

Arrivals & Departures

ARTURO RODRIGUEZ



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SALAMATINA GALLERY PRESENTS

Arturo Rodríguez: Arrivals and Departures

Rhythm is a perception of time. The repetition of the pattern of this wicker chair is a rhythm. The fatigue of one's hand as one draws is a perception of time. Picasso

Marc Andr Robinson's exhibition provides a highly personal and memorable perception of time. Marc is a very special and unique artist and I have had the good fortune to watch him flourish and mature. The concept of the current show was born through our collaborations, and was shaped by numerous conversations, as well as studio visits, that we have shared over the past few years.

Marc is mostly known and recognized by his large sculptural assemblages, but few know the essence of these complicated and extraordinary works – the artist's drawings and studies. I was privileged during a recent studio visit, to closely examine these preparatory materials in their entirety and to unearth, virtually layer by layer, the tremendous physical and psychological demands that Marc has placed upon himself. Nothing can describe the intensity of this experience.

To me, Marc is an artist who digs deep and constantly questions both his world and himself.

It is only through these drawings that the artist's true intention can be fully understood. It is also through these drawings and extraordinary works – that the artist's profound influences – philosophy, social history, music and art – can be fully realized and appreciated. Within the 21st century, several talented artists have transformed found objects into sculptural masterpieces which celebrate the detritus of today. Rauschenberg used trash; Chamberlain old automobiles. Robinson reconfigures cast-off furniture into astoundingly beautiful rhythms of time. With their distinct references to consumerism, politics, racial identity and interpersonal relations, these works speak directly and from the heart. This exhibition is the very first to reveal what lies behind and within that power and it shows who the true genius is.

Oksana Salamatina
Director



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ALEJANDRO ANREUS, PH.D.*

On Leaving and Arriving: The Recent Paintings of Arturo Rodríguez

I Painting was declared to be on its deathbed in the 1970s. Since then, a few so-called doctors (art critics) have pronounced it dead. A visit to the majority of galleries in Chelsea usually confirms this; at these minimal and elegant funeral parlors we encounter cold, clean corpses hanging on the walls. I am an old fashioned guy who believes in God, the power of poetry, the fierce beauty of women and that painting is alive and well and fooling the so-called doctors. Arturo Rodríguez is one of a handful of subversives that lives to paint and keeps painting alive.

II I have had the good fortune to have written on the paintings of Arturo Rodríguez. For years we have been talking of collaborating on a portfolio of his prints and my poems. I have been following his work since the 1980s. It is painting in the best and grandest sense, born of tradition and hard work, of jazz-like improvisation and courageous innovation. For two years he wrestled with intense and overwhelming pictures in his Caravaggio project series. Now, this most recent corpus of pictures

breaks away from the broken bodies of baroque darkness and moves the viewer into the light of leaving and arriving.

III **Departures and Arrivals** is an ongoing series of oils on canvas that range in scale from the tiny to the monumental. At first glance they seem to be pictures of airports, their parking lots, and a handful of train stations. Closer examination reveals that they are much, much more than that. The palette ranges from bluish grays to soft pinks, dense ochre and Turner yellows. The whites are bold and sharp flashes of light that open up and break the compositional surface. Occasionally powdery blue disrupt the melancholic color of these pictures. Throughout all of these works the drawing is simple and direct, bringing to mind the Japanese masters or the gorgeous scribbles of a Jules Pascin.

In all of these pictures people are departing, waiting or arriving. Sometimes in groups, mostly singly, and at times many figures depicted as “being alone together. A woman embraces a man. A child waits in solitude. An elderly

“The melancholy of suitcases.”

JULIO CORT ZAR

man wearing a tie seems lost in a vast concourse. Escalators move the figures up or down. Many figures seem to be floating in moveable walkways. In the backgrounds we see planes landing and taking off, half empty parking lots, and skies, lots of skies that are both frightening and beautiful in their emptiness.

The color schemes, painterly strategies and emotional depth of these pictures by Rodríguez remind me of only two artists: late Corot and Morandi. This family resemblance is achieved by the force of the painterly language that all three share, where the entire coloristic structure is charged and held together by a silvery gray. This endows the pictures with what I can only define as a melancholic lucidity; where mental distance and clarity are balanced by the sadness of the world.

The late Julio Cortázar uses in an essay the phrase *The melancholy of suitcases*. I believe by this that he referred to the sadness of the objects we carry our few belongings in, our broken histories as we move from place to place, temporarily or permanently. There

are a few literal depictions of suitcases in this series of Rodríguez paintings. For the Cuban exile that Rodríguez is, the suitcase (or its absence), acquires a meaning deeper than Cortázar's phrase. One suitcase was the only thing allowed to take when fleeing the island; a paradoxical object which is both a painful reminder of what has been lost and an icon of stubborn resistance against the power of “official history.”

In 1981 Robert Hughes wrote the following words in a review of the work of Giorgio Morandi: *The way they are painted looks awkward at first, ill defined – but only because it makes no concessions to haste. Morandi used no shortcuts. He eschewed the sharply abbreviated shapes, high contrasts of tone and grabby oppositions of color that can make an image memorable on first sight. Instead, the things in his paintings seep deliberately into one's attention. They start vaguely, as little more than silhouettes . . . the silence of the motif and the inwardness of the vision are as one.* (*TIME* magazine) Like Morandi, Rodríguez makes no concessions to haste. His paintings transfigure us from looking to seeing,

which is meditative act, through which we comprehend the world, both broken and redeemed.

Arrivals and Departures are paintings about the world and our place or misplacement within it. Coming or going, these transients are in a state of flux, of perpetual impermanence. Perhaps this is the best way to represent our human condition?

Arturo Rodriguez proves (once again) in this series that a content of substance need not be divorced from REAL PAINTING. These paintings in their bold and extended brushwork paint the world as a melancholic place that moves us.

* Alejandro Anreus is an art historian and poet who teaches art history and Latin American studies at William Paterson University, Wayne, New Jersey. He is the author of **Ben Shahn and The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti, Orozco in Gringoland** (both 2001), co-editor and contributor to *The Social and The Real* (2006). His monograph on Luis Cruz Azaceta is forthcoming. He writes art criticism for **Commonweal** magazine.



Departure XXV, 2009,
oil on canvas, 48 x
24 in.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Bruce Weber, Senior Curator, National Academy Museum, interviews Arturo Rodriguez about Arrivals & Departures

I first encountered Arturo Rodriguez's art in 1985 while I was Curator of Collections at the Norton Gallery of Art (now the Norton Museum of Art) in West Palm Beach, Florida. From the first I was astonished by the vigor and mastery of this young Cuban-born artist's work, the breadth and range of his imagination, his great pathos, humor and depth of humanity. Soon after my initial visit to Arturo's studio in Miami, where he has lived since 1973 (leaving Cuba for Spain in 1970, and residing for periods in that country again in the later 1970s and 1980s), I invited him to execute a painting on one of the three large walls in the Norton's courtyard for an exhibition held in the fall of 1986. Over the course of a few weeks time he created a magnificent multi-figured mural composition featuring an assortment of characters enacting a trio of allegorical and symbolic tableaux entitled *El Gran Teatro Del Mundo* (The Great Theater Of The World). Following the exhibition, which also included the work of David Wojnarowicz and Mike Glier, we maintained close contact, and I have continuously kept abreast of his work through studio visits or via

photographs that have been sent me in New York, where I have lived and worked since 1990.

I have had the great pleasure of watching Arturo's talent unfold and mature - to continue to be aware of the ever changing barometer of his art, watching him dive full body and soul into one ambitious series of works after another - mostly in oil, occasionally in acrylic, watercolor, or pencil. From the spark of a new idea he begins to invent his complex and distinct iconography, filled with poetic, narrative and dramatic allusions, emphasizing the rhythmic interplay of color, line, shape and form, and, frequently, exploring dualities of interior and exterior space (in which at times he seems to be questioning the nature of reality itself), expressions of aggressiveness and tenderness, notions of place and the absence of place (and sometimes of an almost unearthly ghostliness). Among his many series - *Arrivals and Departures* being the most recent - have been *The Ghost Archipelago* (2000), *Illuminations* (2002), *Interiors* (2004), *The Human*

Project (2008-2009). Several of these series are mentioned in the following interview, and a group of earlier paintings are reproduced in order to provide a context for the discussion, and to illuminate how this artist has never failed to keep moving, keep reinventing himself, keep surprising us with his ability to continually tackle new and fresh aesthetic challenges.

Before closing this brief introduction, I want to mention Arturo's immense love of jazz - and what I perceive as its visceral, rhythmic and compositional impact on his picture making. From the distance of New York, I always picture in my mind's eye Arturo passionately at work on a new series surrounded and prodded on by the propulsive sounds on his stereo of jazz flooding the walls and space of his studio.



Ghost Archipelago #2, 1999
Oil on canvas, 63 x 51 in

You never fail to surprise me.
What inspired your new series
“**Arrivals and Departures**”?

ARTURO: I have always been fascinated by airports, train stations, etcetera. Places where you see people waiting, people expecting something. They are emotionally charged places. You observe the constant flow of people arriving and leaving, like a human sea wave. It has always had a hypnotic effect on me.

What do airports personally mean or signify to you?

ARTURO: Airports, terminals, bus stops, are a source of anxiety to me. Yet they fascinate me.

The subject of exile has played a large role in your art. Do you see “**Arrivals and Departures**” as continuing in or breaking from that vein?

ARTURO: Once you become an exile, almost everything you have is lost, your country, your possessions, friends, family; yet all you have left is a small baggage of memories that you always carry inside you, and is a constant reminder of your condition, no matter how well you adapt to other cultures, other people, other countries.

These new paintings rank as among your most architectural. Do you see airports as some kind of modern cathedral?

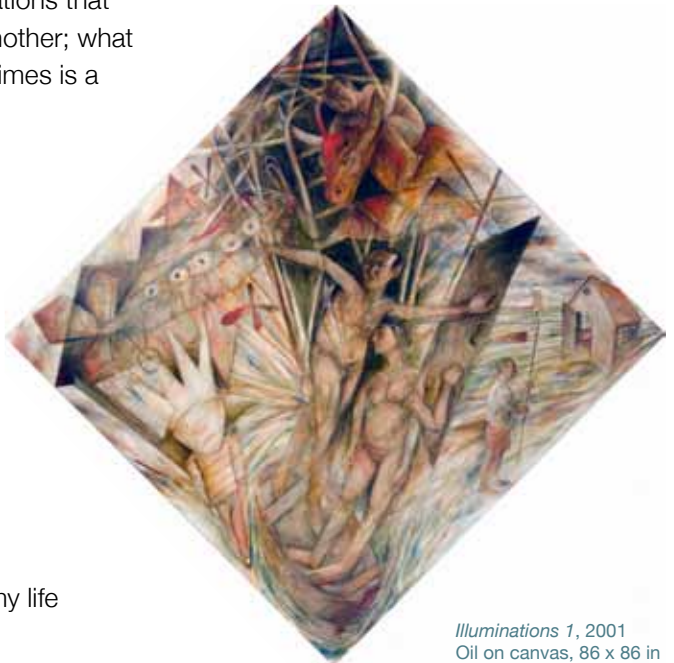
ARTURO: Airports are a cathedral to nothingness, they are just stations that take us from one place to another; what it really reminds me of sometimes is a kind of purgatory.

Is the airport pictured in the paintings based on a particular one such as Miami International Airport?

ARTURO: The airports, train stations, terminals in the paintings are not based on any particular place, they combine bits and pieces of my life experiences.

Are the works based on actually sketches or are they drawn completely from memory? I'd be interested in learning your process.

ARTURO: Sketching from life is like second nature to me. When I am traveling I am constantly drawing on everything I get my hands on - small sketch books, magazines, napkins, etcetera. They are from direct observation from life or from something that comes from my imagination or a combination of the two. I think the only way you understand what surrounds you - what your place in the world is - is by observing and reflecting upon what you saw



Illuminations 1, 2001
Oil on canvas, 86 x 86 in

In some tangential way the works remind me of paintings you created in the early 1980s of people you observed on the beach in Miami. Now the environment of the airport has in some ways replaced the environment of sand and ocean - and the focus has essentially shifted from the outdoors to the indoors. Do you see the relationship of these new works to those from that time or to another series you've created in the past?

ARTURO: They do not have a relationship whatsoever, of course you always carry things from your previous work.

Do you equate these new works with your occasional explorations of landscape, and, even more so, of landscape as “dreamscape” or “fields of memory”? I think back to the singular landscape you created of the landscape of the town where you grew up as a boy in Cuba or to the series you created for Florida International University.

ARTURO: The relationship of this new work with the others is, to me, that landscape is always an inner landscape, which has been evolving through the years, and this, its latest presence, is always part real and part imaginary.

This is also one of the calmest or least agitated group of works you have created, even the paint is applied much more smoothly than you commonly do. The ghosts of paintings past seem to be gone entirely, though the glass roof in **Departure XIV** hovers menacingly over the people below

ARTURO: I agree that this work is more tranquil. The result of one's life experience, and it is reflected more and more in what you paint. That you understand the meaning of the passing of time more clearly, and, naturally, perceive or comprehend death with a more definitive vision.

Ironically, this calmness or “serenity” exists in a place that has grown rougher and more difficult for those who travel - especially since 9/11. Have you consciously avoided painting the lines of people removing their shoes and getting frisked as they enter the confines of the airport?

ARTURO: Every thing changed after 9/11. Society as we know it is different. I think art gives us a different perspective of events than television news , newspapers , photo journalism , or even history, give us.

*Interior #1, 2002,
Oil on canvas, 24 x 48 in*





The Drinker, 2006
Oil on canvas, 44 x 58 in

Following in this vein of questioning - you've managed in this series to push the boundaries of some of your recent experiments with reduction or refinement of formal elements - with color as well as space and the overall composition. This is a long road from such works of the mid and late 1990s as **Tempest III** that are crowded with incident, motion, contortion and distortion.

ARTURO: I think that with the passing years, at least in my case, you can sometimes work in a very crowded, expressionistic way, and at the same time go in the opposite direction at some point. In my case both of these approaches reflect a search for a whole. I always want the work to go where the paintings take me. I am not trying to intellectualize my work. Painting is such an immense language that it is impossible to describe it, let alone make a theory of what you do.

The paintings are extremely subtle in coloration - basically a range of tonality that resembles black and white photography. In fact many of these works are night scenes and feature a glimpse out the window of the pitch black night. These works follow your intense investigation of the paintings of the seventeenth century Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio. Is there a link there in terms of their investigation of the play or contrast of light and dark. Are you thinking more now of Velazquez than Caravaggio?

ARTURO: The influences on these paintings are too many to mention. Of course Caravaggio and Velazquez are an integral influence upon these paintings. Without the intense darkness, the observation from life from the Italian painter, or the mysterious geometry of **Las Meninas**, and the settled grace of the portraits in work of the Spaniard, there would not be the cohesion that exists in the **Arrivals and Departures** series, even if you do not readily recognize these influences, they are always there.

The croppings are very interesting and evocative in these new works. What is the impetus behind them?

ARTURO: I have always loved photography and film. I think that these media capture something unique, that you can never reveal with painting, yet each medium influences the other. I could never have painted these works without having viewed a film by Ozu,

a photograph by August Sander, and the compositions of ukiyo-e prints, or observed Degasí and Bonnardís use of pictorial space. To me they compliment my vision of the world.

How do you see the smaller (12 x 9 inch canvases)? Are they meant to convey a more personal and intimate glimpse of the people one encounters at an airport - rather than being lost in the impersonal matrix of a contemporary airport.

ARTURO: Those small canvas were the ones that started this project of **Arrivals and Departures**, they are more tentative and focus more on the individual. It is like responding to your impulse and using this as a springboard for creating larger and more complex paintings.

In your series from 2004 dealing with interiors you also occasionally included airplanes in the sky, are airplanes meant to have a particular symbolism in your art?

ARTURO: I have always been fascinated with the airplane. The fact that in Miami , where I live, the main airport is in the middle of the city, and there are always airplanes flying overhead, I guess it gets under your skin. Some of my earliest paintings were based on the mythology of Icarus. I am trying to apply a deeper meaning to something as common in the everyday world as an airplane, or the act of traveling to different places , airports, train stations it is one of my concerns as a painter.

Your series **The Human Comedy** features individual's whose giant distorted head appears to float above their body like a balloon while the space or environment around them is broken down into a few elements and passages of neutral or occasionally strident color. In **Arrivals and Departures** you're reversed the relationship of figure and ground.

ARTURO: Yes the **Arrivals and Departures** series is precisely the opposite of **The Human Comedy** series (2006) . In **Arrivals and Departures** there is an absence of distortion , color, and humor. In **The Human Comedy** series there were also portraits of specific individuals. In the new series there is no distortion, almost no bold color, the figures are anonymous, and relate to the architecture that surrounds them. Furthermore, the scale of the figures is normal, and there is a sense of existential dread, of boredom, and the ordinariness of every day, contemporary life.



Deposizione #2 (The Caravaggio Project)
2008-2009, Oil on canvas, 52 x 74 in

The more closely I observe the paintings in the series the more I recognize how you're utilizing space in a metaphorical manner - perhaps most clearly and poetically in **Arrival X** - where the couple stand before what might even be interpreted as a vast blank canvas. Do you see yourself as dealing principally with the poetics of space in this new series?

ARTURO: Of course you deal with various levels of meanings in these paintings, the space and tonality of the works are probably the main ones. I try to convey an emotional state that could be melancholy, expectation, anxiety, loneliness, etcetera, by using space as a metaphor for emptiness and a toned down palette.

Personally, I wonder which are your favorite airports? And why?

ARTURO: I think that airports, train and subway stations acquire the personality of the city, the country where they are located, but the common thread is that they are always very interesting places, no matter whether you are angry, happy, bored or sad.

I also wonder if you have ever envisioned your own art hanging in an airport? Perhaps a mural commission. If so, how do you picture it?

ARTURO: Why not? As long I can do what I want without concessions to public taste which probably means I will never get a public commission for an airport.

Planning any long trips away from your home in Miami?

ARTURO: To me travel is always a paradox every time I travel I want to be in the studio painting, and every time I am in the studio painting I would like to be somewhere else traveling of course.

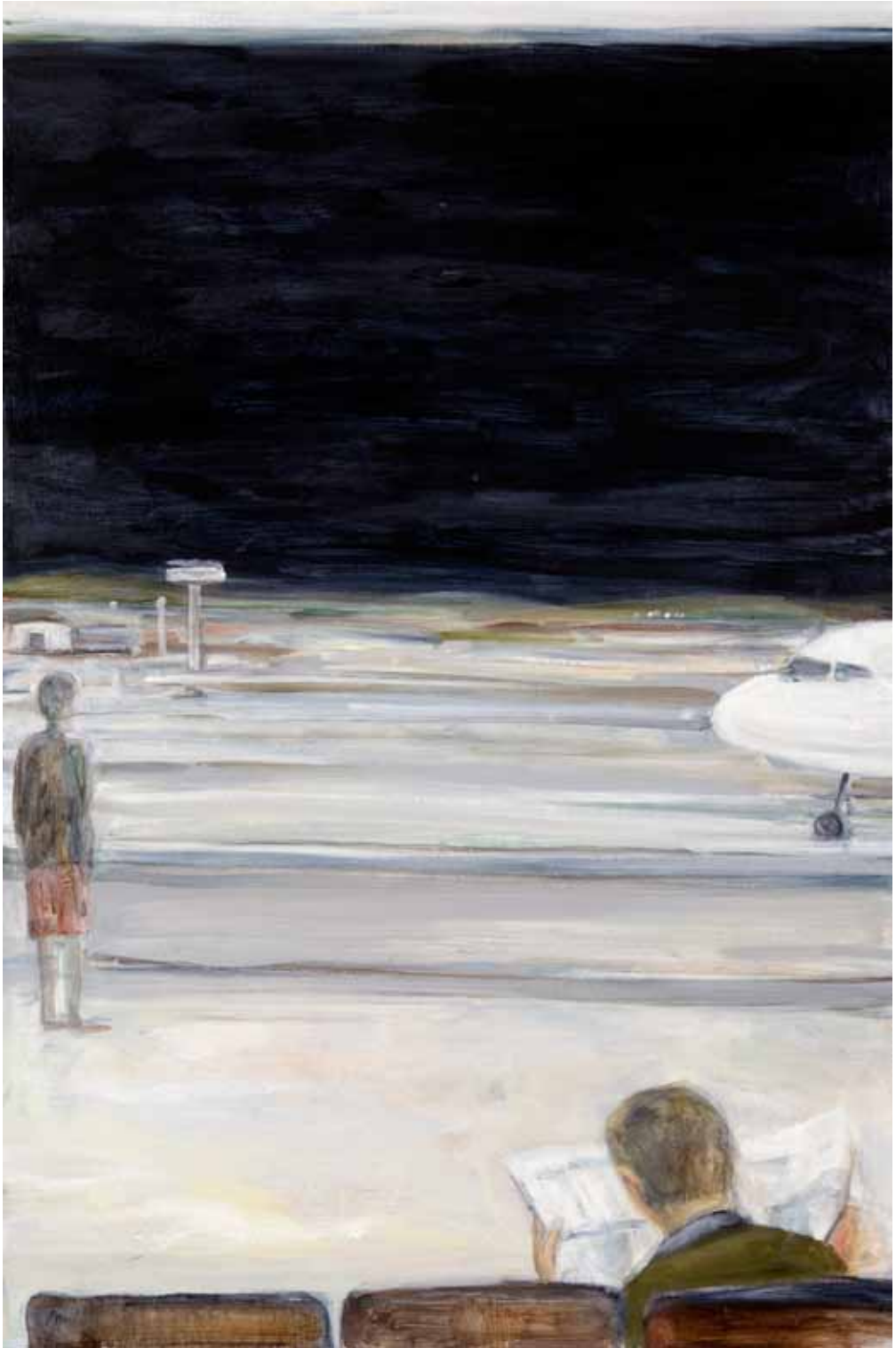


Departure I, 2009 oil on canvas 66 x 46 in.

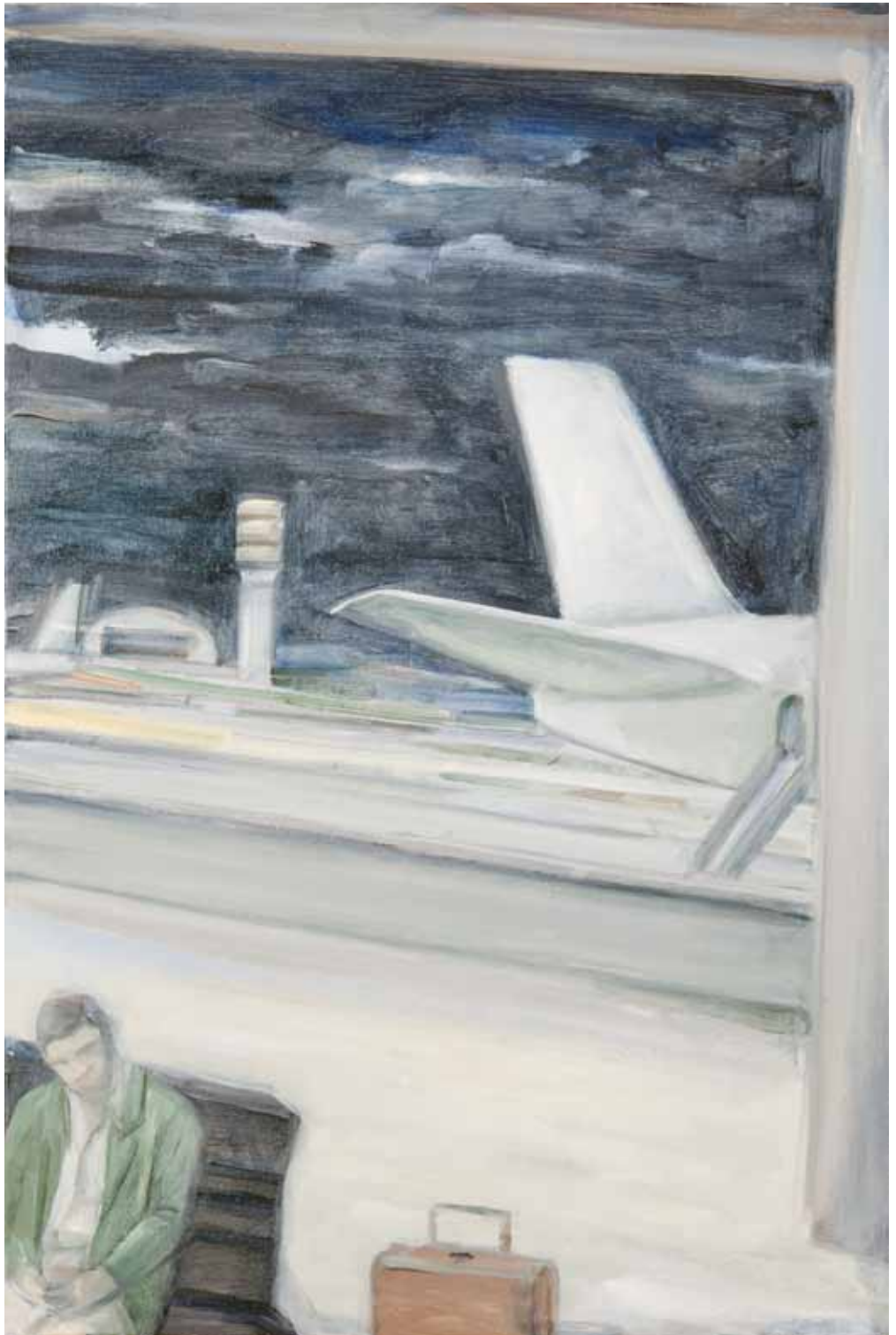


TOP: *Arrival II*, 2009, Oil on canvas, 46 x 72 in.

BOT: *Departures and Arrivals III*, 2009, Oil on canvas, 48 x 68 in.



Departure VIII, 2009, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in.



Departure VI, 2009, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in.



Departure VII, 2009, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in.



Arrival IX, 2009, oil on canvas, 36 x 24 in



Departure XII, 2009, Oil on canvas, 52 x 48 in.





Arrivals and Departures XIII, 2009, oil on canvas/ 44 x 60 in



Departures XIV, 2009, oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in.



Departures XVI, 2009, Oil on canvas, 64 x 66 in.





Departures XVII, 2009, oil on canvas, 72 x 48 in.



Departures XXII, 2009, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.



Departures XIX, 2009, oil on canvas, 62 x 50 in.



Departures XX, 2009, oil on canvas, 56 x 68 in.



Arrivals XXIII, 2009, oil on canvas, 48 x 62 in.



Arrivals XXIV, 2009, oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in.



Departures XXVII
2009, oil on canvas
55 x 67 in.





Departures XVIII, 2009, oil on canvas, 54 x 86 in.



