Clemente, Francesco. "Janaina Tschäpe by Francesco Clemente." *BOMB*. Winter 2018-2019.

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Janaina Tschäpe by Francesco Clemente

ShadowLake, 2012, casein and watercolor pencil on canvas, 138 × 112.5 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.

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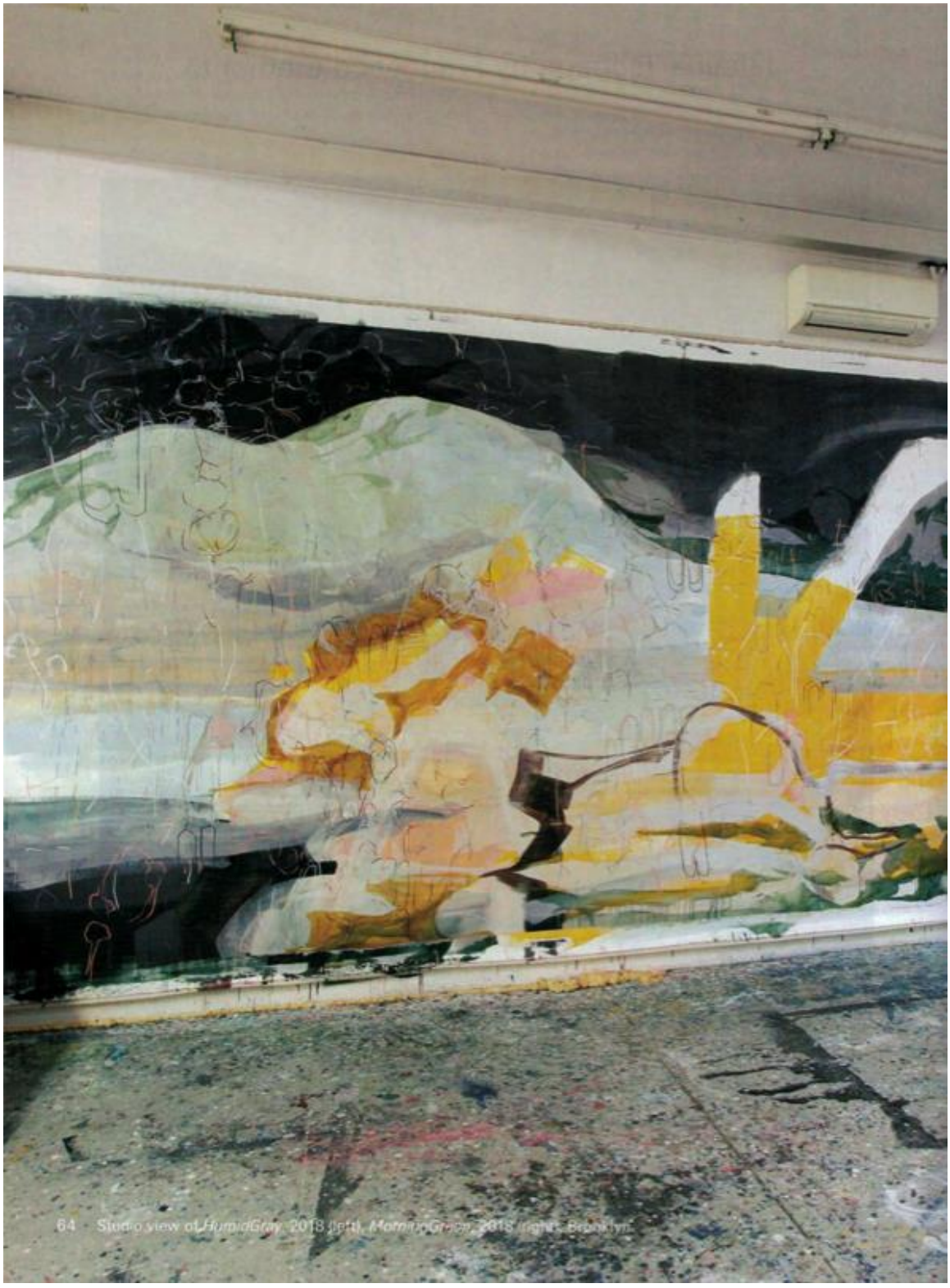

64 Studio view of *HumidGray*, 2018 (left), *MommyGreen*, 2018 (right), Brooklyn

Nature and its ever-shifting colors, shapes, and seasons play a central role in Janaina Tschäpe's works. In particular, water often serves as both her subject and her medium—not only for dynamic, large-scale paintings, but also for water-filled, water-bound sculptures and aquatic performances, many of which are staged on the seashores of Brazil.

The landscapes Tschäpe conjures in her paintings are as much exterior as they are interior psychic terrains that hold personal recollection as well as collective memory, along with local legends and universal lore. Through fluidity in image, gesture, and process Tschäpe evokes the changeability and impermanence of all life forms, including ourselves.

This past fall, painter Francesco Clemente visited Tschäpe's Brooklyn studio to see her latest work and to record this conversation.

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE You have an exhibition coming up. Is there a narrative to the paintings in the show?

JANAINA TSCHÄPE Yes. The show is at Sean Kelly Gallery and its title is *HumidGray and ShadowLake*. I've been thinking about the painting process and I realized how, for me, it's based on memory. Working toward this exhibition, I tried to understand how I start a painting. There is always the thought of color: I remember a situation, a day, a landscape, and it brings me to an image of a color I want to describe. Then I start with that color.

So all the paintings in this show are titled after colors. Mostly I make them up, like this one here is called *HumidGray* because I remembered a day when the sky was so dense, gray, and sort of sexy and sensual, and it was humid. That gray was the first color, the first memory, I put on the canvas, and then the process took me to other places. But there's no linear narrative, only fragments of memories precious to me.

FC But there's also a calligraphic element to the imagery, no?

JT Yes, the marks I make on top of the paint have a rhythm and movement to them that can be reminiscent of calligraphy. It's like they're dancing. I like to think about these marks as mapmaking. Once the paint is down, I start charting inscriptions of different thoughts and feelings with watercolor pencil, treating the landscape like a palimpsest that invites new narratives. This changes the composition's structure or orientation. It tilts the horizon line. The drawn elements might shift the perspective from a frontal landscape view to a view from above.

FC Is that also a way to distance the image from you, having this layer of signs?

66 *Melantropics*, 2018, performance in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Photos by the artist.

JT It is. It's almost like questioning the landscape, challenging that harmony because I think the paint itself, as a liquid, makes for a very soft and romantic narrative, and the drawing can impose a different gesture or feeling. It can feel like rain, or electricity, or make you think of an old cracked painting, or a ceiling in decay.

FC Are you still using milk paint?

JT Yes. Seeing milk paint in your studio years ago was groundbreaking for me. I've not stopped using it since. It can be very liquid but also super thick, and it has that beautiful matte quality.

FC Milk paint is water-based. What's your relationship with water as a Brazilian?

JT You know, my name, Janaina, means the goddess of the sea in the Candomblé religion. I was born in Germany at a time when my mother was longing to return to Brazil. She missed the landscape, the ocean, and the horizon line of her home country. So she named me Janaina to feel connected to home.

I was just in Brazil last weekend, doing a performance on the beach with a giant red-colored intestine-like object. It's 200 meters long, made of red fabric stuffed with balloons. Kids, grandparents, hundreds of people in their bathing suits grabbed sections of this enormous red tentacle and dragged it from the beach into the ocean and onto the rocks.

I find that when you enter water, your perception of yourself changes; you have a different weight and you float, suddenly free of gravity. And then there is, of course, all the mythology and folklore, and the religious understandings of water. Many of these traditions are local, but at the same time we are all connected by the ocean. It doesn't matter if you're in Brazil or America or Asia, there are certain emotions we share.

For me, water as a theme is a constant in my work—in film, performances, painting, and also making these watercolors here. In my performances, as I'm wet or immersing myself in water, I'm taken out of my habitual space and into a new realm that connects me to the past and also to a larger consciousness that we all share. In most cultures water is considered a place of healing and transformation, and in many it's seen as a supernatural region, full of beasts and sirens.

FC The Iemanjá in Brazil is the ocean's spirit—

JT She comes out of the ocean. Janaina is a name for Iemanjá. Her birthday is the second of February.

FC So water is in your destiny.

JT I think so. Iemanjá is a powerful deity and her story is fascinating and still resonates in Brazilian culture. As the story goes, she was very voluptuous, and she said to her husband, "If you ever laugh at my appearance, I will leave you forever." One day he comes home drunk and laughs at her big breasts, and she gets infuriated, leaves for the sea, and never comes back. We bring her gifts that have to do with vanity: mirrors and perfumes to appease her, to calm down the ocean for the fishermen. And to protect the land.

FC I've seen these offerings on the beaches in Brazil—lipsticks and combs.

JT Yes. I was always fascinated by this idea of the ocean as a portal to another world. The story of Bas Jan Ader's artwork *In Search of the Miraculous* had a profound effect on me. In this project, he set sail on his small boat *Ocean Wave* from Massachusetts to England. After several months, the boat was found somewhere near Ireland. His body was never recovered. He was driven by a great appetite for adventure, even risking tragedy, and a desire to surrender himself to the pathos of longing and forces that were greater than himself. This inspired me to go on my own journeys, including a couple of expeditions on ships. When you step on a boat and distance yourself from the shore, it feels like a renewal. You enter a different space.

FC In many mythological narratives, water is the way to the other world or what separates us from the other world. In India, looking for liberation, many go to die in Benares, or Varanasi, the city on the Ganges. Varanasi is on one bank of the river; the other bank is barren and empty and the emblem of the next world.

In the story of Gilgamesh, immortality is on the other side of the waters he had to cross.

JT Yes, just as experiencing a painting allows you to step into another reality.

FC What is your relationship with the scale of your paintings? I see two very large works here. About nine feet by thirteen, something like that?

JT Exactly. There are another three or four paintings of the same size that I made for this exhibition. Some of them are vertical. The large format challenges me in a couple different ways. First, in terms of the physical gesture: to be able to dominate a canvas that size, I'm forced to get out of my comfort zone. And second, it allows me to break the dialogue between the drawn and the painted elements—the size gives it a different dimension.

FC It liberates the drawing. It makes sure the drawing is not too tight, right?

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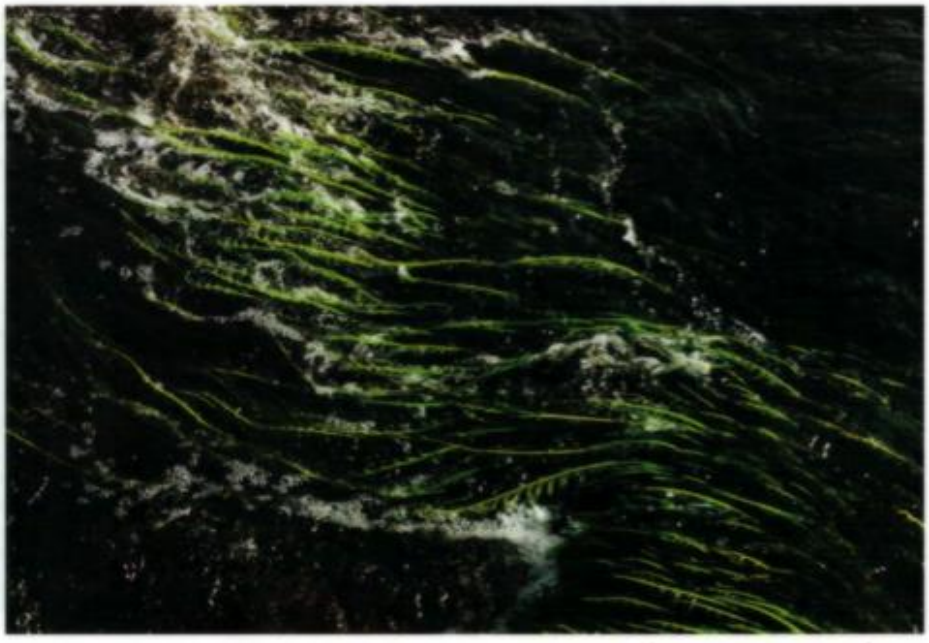

(i) *RoseMadder,* 2018, casein and watercolor pencil on canvas, 81 3/4 × 128 inches. Photo by Jason Wyche.
(ii) *Aquatica* (detail), 2014, chromogenic print, 14 × 24 inches.

JT Yes. The large size also transforms the landscape because you can get up close and become enveloped by it.

FC It also makes the landscape more abstract.

JT It makes it more abstract and that gives me more freedom in the process. There's always the challenge of having to break free from the circumstances of the world I've created and go somewhere else.

FC Which are the colors you consider the subject matter of your paintings in the studio here?

JT There's *HumidGray*. Here is *MorningGreen*. This is *RoseMatter*. Another one is called *ShadowLake*. There is one named *TickleMePink and PineGreen*. For my exhibition, I also made a series of large watercolors, titled *A Day's Color and Other Thoughts*. Last time you were here, we were talking about pigments and pigment sticks and various materials. As painters, in the search for the perfect pigment, we come across all these interesting names because every brand and language suggests their own interpretations of a color. In German, you have very poetic names for pigments and in English, they tend to be funny. In Brazil, there's a color I love called "the donkey when it runs away." (*laughter*) Which is basically when you mess up and start mixing colors, and they become this brown-gray nothing.

FC Yes, like the color of Rothko's black paintings. They look like what's left when you keep washing your brushes in turpentine. You get this kind of red-brownish soup. Last time I came to your studio, you had been traveling over water, a river, no?

JT Yes, I was in the Amazon.

FC How does your travel affect the paintings? And what's the central medium in your work: painting, photography, video, or sculpture?

JT I think things shifted quite a bit over time. About fifteen years ago, I was in a different place, doing more video performances and photography because I needed to distance myself from painting. I had finished art school and had this urge to remove myself from the studio space, physically and emotionally. I seemed to be losing myself too much in painting. I couldn't control it, and I couldn't get the distance I felt was needed. Film and photography taught me how to step back.

FC I see. So photography would be how you position yourself in the world. Painting is you taking a risk.

JT There's more privacy and intimacy in painting. The studio is kind of a womb. You are protected in there and free to explore all kinds of ideas and idea fragments. For a painting you're the only creator, mostly. It's almost like a diary. Photography and video often involve other people for post-production and a distance comes in and you see things in a more conceptual way, detached from emotion. I benefited from this distance. I needed it as a balance to painting, which can be quite intimidating.

I took some time after university to travel, and to perform and document myself. The performances were about metamorphosis in nature—in a way, losing myself in nature. The direction I had been pushed in at school was to deal with identity. But then I just kept losing my identity to the enormity and power of the landscape. I ended up bringing all these thoughts back to the studio and processing them through painting.

I don't know how you deal with this in your own practice—when you come back to your studio and the paintings dictate your life. It's a very powerful and intimate dynamic.

FC Well, it is manual labor, it is physical. Once I asked a Buddhist monk, "Does it make a difference if I contemplate your deities or if I contemplate my own paintings? Isn't that the same activity?" And he said, "Yes, it is the same activity. But if you contemplate [what in Buddhist tradition they call] a worthy object, you're safe. If you contemplate your own paintings, the paintings may take over your life in unexpected ways." (*laughter*) I think you're talking about that.

JT Exactly!

FC You needed some kind of protection from your own perceptions.

JT I think video and photography gave me that protection.

FC Do you feel connected to a lineage of certain artists in Brazil? It's such a specific and strong tradition, and so insular in a way. Was there someone in the beginning who inspired you or triggered your wish to be an artist?

JT Actually, I was living in Germany as a teenager. When I discovered that it was not just me drawing at home but that there was a lot of art out there, I took particular interest in German Expressionism, especially Emil Nolde and his watercolors. As a fifteen-year-old, I went on a trip to visit his home in northern Germany; his practice of reflecting upon nature, both from within the confines of his studio and by painting outside, left a big impression on me. I was mostly drawn to painting at this point, and Germany with its rich history in painting offered a lot of inspiration. Later on, when I moved to Brazil in 1994, I started to discover body- and performance-related work. Tunga

The direction I had been pushed in at school was to deal with identity. But then I just kept losing my identity to the enormity and power of the landscape.

was a good friend of mine and our contact gave me a chance to witness artmaking in a Brazilian context. I was inspired by the intense materiality of his sculptures as well as by his performances. I remember his amazing performance *Seeding Mermaids*, for which he made a mold of his head and then threw it into the ocean. He influenced me in many ways, including in much of my own sculpture.

FC Tunga looked more at European art than American art.

JT Yes, in Brazil, we all looked a lot to Europe. Then I learned about the work of women artists, especially Lygia Clark, who was an important influence while I developed my own performances. Her work helped me to situate myself because, coming from Germany, I was exposed to the works of Joseph Beuys, Sigmar Polke, Gerhard Richter, Henning Christiansen, and Martin Kippenberger. In Brazil, art history includes more female artists, like Tarsila do Amaral, Lygia Clark, and Lygia Pape. A lot of their work makes me feel very connected and comfortable. Then, in Rio, I started looking at landscape architects, like Roberto Burle Marx and his gouaches.

FC They are wonderful, I know. Burle Marx is a very inspiring figure. The gouaches are obviously more immediate than his paintings, but the paintings also feel quite direct.

JT His gouaches are like maps, and they are organic but also abstract. And the way he integrated architecture into nature and composed the coastline, it's pretty mind-blowing. I was looking at a lot of his work—the biomorphic shapes and almost Surrealist elements, reminiscent of Miró's, but also early Agnes Martin. You can definitely see Marx's influence in my paintings. Marx's paintings were parks and his parks were paintings. He was all about the landscape. So was Agnes Martin, in a different way.

FC Tell me about this painting here.

JT *MorningGreen* was the first piece I started for my show and the last one I finished. I struggled a lot. For a couple of months, it was war between me and the painting. I kept breaking the composition, and I kept going back into it with drawing and then painting over the drawing, and then redrawing. But others, like this one, *RoseMadder*, I did in a couple of days. Sometimes painting feels like playing an instrument, a very immediate process. And suddenly, after you've trained for years, you manage to make one brushstroke that just defines what you most want in your work. In *RoseMadder*, I wanted to leave that visible. Other times it's not about a perfect brushstroke; it's about layering and a certain type of storytelling. The drawings on top of *RoseMadder* generate a different dialogue than in other works—you can distance yourself more from the painting. The drawn marks don't reinforce the paint but kind of question it.

FC The paint seems slightly more liquid than in other works. More liquid paint also means you moved across the canvas quicker.

JT I had to, otherwise the paint all runs down, which I also love. I embrace these challenges.

FC You don't paint things flat on the ground, do you?

JT No.

FC You want to see the entire canvas, observe what's going on.

JT In this large size, it would be hard to paint on the floor because I would have to move around the canvas. As you said, I like to see it while it's happening, to have an overview. But I had to train myself to work fast.

FC That may connect to your performance practice. This fast way of painting is also a performance.

JT Yes, it is. It's very physical. My video performances all take place outside. They happen without rehearsal and sometimes quite spontaneously. Whatever occurs will be included in the performance—if it's raining, the rain becomes part of it. This is also true of the work I do in the studio. I allow chance to come in, but I feel more in control. I can make rain, just as I can make the rain disappear. Likewise, if there is an accident—a drip, or a stain, or whatever—I will work with it.

FC Do you select the palette of the painting before you start?

JT Well, as I mentioned earlier, I kind of brainstorm about an emotion on a particular day, in a certain landscape, and it all gets mixed up. Then I try to translate that into a color. So most of the time, I have a palette in my head. *RoseMadder*, for example, started with a memory that triggered the color rose, which then made me think of a mangrove. There's a kind of synesthesia

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(i) *Arco Naturale* (from: *100 Little Deaths*), 1999, chromogenic print, 31 × 47 inches. (ii) *Naiad 2* (from: *Blood, Sea*), 2004, chromogenic print, 30 × 40 inches.

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at play—a memory sparks a color, and then a sort of Proustian effect drives me from one color to another without much thought or reason. I often think of mangroves. I once walked for ten days through a mangrove in the northeast of Brazil. Because of the way the light breaks, you find unique colors: there's a sort of muddiness but then you also have all these flashy little red crabs. It's interesting what memory can do to colors in the process of painting.

FC Do you ever paint from photographs?

JT Never. I like what can be done with re-membered landscapes, putting memory "members" or fragments together in your mind.

FC So the trigger is an actual landscape, and then you construct another landscape inside of it, an emotional landscape, a sort of inner vision.

JT Yes. My recollection of a place is likely to be quite different from the actual landscape. It depends on my emotional experience of that day, on the weather, the people I was with, and all kinds of other influences. Like Borges said, I'm all of the people I've met and all the places I've been to, and these experiences find their way into my work in the form of ephemera and fragments.

When I was in the Amazon, filming and looking at the footage afterward helped me develop ideas. But when I paint, I never consider these images because I'm trying to get to the essence of a landscape in my mind. What are the parts my memory wants to hold onto? Is it the trees' reflection in the river or the line dividing water and forest? Is it the darkness or the muddy red tone of the water? Painting helps me to think these things through.

FC In video, there's a temporal layering. Looking for emotion, you have to choose one layer. But in painting you can break the layer, and the emotion, by distancing yourself from it with the mark-making on top of the paint.

JT The marks are often repetitive. Some are caresses, others are more violent and disturb the surface of the painting. Some just want to reinforce it.

FC It's not calligraphy as I called it earlier. It's more a marking like in the ancient, earliest manifestations of painting, when people made marks on rock.

JT They marked a happening, like the chasing of an animal, and they recorded different symbols. What we see in cave paintings, in a sense, is the development of human consciousness being recorded.

FC Because there are no human figures in your paintings, the marks could be seen as their tracks. They signal that there is not just the landscape; there is also somebody looking at the landscape or walking into the landscape.

JT Exactly. The drawn marks can feel like energy, or electricity, or rain. I don't stretch my paintings until they are complete because I can't apply the drawn marks on stretched canvas—I would pierce through the surface with my pencil. So I staple the canvas flat onto the studio wall and it feels like I'm making a wall painting, or a cave painting. (*laughter*)

People trapped on islands or in prison will etch marks into any surface to count time. It's a primitive way to delineate our existence. Painting gives me a sense of hope, like I'm painting and drawing my way out of prison one notch at a time. I feel the same way about water. Only a powerful force like water can give you a sense of freedom that's worth anything. So the ocean, the primordial soup, is part of my consciousness. Water makes appearances in all of my work. When I look at one of my paintings, I'm seeing my consciousness in color.

FC *ShadowLake*, *HumidGray*. They are different manifestations of water.

JT I'm fascinated by the way things reflect on water and how a water surface changes through color. The Amazon is so brown and dense because of all the trees that decompose in it. *ShadowLake* is the sum of the color of that water and the reflections in the river through my memory.

FC A Mãe-de-santo from Salvador I used to visit here in Brooklyn once said to me, "Francesco, when you look at water, always remember that the water is looking back at you." I think, as a painter, you know this. Because when you look at a painting, the painting looks back at you too.