

SUE COLLIER



Perilous Walk Home (Panel I), 2018-2020, Oil on canvas, 50" x 50"
Cover: *Perilous Walk Home (Panel II)*, 2018-2020, Oil on canvas, 50" x 60"

Sue Collier

Looking for Answers

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Essay by Carol Kino

THE PAINTING CENTER

547 West 27th Street, Suite 500, New York, NY 10001
Tues-Sat, 11-6 pm, 212-343-1060, www.thepaintingcenter.org

Extreme Ideas: From Personal to Worldly

Sue Collier and I met in the early 1990s, when she was already an established artist and teacher, and I had just started writing about art and was trying to figure out how to put what moved me about it into words. Back then, Collier's paintings typically depicted American figures in Vuillard-like interiors: a group gathered in discussion around a table, one basking in sunlight from a window; or a woman lying in a bed squeezed into a corner of a wallpapered room, gazing up at a beam of light that streamed down from on high.

The people in these paintings, who might have walked out of compositions by Hopper or Marsh, always looked oddly in repose, their apparent languor underscored by the geometry of the composition. But even then, one came away with the impression that some sort of tension roiled beneath each work's shimmering surface. This was partly because every area of the painting, other than the flesh of the figures themselves, was intensely patterned and decorated—with zigzags, ovals, lozenges, blossoms, fleur de lis. (An example of this kind of patterning can be seen in the 2015 painting *Open Door*.)

In another series of beach scenes made a few years later, the figures themselves were shrouded behind layers of mist or fog, created with pointillist washes and pencil marks that suggest Seurat. Only by standing away from the work could one see the subject of the painting or drawing—the tightly packed bodies of women, rising from the sea. Beautiful, yet also somehow disturbing.

The paintings and drawings on view in this show, many of which were made during the pandemic, delve more profoundly into the sense of disquiet that permeates these older bodies of work.

The most obvious example lies in a new drawing series called *Migrants*. These works, which are large and labor-intensive, depict barely indistinguishable, cartoon-like figures crowded together into an indeterminate space. In *Immigrants* (2017-2019), which is over 4 feet high and nearly 6 1/2 feet long, the bodies are packed tightly into diagonal rows that describe the hull of a ship. In the 8-foot-long *Migrants* (2019-2020), they're jumbled together into a mass so tight that it's harder to get a real sense of the space. Nonetheless, long looping ropes have been flung across the crowd, superimposing loose triangles upon it, and many of the figures reach out together to tug on these lines, as if pulling themselves ashore, or hauling others in from danger.

Despite the morass, random details suddenly leap out from this tangled sea of humanity: arms cradle children, bodies fall upon other bodies, arms reach up for help from the floor. The figures begin with soft orange pencil that has been rubbed out, worked over with other colors, and erased and reworked many times, as if to suggest that each body isn't the first and won't be the last. (Collier recently received a 2020 NYFA Grant for this work.)

While these drawings were clearly inspired by real-world events, the monumental triptych *Perilous Walk Home* (2018-2020), which is nearly fourteen feet long, seems the stuff of childhood nightmares or fairy tales. It also summons up the specter of the body in a different way.

Here, a field of pink, green and golden brushstrokes resolve themselves into leaves, flowers and flickering light, and the figures seem to emerge hazily from the space created by these shapes, as they might in a memory or a dream. Near the center of the right-hand panel, a girl in a summery dress walks through dark green leaves over a surface that could be a forest floor or a bottomless pool. She appears to be heading away from a house and toward the rest of the painting, where three women stand near another doorway made of trees, bathed in horizontal bars of light. Far off in the distance is the tiny, menacing figure of a man. The girl traverses a long, dark, uneasy passage between the two.

The show also includes a group of small oil on canvas works made in the year or so leading up to the pandemic. Painted en plein air in Central Park, each was made spontaneously, over the course of about three hours, with the start and stop times depending on the changing light. Some hone in on flowers and foliage; others depict real people in the park, or take inspiration from the setting to summon up a scene from memory. Collier made them as she was at the tail end of raising children and while a few show crowds of people--scenes that now look like postcards from a vanished world--many suggest the passages of parenthood. We see a man with his hand on a woman's pregnant belly; three women pushing carriages at the end of a leafy pathway; a woman leading two children by their hands from a small path onto a larger road.

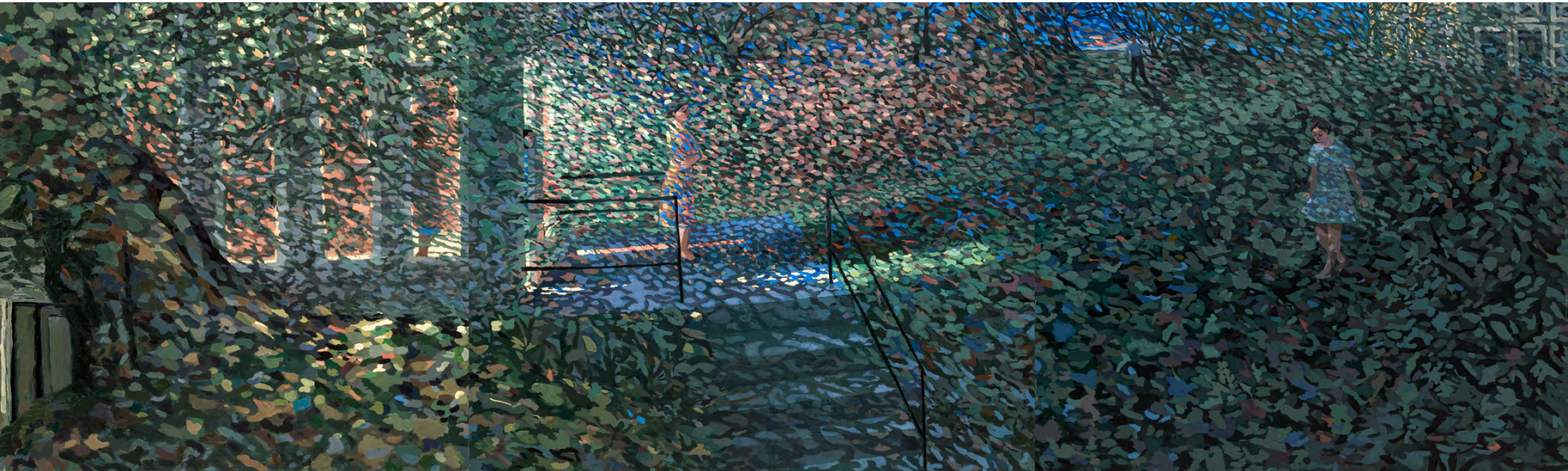
Many artists, cut off from their studios and equipment during the pandemic, took the opportunity to focus on work like these intensely pleasurable plein air scenes--projects that could be made relatively quickly, on kitchen tables and in living rooms. But the global crisis pushed Collier in the opposite direction, by giving her the chance to spend more uninterrupted time in her home studio, making monumental work she had been thinking about for years. The result has been a creative breakthrough.

At first glance, these three bodies of work seem quite different from each other. But the *Migrant* drawings and *Perilous Walk Home* actually have much in common, from the tension produced by the all-over patterning to the strong geometric shapes that underpin both compositions.

They are all related in another way, too, for what makes the *Migrant* drawings so powerful is the underlying awareness that every one of these anonymous, seemingly interchangeable figures makes its perilous journey carrying the same sort of vividly personal experiences and memories we see in the plein air paintings created in the park.

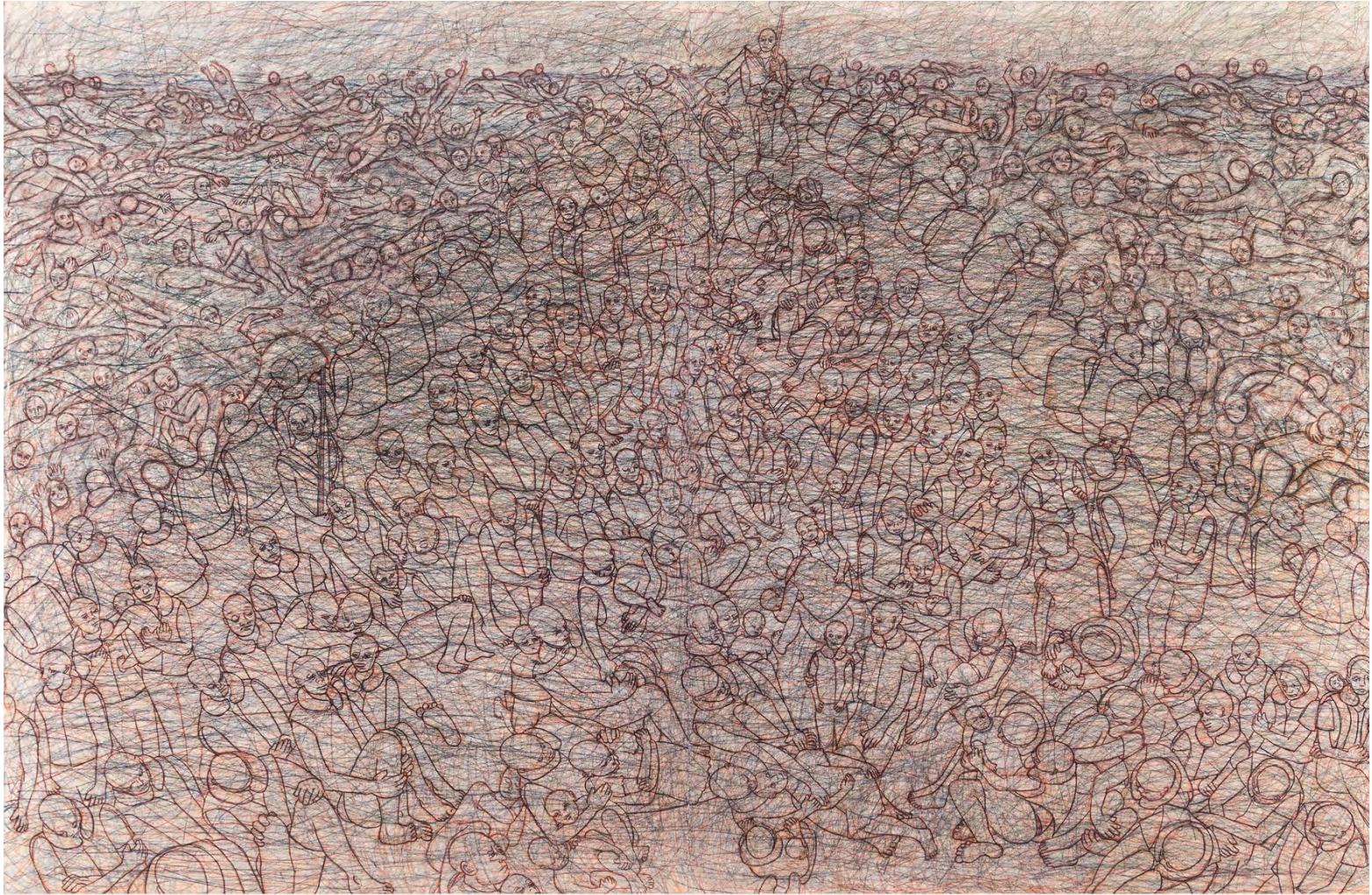
Carol Kino, 2021

Carol Kino's writing about art has appeared in WSJ. magazine, the New York Times, and many art magazines. Her first book, The Fair-Haired Girls: The Twins Who Became Photographers in the Golden Age of Magazines, will be published by Scribner next year.



Perilous Walk Home, 2018-2020
Oil on canvas, 50" x 167", Triptych

Page 12-13: *Migrants*, 2019-2020, Color pencil on print paper, 48" x 96"
Page 10-11: *Immigrants*, 2017-2019, Color pencil on print paper, 50" x 77"







A Day in Central Park, 2017
Oil on linen, 24" x 32"



Resting in the Shade, 2019
Oil on canvas, 12" x 16"

Sue Collier

Sue Collier, a 2020 NYFA Fellow, has exhibited nationally and her work has been reviewed by *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Art News*, *Art in America*, and *Art New England*, among other publications. She is currently featured in the first online exhibition of Skowhegan School, Endless State, and USPS Art Project in Greenly Art Space, CA.

Website: www.suecollier.com

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To my fellow Painting Center friend and colleague: Tony Cuneo

Special thanks to Ryan, Torin and Laurie Mark. Thank you Shazzi Thomas for your tireless efforts, patience and beautiful design.



Perilous Walk Home (Panel III), 2018-2020
Oil on canvas, 50" x 56"