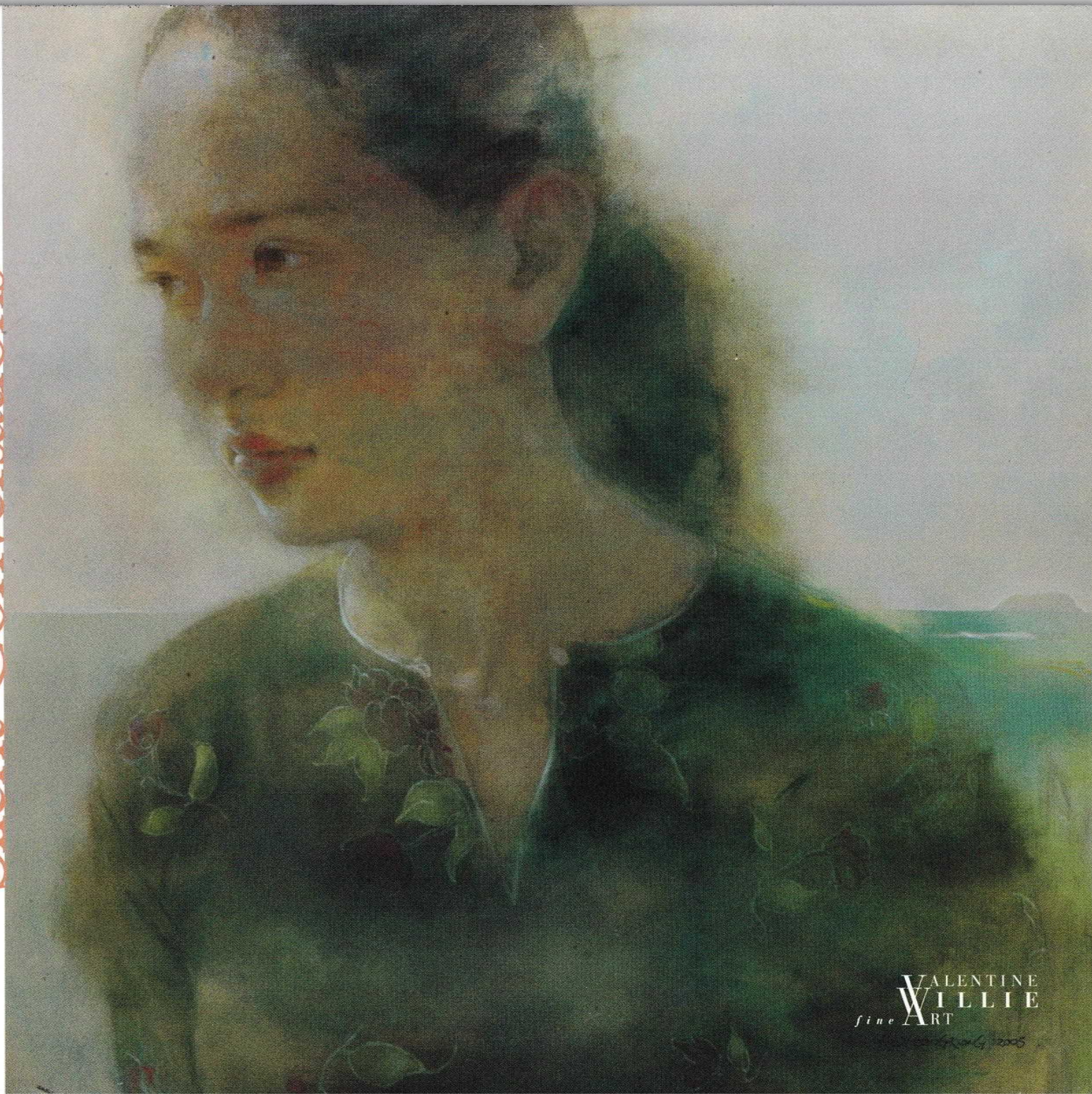


Kow Leong Kiang

# Silent Conversations



VALENTINE  
WILLIE  
fine ART

2005







## Silent Conversations

In almost ten years of painting professionally, Kow Leong Kiang's principal subjects have been Malaysian youths or Balinese girls set in idyllic landscapes. Many artists who touch on these themes only manage to produce pictures trapped in nostalgia and exoticism. Kow Leong Kiang's paintings speak through this cacophony of Malaysian kitsch and Balinese clichés with a soft and subtle voice reminiscent of Hoessein Enas' works from the 60s. Besides possessing this charm, the shifting surface and signs in his paintings promises viewers the chance for an intimate and inexhaustible exchange.

This new series springs from Kow Leong Kiang's travels to the East Coast, and the islands of Perhentian and Tioman towards the end of 2004 and beginning of 2005. These tropical locations have never ceased to be a source of inspiration for the artist. Back at his studio, the artist filters through a mountain of digital shots of the land and recomposes them into photo-collages that meet his ideal. The other image the artist reshapes extensively is that of the 17 year-old Malay girl from the East Coast who modeled for him for a day. She too acquires an unimaginable perfection. Pencil sketches are then made to polish the composition some more before painting finally begins. Work is initially slow as he experiments with new ways of hiding realities and revealing illusions. As time goes by, a flow is found and images emerge from layers and layers of finely laid paint. Stripped of their original context and identity, both the land and the girl eventually find a new home and meaning in Kow Leong Kiang's painting.

The sole and central figure of over a dozen finished paintings is "she", *gadis Melayu*. Who is she now if she is no longer that anonymous island native? Has she transformed into a legendary maiden like *Puteri Gunung Ledang*? Perhaps. Is she like Intan, the modern cinematic heroine of Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet*? Maybe. To really know her, one need only to remember that she is a painting – a two-dimensional surface covered in paint. An object though she may be, simple she is not. The artist gives each of his 'object' of obsession a surface that holds layers of beauty and rich symbolism. The work entitled *Promise* is a good introduction to this subtle language that Kow Leong Kiang's paintings speak. On the left of the diptych, a silhouette of a face is trapped beneath a layer of translucent ochre. She is here more paint than person. Yet we recognize her delicate profile and draw her into existence. A promise fulfilled? On her right, a few simple lines and wash of colours are enough to symbolise the sea, the land, and the sky. Look closer and this illusion sinks unrecognisably back into the picture surface as paint. A promise broken? Here, surface and signs rock back and forth fiercely. In the rest of the series, the movement settles into the gentle sway of dreams.



There is only one painting in which her gaze seems to meet ours. We expect that it will reveal the most about our protagonist. Yet as wide-open as her eyes may be, it still seems impossible to penetrate her thoughts and emotions. An invisible curtain covers these windows. If we relent and seek out the title of the painting, a little shock is in store. '*You never really cared*' it declares. Then the specks of light under her eyes change into teardrops while the sensual lips tighten into a stern pout. Everything around her takes on a more sombre tone. The once calm sea hardens into cold amber.

The titles that so strongly affect the mood of the paintings originated from song lyrics of two Chinese rock bands familiar to the artist. The Taiwanese band sang about love while the one from China spoke of politics. Listening to the two albums, Kow Leong Kiang found all the words necessary to describe his then already completed works. Besides serving as a clue to her sentiments, the titles also add new dimensions to the paintings as well. Take for example the piece named '*I won't think of you anymore*'. Who is the 'I'? Who is the 'you'? And why was it said? What is offered to us is actually an unfinished dialog with no specified speaker. Adding to this ambiguity is the timeless and nameless setting.

Returning our attention to the paintings, we see "her" looking to the left, to the right, and everywhere except at the viewer. She avoids us to such an extent that it can no longer be explained by shyness or modesty. Is she contemplating a bitter sweet memory or experiencing guilt? Such projections cast her down as a vulnerable girl-child but in turn make us succumb to feelings of friendly sympathy or familial support for her. Now, what if her evasiveness is in fact a show of defiance or indifference? This perspective lends her greater depth and maturity, and allows for tales of more romantic or serious nature to develop. Is she a sweet innocent child, a confused teenage girl, or a sensual and confident young woman? We are thus now left with an open interpretation to what defines the gadis Melayu of our time.

The way our heroine continuously draws questions and rouses sentiments might well frustrate us, yet her closeness to the canvas invites intimacy and her harmony with the colours around her contributes to an awesome serenity. In '*You were lying to me all along*', her eyes are downcast but the other magnified features of her face and body, or even the environment can provide alternative routes to her soul. Looking at the resolution in her firm brows and feeling the soothing colours of the still water, one can easily imagine her saying 'You were lying all along? Well, so be it'. And we let her be.







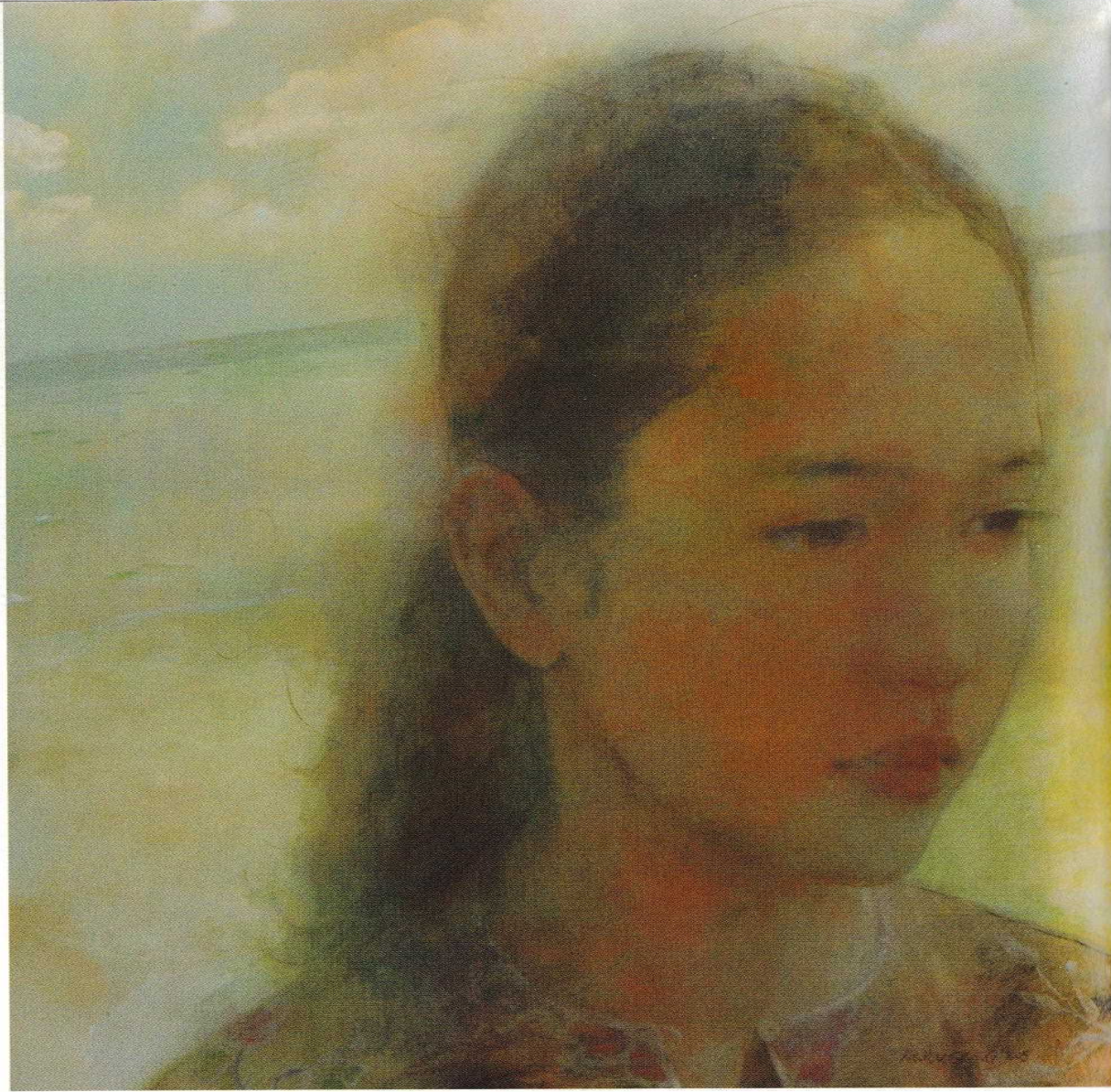
## 你已忘记你曾经许下的诺言

You have forgotten your words

2005

Oil on canvas

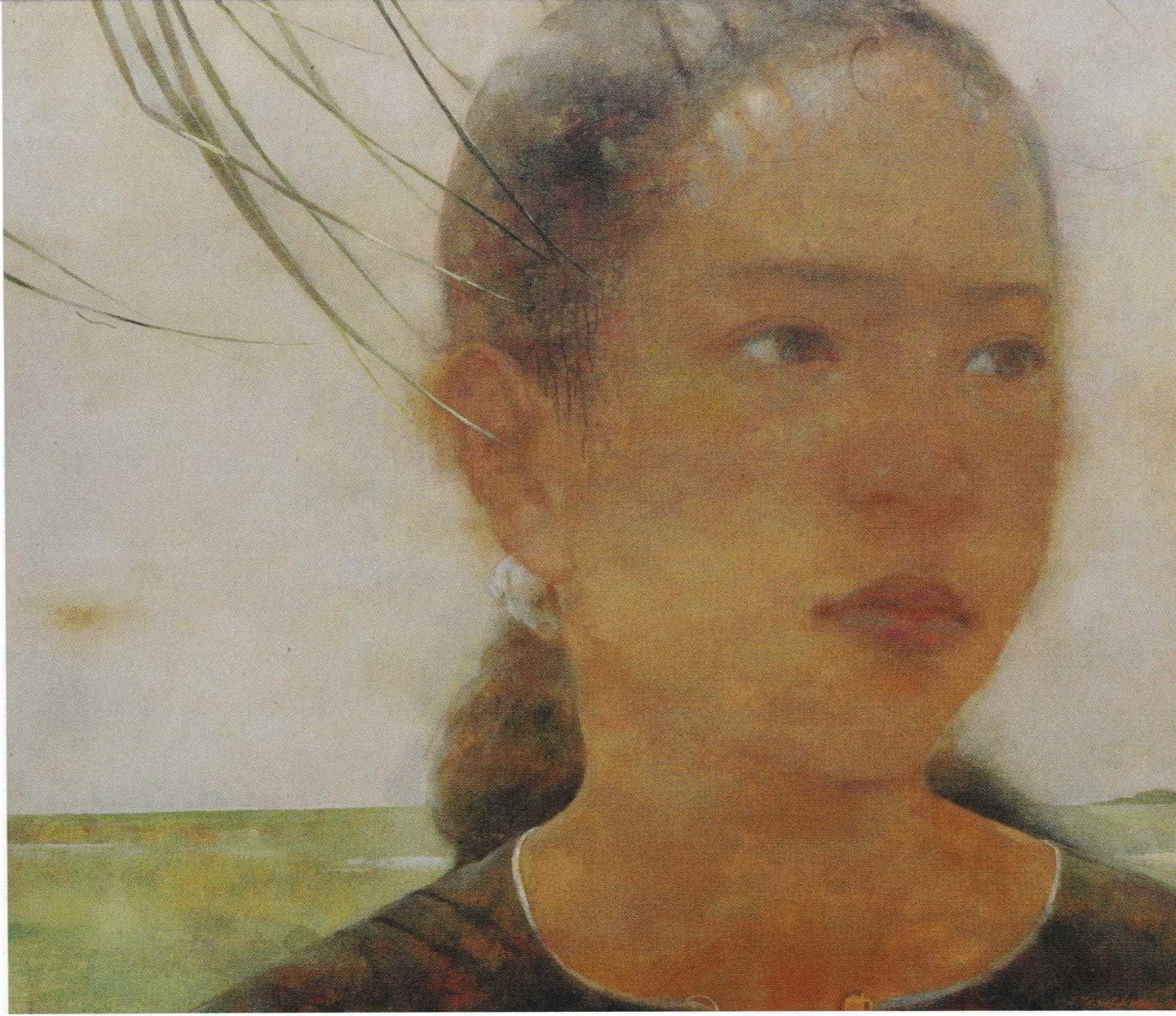
120 x 120 cm





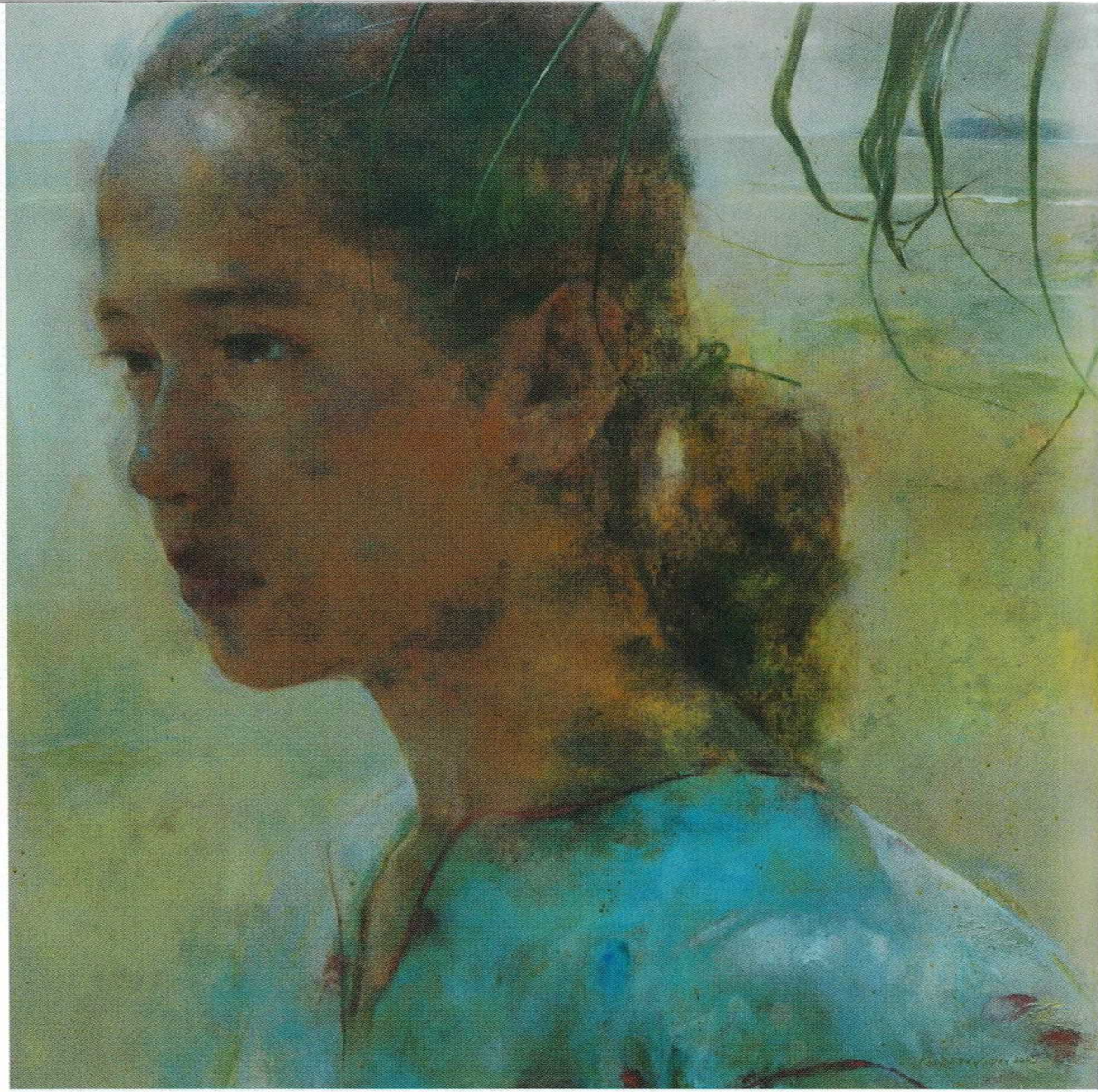
## 不要再想你

I won't think of you anymore  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
120 x 138 cm



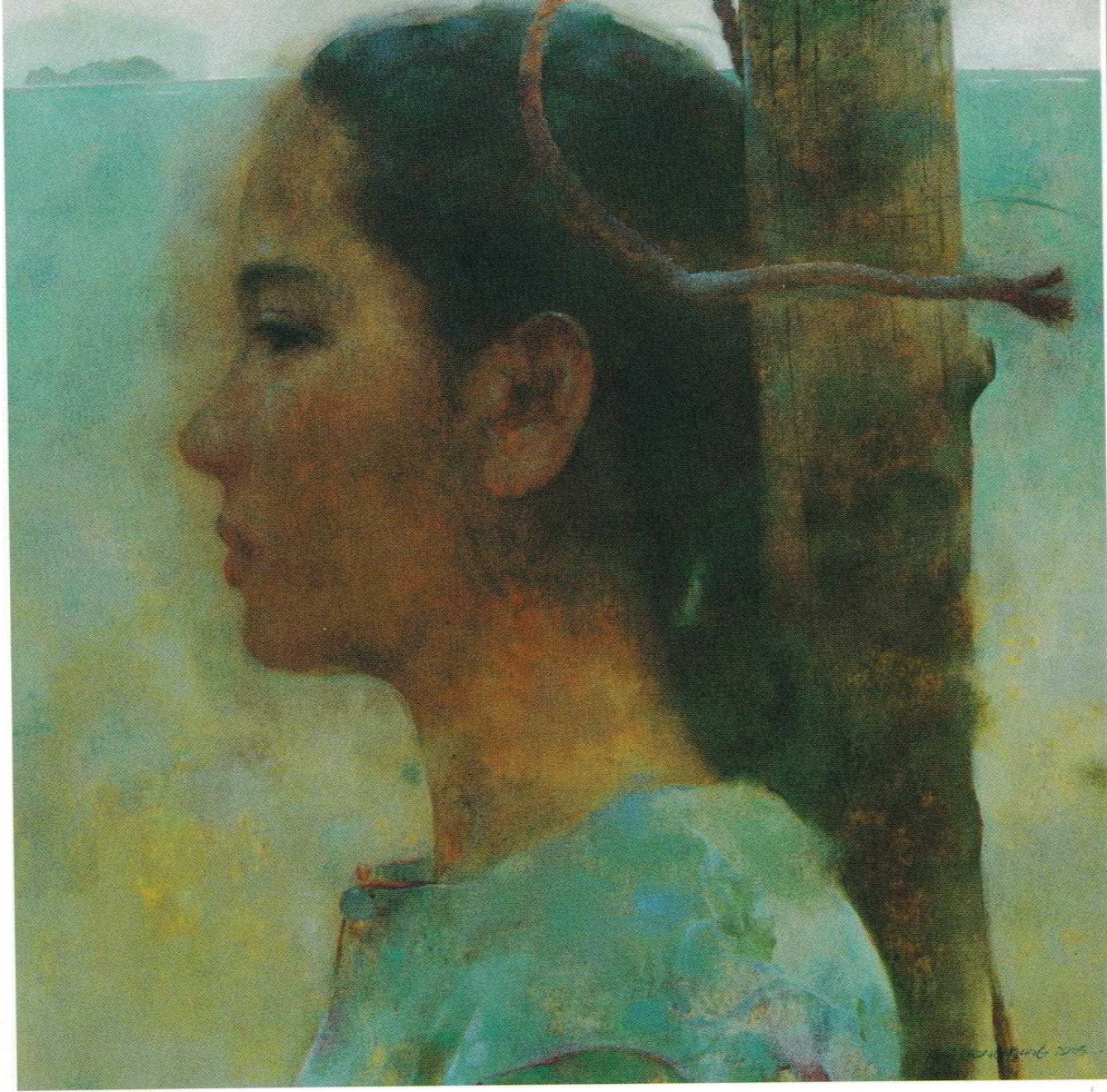


Melancholy  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
120 x 120 cm



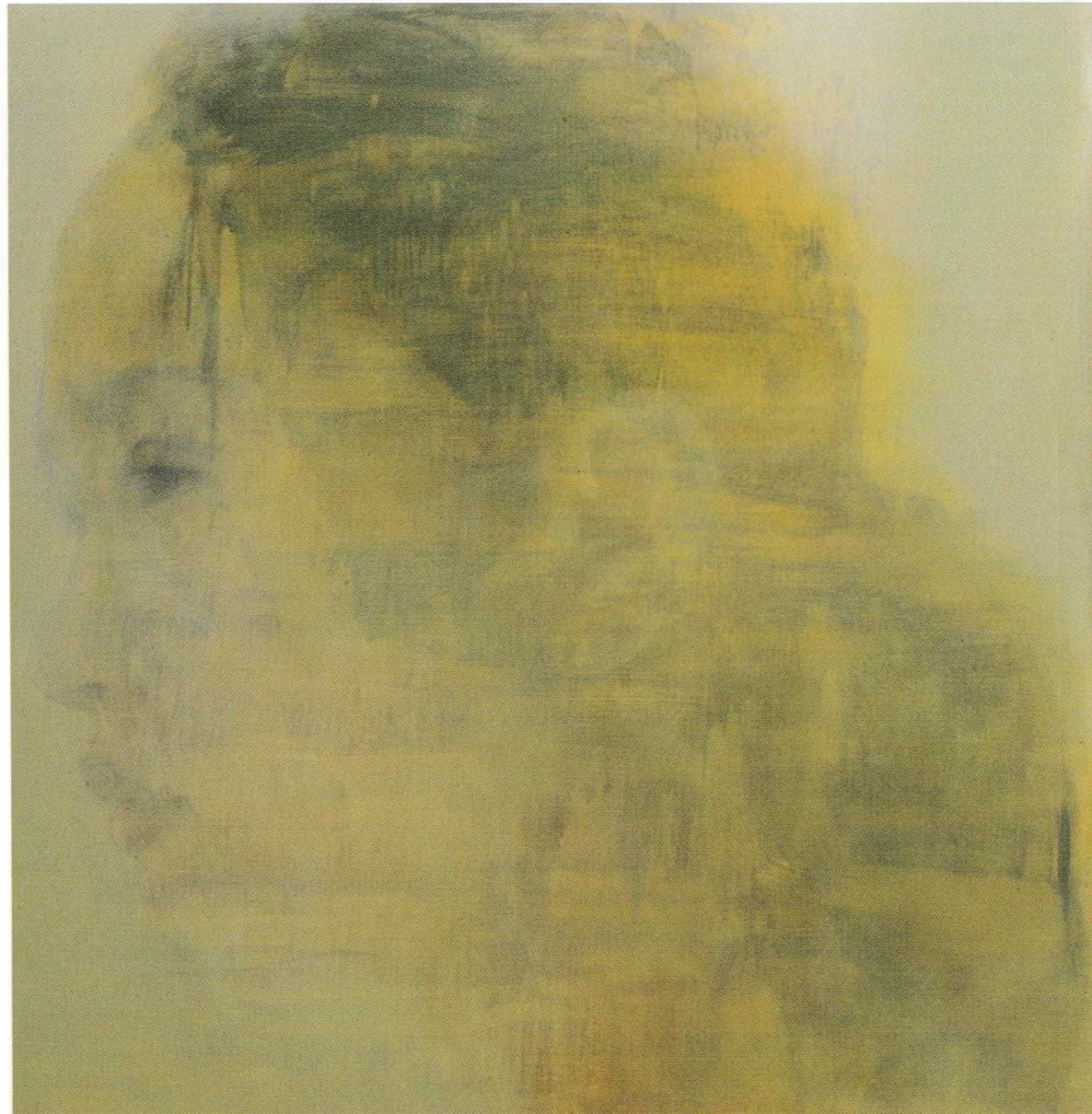


Let's go on pretending  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
120 x 120 cm

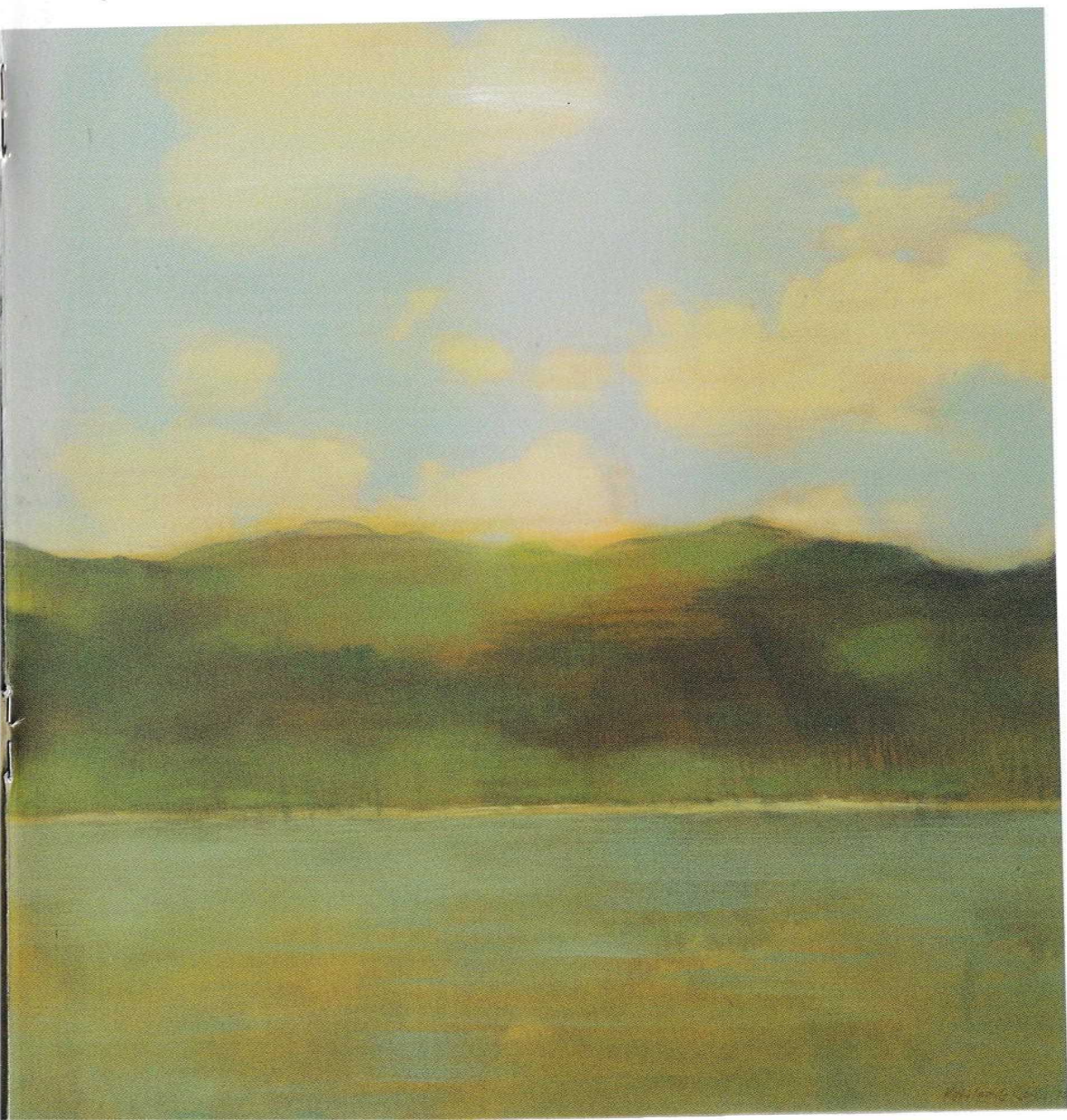




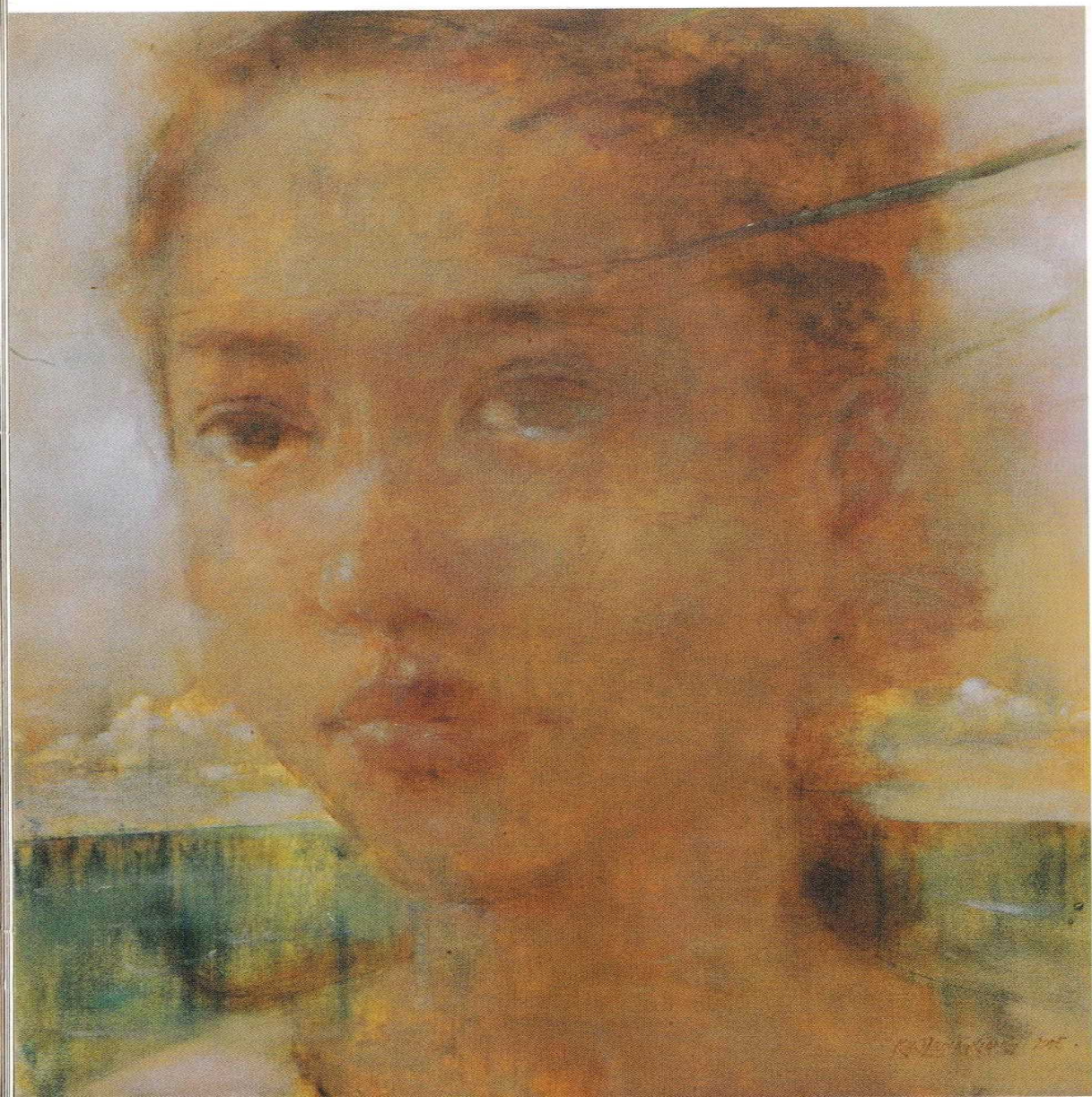
Promise  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
120 x 240 cm







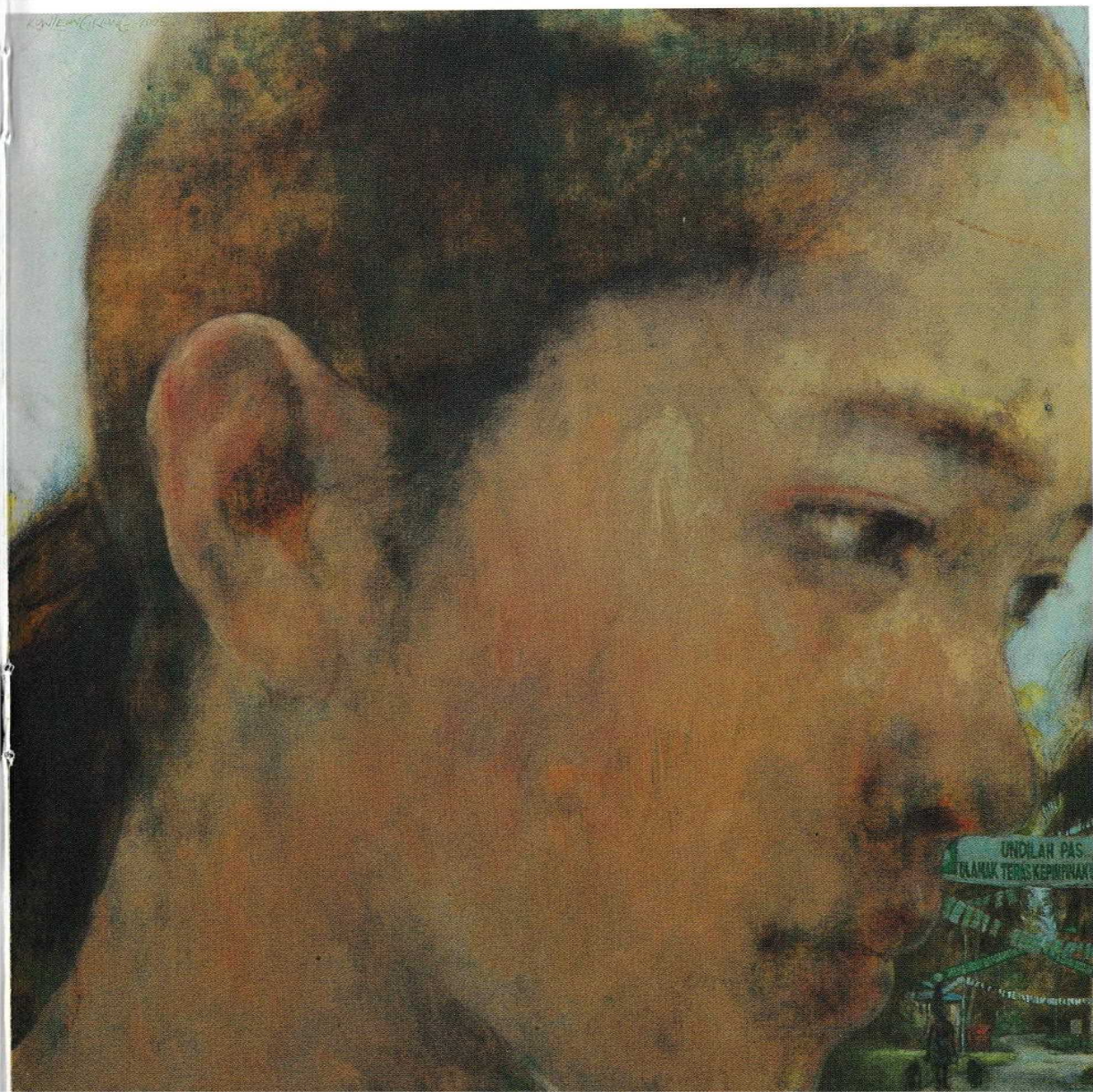




你已忘记你曾经许下的诺言

You never cared really  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
89 x 89 cm

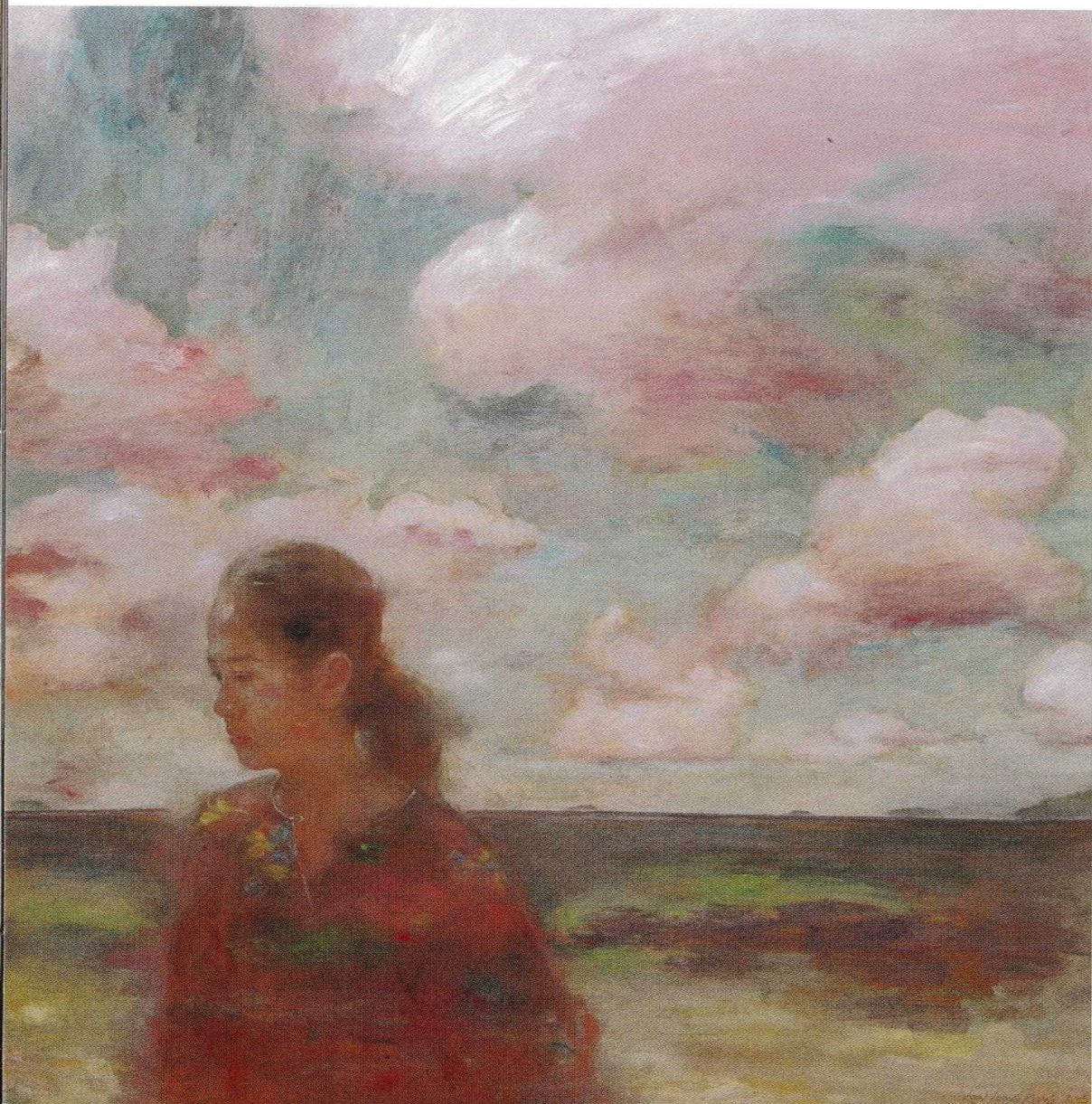




夏日午后

One afternoon  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
89 x 89 cm

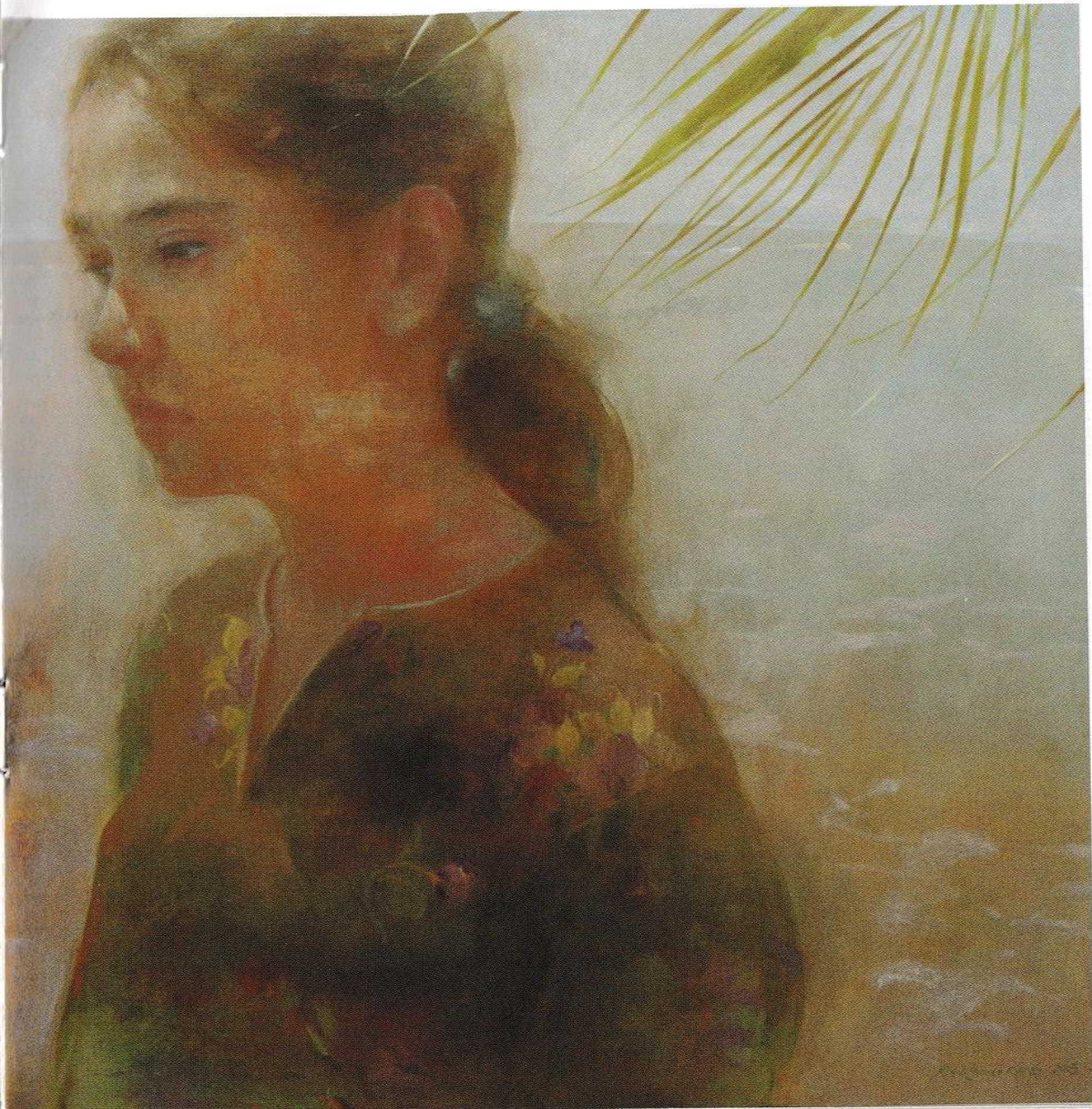




你的承诺是那么熟悉

I've heard these promises before  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
152 x 152 cm





你一直在骗我

You were lying to me all along  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
120 x 120 cm

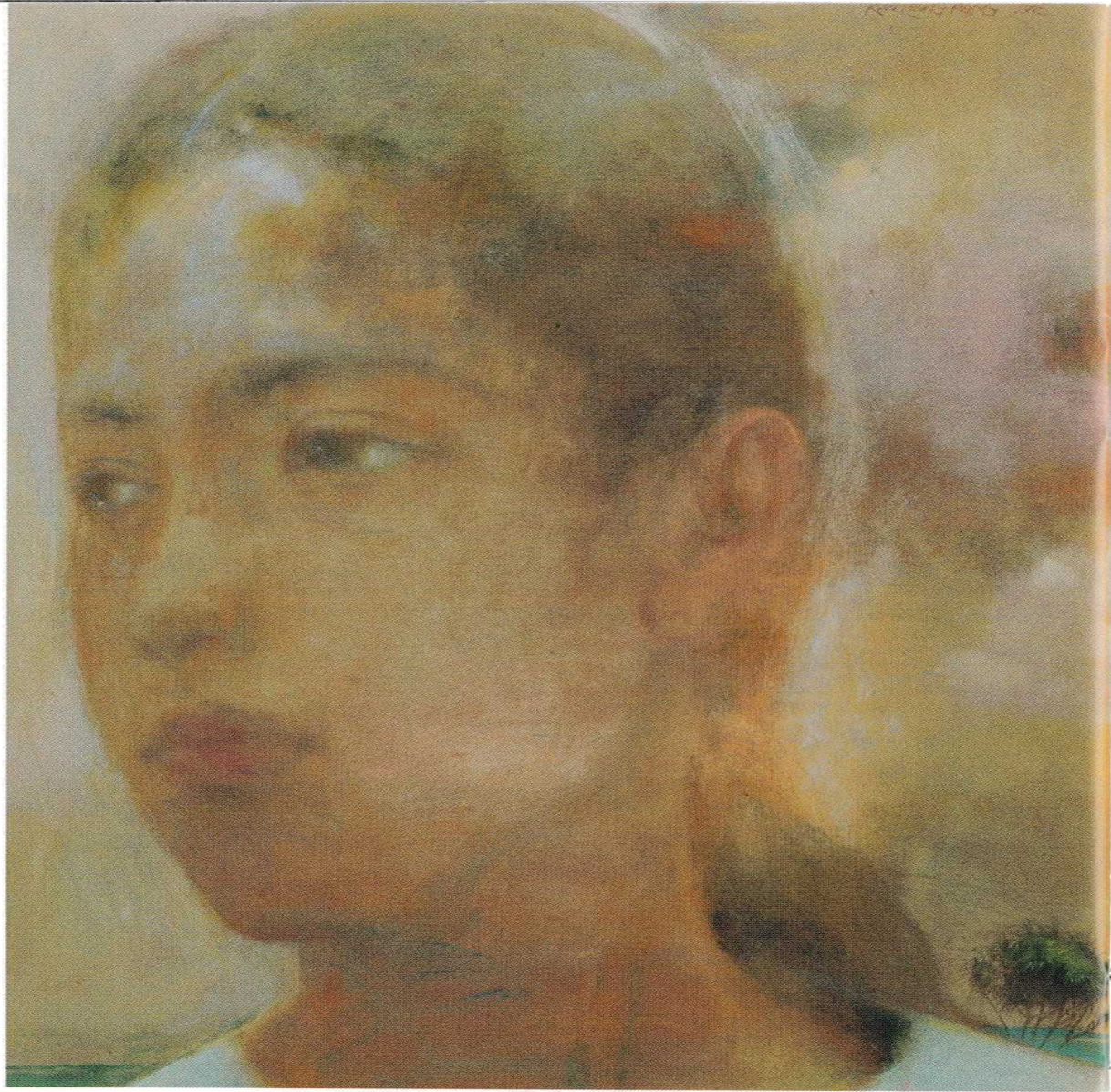


It was wrong to love you

2005

Oil on canvas

89 x 89 cm





## 我想我会离开

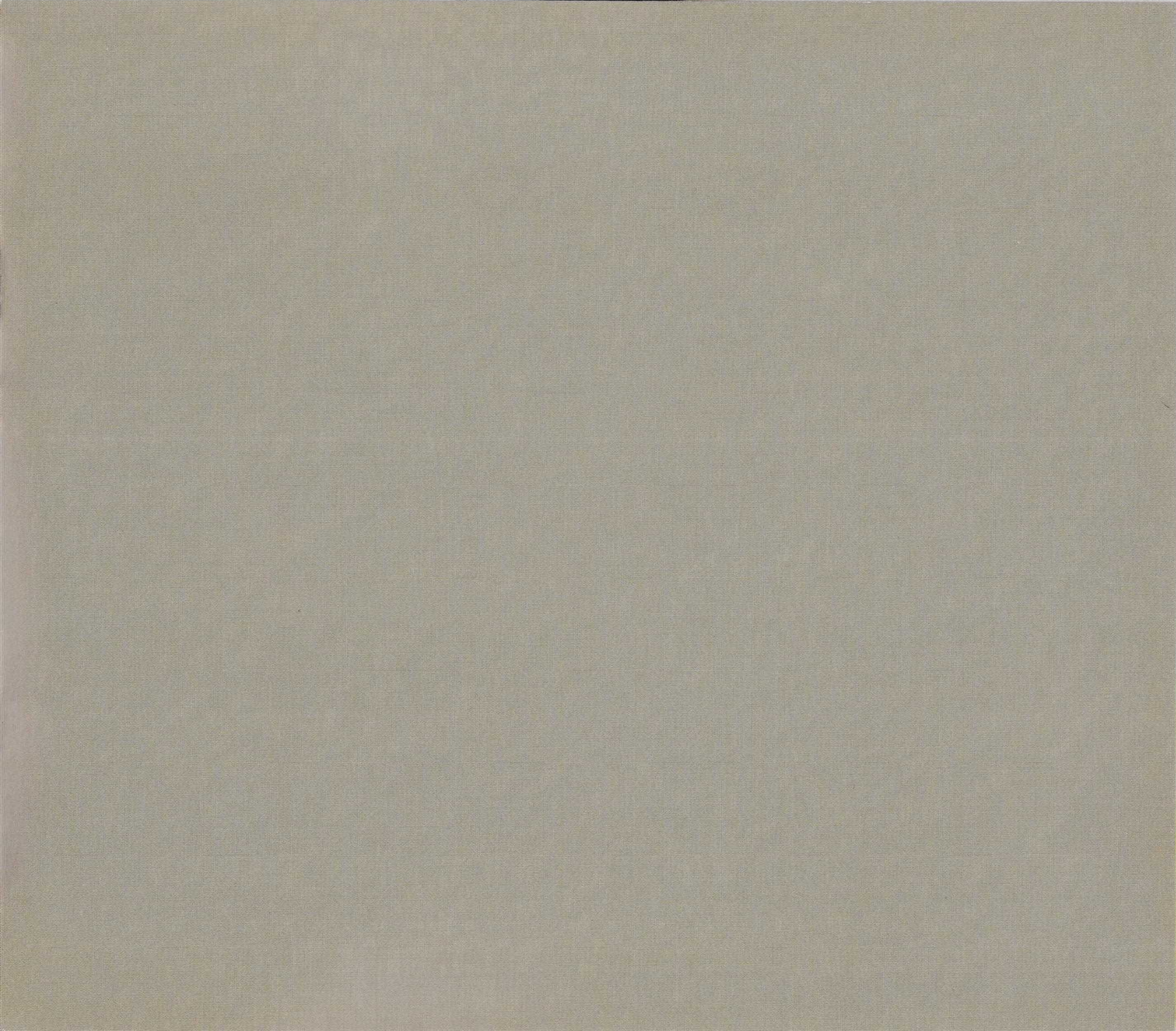
I think I will leave  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
229 x 76 cm













Exhibition dates: 9th November – 20th November 2005

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