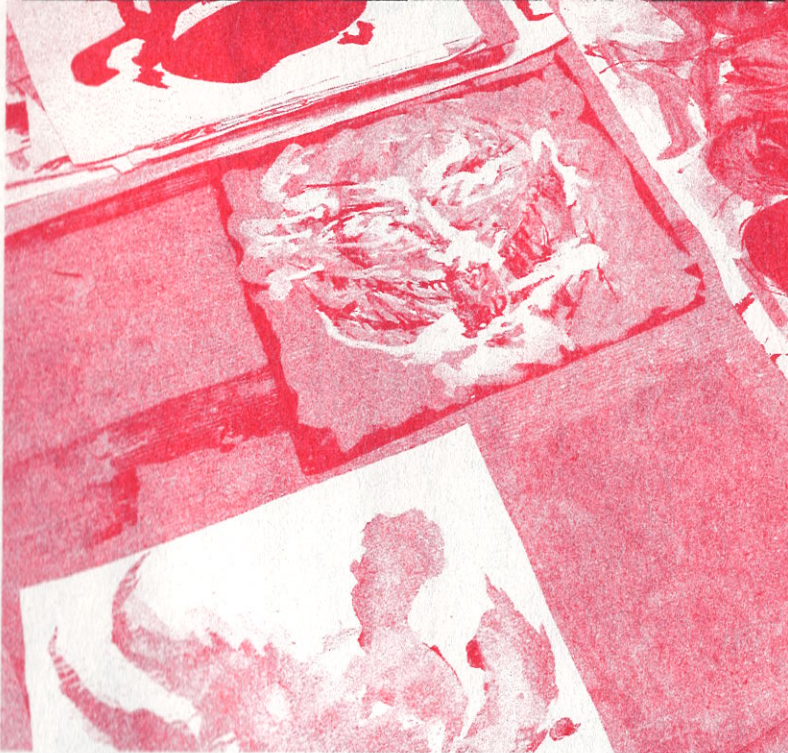
I often rummaged through that space during my life in Pretoria, and later when I would visit my family on the occasional expedition from Joburg for Sunday lunch. The feeling of being in that room was always somewhat depressing, yet there was something wonderfully pathetic about that mess. It gave me a sobering bird's-eye view of my very brief history on earth and my glaring shortcomings. However, this was not where all my efforts ended up. This was a ragbag collection of, not failures exactly, but things that had failed. They were not suited for a wall in a house, nor were they disastrous enough to be liberated into the fire or the garbage dump – and to be clear, a lot of things did go to the dump. But these works, the ones that found refuge in the garage, were

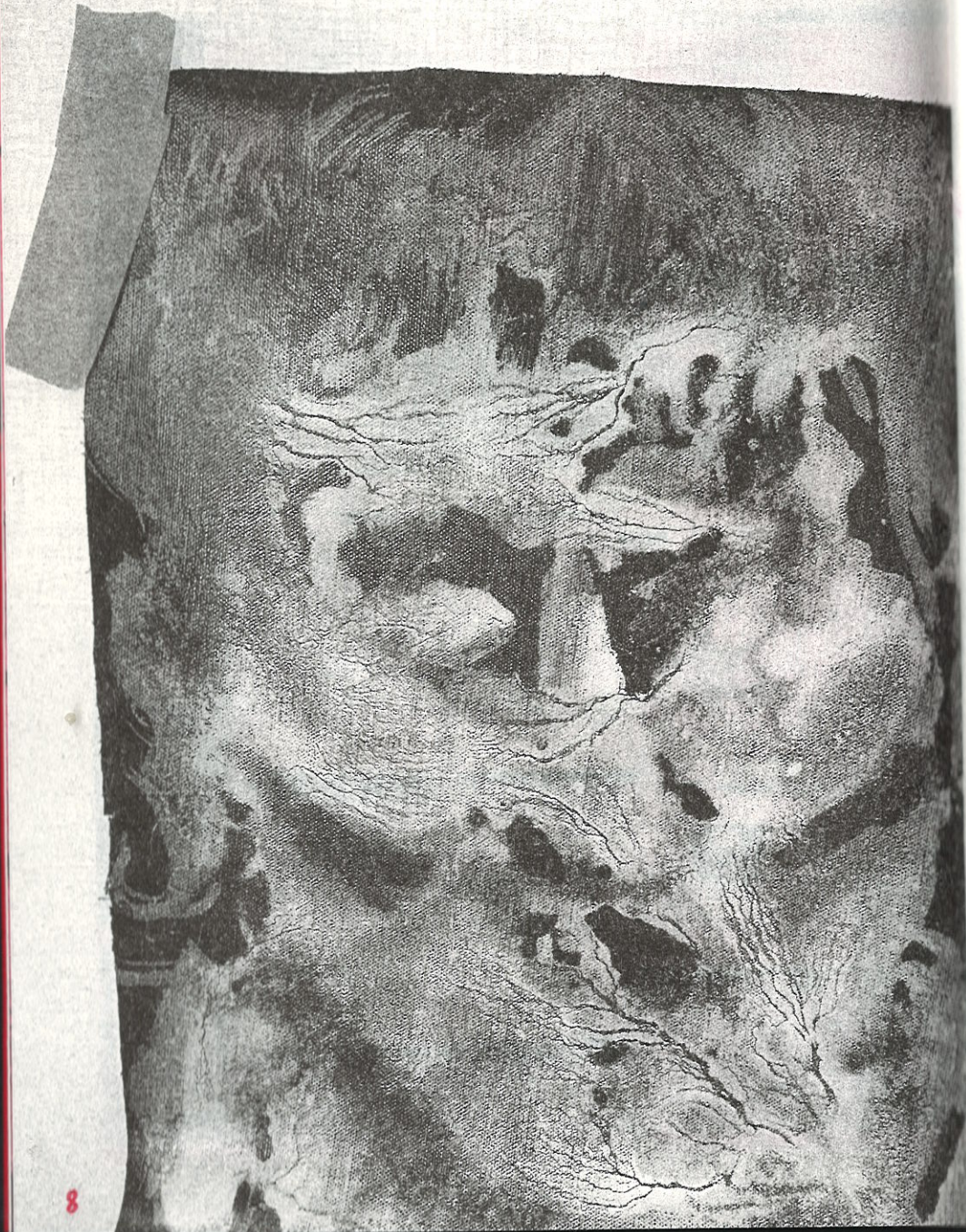
weirdly exciting, almost transgressive in their wrongness. There was something off or freakish about each piece: the perspective didn't quite make sense, or the awkward proportions of a figure or face made you feel slightly ill, or the colour was grating, or the brushwork was tepid, or the choice of subject was ludicrous, etc. They were mystifying creatures that were unfit for the world, unfit for daylight. They were not prized, adored or even liked, but they hit a nerve of some kind. These failures that had not quite failed existed inside another territory where the rules for success were different. Possessed by a curious energy, these works revealed a truth that was hard to look at, yet harder to look away from. I kept them locked away in limbo, revisiting them from time to time in real life and later, increasingly, in my memory, over and over.

In my imagination, this once cramped, unexceptional space has morphed into a massive, elaborate and ever-expanding cathedral, filled to the brim with artefacts of human limitation. This almost magical impression of the garage of my youth has become the catalyst for my recent paintings. I'm trying to make work that does not pander to any dogma or discourse. Work that does not preemptively judge or censor itself. Work free of conceptual justifications tagging along for the ride. Work that is not affected or forced, that does not apologise for my shortcomings and context – if anything, work that celebrates my shortcomings, and the awkward mediocrity of my context, origin and self. Work that does not have to be sensible or make any sense. Work that admits defeat, without giving up. Clearly much of what I'm saying and aiming for is contradictory or impossible, as is usually the case. But if you can look past the theatrical artifice, these are all really just instructions that I'm feeding into the machine, hoping that the correct combination will produce interesting results, which simply flow from brain to hand to canvas.









GARAGE-ISM MANIFESTO

garage-ism

'gara:(d)ʒɪz(ə)m, 'garaɪdʒɪz(ə)m, gə'ra:ʒɪz(ə)m

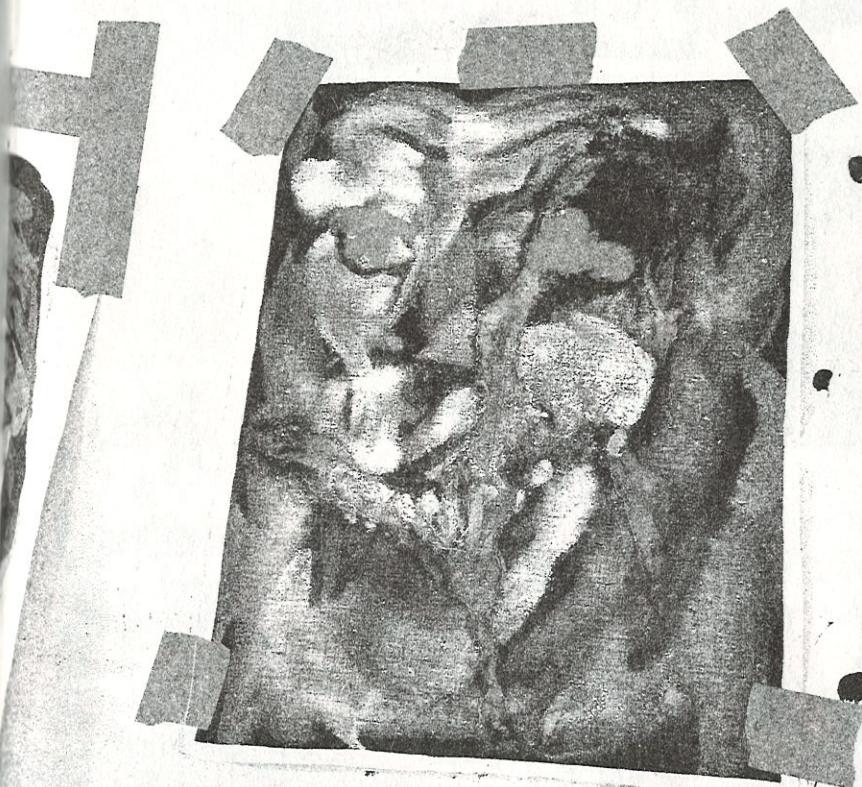
(also *garagism*)

noun [mass noun]

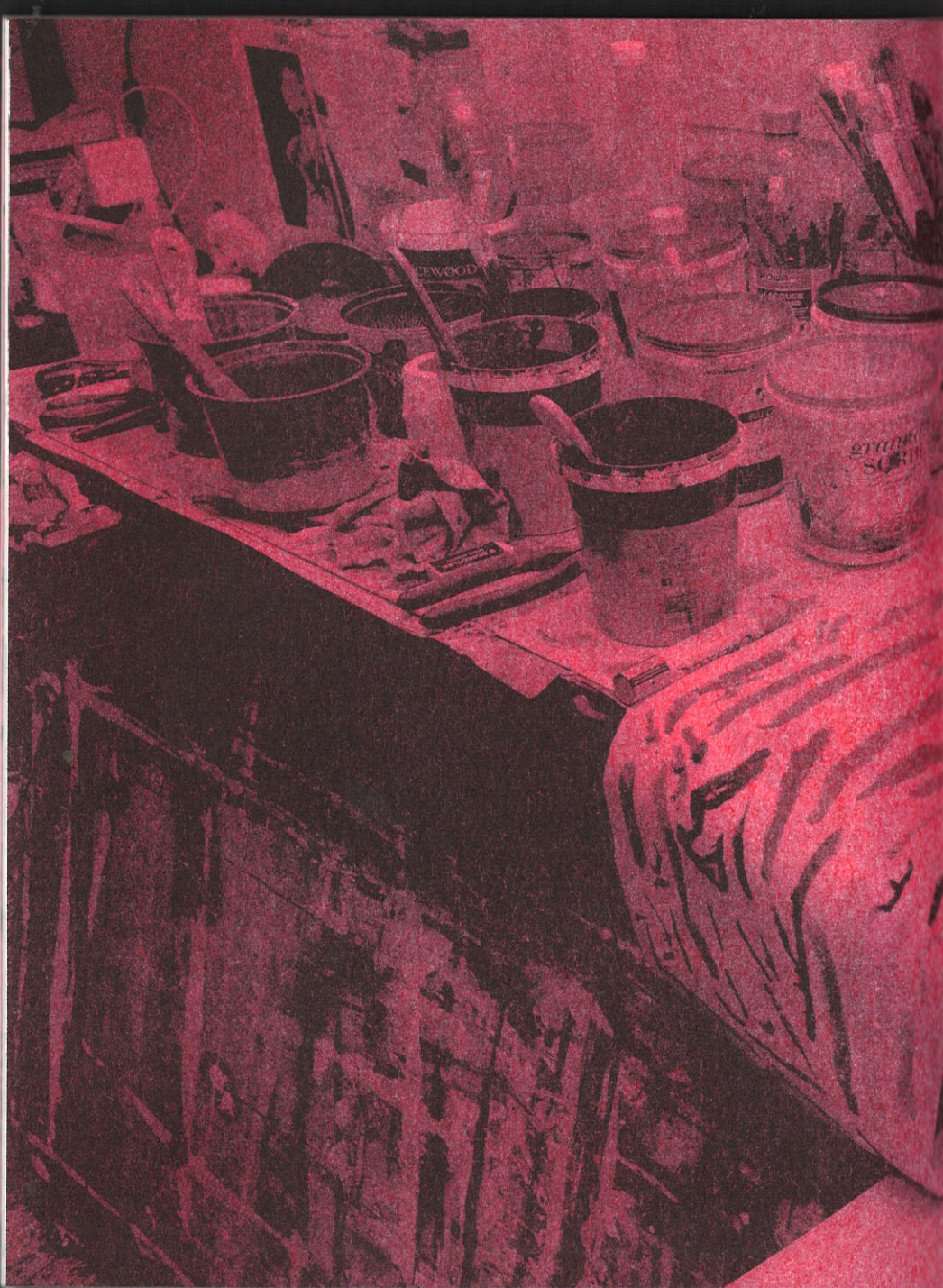
Garage-ism is an approach to painting in which the aim is to make works that look like they could have emerged from a garage; works that appear to have lived and spent time behind boxes and stacks of old furniture. It's not faux garage, it's not about sticking cobwebs or dust onto canvas, and it's not about nostalgia. Nor is it about paintings being made *in* a garage. It's about working in a mental space where the desired destination for your efforts is neither the trash heap nor the museum. It's about cultivating paintings that seem to have no desire to grace a pristine gallery wall, or even reside above a couch in a lounge. It's about aiming to make work that is only really fit to live in that nether space: the garage. In this sense *Garage-ism* is a way of tricking yourself into giving up on superficial

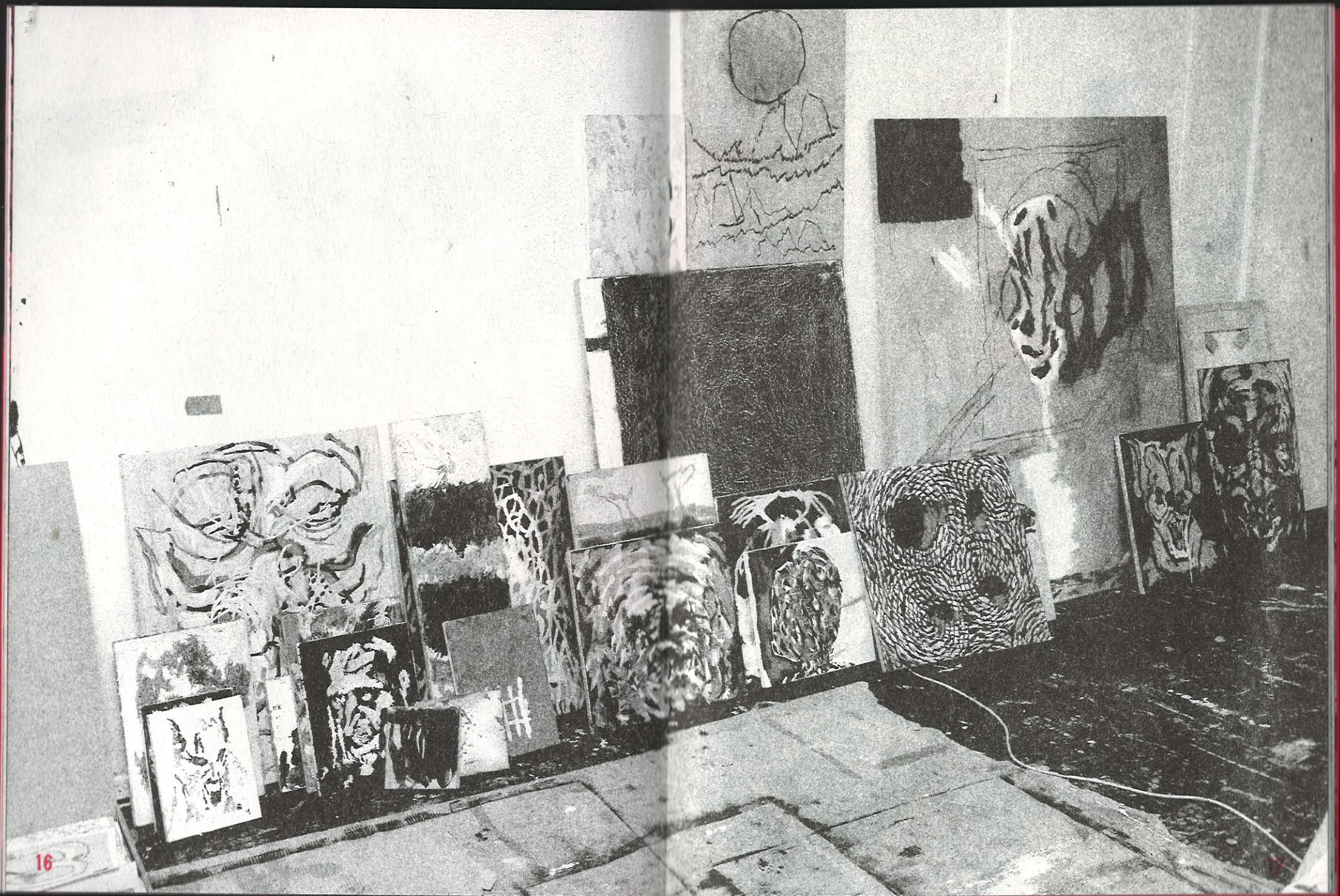
ambition in painting without descending into depression and apathy. The aim is to strip away the layers of external motivators, to reject the clamour of hollow voices in your head and move towards your own essential nature. In a way it is about not aiming at anything at all, but since that is an unproductive proposition, *Garage-ism* is useful as a kind of proxy for the void. It functions as an anchor with a very slack tether – a simple idea that allows you to move around freely, without drifting off and getting lost in space.

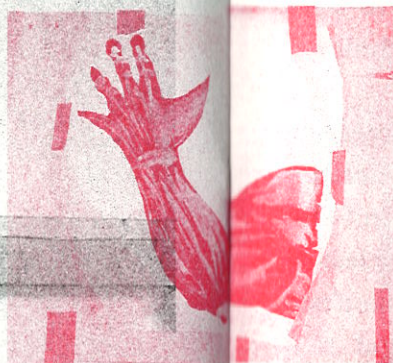
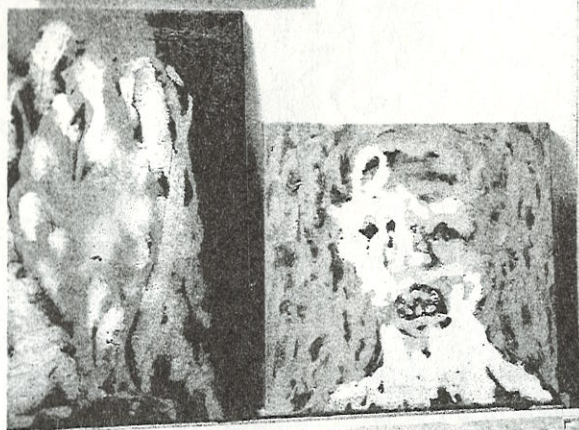
Manifestos are usually a trite business of pompous declaration associated with the 20th century. An obsession with progress and the claiming of the new is practically written into its DNA. This is not that. This is a whisper of permission, a 21st-century self-help, self-acceptance guide. *Garage-ism* proposes that your own unique set of shortcomings may actually be the most interesting thing about you. This strategy is also an exercise in self-deceit, because in truth nobody wants their work to end up forgotten in a garage. However, this ruse is intended to take you somewhere inside yourself, where you can be free, and without judgment or limitation. *Garage-ism* should allow you, even if just for a second, to forget about trends, theories, expectations, current discourse, the norm, the new, the blue-chip, the polished, the accomplished, the big-budget, the art world, the market, the critics, the gatekeepers – so that you can start making something, anything, today. This is a manifesto against creative paralysis in a very confusing world.











Garage-ism in Practice



Garage-ism takes the form of a projected-personal-mental-space.

Therefore, its interpretation will be highly subjective, and the results of its application diverse. What I imagine emerging from a garage may be very different from what someone else does. I might think a Rothko or a Rousseau fits the profile, while you may think a Bruegel or a Warhol is pure *Garage-ism*. My own paintings that follow the guide of *Garage-ism* have leaned towards a grunge aesthetic, and ultimately seem to manifest as some kind of low-brow expressionism. But this shouldn't be a distraction; this has to do with my youth, my memories of damp garage spaces and the strange creatures that lived there. Since I am trying to be honest

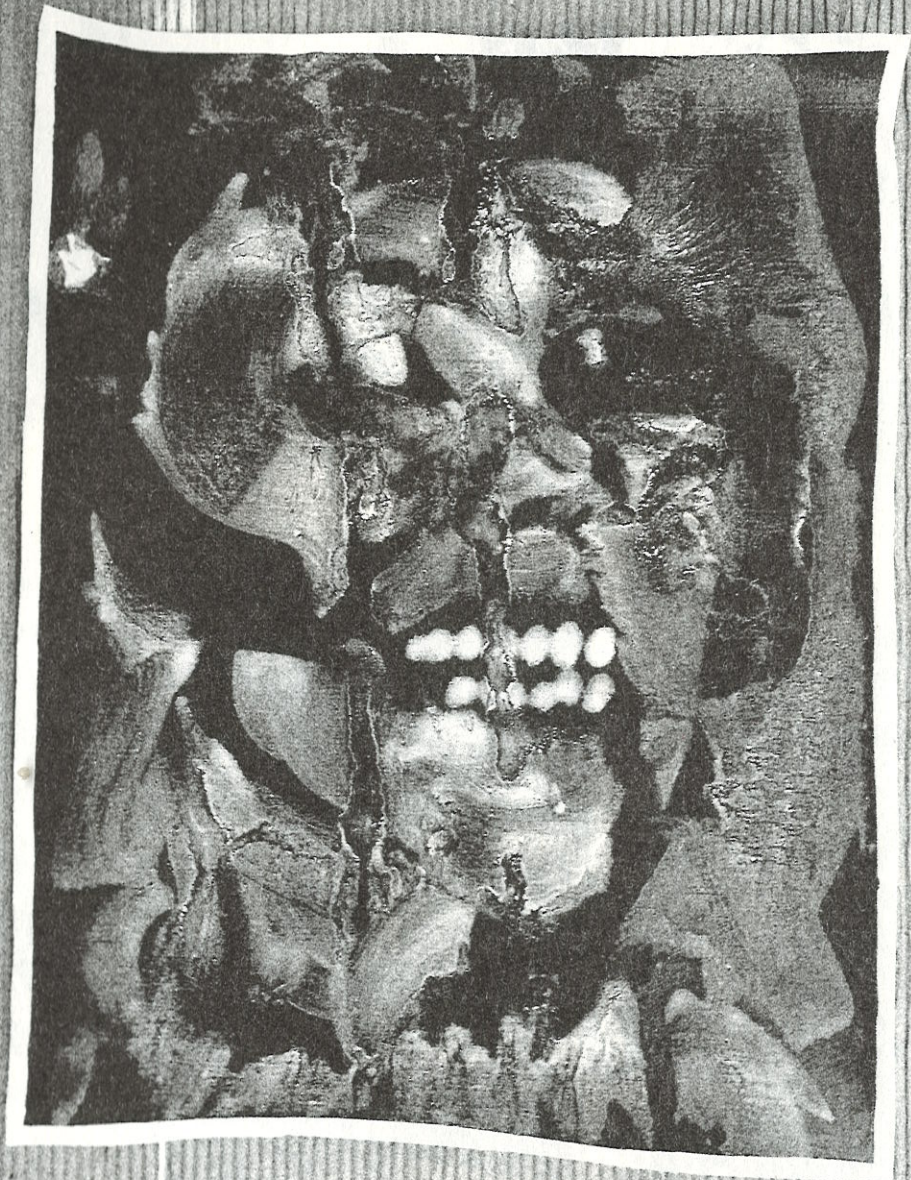
with myself about my limitations and what is meaningful and essential content from my life, this also means that I try to work with materials that are in reach, easily available, and techniques that are unpretentious and uncumbersome.


Garage-ism is intended to give an artist maximum freedom, but it should not be an excuse for substandard work. Just because something has that damp garage feeling doesn't mean it can't also be urgent, powerful, remarkable, subtle, beautiful and timeless in its own way. It would be great if *Garage-ism* could be a manifesto that proclaimed *ANYTHING GOES!* But I have found that impossible to implement. And even *Garage-ism* can't save work if *there is no there there*. We will always have evaluation criteria and various lenses through which we judge and make sense of things. *Garage-ism* simply and humbly offers a tailor-made lens that has helped its author frame and understand their current activities. It's probably quite a derivative and conservative lens, considering how radically free and open the space for contemporary art is at this point in time. Regardless, if it helps no one else, at least *Garage-ism* has opened up a new kind of freedom in my continued journey into painting.

Garage-ism gives you permission to mine your own weirdness, and embrace your own unique brand of mediocrity. So let your mind wander in those dark draughty spaces and bathe in the unbearable flickering fluorescent light. Seek out the ghosts that linger here and learn to harness their bountiful energy.

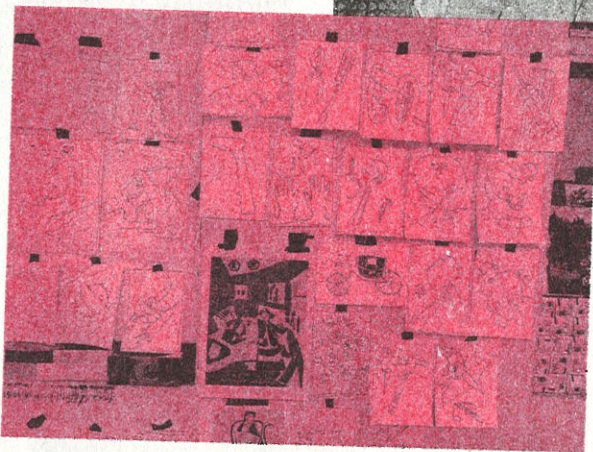








Notes from the Studio



At the moment I'm working mostly on loose fragments of canvas. I think of what I do now as painting installations or gangs of pictures, a mob of images. These fragments get taped or nailed to the studio walls. Once the walls fill up, I document the room, take the fragments down and pack them away into a box. Then the box goes back under the couch. My life for the last year has mostly been this cycle on repeat. Today the walls are almost empty, except for a couple of resolved pieces that have been put up. This new room is still in the very early stages of the cycle. There are a lot of unresolved fragments of canvas all

around, strewn on the floor, hanging on drying racks, and in piles on tables and on top of boxes. Some pictures come to life in a matter of minutes. Others spend months going from table, to floor, to drying rack, to pile, back to table – collecting layers of marks along the way, before maturing into something worth nailing to the wall. When we make an installation in the gallery, we often use the studio photographs as reference to see what worked well together, but we're not always faithful to the original arrangements.

Some days I have a plan, I have reference images and very simple sketches, and I work from them in a focused, deliberate way. Other days I have no patience for this kind of thing, and then the best I can do is push pigment around hoping something interesting will eventually happen, accumulate or emerge. So short intense bursts of focus are balanced out by hours of casual labouring. It's a kind of yin-yang process that helps maintain sanity in the studio.

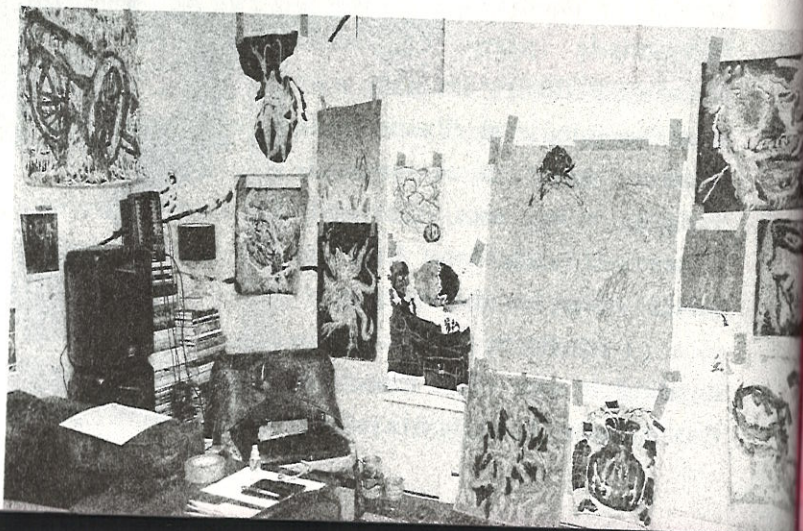
The references that I work with come from everywhere: film stills, children's colouring books, nature/wildlife books, random internet memes, grainy images of aliens, death masks, home-made party costumes, conspiracy theory imagery and symbols, medieval illustrations, iPhone snaps of a strange-looking tree, etc. Currently I seem to oscillate between images of horror and comedy.

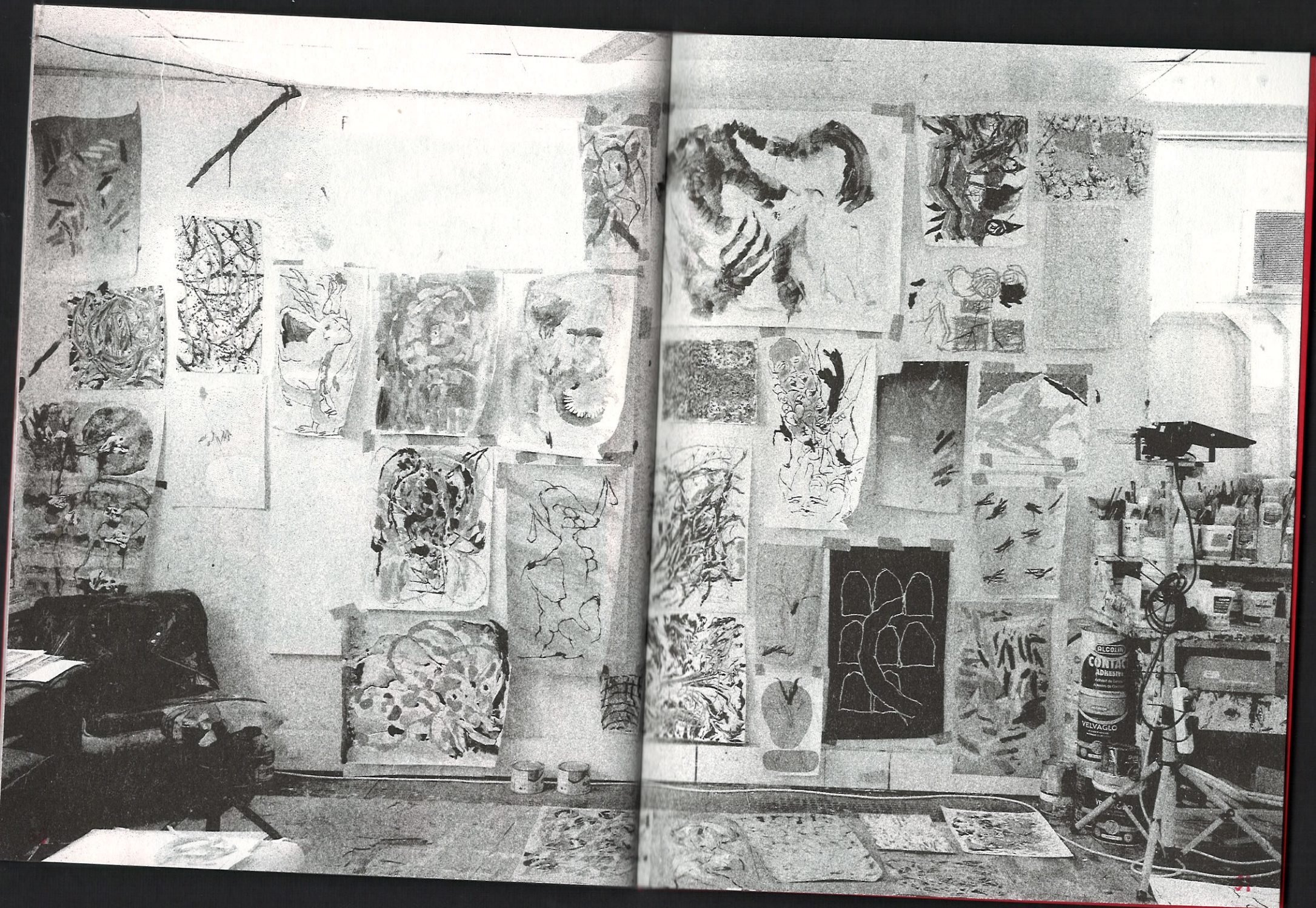
Intellectually I know I'm heading in the right direction, but my lizard brain tends to drag



a bit behind. My eye craves some of the old visual tricks. It wants order, safety, a place to rest. But I know this is not the time or place for that. I often have to remind myself that it's OK to swim in an ocean of uncertainty, in layers and layers of tentative marks. If what flows out naturally is mud and unresolved slop, then that's just perfect; let it keep flowing until a picture is complex enough to have its own pulse, its own engine, its own logic, and then move on to another. Just keep painting everything that comes in, and out, and at you, and through you. The job now is to transmit energy, any which way it appears, and try to make it stick to the surface in front of me.

The idea of abstraction and figuration as two opposing forces or categories in my mind has quietly crumbled and fallen away. These kinds of distinctions no longer seem relevant or useful. Whether I paint a face or a square or a simple composition of colours and textures, or a scene with creatures interacting in a landscape – it's all one world now.





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