

Cover:  
**Blue Wind (detail)**, 2011  
mixed media on canvas  
107 x 168 cm

First published in 2011 by Agent Morton Ltd

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**HEART LAND DAMIAN ELWES**



# DAMIAN ELWES HEART LAND

20 June - 29 July 2011

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## HEART LAND

Unlike Gauguin, when Damian Elwes left ‘civilization’ to find his personal Garden of Eden and live in tropical, colour-saturated, visceral nature, he took his wife with him. At their home on a little coffee farm on the edge of the Colombian rainforest, Elwes painted dioramas of the forest in an attempt to express our deep connection to the natural world. He also made endless nude drawings of his wife. It was a response to seeing Lewanne so profoundly immersed in her environment, he says, a desire to record the naturalness and sense of freedom she exhibited by walking around naked. It began to occur to him that women are so fundamentally connected to nature, through their physiological and mythical relationship to the moon and in motherhood, that they more perfectly embody this connectivity than a tree or a mountain. “But I’ve always had a problem with men painting women; the result can be voyeuristic or titillating and I wanted to be respectful. It is easy to be captivated by the beauty of the female form.” Consequently, on their return to Santa Monica, seven years later, Elwes didn’t show the drawings. “They were private and personal, secret even. Also, it seemed to me that it had all been done so well before. Where is there to go after Klimt and Matisse?’ Sitting in on a fine arts class at Harvard, his Alma Mater, Elwes was concerned to discover how the viewer’s eye fixes on the eyes in a portrait. “We look at the eyes, then away, then back again, and I didn’t want to make paintings with that kind of focus. I wanted to create pictures you get lost in, that lead you into meditation. I wanted the viewer to be the subject.”

Leaving the drawings of Lewanne to one side, Elwes embarked on his celebrated series of artists’ studio interiors in which the artists themselves were absent. Quite removed from the passion and immediacy of the rainforest nudes, these

paintings and installations sprang, nevertheless, from the same source: “I try to capture a moment of inspiration, to explore where creativity comes from, to make things dream-like,” he said at the time. Forensically researched, complex and beautifully cluttered, the studio paintings were also transportive, taking the viewer into the minds of the artists via the sun-lit rooms and views that inspired them. After several successful shows, Elwes found his imagination returning to the rainforest. It was as though, having explored other artists’ creative worlds, he could re-address the central question behind his own: where does it all begin? In 2010 he exhibited a vast landscape painting at Morton Metropolis. The painting was placed on the floor beneath plexiglass and visitors were able to walk over it. Containing almost a thousand flowering plants, the work described an actual ecosystem surrounding a primary source of the Amazon River, which exists on top of an active volcano in Colombia. Elwes, a consummate story-teller, describes how he found such a place and why it became an inextricable part of his new paintings of women for this exhibition, Heart Land:

“When Lewanne and I lived for seven years on the edge of a rainforest in the mountains of Colombia, we had no TV, internet or telephone and very little electricity. Most nights, when the lights went out, we lit candles and went to bed early. Each day at dawn, we awoke and sat on our balcony sipping a cup of coffee and watching the sunrise. It was like living in an aviary of birds. We had a 360 degree view of mountains covered in rainforest. Off in the distance, way above the trees, we could see a beautiful volcano, covered in snow. Plumes of smoke belched from the crater. It was active. But that was the only time of day one could see the volcano; after an hour, it was hidden beneath darkening clouds.

Locals told me the volcano was called Puracé. It had erupted in 1999 and the earthquake had caused great damage to the distant town of Popayan, killing 300 people. I was advised not to go near it because it was still dangerous and the weather was violent. Each year in January, one could see the volcano all day. It was bathed in sunlight and I realized that it must be summer up there. Again, I began to ask questions. What was up there if you reached the summit? Could you see into the crater? And the answer I received was astonishing: near the top, just below the crater, there was a colourful plateau where water sprang in all directions. Three of these rivers went west through Ecuador and fell into the Pacific. One went north and became the mighty Magdalena River, flowing all the way through Colombia to the Caribbean. The last one was a primary source of the Amazon and it flowed eastwards across the widest part of the continent, through the Amazon rainforest to the Atlantic. This was incredible! At the source of a river, one can observe how life begins. The plateau was going to be an awe-inspiring place and I knew I had to make a painting of it.

But each year in January, I traveled there with my friend Iliasa, a guide who had taken me to many primary rainforests. We drove as far as we could by Jeep, and then hiked through the perilous terrain. We wore plastic suits and rubber boots: with eleven months of rain every year, the landscape was seeping water. It was like being on the bottom of the ocean and many of the plants resembled seaweed. Sometimes we were above ground but often we slipped below and clambered forward through tunnels of wet foliage. Under there, we saw colourful grubs and caterpillars and nameless creatures living in the mud. In our hands and over our shoulders we carried ropes and tent pegs. When we finally reached the plateau, it was like nothing I had ever seen before on earth, a field of different coloured mosses, punctuated by thousands of wet,



spiky plants. January was summertime, so all the plants were flowering and there were birds and butterflies floating around in the steamy haze. And in the middle of this ethereal landscape, we located the source of the rivers. It was the epicenter of this thriving ecosystem.

By some extraordinary coincidence, it was located just below the crater of an active volcano, so every few years the volcano would erupt, with the force of a nuclear explosion, and molten lava would cover the plateau and kill all life here. But the rain would continue to fall and the river would continue to spring from the ground, and an entirely new ecosystem would grow. This is the sort of place that might have existed millions of years before humans and could exist millions of years from now. It is a place of both scientific and mythological significance. Caught in an endless cycle of life and death, it tells us much about the force we call nature. We took the ropes and pegs and made a grid, dividing the area into twelve large rectangles around the source. Over the course of the next eighteen months, I made an enormous painting of this phenomenon. While I worked, the local Indians told me their stories about this spring. In their mythology, the source of the river was the first woman in the world and all life came from her.”

Last year, Elwes showed 40 large paintings of women, inspired by Lewanne but not specific portraits of her. They were universal, an amalgam of all the women he has loved, seen or known, and they were clearly a metaphor for the moon, the water; the source of life. Matisse’s paintings of naked women in repose were obviously an influence, and Elwes’ works were equally gentle in their sensuality: there was none of Gauguin’s objectification, but nor was there his lush, natural context. Elwes was on his way: “I always knew I’d end up

painting women, I just didn't know how or why," he says. Now he knows. In his paintings for Heart Land, there is no background or foreground; women are made from nature and nature from women. The eyes are closed, the women are dreaming. For Elwes, as for the rainforest Indians, women and nature are fully integrated, and he found he could not paint one without the other. Using the foliage from the volcanic plateau that continues to provide rich inspiration, Elwes wants us to know that he is not just painting any aspect of nature: this is a place of life and death, the birthplace of Eve.

His methods belie the apparent ease of the paintings. First he draws on canvas and then he covers the drawing with white paint, as though by obliterating his first picture he is forced to re-imagine it more deeply. Slowly, by adding blocks of colour, he brings back the foliage and the figure. "I have piles of colours on the floor, about 300 swatches, and I mix and match." Like Matisse, Elwes' mother was an interior decorator. Squares of colour are plastered on the studio wall around the paintings and once he's fixed on the colours, the painting begins to take shape. But the more whiting out that occurs, the more blocks of colour added, the better the painting, he says. In spite or perhaps because of the layering, the works appear sharp and immediate. Elwes' lines are clean and minimal, resulting in a simplified, wallpaper effect that expresses both the fragility and enduring power of nature and human life: eradicated by volcanic explosion yet born again in an endless cycle.

There is also the idea of mark making in the simplicity of these works and the influence of cave paintings is powerfully clear. Elwes spent time making rubbings of cave drawings in the Sahara in the early eighties and has always been fascinated by them; in Heart Land he seems to have returned to some of

the inspirations that turned him into an artist as a young man. Based in New York when the Graffiti movement was at the forefront of contemporary art, Elwes had decided that painting was dead. His father and grand-father had been portrait painters and had died within three months of each other when Elwes was fourteen; they'd both left him their brushes but he was determined not to become a painter. "Graffiti was so vital, people would change other people's work, add things, and I thought this was so alive!" Elwes watched Keith Haring drawing with markers on the subway walls and they became friends - "just paint on my paintings," said Haring, but Elwes was "too English." Instead, he found an abandoned building and began to work on the walls, entering at night from a fire escape joined to the hotel opposite. "I used a store room in that hotel as my office and bathroom. I'd transform into my painting clothes, like superman. The doorman thought I was staying there, they never clocked that I was using the room illegally."

Elwes spray-painted so much that he passed out from the fumes; blowing his nose, colours came out onto the tissue. "I looked around me and saw my subconscious on the walls." Back in London, from 1983-85, Elwes graffitied every abandoned building he could find. Introduced to Jean-Michel Basquiat by dealer Robert Fraser at Basquiat's ICA retrospective, Elwes told him how much he appreciated his work. "Until now, perspective has been about depth," he said, "but in your paintings perspective is about time, the building up of layers." Basquiat thanked him but pointed out that the paintings they were looking at had been made the previous night. Some of his work was stuck in customs, so he'd found these old beds in the alley behind the Hilton Hotel and constructed paintings from them.



Elwes showed with Basquiat in 1984 at the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh and a few years later, Basquiat was dead. Both artists had explored the affinity of cave painting with graffiti art and there are always photos of cave art on the walls of Elwes' studio. In some of the earliest cave paintings and carvings, the subjects form a triangle, in allusion to the female genital area, he tells me. "They were trying to figure out where we came from and that's what I'm trying to do too."

Elwes' women are not flesh, not separate from the natural world. They emerge from the leaves and are held by the foliage, part of the beautiful, spiky and ancient landscape that Elwes loves to disappear into and paint. Nude, but not naked, they are clothed in nature. His daughter, born in the rainforest, is growing up, he says, and the world is open to her in contrast to the way it was for her grandmothers. "The future is the story of women," he says. "They can make the world a more rational place, little girls try to do this naturally. I don't know if paintings can change the world..."

They can certainly try. In these paintings, you can see Elwes thinking, there is a strong conceptual element but they are, above all, utterly beautiful because he is painting about love.



**Honor, 2011**  
Reed pen and ink  
21 x 30 cm

*“And on thy cheek a fading rose...”*

John Keats

**River Spirit, 2011**  
mixed media on canvas  
107 x 107 cm



Nature Lovers, Colombia, 2011  
mixed media on canvas  
106.7 x 132.1 cm

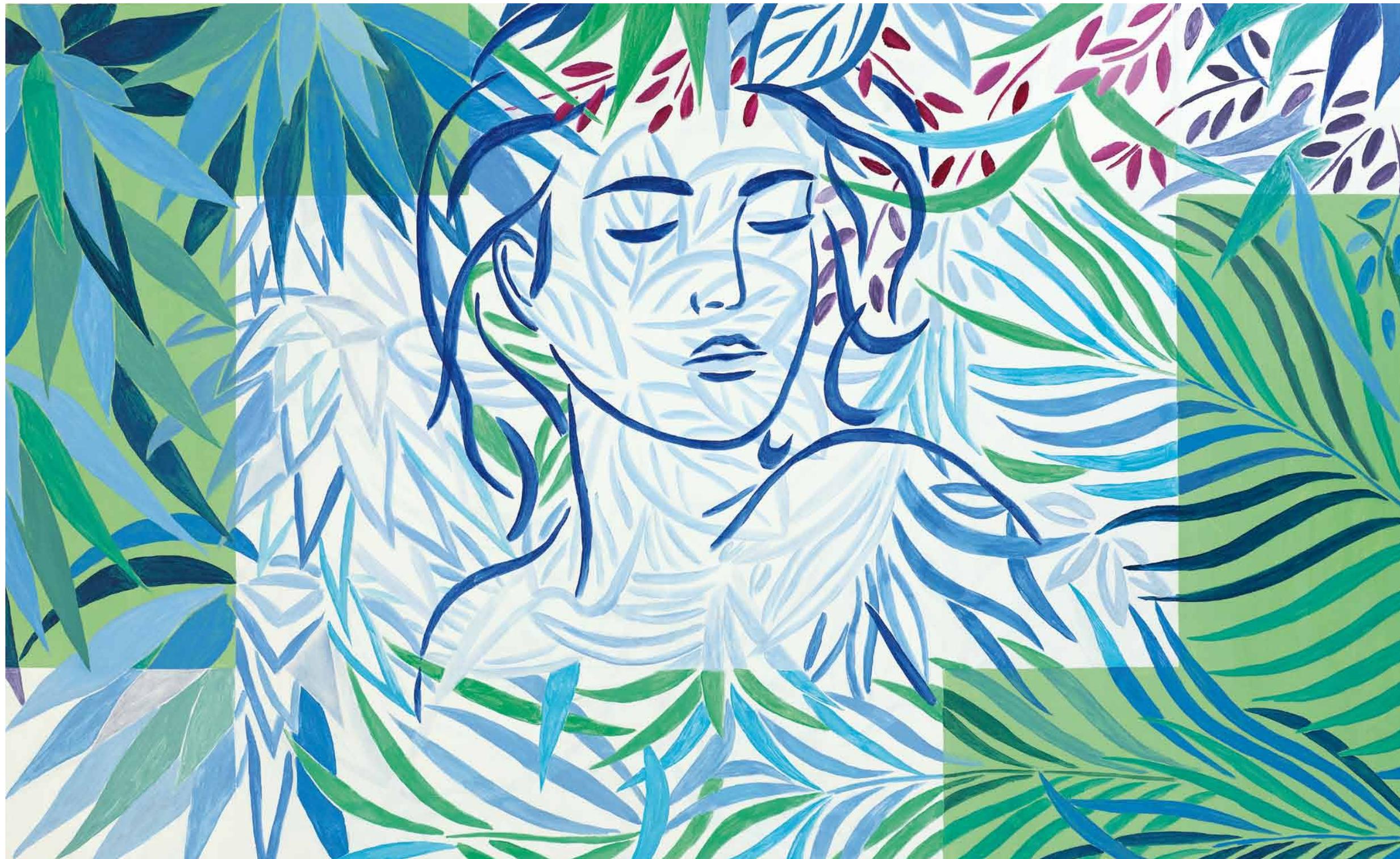


**Blue Wind, 2011**  
mixed media on canvas  
107 x 168 cm



**Rain, 2010**  
mixed media on canvas  
80 x 116 .3 cm





Eve, 2011  
mixed media on canvas  
112 x 183 cm

Sea, 2011  
mixed media on canvas  
106.2 cm x 122 cm



**Jurema, 2010**  
mixed media on canvas  
122 x 97 cm





**Sun, 2011**  
mixed media on canvas  
Circle with 104.2 cm diameter



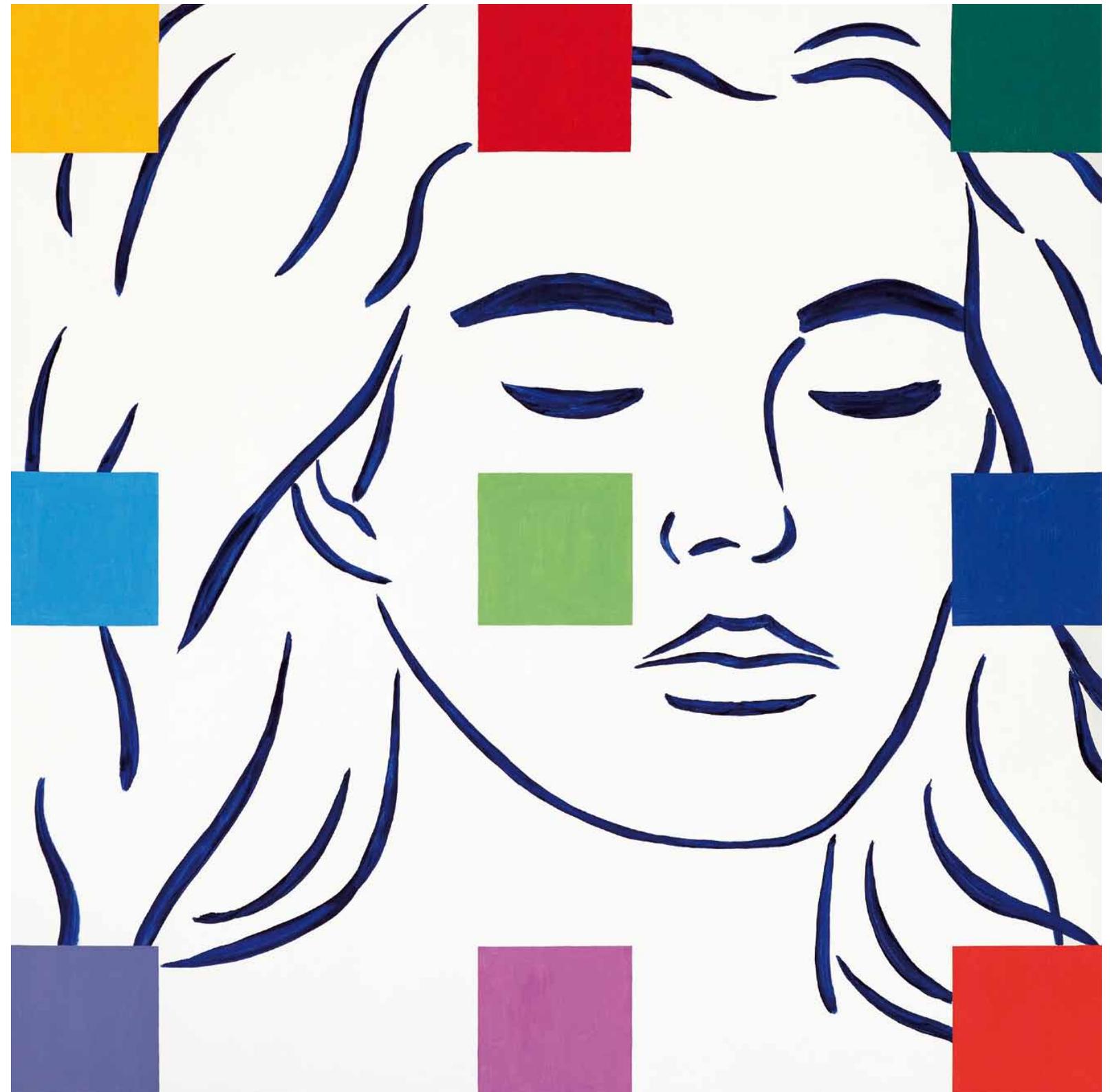
Nirvana, 2011  
mixed media on canvas  
169 x 167.7 cm

**Soul Garden, 2011**  
mixed media on canvas  
107 x 122 cm

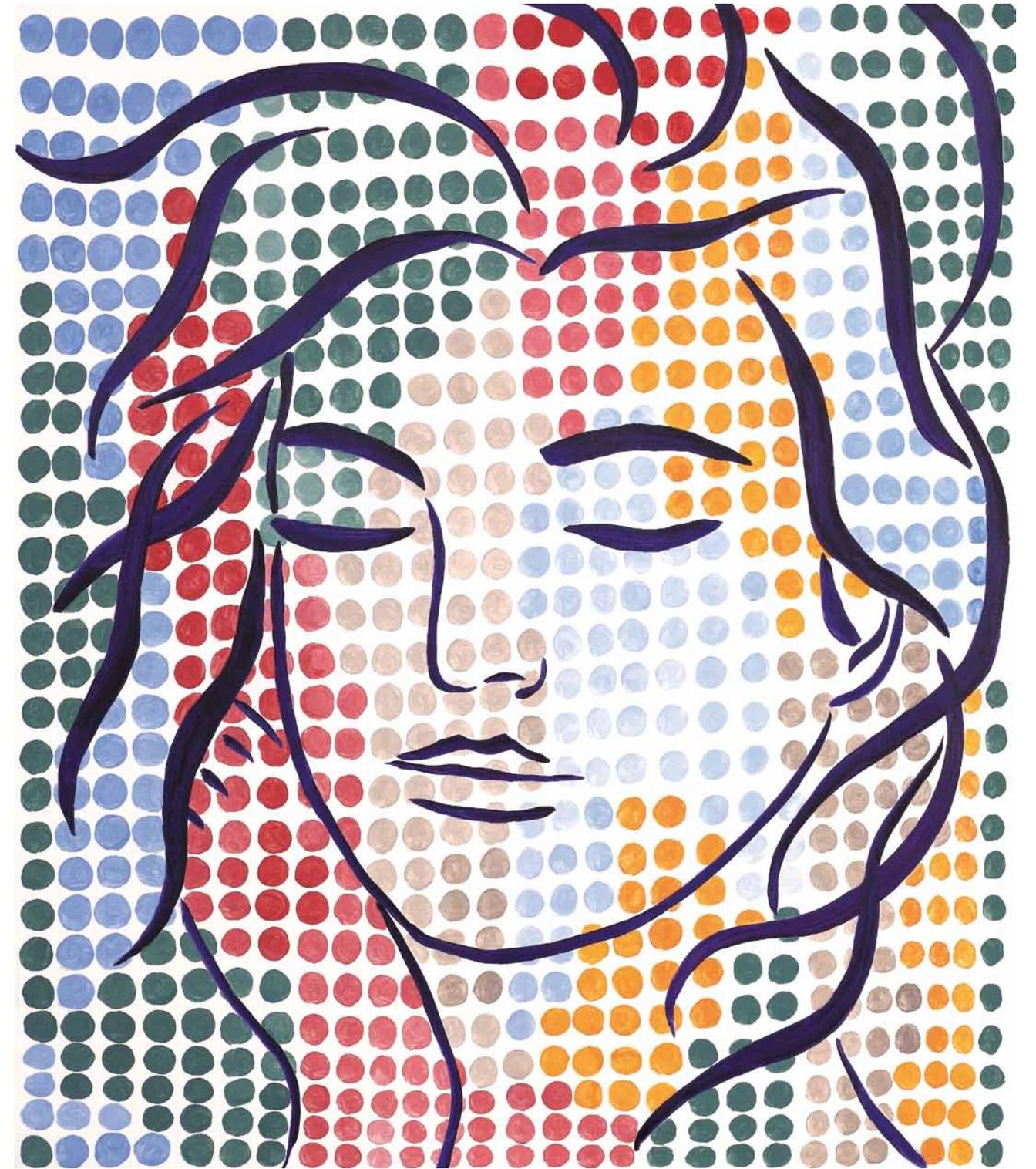




**Meditation, 2011**  
mixed media on canvas  
168 x 168 cm



**Inspiration, 2011**  
mixed media on canvas  
169,5 x 142 cm





**Transcendence**, 2011  
mixed media on canvas  
167.4 x 168 cm

**Secret Garden**, 1996-2011  
mixed media on canvas  
162.4 x 275 cm



Villa Californie (Picasso's Studio), 2011  
mixed media on canvas  
168 x 168 cm



**Matisse's Studio (Collioure, 1905), 2009**  
mixed media on canvas  
163 x 219 cm



Picasso Studio (Cannes, 1955), 2009  
mixed media on canvas  
168 x 254 cm



## **CREDITS**

Curated by Serena Morton

Special thanks to Barney Battles, Marcus Yeoman and Genia Marek

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