

# JAMES DRINKWATER



*Child at the Met* 2023 oil on linen 122 x 70.2 cm

## 'CHILD AT THE MET' & OTHER JOURNALS

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY

MELBOURNE  
ArtFair ART FAIR ArtFair  
22—25 FEB '24

**James Drinkwater in conversation with Alison Kubler**

**Melbourne Art Fair, VAULT stand**

**Sunday 25 February, 12pm**

**Alison Kubler**

**Today we're going to talk a little bit about painting and what James has been up to, and the new monograph *I love you more than paintings 2008 - 2024* which has been launched at the Melbourne Art Fair by Nicholas Thompson Gallery. James how about you start by telling us, because you've been overseas, where have you been and how has that influenced your recent work?**

James Drinkwater

Yes, it seems like we're doing a lot of travel at the moment. I'm tempted not to use the word mid-career as it feels like the kiss of death (laughs). But it seems like I'm in that moment where things have started to bubble away. And my children are at a good age for travel. It just feels right to be not only be receiving opportunities overseas, but being able to meet them and turn up. So, we've been in France and London, and we'll be in Italy and Paris later in the year. Such hard work (laughs).

**Well, I can imagine it is, are you buying materials everywhere you go or are you taking them with you. You work on both a big scale and little scale. How do you do that?**

I buy when I get there. Or pre order. I love foraging. There's the Sennelier art store, in St. Germain, where you can find special things. And the stair, as you walk in is indented. And you think of all the people, the famous artists, who have been through there. You can get into all that romance, the foraging for materials.

**And on that note, in these paintings, there's a little bit of France, right?**

Indeed, those places are literally embedded in it. This time last week I was in Cornwall, St. Ives. And there's some paintings that we have here that I painted before that experience. It's interesting meditating on something from afar, then you actually go to it, and the passage of time plays its part in that. The paintings gain their meaning by the actual going to the source. It's interesting, all those layers. I'm interested in doing the work before and then also going and seeing what happens after. Time becomes malleable, like a piece of clay.

**I think that is a very interesting point that you make, because that's really what art and painting is. It's sort of time spent, isn't it? Literally time spent.**

Yeah, it is. And there's a hunger that is the currency of it. The more you give it, the more it wants.

**It seems on the outside that you're really prolific like that. You are making all the time. Are you making all the time?**

I am. I'm compulsive, absolutely. I edit, though, a lot. And believe it or not, the editing is not in destroying, it's actually painting out. So, you may see five or six major paintings there. A lot of labour. Editing, editing, editing. And then you have people you trust, such as my wife Lottie, and certain heroes that come through the studio and can give you the hard truth.

**I think that's quite generous of you to let people do that.**

I like to use that word permission. I think you allow it in. The other thing is, if you make it from the right place it cannot be wrong. So therefore, criticism all falls away. And I think that's what actually rings true. If something's made from the right place, there's an authenticity that's undeniable. Then it comes down to just taste. You like it or you don't. And that's why it doesn't really bother me if you like my work or not, because I've made it from my heart. The wire between my heart and my brain is fused and I'm listening to both. So, if you don't like it that's fine. Some people don't like bolognaise, it doesn't matter.

**That is very interesting. In all the talks that we've done, that word authenticity has come up so many times. And I find it very reassuring, I guess, because we're living in an age of digital reproduction, or AI or whatever it might be, and the decisions around as to whether you use that as a tool or don't. Or engage with it or don't. But Bill Henson talked about that on Friday, about authenticity, and it's so fantastic to hear another artist talk about that. Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran yesterday was talking about a similar thing. He was very generous in talking about the bad reviews. He's had people saying really terrible things and at one point in his life that affected him, and now he just doesn't care. And that for him is about an authenticity. And that's the only way you can make it.**

That's right.

**You've talked about the reason that you're making work, and I know that a lot of your work does feature your children and these truly authentic experiences. Can you talk to some of the works that people can see at the fair?**

So, the core theme I work with is intimacy, what Betty Woodman calls the *Theatre of the Domestic*. And I think that's perfectly put, because I visualise my life as a series of theatres, or rooms of my life, if you will. The interior walls of my life. And that's sort of metaphorical, but also physical. The bathroom, the table, the events that map out around a kitchen table are so special and nuanced and real. This big lump of wood houses the theatre of your life, good and bad. I see these theatres and I celebrate them and the nuanced little moments that you might overlook, but that's our job, to tease out little events and illuminate them and celebrate them for what they are. There are some paintings in the show that came from a trip to New York. We spent a couple of months between the Hamptons and in the city, and just being there with the children was incredible. Pulling up to the Met and seeing their experience. One of the paintings is called *Child at the Met*. The title of the show is *Child at the Met and other journals*. So that gives us space for all the anecdotal things in between. And you see a school bus turn up to a museum and it just makes my heart fuzz. When you see children pile into a museum, it's egalitarian for everyone, which I like. There's a painting called *Boy holding Guston's nails*. I have these lovely daydreams with narratives that tease out and turn into paintings. I imagine my son

pulling the nails out of a Philip Guston painting and walking around with them, and then it becomes a noisy thing, like there's an audio to the painting.

**On that, I know also in your work there are lots of art historical references that might not be immediately obvious, but I know you are very well read and you're looking at a lot of art. Can you talk a little bit about some of the influences on your work, or maybe not influences, but the artists that you're interested in.**

Even just the idea of influence, this idea that you are actually in a line somewhere, humbly in that line and you're conversing constantly back, pushing forward, but honouring the path. There's so much, it depends on what part of the world I'm thinking of and what era. I mean, I was thinking a lot about the Cornish artists, which led me to discover that they all left London, people like Barbara Hepworth and Chris Wood.

**Is that why you went to Cornwall?**

Yeah, I had a show in London. I was getting sick of London. I hired a car and the gallerist I was working with has a house down there. I burnt down the road, went to St Ives and visited Alfred Wallis' house and I literally kissed the doorstep. It's actually real then. Which that got me thinking about Lee Krasner and Joan Mitchell and everyone leaving New York for the Spring. Boyd and Nolan and Blackman and Hester going to Heidi, Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson going to Cornwall. Lottie and James going to Newcastle (laughs).

But there was this moment when we came back from Berlin, we'd been on such a good wicket, it was the first time we'd been able to be full time artists. And we're thinking now how do we do this? Lottie was pregnant, we were pregnant. How in God's name are we going to survive back in Australia as artists? And Sydney and Melbourne just weren't an option for that reason. And I grew up in Newcastle, so we made that same decision to push out. You can have a big space, you can swim in the ocean every day. I suppose what I'm getting to there in a roundabout way is I went to Cornwall for Christopher Wood to look at the paintings, but then he's got this whole other idea of getting out of cities and then I just follow these threads down and down and over and I'm open. I just try to be available. That's the word I always use, just available. Some kind of receptor for the things that happen to you.

**Are you good at living in the moment, then?**

I think that's my only talent.

**I think that's a great thing because I don't think I'm very good at living in the moment. I try a lot to do that and I have found some artists are very good at that and others can't do it very well. But it does strike me, I think looking at your work you can feel the immediacy of what you're painting. Can you tell us a bit about that gestural figuration?**

I've operated on urgency my whole life. Everything is done. Anything that slows me down, I don't want to know about it. I cook a lot and as soon as it gets scientific, methodical, I just can't do it. And I learned by making mistakes too. I have to do it and make

the mistakes. So, there's an urgency in the painting and it's the clearest way to express my experience and it's very direct. I painted a ceiling painting for a friend in Newcastle recently at his house in a gorgeous spot. At the Cowrie Hole. It's very special.

**Wow, it's amazing.**

It's very nondescript. It could be in Croatia. It's full of sea urchins and Cowrie Crabs. I had to spend hours down there alone or with the children. Looking in, looking down. I love how Fred Williams worked, while they were all out painting and looking at the vista he painted the trees behind. It's that idea that it's on the ground under your nose. So, I was painting this ceiling and I could quite literally walk out of the house, plunge in to the water, have a bath in the ocean, forage, look, eat an oyster. And then go back and paint directly from that. And that's the way I love to work. With that immediacy.

**So you're quite rigorous. Do you sort of say to yourself, I will paint a certain number of hours a day? I would imagine you paint every day. Right.**

I just like painting. I still love to do it. It's my favourite thing. If I'm not painting, I like to cook and if I'm not cooking, I like to look at pictures. It's still my favourite thing to do. And now we have a studio at home for the first time. I can paint in my pyjamas. I can make decisions while the sauce is cooking. The kids can be around your ankles and they see actually what it is. You get all this unnecessary time in the studio, it's in between, in those slips, that where all the good stuff happens.

**When you're at something like an art fair and walking around, do you feel sort of a frustration? You just want to get out and get back? I sometimes see that, artists walking around and they do seem inherently uncomfortable. As though they are thinking I'm meant to be here and doing this, but I don't really want to be here.**

I said to Nicholas yesterday, you just tell me to go away. It's great, you come here, but you do have to do it properly.

**I always think it's admirable, just even having you sit here and talk about your work. It's not necessarily an artist's favourite place to be, describing something that is on the walls when you can literally go and have a look at it.**

**Let's talk about this very beautiful monograph. Can we talk about the title, I love you more than paintings? Because that did make me laugh out loud. As someone who's married to an artist, I had a big chuckle about that. But I think you mean it in all seriousness.**

It's actually something my daughter said when she was four or five. I've been making these plaques with phrases on it. There is a plaque that says this, *I love you more than paintings*, which is what she said to me, which just knocked me out. I think she was her trying to decode her world and my world. And if she could say to me, she loves me more than the one thing I love, my first marriage of painting, that was a big expression. That's how I read it. So, I put it on a brass plaque and we associate brass plaques with barristers, very serious work, the important things of the world. Doctors and people doing real work. But I thought if I put these things on plaques, they're really disarming. I had one out in front of our old house that just said *be generous with your*

heart. And people either loved it or really hated it. Tourists would get selfies in front of it. We live in the old historic part of Newcastle and there's about ten of them and now people want them.

**That's fantastic.**

I've got lots of them. But that's something my daughter said, *I love you more than paintings*. And Nicholas and I did a show, I'm going to say, four years ago, and that was the title of the show. I've had a few titles with that *I love you more* sort of thing. And then subtitles of *another journal*. We did a show called *Sand drawings and other tropes*, which came from drawing with the kids. That's where the title came from. And for the book we looked at what years we wanted to review and 2008 onwards seemed about right. That's when we moved to Berlin, when Lottie and I sort of shook hands and made a pact. Let's do this.

**And then just looking at that show that Nicholas has and then also looking at the book, is it strikes me that the whole thing is kind of a love letter to your family. And again, being married to an artist, I think about this. Do you find that when you had children, it became easier or harder, or was it just clearer what it was you were doing?**

I think clearer. I sort of got all ramped up. It became easier. Because it felt clearer. The intention just took over and time is incredibly valuable. So, you use it in a way you never had before. And the enrichment, for me, my work, is about love.

**I think that's really clear. When you look at the book it is obviously all about love, because it's your love for being an artist. You can feel that thread.**

I also think it's important as a man in the world to cut that cord of, 'I'm married to my work, I'll never love you more than my work'. My work doesn't exist without them. So, I'm actually a family man first. And then what that means is the work can exist, so they're a function of each other. That idea of putting your art first and people second is so old fashioned. Lucian Freud was apparently such a prick to his lovers. And there is something amazing about that, too. But I just don't want to continue that narrative.

**The thing that is really fabulous about the book is an introduction by Julian Schnabel. Tell us about that, because it's fantastic. It's totally rambling and brilliant. You obviously met with him, you went to his studio. What was that like?**

Oh, incredible.

**Is he generous?**

Very generous. He's formidable. He's a force. I actually met him through a surfer on the Northern Beaches. I grew up surfing because of peer pressure and as soon as I was old enough to say I didn't want to do it, I stopped and moved to Melbourne and lost my tan.

**How funny.**

I never had a tan, actually. Anyway, this surfer that I know through friends said you should catch up with my friend in New York. I said who's that? And he said Julian Schnabel. I wrote him a letter and we just became friends. And when they were in Italy shooting a film we stayed in Montauk in his iconic studio. I don't know if you know the studio. There's no roof. It's like a ship deck. And you dive into the pool off the concrete. It sounds very bougie and it's actually very relaxed.

I was surfing a lot with the painter decorator that keeps the house intact. It's an old Stanford White house, one of the seven sisters along the spine of the Montauk coast. It looks like something out of a thriller, there's a lot of shingles and vines growing all over it. I went surfing with this guy who keeps the place in order.

There's this kind of wonderful, relaxed way about Julian, you can see it in what he wears. You walk around the East Village in New York and if you saw him you wouldn't look at him twice. He has this very cool, effortless thing. But while we were in Montauk, he was in Italy.

Julian called me and said *what are you doing out there?*

I said *I'm going to go see the Krasner Pollock house. I'll be doing all that American history.*

He said, *you're in fucking American history - what am I?* (laughs)

He said, *why don't you make some painting?*

I said *I'd love to, but I wouldn't be so presumptuous as to use the studio.*

He said *Are you kidding?*

And in about five minutes all these assistants appeared to take me to get materials. I painted for a month. He said make big painting. Everything's big there. So every week I went to the St. Sebastian. This was two or three years ago. His son also has a really nice gallery. They are just nice people.

**It's such a beautiful introduction and it feels very authentic. And I could almost imagine his voice saying it.**

**Can you tell us about visiting the studio of Alessandro Twombly?**

That came about in a similar way. I was having breakfast with Julian in St Sebastian, Lottie and I are trying to live between Newcastle and Italy, which also sounds very fabulous.

**It sounds amazing. Between Newcastle and Italy. It's very natural. But I actually think that is the Australian condition. It's very normal to go between.**

And he said, oh, Italy. You should meet my friend Paola Iglori. She's a poet, filmmaker and landlord. She's got fifty hectares just out of Rome and she shows around all the properties from Palazzo's down to Shepherd's quarters. She had a very Distorted idea of how much money I had. (laughs) And Alessandro Tombly's studio is on the property as well. I've followed his sculpture for about ten years and obviously his dad was no slouch. It was fantastic to meet him. He's got an obsession with Australian cinema, so we spoke about *Acute Misfortune* and *Two Hands*. He is a really decent guy.

**How wonderful. We could talk all day with you. I think you'd have to write a book just about those things. I can see it now, a cookbook slash memoir.**

We'll shake on it.

**I love the idea of it. The new book is a beautiful publication and the reproductions are absolutely beautiful. I can see you've laboured over that and I must say, ArtInk puts a lot of time into getting it right.**

It's been an absolute pleasure this book. I've done a few publications that I've sort of bled into a lot and I'm very proud of them. This is the first one with distribution with a machine behind it. Its really an honour.

**And finally, what is next on the agenda for you? Are you about to head off some shows overseas?**

I have a show in Paris in April and a solo in Athens.

**Wow. You've got to get a tan somewhere.**

If the freckles join up, maybe.

**That's wonderful. Well, congratulations, James, and we'll consider the book launched. Thank you.**

A delight. Thank you so much.





NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Boy collecting Guston's nails*

2023

oil on linen, framed

102 x 122.5 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Child at the Met*

2023

oil on linen, framed

122.5 x 102 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Head in the sand, Montauk NY*

2023

oil on linen, framed

102 x 122.5 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Hester on receiving the news we are leaving for France*

2023

oil on linen, framed

102 x 122.5 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

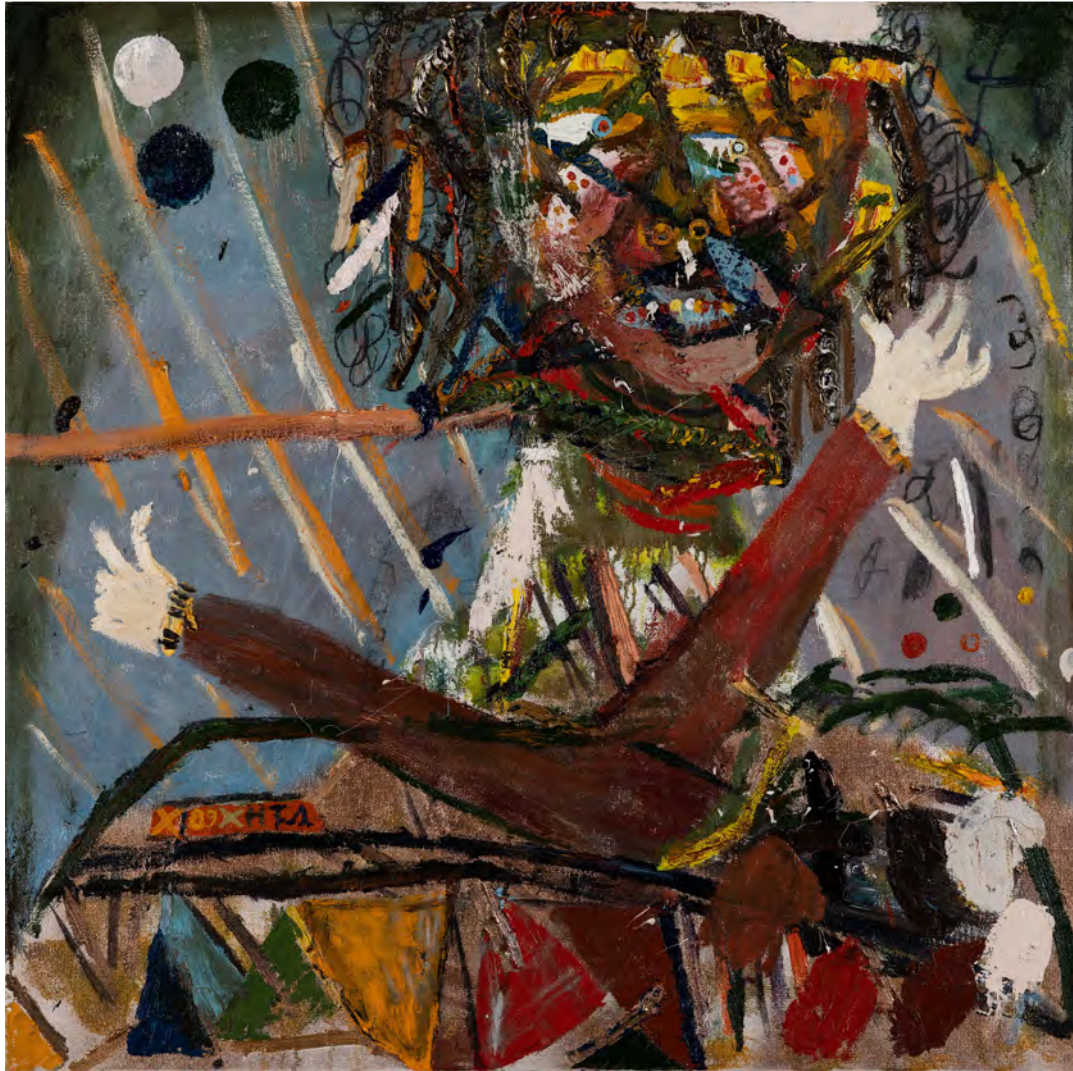
*Vinnie on receiving the news we are leaving for France*

2023

oil on linen, framed

122.5 x 102 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Kit Wood on opium thinking of Wallis*

2023

oil on linen, framed

107 x 107 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

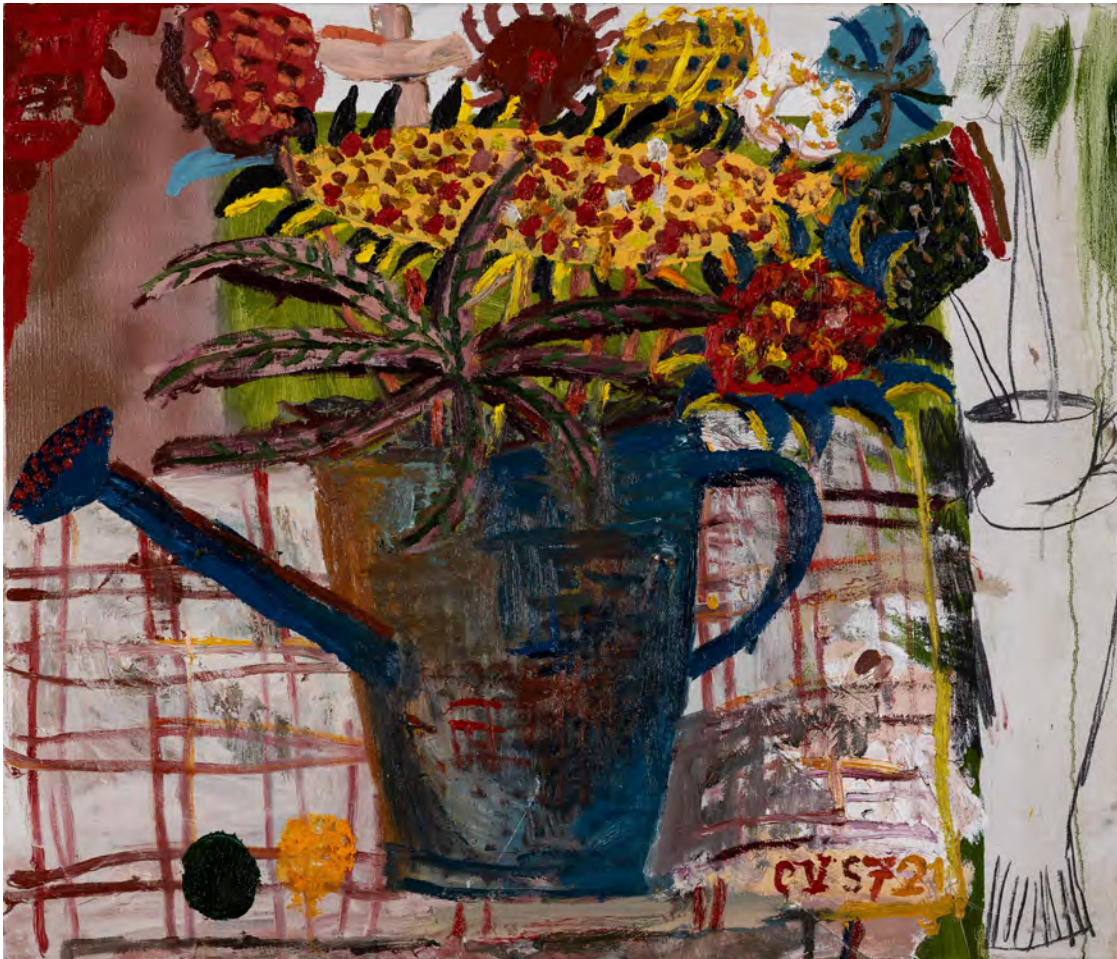
*In memory of Kit Wood*

2023

oil on linen, framed

102 x 102 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Flowers in a watering can on a Cornish table*

2023

oil on linen, framed

86.5 x 102 cm



NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Drawing 1*

2023

mixed media on French paper, framed

77 x 56 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Drawing 2*

2023

mixed media on French paper, framed

77 x 56 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Drawing 3*

2023

mixed media on French paper, framed

77 x 56 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Drawing 4*

2023

mixed media on French paper, framed

77 x 56 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Drawing 5*

2023

mixed media on French paper, framed

77 x 56 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Drawing 6*

2023

mixed media on French paper, framed

77 x 56 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Bather on the Montauk Spine*

2023

oil on panel, framed

49.5 x 60 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 1*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm



NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 2*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 3*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 4*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 5*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 6*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 7*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 8*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 9*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm



NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 10*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 11*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 12*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 13*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 14*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 15*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 16*

2023

oil on panel, framed

20 x 40 cm

NICHOLAS  
THOMPSON  
GALLERY



**JAMES DRINKWATER**

*Composition 17*

2023

oil on panel, framed

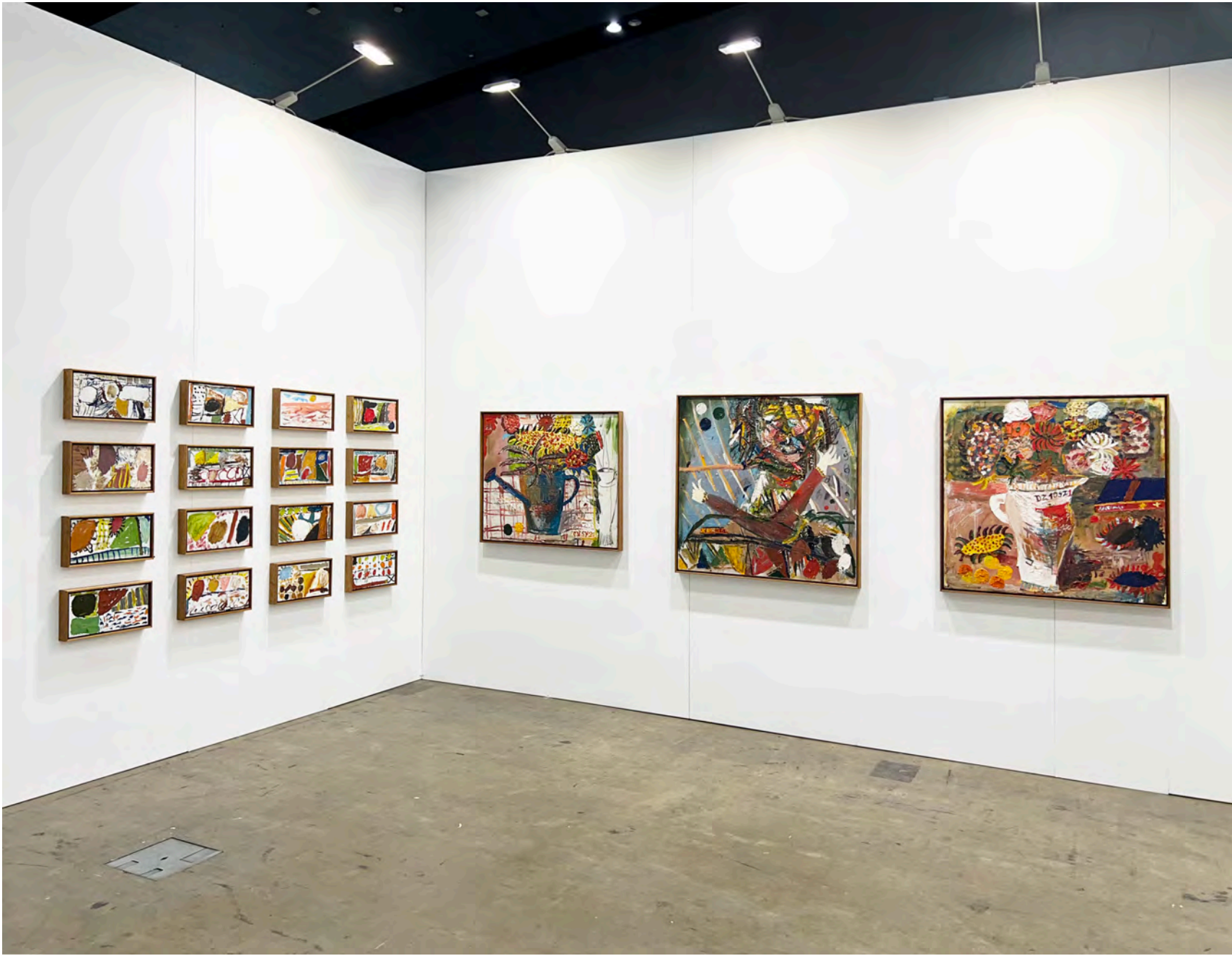
20 x 40 cm















K1

NICHOLAS THOMPSON  
GALLERY  
Artists/Artists

