



TABULA RASA

The Art of **BEN QUESNEL**
Available in our VIEWING ROOM
Nov. 14th at 6:00PM



BEN QUESNEL



TABULA RASA

BEN QUESNEL at The GREENWICH ARTS COUNCIL

The Latin phrase *tabula rasa*, translates to English as “blank slate.” It refers to the idea that we are born without preconceived notions or innate traits, that our ideas and ways of being are “written” by our experiences. Taking this notion one step further, psychologists and neuroscientists now believe that we are the architects of what we perceive to be real. We learn to understand and categorize our experiences and the world around us through a social reality that we create collectively through language. *“Tabula Rasa,”* a solo exhibition of the work of Ben Quesnel, inspires viewers to quite literally play with the mechanisms by which meaning, categorization and identity (in short, reality) are constructed and disseminated.

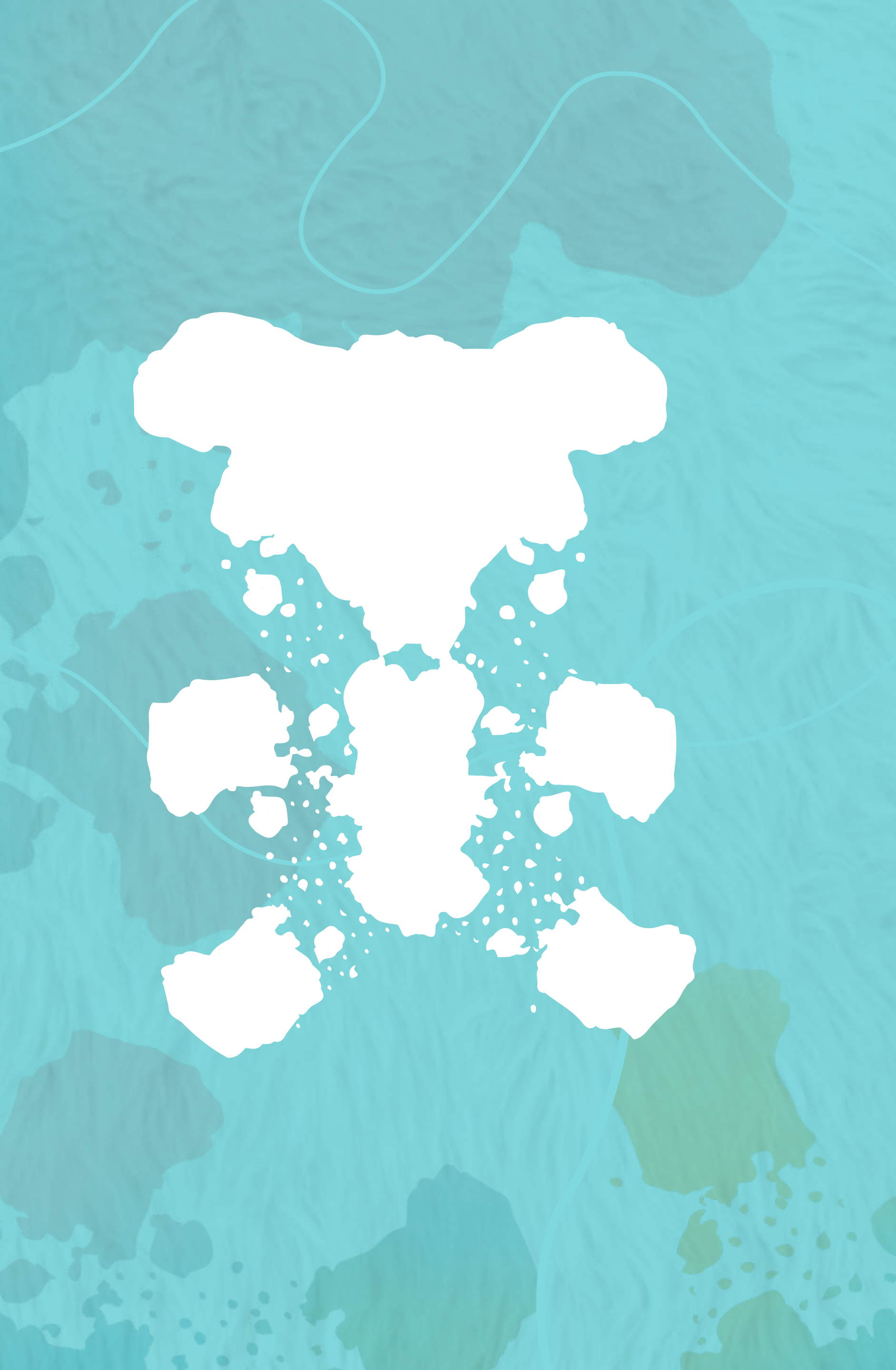
Quesnel's work draws from the material lexicon of contemporary childhood. As children, we learn to perceive ourselves as individuals, assembling the concept and experience of being a “self” acting in the world. Quesnel's paintings, sculptures and an interactive installation riff off of the bright colors and visual styles of psychological tests and stuffed animal toys, bringing us back to the wonder and anxiety of a time when every experience is new.

Quesnel's untitled interactive sculpture is a cross between a marionette and an oversized claw-crane game where participants are encouraged to rearrange giant, mismatched stuffed animal body parts using a system of ropes and pulleys. Those who play the game are invited to name the creature they assemble. The rules of this game are an allegory for

how we construct categories. We dismantle one body to create another, yet the new body is always built within the confines of a system of parameters (the pulleys and ropes). The rigging on which we assemble our creature is a metaphor for language, which forms the shared parameters for how and where we move the pieces. Though it is plausible to interpret this piece as a disavowal of the possibility for liberation (we simply rearrange the same body parts on the same tracks over and over, giving them different names) it also inspires us to revise our notions of what liberation could be.

The human mind creates limiting structures of thought and social order as a way to make sense of the world. These structures allow our minds to make assumptions, take shortcuts and believe we know what we perceive so that we can move, behave and learn without deciphering every object or experience anew. Though we will never dismantle the structuring impulses of the mind, we can gain awareness of how these structures operate and radically change our relationship to them. Once we see the pulley system, we may choose how and whether to use it. We can even choose to build a new one.

The Roman *tabula rasa* was made of wax, a tablet that could be written or drawn and repeatedly heated smooth. Unlike a slate with chalk (two rigid stones) the wax tablet is infinitely plastic -- re-writable and subject to total meltdown. These qualities are metaphors for the suggestibility, fragility and resilience of the human being.

The image shows an abstract artwork on the left side of the page. It features a teal background with various white and light blue splatters, blotches, and organic shapes. Some of these shapes resemble the outlines of continents or abstract faces. The overall composition is layered and textured, with some areas appearing more saturated than others. The right side of the page contains text that discusses the artist's work, including soft sculptures and paintings composed of meaningful blobs and symmetrical patterns.

In keeping with this theme, Quesnel's soft sculptures and paintings are composed of meaningful blobs. He reimagines monumental totem poles as constructions of canvas and splayed stuffed animal bodies that form bilaterally symmetrical, face-like forms. These pieces speak of the desire to make meaning and identify stable symbols within the great confusing mush of existence. One way of understanding a contemporary stuffed animal is as a lump of spun and puffed plastics. Another way is as best friend and personification of everything that is good and right with the world. As humans, we search for and perceive faces wherever there is symmetry. This desire to find meaning everywhere belies the overwhelming vulnerability we experience as living beings in a complex world.

We see the physical form of this vulnerability in the sculpture *Unburdened Bare*. In a simultaneously comical and gruesome gesture, Quesnel has torn the furry "skin" off of the trunk of a giant white teddy bear and put its stuffing into a transparent plastic bag. Its shiny black button eyes are affixed to this bag of fluffy guts, surrounded by its deflated head and paws. *Unburdened Bare* slouches against the wall, cute and sinister in its rawness, like the *Velveteen Rabbit* who came to life through the experience of suffering.

The paintings and wall sculptures of "*Tabula Rasa*" intentionally mix metaphors of comfort and meaning. Meaning is a form of comfort. We desire to read, understand and predict what will happen in our complex world. Quesnel's series of ten paintings show blobs of color arranged in bilaterally symmetrical patterns inspired by Rorschach tests. Such tests were popular with 20th century psychologists and anthropologists seeking to identify unconscious and shared cultural narratives. In Quesnel's paintings, we discover that the colorful shapes are the template for a teddy bear – the narrative itself is instruction for the assembly of a comfort object.

A series of larger canvases is painted with uniformly-spaced, amoebic shapes. Upon examination, we see that these are the shapes of shadows cast by hands in various symbols, from shadow-puppet dog to the "OK" symbol recently appropriated by the white power movement. In Quesnel's paintings, the shadows themselves cast stark shadows, speaking of the layers of meaning we inherit, reproduce or reimagine.

Ultimately, Quesnel's work invites us to occupy the beginner's mind. What is our world? How did we create it? What is possible once we realize we are responsible for what we have collectively made? These questions take on practical meaning in 2020, a year that has demanded that we radically change our relationship to physical presence and social behaviors while questioning the foundations and promises of our institutions, including American democracy itself. Ben Quesnel's "*Tabula Rasa*" addresses these questions at their roots and invites us to play and assemble in a new realm of possibility.

Written by Alexandra Hammond.



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Left: Soft Totem II, 2020
Cotton, fabric, wood, canvas.
51 x 20 x 15 inches
129.5 x 50.8 x 38.1 cm

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Right: Soft Totem I, 2019
Cotton, fabric, wood, canvas.
54 x 14 x 10 inches
137.2 x 35.6 x 25.4 cm





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Untitled Installation: Tabula Rasa, 2020
Found stuffed animals, pulley system.
Vary in size



Bear Template 1, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



Bear Template 2, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



Bear Template 3, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



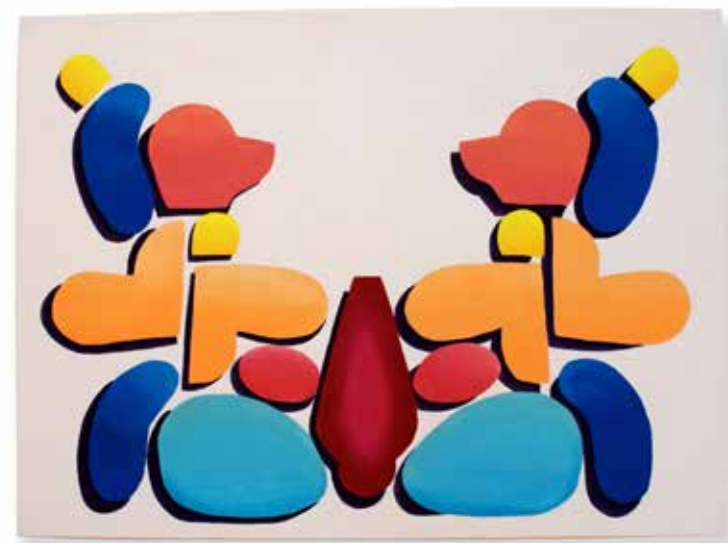
Bear Template 4, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



Bear Template 5, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



Bear Template 6, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



Bear Template 7, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



Bear Template 8, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



Bear Template 9, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



Bear Template 10, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
24 x 32 inches
60.96 x 81.28 cm



Tabula Rasa I, 2019
Wood, latex, cotton, fabric.
38 x 58 x 2 inches
96.52 x 147.32 x 5.08 cm



Tabula Rasa II, 2019
Fiberglass, latex, cotton, fabric, paint.
14 x 15 x 3.5 inches
35.56 x 38.1 x 8.89 cm



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Left: Coaxed Red, 2020
Acrylic paint on canvas, wooden hand,
rope, single light source.
36 x 36 inches
91.4 x 91.4 cm

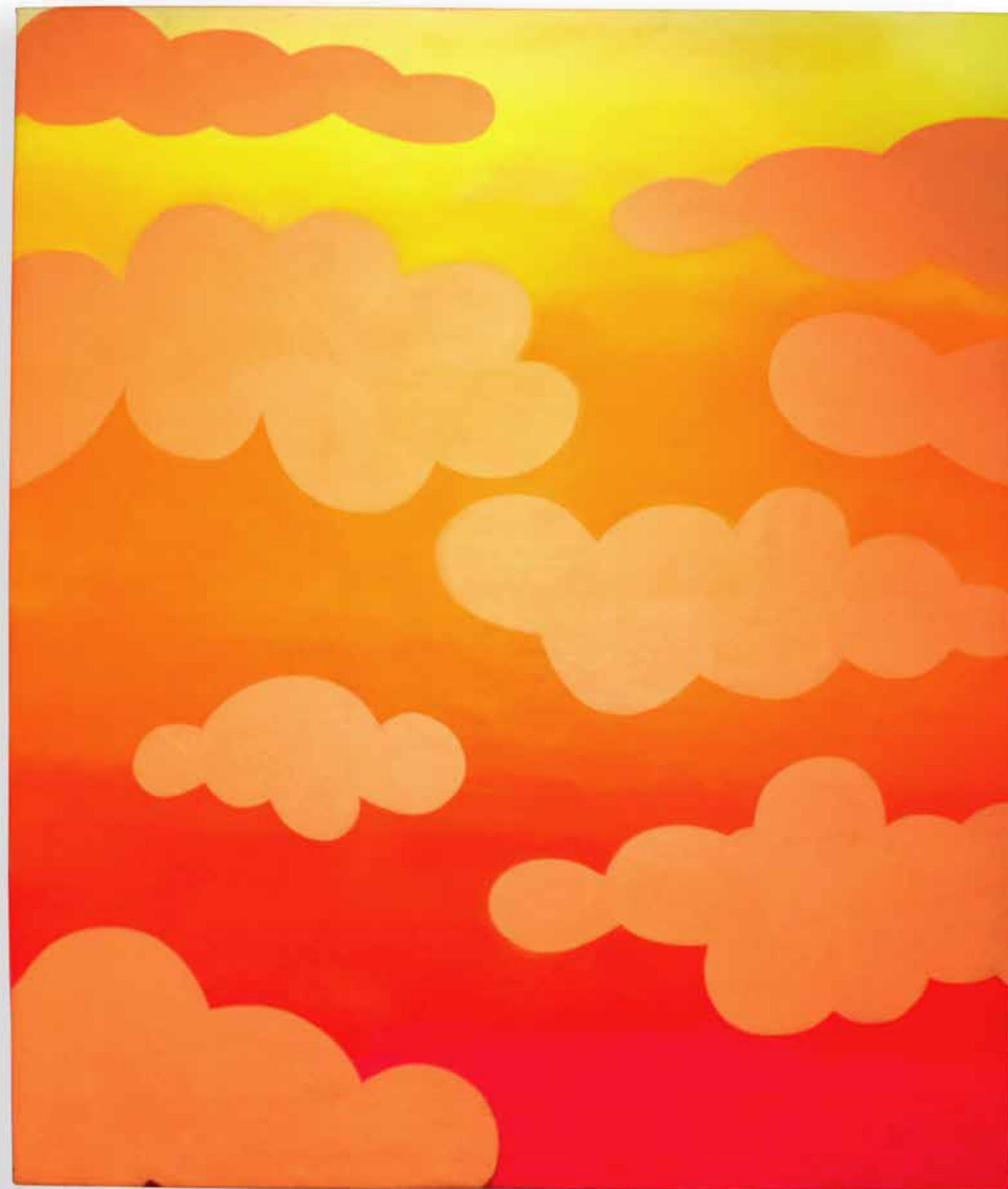
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Right: Coaxed Blue, 2020
Acrylic paint on canvas, wooden hand,
rope, single light source.
36 x 36 inches
91.4 x 91.4 cm



— **Stuffed Thing, 2020**
Combined stuffed animals on shelf.
11 x 10 x 8 inches
27.9 x 25.4 x 20.3 cm



— **Stuffed Thing (Totem), 2019**
Found stued animals on shelves.
56 x 9 x 9 inches
142.2 x 22.9 x 22.9 cm



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Clouded, 2020
Gouache on canvas.
84 x 72 inches
213.4 x 182.9 cm



Obstructed Shadows, 2020
Spray paint and acrylic on canvas.
48 x 63 inches
121.9 x 160 cm



—
Nurtured Shadows, 2020
Acrylic on canvas.
48 x 63 inches
121.9 x 160 cm



Unburdened Bare, 2017
Found object.
48 x 36 x 32 inches
121.92 x 91.44 x 81.28 cm



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Teddy Bear Rug, 2017
Found and donated teddy bears.
72 x 96 inches
182.88 x 243.84 cm

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