

MARY BETH MCKENZIE

A LIFE IN ART

Erie Art Museum
July 13 - September 24, 2018



A Note from the Artist

As you view my work, I invite you to connect with my paintings, my subjects, and me without prejudice. I work from life because I want a direct response to color and shape, and a direct interaction with the subject. I would like you to appreciate the process—the hundreds of hours of work behind each painting, and the time it takes an artist and a model to develop the symbiotic relationship that makes a painting possible.

In a world that is neither honest nor simple, I hope that when you see my work, you see life as I see it: unclouded by agenda, moment by moment, and one stroke at a time.

-Mary Beth McKenzie

Mary Beth McKenzie: A Life in Art

Erie Art Museum, July 13 – September 24, 2018

For Mary Beth McKenzie (American, b. 1946), painting is a way to see and understand the world. She works intuitively, starting with a visually exciting idea and then finding her way to the finished canvas one brush stroke at a time. She is motivated simply by “the exhilarating and exhausting act of painting.”

When I paint, I lose all sense of time. I'm not making a statement or crafting a message. I'm composing an experience of color and form. At the same time, my paintings are deeply personal reflections of my own life and my interactions with my subjects.

McKenzie's intimate portraits offer windows into her world and the inner lives of her subjects. She paints from life, avoiding the camera's flattening perspective, focusing on herself, her students, friends, and family. Around and behind her models are her studio walls, paintings, furniture, and the Manhattan skyline outside the windows. “I like having a dialog between the outside and inside within the same painting,” she explains.

Prior to starting a canvas, McKenzie paints a quick color study to work out her idea. Then, she uses thumbnail sketches to focus and balance the main elements. She constructs her compositions like a sculptor: building an armature of active lines, adding planes of color, and then carving back through the negative space. She reveals volume, space, and expressions with dabs and slashes of paint, carefully observing color, quality of light, essence of gesture. Although she hopes to express “something on a deeper level about my experience of life,” this is not a conscious aim while she is working. “When I paint, my involvement is with color and form, abstract relationships and patterns.”

There is always a self-portrait in process, both because McKenzie is her own most convenient and patient model and because it frees her to take chances. She notes, “You have models for a limited time. You have yourself forever.” The self-portraits can take many months to complete; each day she arrives with a new perspective. “I may have worked on one small self-portrait for 6,000 hours. I think every self-portrait has a hundred different self-portraits underneath.”

McKenzie's paintings communicate a sense of time and space in their layers, their focused stillness, and, collectively, through repeated depictions of the same models over many years. In contrast to the ephemeral digital images that mark our moment, her work invites slow contemplation and creates awareness of our embodied experience of the world.

Susan Barnett: Curator, Erie Art Museum, July, 2018



MARCSI (with arms crossed) 51" X 26"



BENAT 64" X 48"



I like painting people sleeping because they are in a state of total abandon, without pretense.

SLEEP (Christina and Benat) Oil 2011 48" X 60"



I love form. There is nothing more beautiful than the human form, and nothing more beautiful than a line that brings out a form. Many of my paintings are life sized nudes.

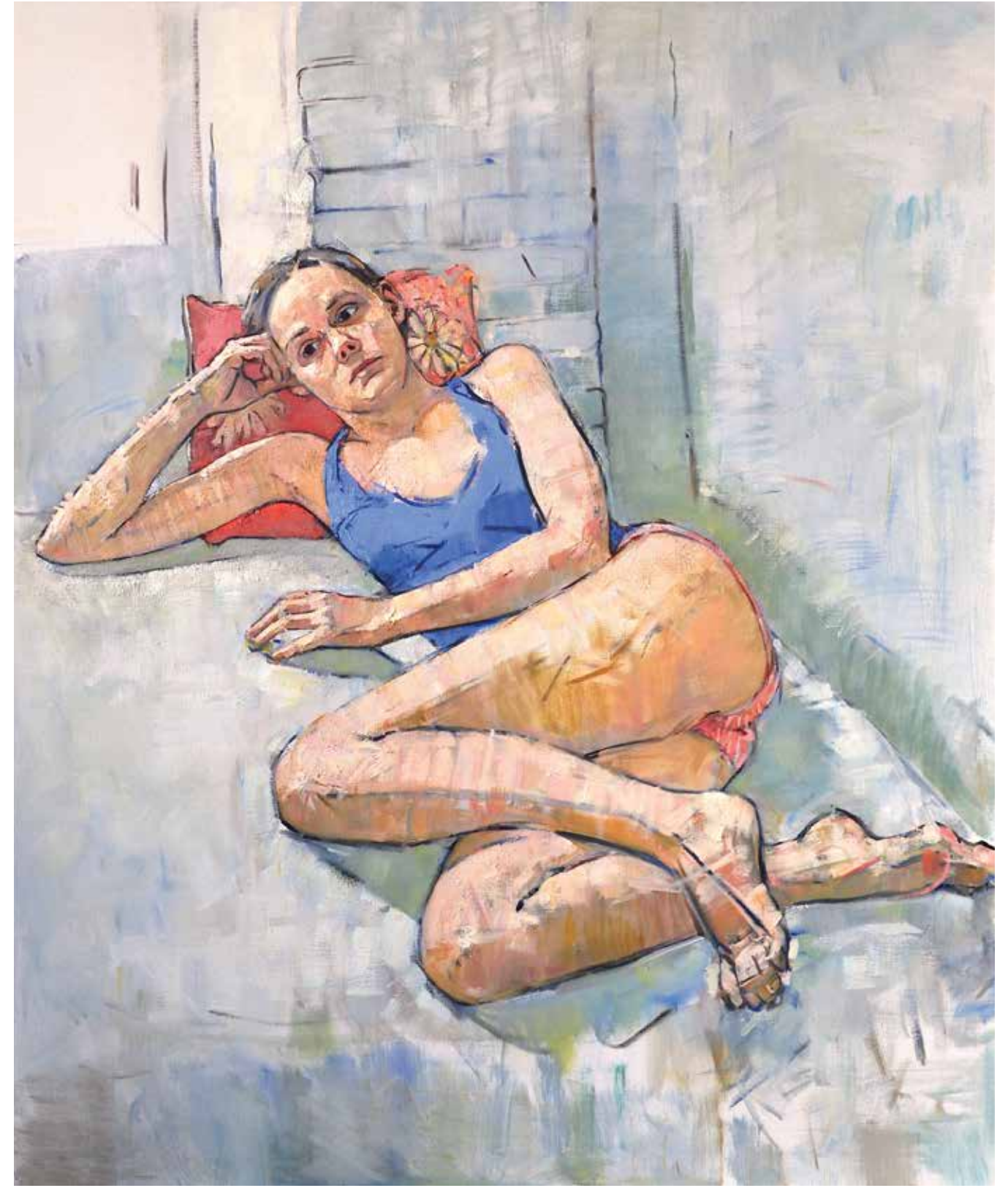
MERY (two figures) Oil 2005 50" X 60"



CHRISTIAN AND IVY 51" X 64"



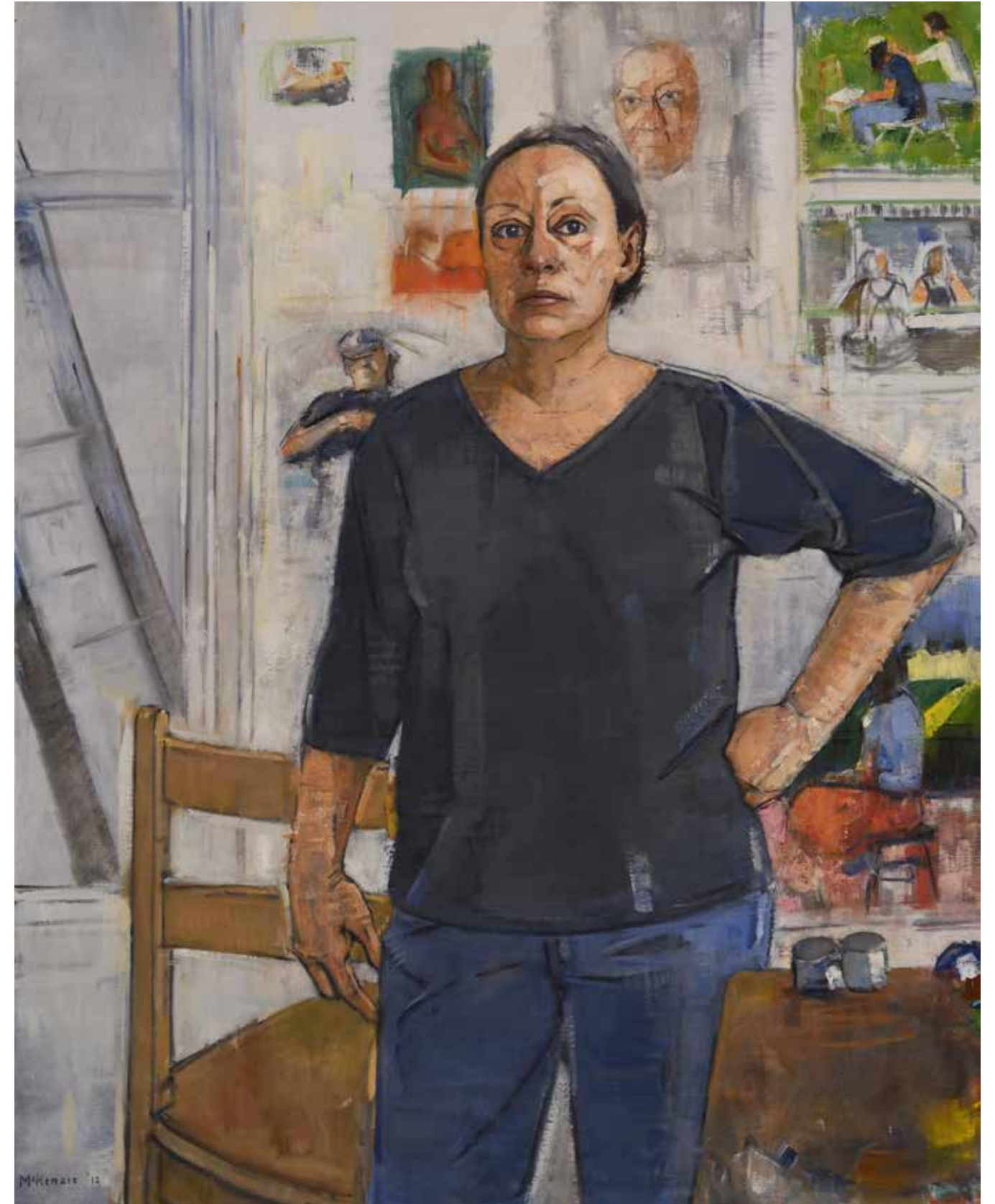
IVY (green wicker chair) 64" X 48"



IVY (blue Shirt) Oil 2012 64" X 48"



SELF-PORTRAIT (seated with palette) 44" X 42"



SELF-PORTRAIT (Studio wall) 50" X 40"



BACK NUDE (loft interior) 82" X 45"



MODEL STAND (bass player) 30" X 40"



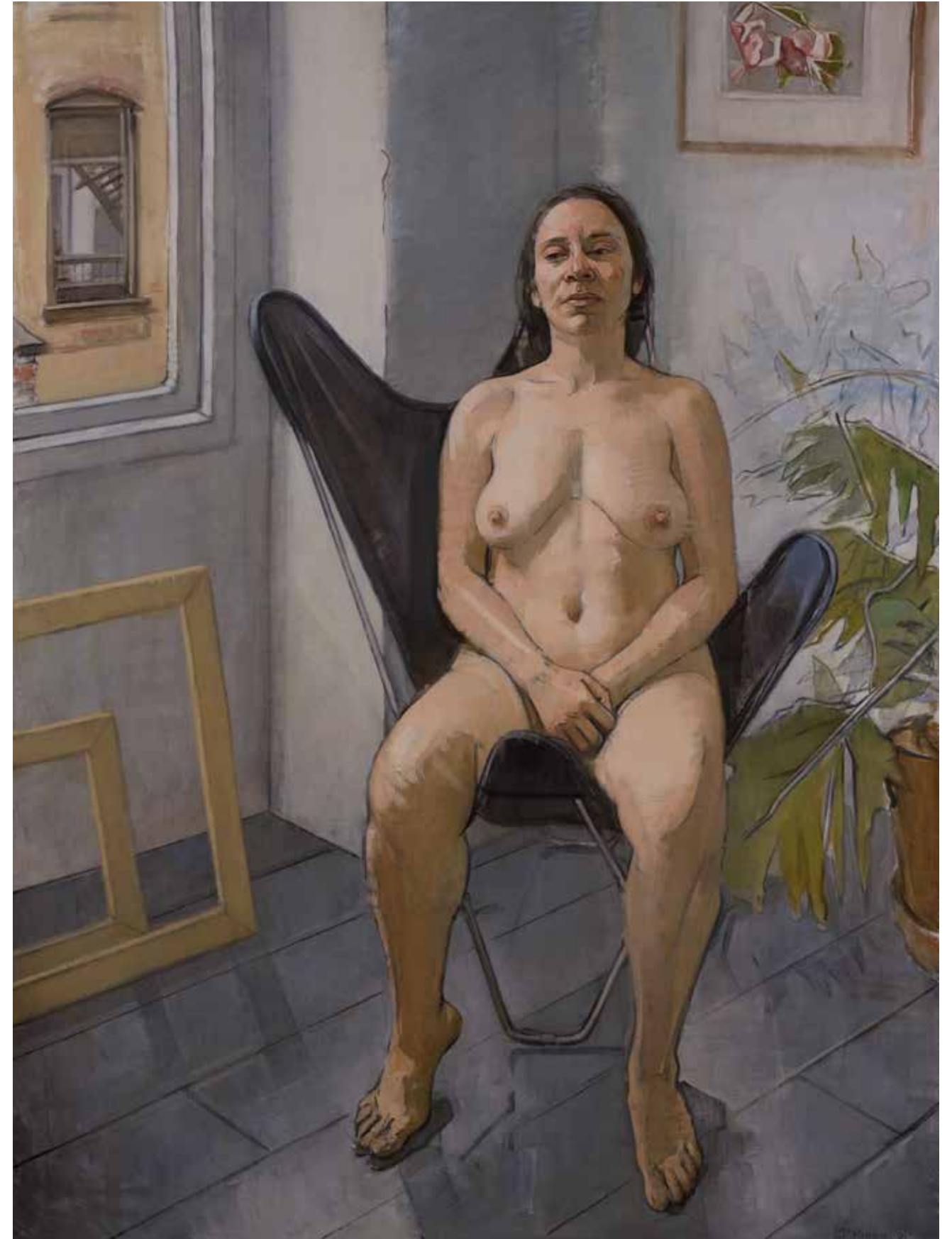
CONVERSATION (Maria and Mery) 44" X 42"



JACK (red background) 22" X 23"



NEW YORK WINDOW 73" X 56"



MERY (butterfly chair) 64" X 48"



AMINA AND MAURISE 50" X 60"



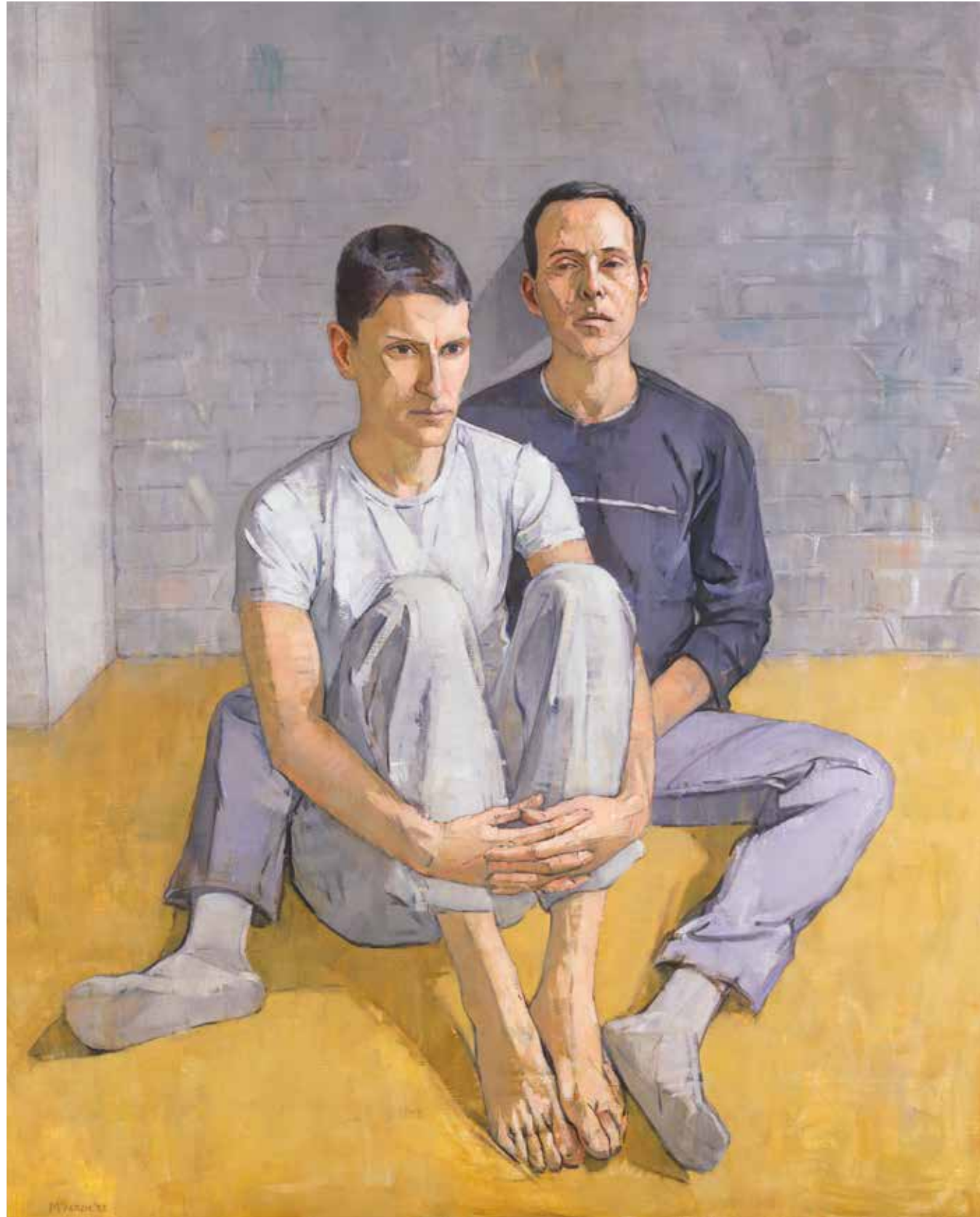
SISTERS (Tanya and Irene) 50" X 66"



JAZZ GUITAR PLAYER 56" X 44"



MARCSI (lilacs) 31" X 24"



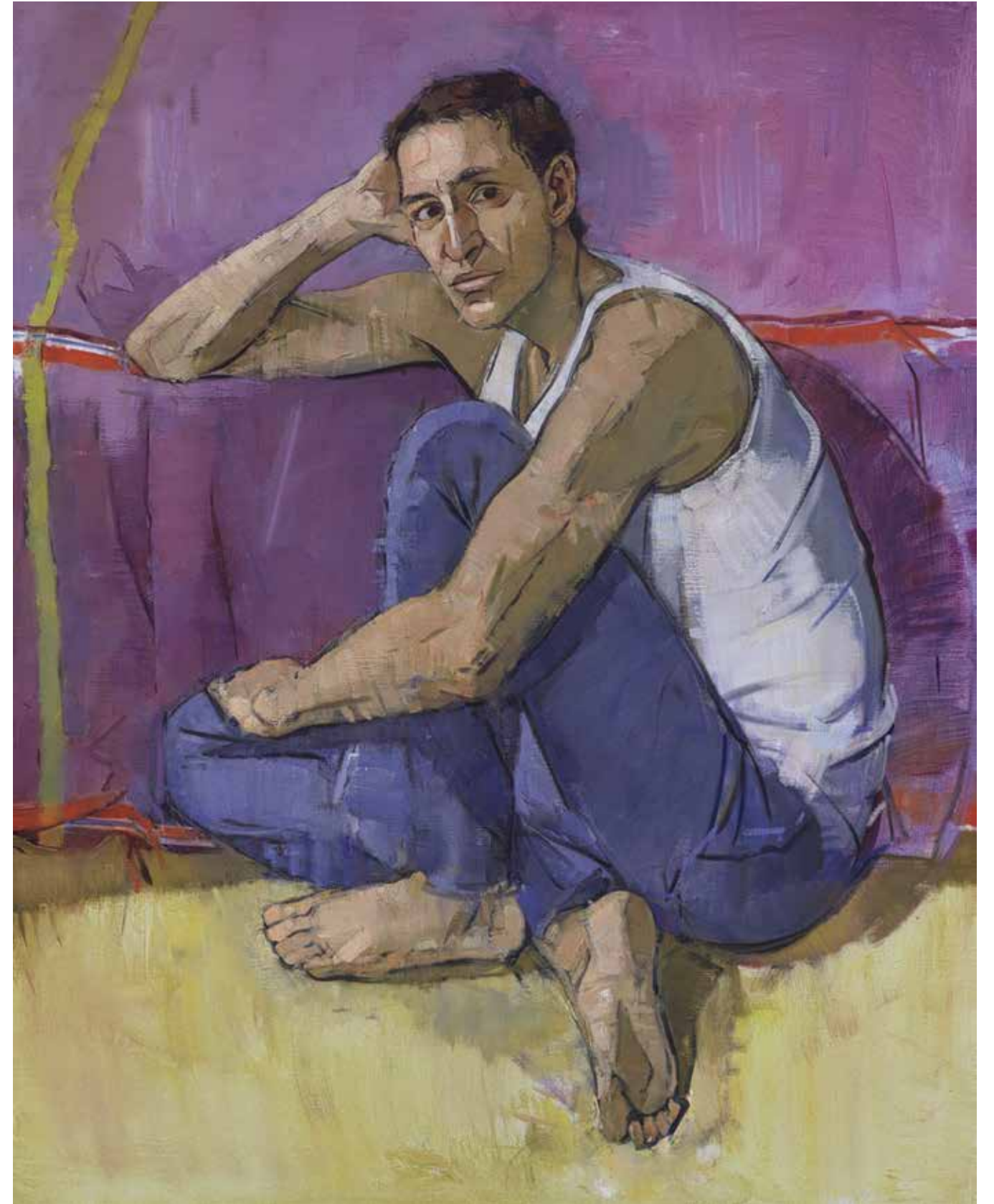
COUPLE (Bob and Rich) 64" X 48"



RENEE (mirror) 50" X 45"



IVY (hands and feet) 50" X 34"



ANDREW 50" X 40"



SELF-PORTRAIT (striped sweater) 16" X 13"



CHRISTINA (striped sweater) 44" X 42"



HELLS KITCHEN 50" X 40"



DANCER (red dress) 54" X 48"

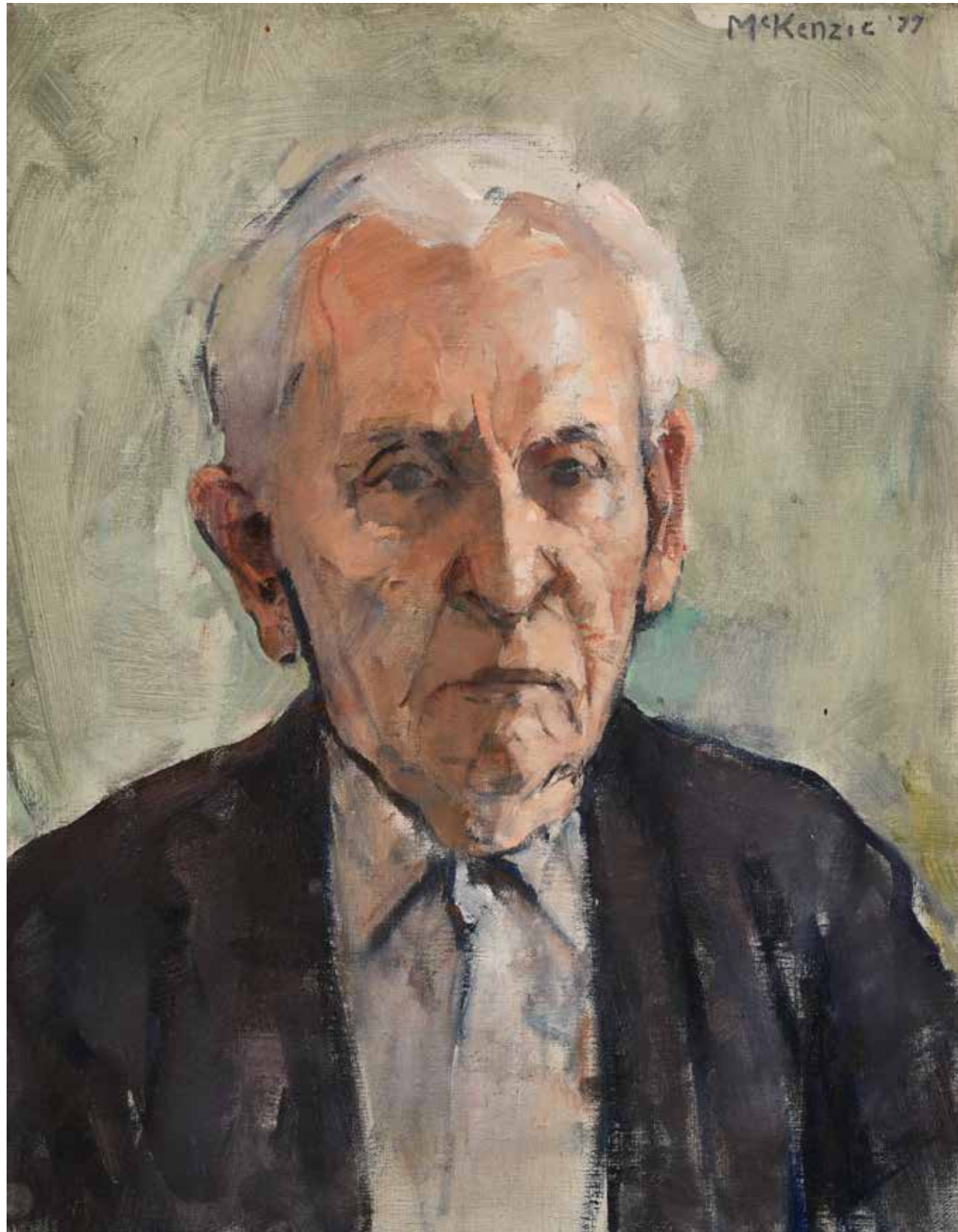


My younger daughter, Marcsi, brought a self-portrait home from school and I loved it. I was fascinated with the colors and simple geometric shapes. The self-portrait hangs behind her and inspired this painting.

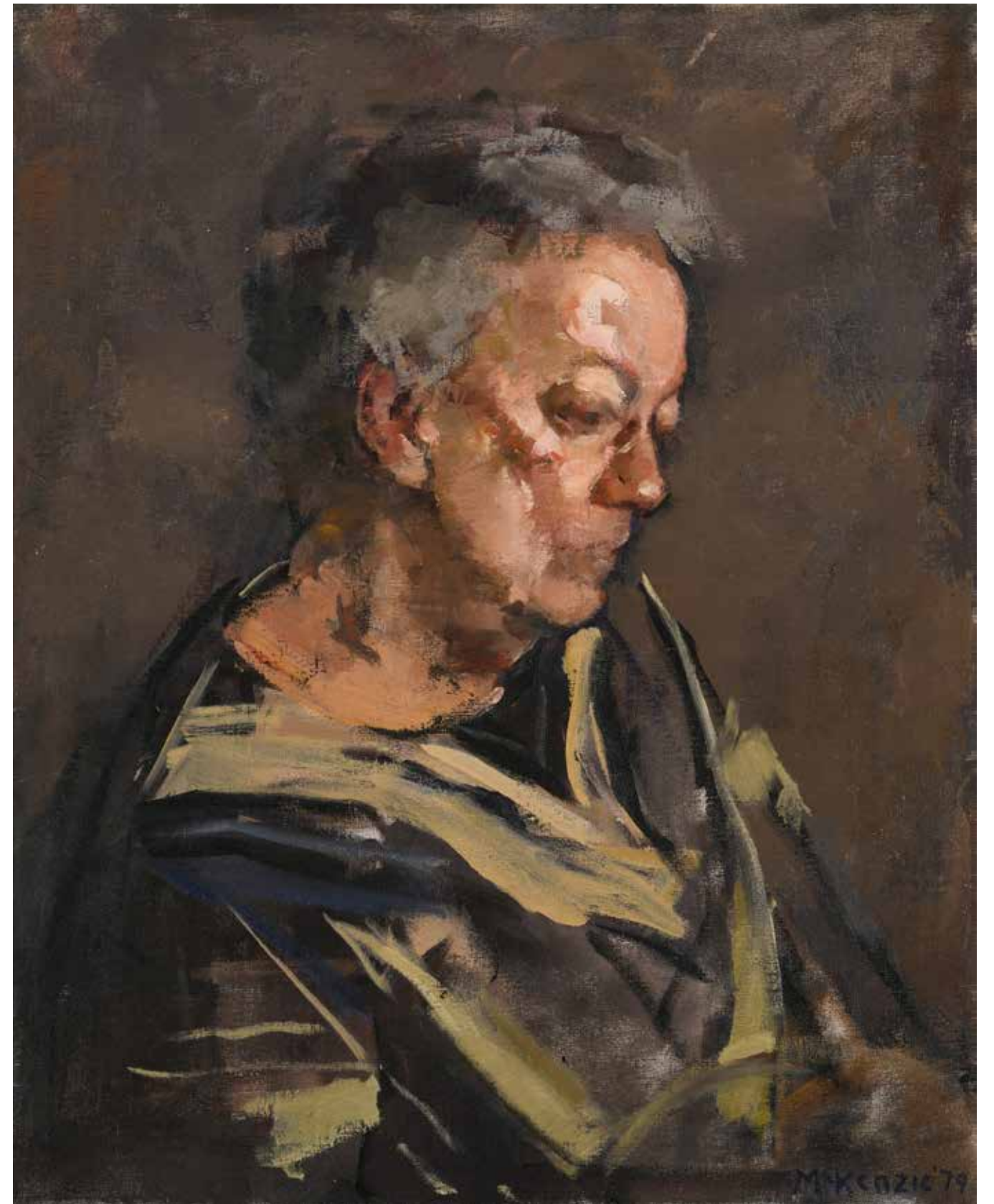
MARCSI (self-portrait) 35" X 30"



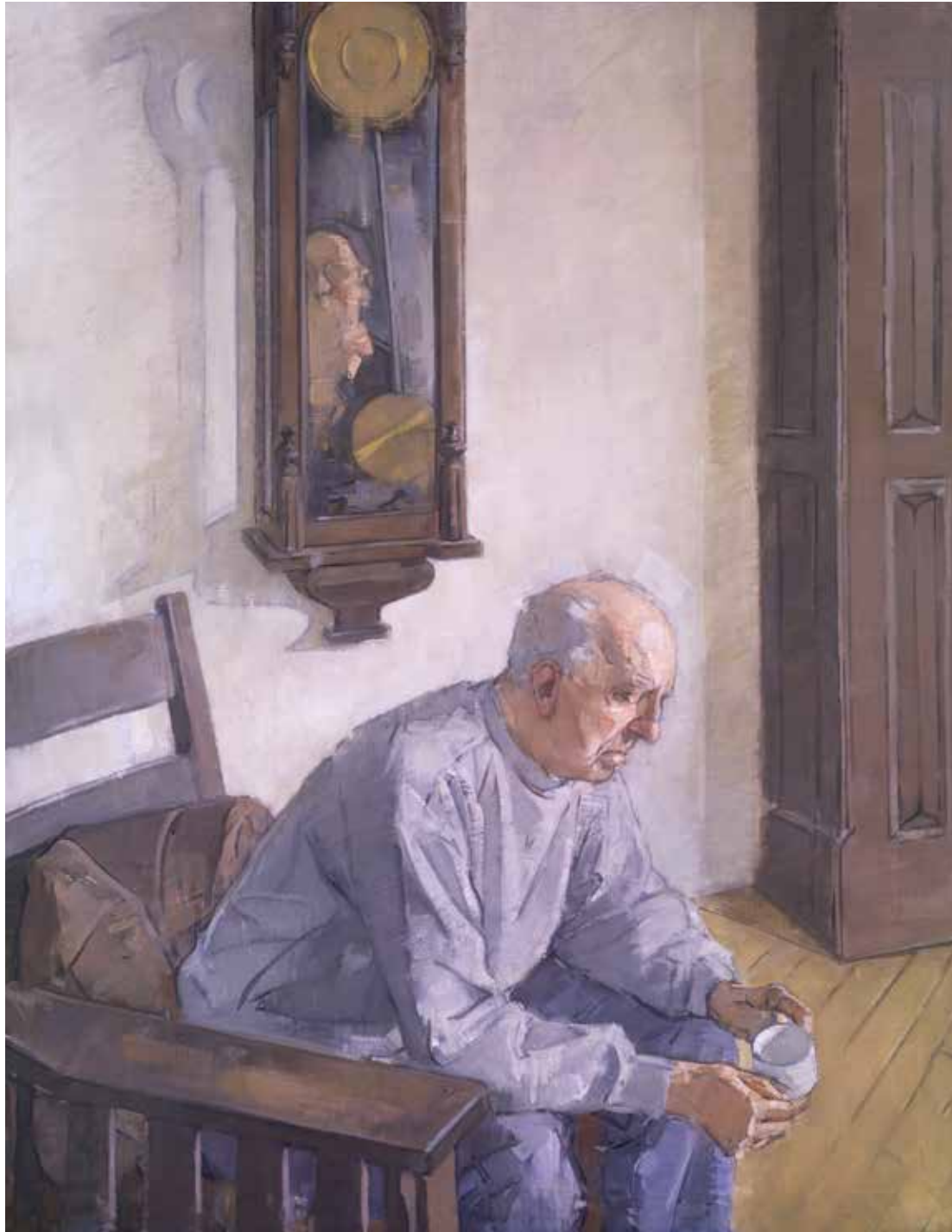
MARCSI, ZSUZSA AND PIP 43" X 50"



MY FATHER (sweater) 18" X 14"

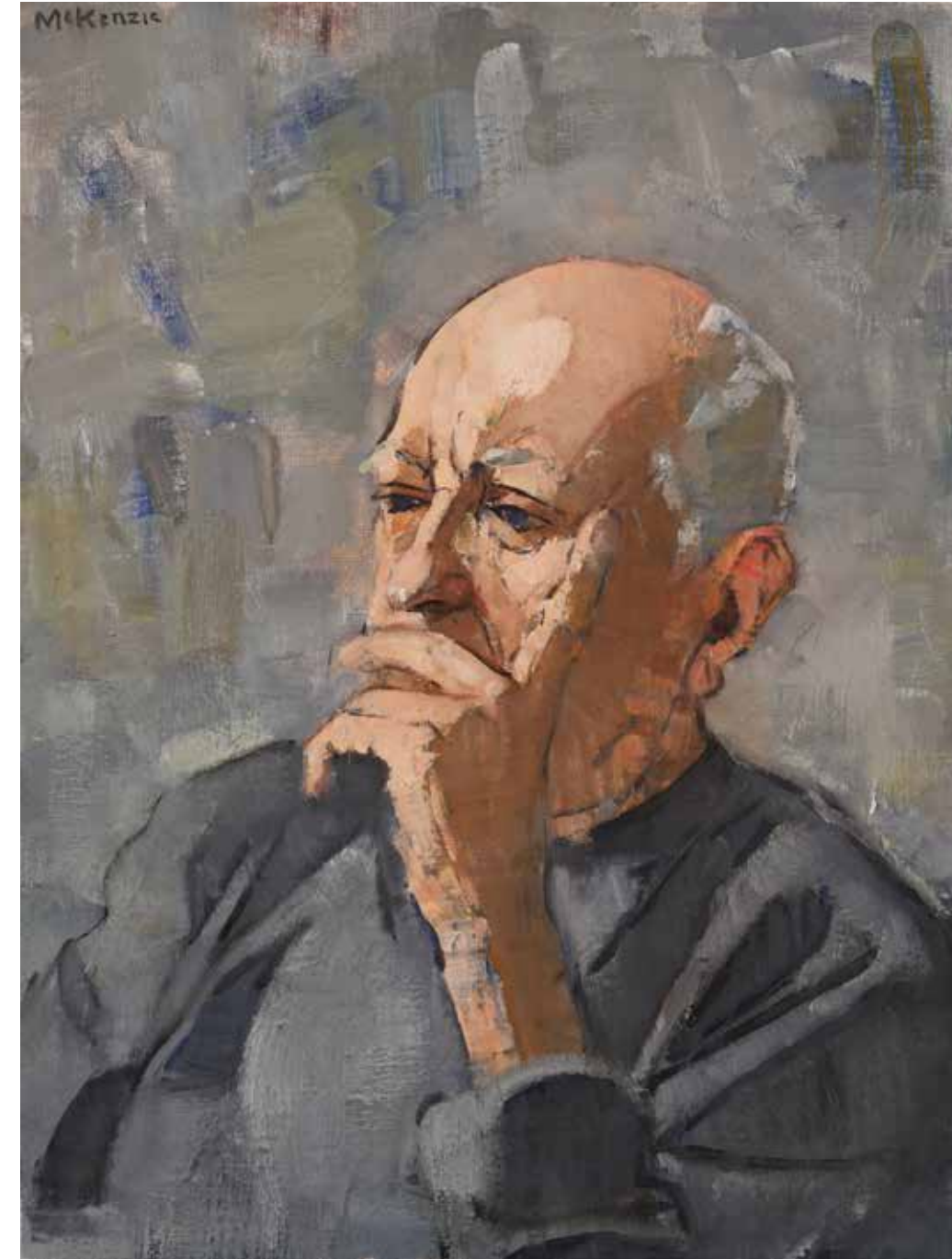


MY MOTHER (striped top) 20" X 16"



While I am painting I am not thinking about what the painting will say to someone else. I am focused on color, shape, and relationships. Later I may discover a deeper psychological content, or someone may point it out to me. In this painting, it is clear to me now that my self-portrait in the clock represents the 21-year age difference between my husband and myself.

TONY (self-portrait in clock with coffee cup) 60" X 48"



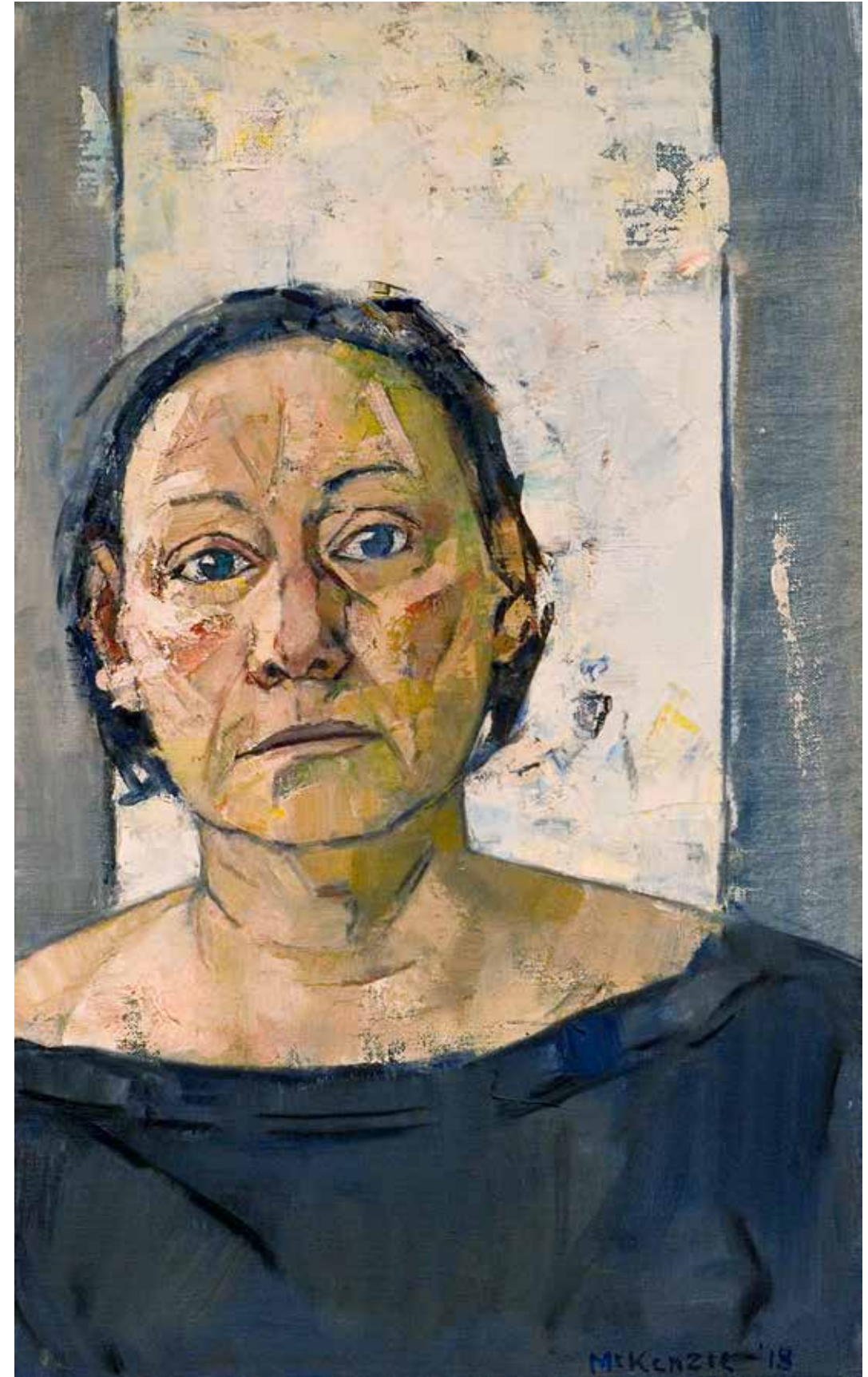
Basically you paint your life. This is probably true for every painter, and perhaps inevitable. My husband was never eager to pose, but over the years I have done a number of paintings of him. I am fond of this painting because I feel him in it.

TONY (hand up) 24" X 18"



This very confrontational painting conveys the intensity and strength of character of my daughter, Zsuzsa.

ZSUZSA (in plaid shirt) 24" X 18"



SELF-PORTRAIT (white background) 20" X 12"



LIZ (marble fireplace) 79" X 59"



