

Renee Lai

Portfolio

Sept. 8, 2023

Artist Statement

My work explores issues around gender and race. I am interested in our relationship to boundaries in the landscape. In my most recent body of work, my painted and drawn figures are placed in bodies of water, deep, dark, and threatening. These bodies of water reference rivers and oceans, things that we use to mark the edge of a state or a country. Situated in this sort of no man's land, my figures float, monolithic and almost spiritual in the pared down expanse of the water, caught between two places. The landscape of water serves to reflect the body or obscure the body. In the series *The Water Transforms Me*, my body is traced in various swimming positions. The filled in silhouettes hide any trace of gender and race, despite the very specific outline of my body. I explore the effect of the landscape and water on my body in *My Asian* and *My American*. I traced two outlines of myself onto canvas, painted it, and then filmed myself dragging the painting into the lake. I then swim around it, sink it, and drag it back and forth from the water to the shore. Prior bodies of work examined boundaries that were drawn from the landscape in my Texas neighborhood— different types of fence posts, dense groupings of bamboo. I draw on my longstanding interest in landscape to help me shape my compositions and to understand our relationship to the world. My most recent essay, *God's Land*, drew on the landscape of rural Maine and conversations I had with town residents to ask questions about our current political divide.



Install of The Water Transforms Me, graphite and ink on paper, dimensions variable, 2021



The Water Transforms Me, III, graphite and ink on paper, 80x96.5", 2021



The Water Transforms Me, IV, graphite and ink on paper, 96.5x40", 2021

Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/606635343>

Swimming in Graphite, video, 4:19, 2021

Documentation of a performance. Powdered graphite is scattered onto my drawing. I lay down and perform various swimming motions, scattering and drawing with the graphite.



Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/787647344>

My Asian and My American, video, 8:02, 2023

I

In the video, I drag a painting of my two selves into the water (My Asian and My American painting from the prior slide). The painting alternates between floating and sinking, and I swim around it, lay on it, and further grapple with the heavy, wet painting as I pull it in and out of the water. It interweaves the American folk song, Simple Gifts, with a poem that explores the splitting of my identity as an Asian American woman.





My Asian and My American (painting), oil paint on canvas, 110x65", 2023

The painting consists of two tracings of my body. It is also performed in the following video work, [My Asian and My American \(video\)](#).



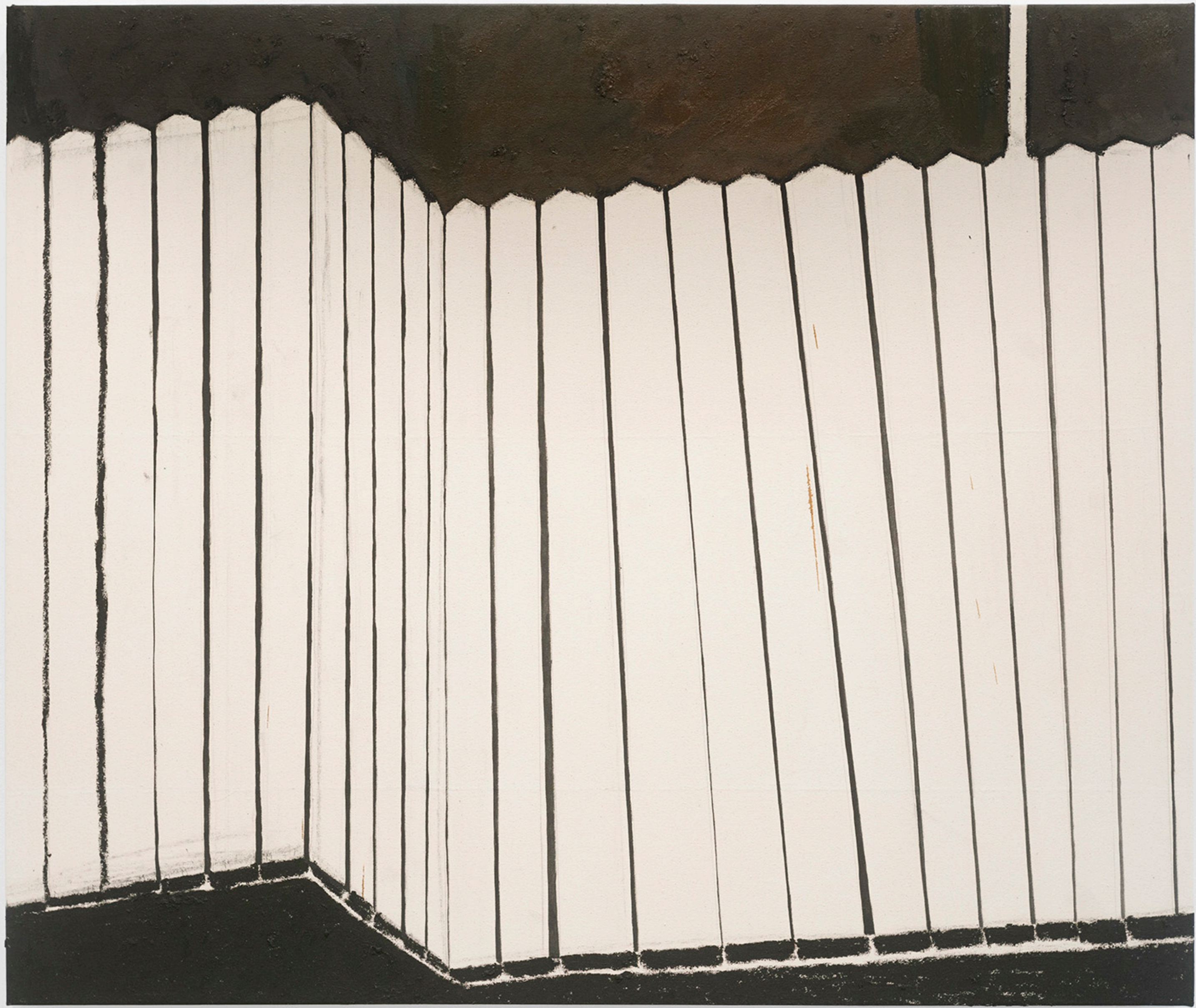
Picket Fence Portrait III, graphite on paper, 30x22", 2020



A Study of Fences Suite, ink and graphite on paper, dimensions variable, 2020



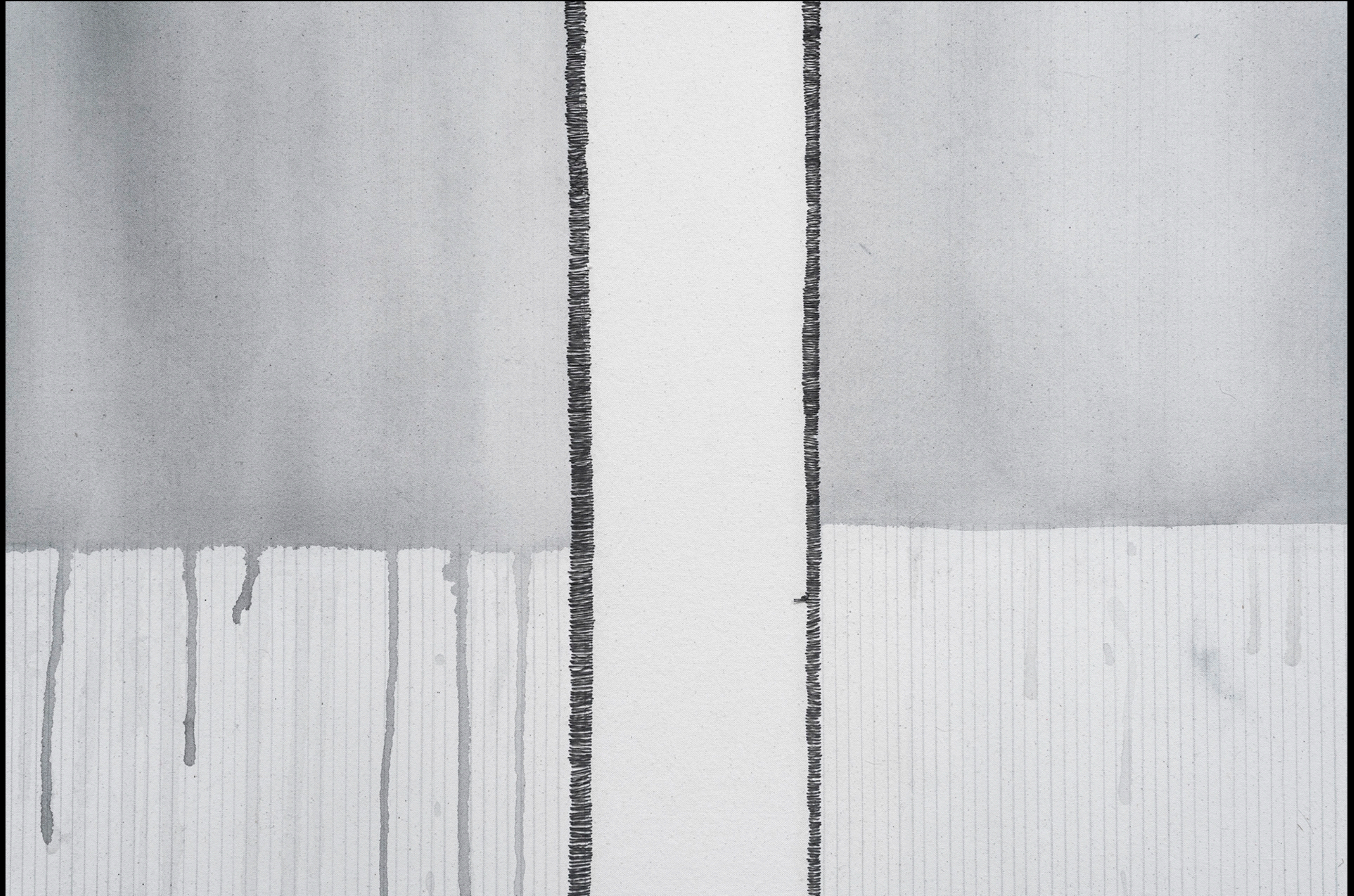
Artist Book *A Study of Fences*, risograph book, 9x12", 2021



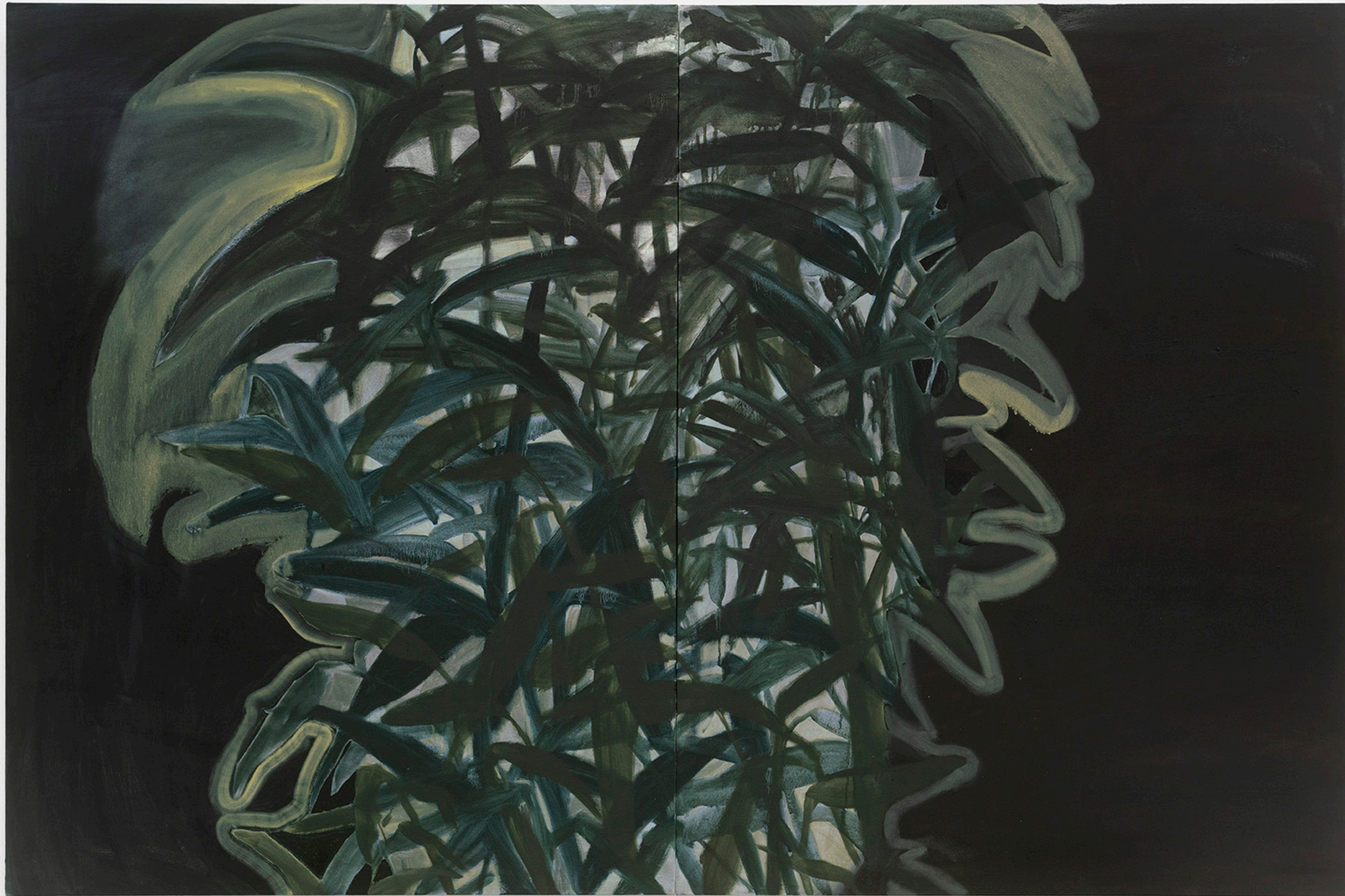
Suburbia, oil and graphite on canvas, 61x51.5", 2020



Barrier VII, ink, graphite, thread on canvas, 65.5x56.5", 2020



Barrier VII detail, ink, graphite, thread on canvas, 65.5x56.5", 2020



Barrier XI, oil paint on canvas, 72x48", 2020



Bamboo, Night, ink and oil paint on canvas, 60x40", 2020



Bamboo, Moonlight, oil paint on canvas, 27x34", 2021



Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/679567455>

Crossing the Sky, video, 3:19, 2021

The video toggles between the sky and a figure swimming back and forth in the pool. The lines that the swimmer's body makes as it crosses the pool repeatedly echo the line that a plane draws in the sky.

Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/767936706>

The Bathing of the Sphinx, video, 6:58,
made collaboratively with Rosa
Nussbaum, 2022

The Bathing of the Sphinx is an exhibition by artists Rosa Nussbaum and Renee Lai commissioned by the Elisabet Ney Museum in Austin, Texas.

The exhibition features an outdoor sculpture on the grounds of the museum and a video installation inside the museum itself. Both works interweave the bodies of artists Renee Lai and Rosa Nussbaum and their own fraught relationships with art, Texas and femininity, into Ney's own account of her life and struggles as a woman artist.

During Lai and Nussbaum's research, they discovered an account of a missing statue, in which Ney had depicted herself as a sphinx. In the work, this lost sphinx becomes the guide and proxy to Ney's enigmatic personal history.



Still from *The Bathing of the Sphinx*, installation shot, projection, acrylic paint on canvas, 109.5" x 72.5", 2022



Install shot of sculpture from *The Bathing of the Sphinx*, wood, paint, brick, plaster, mixed media, 100"x37", 2022



Exterior sculpture from *The Bathing of the Sphinx*, wood, paint, brick, plaster, mixed media, 100"x37", 2022



Sculpture reflection in the pond from *The Bathing of the Sphinx*, wood, paint, brick, plaster, mixed media, 100"x37", 2022