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Decline
2012
oil on linen
60x45 in. / 152.5x114.5 cm

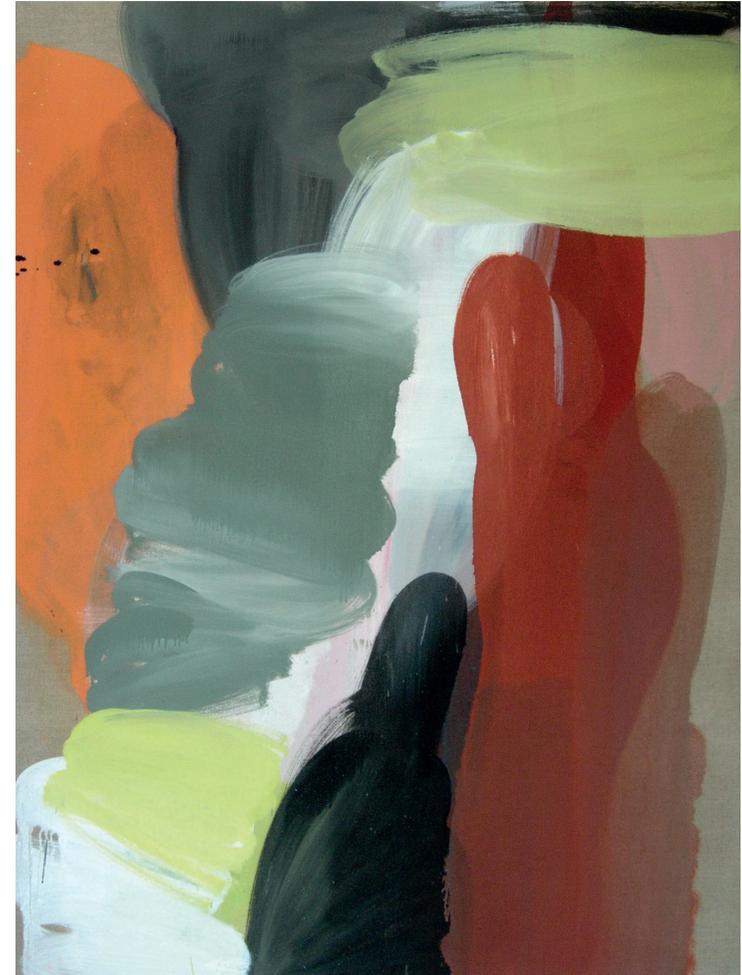
In *Decline*, a blossoming form is placed front and center; a series of green and black loosely and energetically applied strokes suggest fronds waiting to seize the light through a forest floor. Each of several vertical gestures is bound one to the other: they sway and stagger, not quite in unison, yet neither able to separate one from the other. Here, again, is the urban experience of intimate strangers: figures moving past and sometimes bumping into one another, the blur of their activity, walking along city sidewalks, making one difficult to distinguish from the other. In the past few years, the cityscape surrounding Van Cauwenbergh's studio was in constant flux; one building just across the street was being demolished while others were being built, creating slim and changing channels of light.

In *Seated Headless* evocations of the figure are layered one atop the other in a palette of citron yellows and a sweeping passage of rising black. Indeed, all of the forms in this painting seem to be rising, falling or jostling one against the other: hips pushed in sensual knowledge; comfort with the awkwardness of the body; grace in the breath moving in and out. It appears to me that I am looking at a person who, in the moment of walking away from me, unexpectedly turns to wave goodbye. It is a near filmic moment, but perhaps more important in understanding Van Cauwenbergh's compositions, palette, and vocabulary is not the space and time between actions, but the space and time between flickering emotions. The sense of melancholy is palpable. Blue over white over pink is sky over light over flesh. It is a vocabulary of an expressive gesture made with great tenderness that is the mark made sacred. It is the resurrection of the figurative amidst the expressive that is Van Cauwenbergh's offering and triumph.

— *Barbara O'Brien*
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at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art,
Kansas City, Missouri

Front page:
Eclipse
2012
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Marc Van Cauwenbergh
INTIMATE STRANGERS



Untitled #5
The Encounter
2012
oil and acrylic on paper
11^{1/8} x 7^{5/8} in. / 28.5 x 19 cm

The initial form, the one first laid down on linen or on paper, in a painting by Van Cauwenbergh is often, by the painting's conclusion, nearly obscured, tenderly buried beneath washes of subsequent colors and forms. Unfolding, retreating, hide and seeking — they are disappearing evocations of the very human and complicated experience of living in the City of New York: being one among millions of intimate strangers.

The paintings often suggest a figure, gaze slightly averted, but having a sense of weight that suggests sculptural form in conversation with painted image. The figurative allusions have a demure quality, emphasized by the sense of turning away that is implied by the broad brushstrokes atop the more solidly painted forms hidden beneath. A palette of bright colors, into which grey tones are worked, aids the often-melancholy mood of a Van Cauwenbergh painting. In *Untitled #5 (The Encounter)* (2012; oil and acrylic on paper), the theatrical nature of many of his compositions is revealed. A black, weighted form takes half-hidden center stage — an odalisque revealed through parted translucent curtains of dusky pink. A second coiled black form — sculptural and seemingly suspended from the top edge of the painting — seems captured in motion, stilled in the arc of a pendulum's swing, and is thrown into relief against a rising hillside whose terrain is pink powder against hard-bitten ruby lips. The space that is created, like in many of Van Cauwenbergh's paintings, is the space of the stage, a theatrical arena. Our gaze moves toward what we expect to be deep space, three-point perspective, but is consistently thwarted by the proscenium-inflected space. The implication of drama unfolding or stilled is potent.



Untitled #4
2012
oil and acrylic on paper
11^{1/8} x 7^{5/8} in. / 28.5 x 19 cm

Marc Van Cauwenbergh is working with oils only for his paintings on linen. He uses a clear matte acrylic medium as a primer so that the linen acts both as a part of the palette and as a texture component. Because he often uses transparent veils of color the linen color has an effect on how the viewer perceives the subtly shifting tones. The works on paper sometimes have figurative sketches underneath that are done in acrylic. After adding a layer of the clear acrylic medium, he paints over that with oil. In some cases the acrylic remains partially visible in the final work, as in *Untitled #4* (2012; oil and acrylic on paper).

Untitled #4 began with a red form — a bulbous, rounded rectangle — that was never quite silenced by the ensuing veils of color that followed: a rosy, blackened mauve; a crisp orange. But, as with many of Van Cauwenbergh's paintings, the viewer's gaze settles first on the sometimes strident, energized black passages

that hold the memory of the artist's gesture. In *Untitled #4*, the black forms on the right and left create a gateway to the image, a weighted entrance that moves the gaze through a series of translucent and transparent scrims of color, deep into a glowing series of softened geometries that evoke color field paintings, as if Willem de Looper (1932–2009) had organized his glowing palette into softened geometries or Jules Olitski (1922–2007) had given gestural physicality to his ephemeral sprays.

Continuing the theme of intimate strangers, Van Cauwenbergh's studio is filled with beautiful, glowing faces and images from the history of art. Diego Velázquez (1599–1660) painted Queen Dona Mariana of Austria in 1652–53, yet the inspiration is palpable. The 'objectness' of her black skirt becomes a sculptural base upon which her body is poised. A curtain is pulled aside in the background, creating the theatre in which she is to be viewed. A translucent handkerchief shimmers in silver blue against this velvety black. Van Cauwenbergh often plays glowing lights against matted blacks in an effect animating the palette and composition in a dynamic dialogue. In Pierre Bonnard's *The Bathroom* (1932), a woman's figure is the ostensible subject: slim and abstracted by her bent-from-the-waist gesture; arms wrapped tight against her torso; head slightly to one side; one leg placed behind the figure, which seems to balance precariously on only one foot. She is reaching, for what we do not know; a dog at her feet suggests domestic comfort and ease. Her figure is one of a series of patterns abutted one to the other and activating the canvas from edge to edge. Her figure, soft and impressionistically worked, is in dialogue with the geometric patterns of the tile, window blinds and blocky walls.

Van Cauwenbergh's interest in the Symbolist painters of the early twentieth century includes fellow Belgian Gustave van de Woestyne (1881–1947), whose painting *The Artist's Wife* (1910) creates a barely-there distinction between figure and ground. While the slim woman's features are finely rendered, her gaze is nearly averted. She seems to look toward us because she must — perhaps as instructed by the painter himself. There is little distinction between the apricot-maize color of her sheer dress and the skin that we know rests just beneath. Like Van de Woestyne, Van Cauwenbergh also creates transitions between the shifting light, between palette and form that seem to evolve in real time as we stand viewing a painting like *Seated Headless* (2012), implying, certainly, a classical torso with whom history has had its way. *Seated Headless* is a companion painting to *Decline* (2011; both oil on linen and 60 by 45 inches).



Seated Headless
2012
oil on linen
60 x 45 in. / 152.5 x 114.5 cm