UNBOUND

An Origin Story

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Introduction

Judaism is a culture of dogmatic origins: the original monotheistic religion; the original nation of The Book; the original 'chosen people'; and as most controversially claimed by believers, the original nation of the land of Israel. Throughout my childhood in a country founded on an inflexible notion of origin, confronting the concept was simply inescapable. These narratives were constantly and cleverly drilled into my consciousness from all directions – in school, through the media, and around the Shabbat dinner table. As a result, challenging these could have easily turned into a taxing affair, and I regularly found myself vacillating between ferocious criticality and escapism.

The picture today is hardly any different. Debating the notion of an original baseline, as it pertains to foundational Israeli-Jewish narratives, is almost sure to spark a debate – whether with members of my own family, or a complete stranger on the other side of the globe[1].

Yet, attempts at determining original states are not endemic to Judaism, Israel or the Middle-East. Terms reflecting an original state, such as 'native species', 'natural habitat', 'ecological baseline' or 'indigenous peoples' are fundamentally etched in cultural and academic discussions around the world – but what do they actually reflect?

In *Unbound*, I embark on a semi-autobiographical quest, through which I contemplate myths of origin. I return to the two foundational yet competing epistemes that have been shaping my understanding of the concept throughout my life: On one end, the dogmatic Abrahamic mythology with which I was raised as an Israeli Jew; On the opposing end, Darwin's theory of evolution, as laid out in *On The Origin of Species*, which gradually came to replace many of my childhood's traditional narratives. In a body of work comprising a graphic novel and a series of large-scale oil paintings, the Darwinian and Abrahamic stories clash, bend, and blend.

Unbound is the practice of reflexive doubt. While this project exists in an academic sphere, I refrain from calling it 'research' in the traditional sense of the word. Rather, I choose to frame my academic practice as 'artistic inquiry', for it is aimed at asking critical questions, rather than providing definitive answers. To this end, I generate a lexicon of visual iconography, a strategy which, in the words of art scholar Daniel Morris, enables the work to live between 'public history and private myth' (1996). I draw from an array of

[1] This essay was written before the October 7th massacre in Israel and the war in Gaza that followed.

influential Jewish artists who have used this method effectively, among whom are Philip Guston, William Kentridge, Will Eisner, and Art Spiegelman.

I wrote this essay in order to allow my reader to view *Unbound* through the lens of its maker. Hence, this document will not aim to function as a dry academic argument. Instead, it will combine autobiographical narrative with critical theory in a manner most appropriate for the goals of this project.

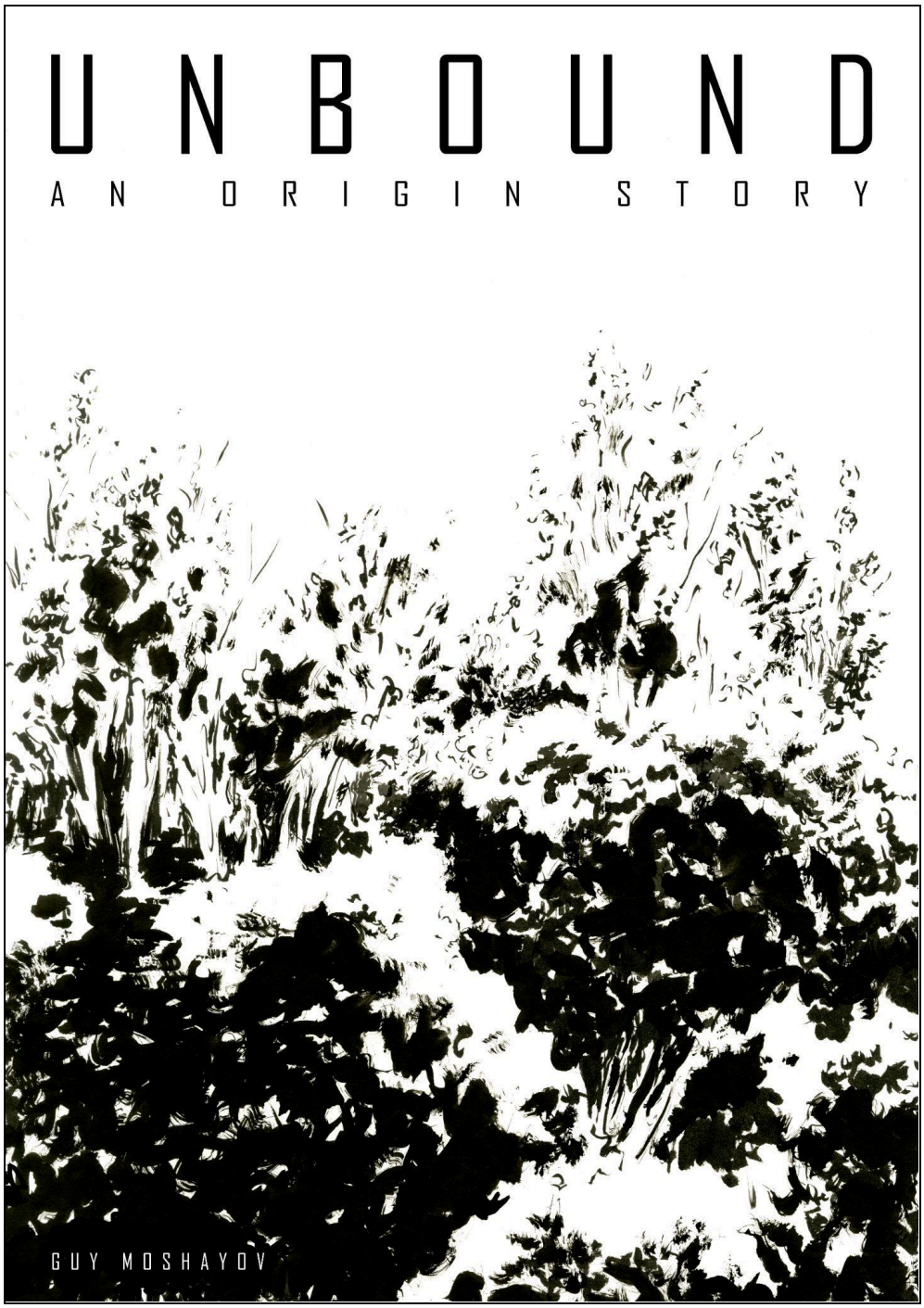

Figure 1: *Unbound*: a reflection on faith, rationality, and contemporary Jewish identity through a modern retelling of *The Binding of Isaac*.
Cover page of graphic novel, Ink on paper

23 & Me: A New Myth of Origin

Last year, I took a DNA test (distributed by the American biotech company *23 & Me*) which mapped my genetic data. As expected, the results coincided with my family's health history: for instance, the test reflected my increased likelihood of developing high cholesterol (my parents and grandparents from both sides have all suffered from high cholesterol, and my own cholesterol levels are indeed high despite my healthy diet, relatively young age, and level of fitness). It also accurately described the prevalence of nearsightedness in my family, as well as the high risk of diabetes, acne during teenage years, male-pattern baldness, and more.

But my anticipation for the test results focused on unveiling my ancestry report. While written documentation of Jewish heritage in the form of Hebrew texts dates back 3000 years (Garfinkel *et al.*, 2015), it cannot provide anything close to the reliable and cohesive ancestral image DNA mapping produces. With centuries of migration, exiles, persecution and assimilation, combined with political realities that manipulated narratives to fit various agendas, Jewish ancestry is so elusive that I had a very limited idea of what my results might reveal.

Here is what I knew about my lineage from my parents' and grandparents' personal accounts: My mother's family came to Israel in the 1960s from Essaouira (formerly named Mogador), Morocco. My father and his mother were born in Tel Aviv, and her family came in the 1920s to British-Mandate Palestine from Aleppo, Syria (riding donkeys across the border, according to my grandmother). My grandfather's family emigrated from Uzbekistan – where Moshayov (meaning 'son of Moses') was a fairly common Jewish last name, yet he himself was born in Iran during his family's journey from Uzbekistan to Israel.

My genetic ancestry, however, revealed a much broader story than the one I heard from my family: tracing genes 300,000 years back to the emergence of Homo Sapiens in East Africa, the test unveiled my maternal and paternal migration patterns from Africa into the Middle East, Northwest Asia, Europe, and back to the Levant.

My DNA associated 9.5 percent of my genes to the region in Morocco in which Essaouira is located, and pinpointed 2 percent of my genes to Aleppo in Syria. I expected to find some ancestral traces in Portugal or Spain (from which Jews were exiled to North Africa during the Spanish Inquisition), and

the test indeed linked 1.1 percent of my DNA to Portugal. Hence, 12.6 percent of my genes lined up with the ancestral narratives I received from my family.

The remaining 87.4 percent, however, described a rather surprising picture, by detailing the following ancestral composition: no genes were traced back to Uzbekistan, the home of my family name. Rather, the test matched nearly half of my DNA (43 percent) to the Tehran region in Iran – a place that never held any significance in our family's cultural identity.

Being of a Moroccan-Syrian background, my known ancestors practised Judaism according to Mizrahi (Eastern)-Sepharadic Jewish traditions, as opposed to the culturally-distinct Ashkenazi Jewish practices of Northern Europe. They did not only distinguish themselves from Ashkenazi Jews by religious customs, but also by language, societal norms, cuisines, etc. In fact, the cultural distinction between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Jewish practices remains a dominant defining factor in Israeli Jewish identity today. Despite growing up in a Mizrahi-Jewish household on both sides, my DNA linked 7 percent of my genetic makeup to Ashkenazi Jewish communities in Poland and Ukraine. To broaden the picture, the test traced an ancestral migration pattern from the Levant to Morocco through Ukraine, Poland, Italy, and Portugal. Thus, the test also matched 3.6 percent of my genes to Italy, 2 percent to Egypt, 0.5 percent to Sardinia, and even associated 0.1 percent of genes with Coptic Egyptian (an ancient Christian ethnoreligious group).

The remaining genes traced ancestry more generally, showing 'broadly Western Asian & North African' (19.6 percent), 'broadly Arab, Egyptian & Levantine' (5 percent), 'broadly Southern European (4.3 percent), 'broadly European (2 percent), and 'broadly Northern West Asian' (0.4 percent).

Like in most families, ancestral narratives have been shaping my family members' sense of identity. Therefore, I was not surprised by my uncle's hostile reaction when the unexpected test results rattled an established sense of tribal belonging. The general tone of his reaction echoed the following argument: "I do not care what some test shows, I believe what my parents and grandparents told me from the day I was born – We are Uzbeki Jews from Bukhara, this is our culture, our heritage, and our collective history, and to me, no test could ever change this."

A part of me understood his position: when barred from fully integrating into their physical societies, diaspora Jews often resorted to associating more with their 'imagined communities' (in the words of

Benedict Anderson),[2] and hold on to an ancient Israelite nationhood (Anderson, 2006; Schiffman, 2022). Still, I kept asking myself – why did my uncle react so strongly against the reception of dry genetic data? Surely he would not have responded similarly if his blood test showed high levels of blood sugar or cholesterol, or if his DNA test indicated any genetic illness. I cannot imagine him scolding the doctor by stating: "I am healthy, I have always been healthy, and these test results will not change what I know". Yet, when it came to an ancestral report that did not align with his own traditional narrative, his guard was immediately raised.

I present his case as a primer for the main argument this project unpacks: baselines and their critique. In the following sections, I will expand upon the tension between physical and mythical origins, and share with my reader my own personal journey of grappling with the question of origin as it pertains to my own identity and context. Lastly, I will elaborate on the ways in which this theoretical framework informs my artistic project, *Unbound*.

[2] Anderson defines national affiliation as an imagined association between members who are often strangers, collectively constructing a sense of kinship and communion through shared beliefs. While he uses the term 'imagined community' in reference to nationalism, his analysis could be extended to accommodate a Jewish collective affiliation with their historic sovereignty (Anderson, 2006).

Unbound: An Origin Story

Unbound is the story of a return to an origin: Abraham's return from Mount Moriah to Be'er Sheva; A Jewish person's return to the origin of an Abrahamic mythology; And an artist's return to his childhood in Israel. I will begin by describing the latter.

Even though I was born in Israel, I never wanted to be labelled as an 'Israeli artist', and though I grew up in a Jewish household, I never wanted to be classified as a 'Jewish artist' either. In fact, I have always had a contentious relationship with the commonplace narratives with which I was raised. My mother grew up in a religious household, yet decided to leave her religious upbringing behind when she was about 18 years old. By her early 20s, she moved to Tel Aviv, where she met my father. His family, originally from Tel Aviv, was somewhat conservative but not fully religious – they believed in God, went to the synagogue on occasion, and practised Jewish customs such as keeping Kosher, fasting on Yom Kippur, and performing Kiddush on Shabbat. They did not, however, wear yamakas or other Jewish signifiers, nor did they pray ceremonially on their day-to-day. For them, it was more about keeping a Jewish tradition alive than following a 'God-given' code.

Despite their traditional backgrounds, my parents settled in Tel Aviv, Israel's liberal hub, and sent me and my brother to liberal-secular art schools. Non-Israelis are often perplexed when I share that even in the secular art schools we attended, we studied the Jewish bible for ten years, but in our school, unlike in the religious schools, it was taught as literature. The Hebrew bible is not merely a holy text for Jews – it is also the folklore of a nation that defined itself throughout the millennia by telling and retelling its cultural history. Hence, the bible made its way into a mandatory part of the core curriculum – even in secular schools.

Where, then, should Israeli institutions place the Hebrew bible on the spectrum between a holy text and literary folklore? The different answers to this question reflect the various sects of Israel's Jewish population, and one of the most fundamental divisions in Israeli politics. Due to the sensitivity of this debate, the role of the bible in Israeli society was never clear to me as a child, and I sensed an ideological friction among adults around me from a very young age.

I started forming my own judgement regarding the bible when my interest in biology led me to pursue scientific education. Natural science became a better way for me to understand reality, and I fell in love with the

field. The more I pursued scientific knowledge, the more I questioned the dogmatic nature of religious beliefs. I took an advanced placement biology track in high school and excelled in my studies. With my growing passion for the field, I even started a study group (in a rather missionary fashion) to help other students understand the language of biology and improve their test scores. In my family, I became an ambassador for biological explanations of natural phenomena. While many family members responded with curiosity, others expressed their dismay. To the latter, I represented a new generation who turned its back on a tradition that kept the Jewish nation alive in the diaspora through centuries of persecution.

By the time I reached adulthood, my relationship with religion and tradition became bitter and heated. Religious norms in Israeli society seemed gradually more absurd, and like many other Israelis, I opted to leave most of them behind. Numerous orthodox rabbis have been arguing that the biggest threat to the Jewish population left in the world today is not persecution, antisemitism, or harm, but rather the danger of assimilation into Western culture. In light of my growing advocacy for scientific rationality, I suppose I too had become part of the danger.

In my early 20s, I proceeded to leave my home country and pursue higher education overseas, first in the U.S., and then in South Africa. In the academic sphere, as well as in the international art world, I often felt an external pressure to be classified as an Israeli and/or Jewish artist, and represent my 'tribe'. Yet, given my own internal conflict with some fundamental aspects of Jewish tradition and with the manner in which they mould core Israeli narratives, I pushed strongly against any attempt to box me and my practice into one of these labels. This resistance changed rather unexpectedly, when I learned about the Jewish origins of the graphic novel, a point upon which I will elaborate in the following section.

By Virtue Of Collective Trauma: The Underlying Jewish Roots Of Superhero Comics

Fans of American comic books are often familiar with prominent Jewish artists such as Will Eisner and Art Spiegelman, mainly due to the fact that these authors created graphic novels telling Jewish narratives, inspired by the artists' personal backgrounds. Will Eisner, known as the 'Godfather of the graphic novel' (Anderman, 2016), wrote and illustrated *A Contract With God* (1978), in which he depicts the lives of several Jewish protagonists living in a New York City tenement. Art Spiegelman based his Pulitzer-Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus* (1991) on his own family history, focusing on his Holocaust-survivor parents and their personal journey as they fled from the Nazis.

Yet, fewer readers might notice that Jewish themes existed deep in the core of the comic-book industry decades before the titles above were published. In fact, one could argue that the 'golden-age of comics' (during which the modern comic book was invented and popularised) was largely established on a foundation of post-war Jewish narratives (Spiegelman, 2019).

The modern comic book was created in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Prior to this period, comic strips mostly appeared as short segments in magazines and newspapers, and effectively no publisher had dedicated entire titles purely for comics (Anderman, 2016). This began to change when a few artists and entrepreneurs established several comic book publications in New York, and noticeably enough, nearly all of them were Jewish. This was no coincidence: in light of rampant antisemitism in the U.S., Jews were largely excluded from mainstream media, and it was practically impossible for them to publish their contents in major publications (Shoenberger, 2021). As a result, aspiring Jewish artists and publishers had to establish their own independent platforms. Intentionally or not, these individuals became the pioneers of a quickly-growing comic book industry, bringing the formerly-marginal platform into the cultural forefront.

Soon after the appearance of the first comic books, an even bigger phenomenon entered the scene: the superhero.[3] In the wake of World War II, the emergence of superhero comics gained unprecedented national and

[3] Superhero comics are characterised by a "heroic character with an altruistic mission, who possesses superpowers, wears a defining costume, and functions in the 'real world' in his or her alter ego". (Eury, 2019)

global popularity, etching the comic-book format in mainstream consciousness ever since.

In 1938, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster introduced Superman in the first issue of *Action Comics*. A year later, Bob Kane and Bill Finger brought Batman and Robin into the world of comic-book readers, and in 1941, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby added Captain America to the growing canon of American superheroes. During that same year, a young Stan Lee became the editor-in-chief of *Timely Comics* (soon-to-become *Marvel*), and quickly made his mark on the industry: In the following decades, Lee and Kirby would become the faces of what would later be known as 'the golden age of comics' (Kowalski, 2022). The two would eventually create an array of popular superhero comics, among which are *Spider-man, Iron Man, The Avengers, X-Men, The Fantastic Four, The Hulk, Black Panther*, and more.

Most fans of the genre could recognise a common denominator among these superheroes: they all had to conceal their superpowers and pose as ordinary people in their day-to-day lives. Readers knew that behind their masks, Spider-man was in fact Peter Parker, and Batman was Bruce Wayne, yet not everyone could easily identify the 'secret identity' of their creators. Jacob Kurtzberg, the son of Austrian-Jewish immigrants to New York, knew that his Jewish identity might face hostility and rejection, as was the case for many (if not most) Jews during the 20th century. Hence, he created the alias 'Jack Kirby' (fig. 2), which served as a palatable 'cover-up' for his true identity (Shoenberger, 2021). Stanley Lieber, the son of Romanian-Jewish immigrants, acted similarly when he adopted the name 'Stan Lee' (Shoenberger, 2021). In fact, nearly all of the pioneers of superhero comics were first-generation Jewish immigrants whose families fled to America from antisemitic persecution and pogroms in Europe. Jerry Siegel's parents changed their last name from Segalovich; Joe Schuster's parents left the name Schusterowich behind; Robert Kahn (German for Cohen) became Bob Kane. Those with less-obvious Jewish names, such as Joe Simon or Bill Finger, did retain their names, however, they too were essentially excluded from mainstream platforms and ended up partnering with other Jewish artists (Shoenberger, 2021).

The titles they created reflected notions of a xenophobic society that will be quick to turn on anyone foreign, regardless of his or her merits. The protagonists they created offered superhuman value to the benefit of their communities, yet they had to operate in thankless anonymity, fearing persecution due to their 'otherness' (Anderman, 2016).

Figure 2: Detail from the cover of *Captain America*, Issue #1 (1941), In which the masked hero is seen punching Adolf Hitler.
Written by Joe Simon & Illustrated by Jack Kirby.

The first comic book I owned was a 1995 issue of X-Men comics (fig. 3), the first of its kind to be translated into Hebrew. The book follows the quest of a young protagonist, a lonely 'mutant' who gets rejected by his xenophobic community for his otherness. Upon learning about the young man's 'mutation', a mob persecutes the protagonist, who then flees in hopes of finding the X-Men – the mutant community that would embrace and protect him from harm. As the X-Men learn about the distressed man, they too set out to find him before he is captured by the mob. In the horrendous ending, the young mutant fails to find the X-Men before the hostile crowd captures and lynches him.

The story is etched vividly in my memory, since I read it when I was only eight years old; it left me horrified. My parents, who bought me the book, had no clue of its gut-wrenching content. They did not suspect the seemingly innocent, childish cartoon of delivering such narratives. I, on the other hand, found these superhero comic books appealing precisely for this quality. Under the radar of my unsuspecting parents, these vividly-coloured illustrations served complex and provocative narratives to a curious child. I became intrigued with the medium and genre, using it as the gateway for themes which would have otherwise been inaccessible to me.

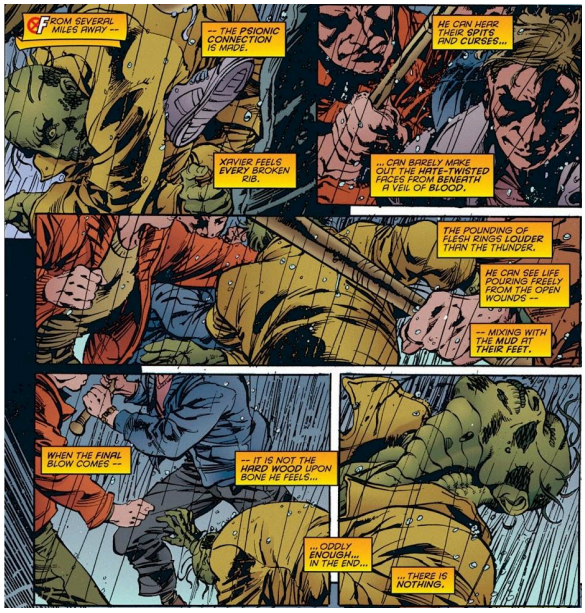

Figure 3: Detail from *X-Men: Prime*, Issue #1 (1995): A mob lynches the persecuted protagonist
Written by Joe Quesada and Fabian Nicieza, Illustrated by Jeff Matsuda, Jim Calafiore, Michael Mckone, and Paul Pelletier

Despite my early love for these American comic books, it was only recently, at the age of thirty-five, that I learned about their underlying Jewish stories. As the child who always rebelled against his Jewish upbringing, I was rather surprised by the immediate relation I felt to these early comic-book artists upon discovering their personal backgrounds. These creatives unpacked a core facet of a Jewish experience I actually identified with – one which is not religious, traditional, or nationalist. Rather, they all coped with an identity that is Jewish by virtue of sharing collective trauma. This trauma, which still persists in the Jewish cultural consciousness, is one I have been grappling with throughout my life in Israel and abroad.

In order to illustrate this point, I would attempt to describe my own understanding of the space collective trauma occupies in Jewish folklore and tradition. An immediate example that comes to mind is the presence of trauma in Jewish holidays. Both ancient holidays, as well as more recent ones, often commemorate events of persecution – whether by Egyptians (Passover), Greeks (Hanukkah), Persians (Purim), or Germans (Holocaust Memorial day), and celebrating an unlikely Jewish survival. I can still recall my first attempt at hosting a traditional Rosh HaShanah (Jewish New Year) dinner for my non-Jewish South African friends, who pointed out to me the unusual

amount of blessings dedicated to the vanquishing of those who persecute the Jews.

Yet one need not go far into ancient times in order to find narratives of collective Jewish trauma. Many (if not most) Jews living today carry familial stories of relatively recent displacements – whether by being descendants of holocaust survivors, or of families who fled persecution in Europe prior to WWII. Even after the holocaust, many Jews faced new situations of ethnic persecution. American Jews, for instance, experienced openly antisemitic policies until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banned any discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin (Shoenberger, 2021).

Some, like my own family, are descendents of Spanish-inquisition exiled Jews, who later fled to Israel from Muslim countries due to hostilities, discrimination, anti-Jewish violence, and other factors. In our own family, each generation carries their own traumatic stories, which were intertwined with a Jewish narrative of persecution and survival: my grandmother's family, for example, lived in staircases as war refugees, after being driven away from their home in Southern Tel Aviv by Arab snipers from Jaffa, during Israel's war of independence. My mother nearly died as a baby while falling terribly ill on the boat journey when her family fled from Morocco to Israel, after three of her uncles were ambushed and murdered.

Lastly, since the establishment of Israel, Israeli Jews have been engaged in regional wars and armed conflicts, either as civilians, or as soldiers in the country's mandatory service.[4] Nearly every one of my family members and friends participated, actively or passively, in the ongoing Israeli-Arab conflict – a situation which only further enhances a sense of collective identity through shared fates.[5] My father and brother, for instance, each lost a close friend who died in service, and my mother suffered a miscarriage on a day of Iraqi bombardments during the first Gulf War in 1991. In fact, scenes from this war, in which my family is sitting together in the bomb shelter wearing gas masks (fearing Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons) are amongst my earliest memories as a child.

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[4] Service in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) is mandatory for both men and women at the age of 18.

[5] After the compilation of this essay, Hamas militants from Gaza managed to infiltrate into southern Israel and carry out the deadliest attack on Jews since the Holocaust, now referred to as the October 7th massacre. Israel responded by declaring a war against Hamas in Gaza – a war that has already claimed the lives of thousands, and displaced many more Gazans and Israelis.

This is not to convey a moral or political stand, but rather to illustrate the manner in which Jewish identity has been shaped by shared traumas, and offer a contextual lens through which one could read the works of Jewish artists who have merged private myth and public historicism. I realised that I, too, have been restlessly dedicating much of my practice to finding a language through which I can address this collective pain. Unknowingly, I have been drawing from the established language of superhero comics in order to reflect on my own cultural context. Following these pioneer creatives, I decided to create the graphic novel *Unbound* – a modern retelling of *The Binding of Isaac* through which I contemplate faith, rationality, and contemporary Jewish identity.

Yet *Unbound* is not a story about a superhero – or is it? This chronicle begins with the moment of horrific realisation, of the guttural reaction to the act of sacrifice, of child-slaughter, of God's will. It is sunrise on Mount Moriah, and first rays of the morning sun illuminate Abraham, Isaac, the rock, and the blade. Isaac had just been slaughtered. Yet Isaac is not dead; Neither is he alive. Abraham picks up Isaac's severed head and begins the long journey down the mountain and back to Be'er Sheva. Throughout this journey, Abraham and Isaac process the aftermath of the execution. Together with the reader, they must try and make a judgement of the events that preceded.

Figure 4: *Unbound*, opening scene: “The Aftermath”
Ink on paper

Figure 5: *Unbound*, journey scene: “The Fruit of the Tree.” While reaching for the fruit, Abraham is startled by a coined-marked snake devouring an eagle chick.
Ink on paper

By Virtue Of The Absurd

If God asked Abraham to butcher his own son in the name of faith, and if Abraham is holy and righteous only by his undoubting execution, does it make a difference whether God saved Isaac eventually? Has Abraham not swung the blade toward Isaac with the unflinching intent of killing? Does it matter whether Isaac lived or died, and should this result impact the reader's judgement of Abraham's act?

These exact questions led Soren Kierkegaard to write *Fear and Trembling* (1843). A devout Christian, Kierkegaard argues in favour of Abraham's monomaniacal devotion, and concludes that in order to fully embrace religious faith, one must abandon rationality (Kierkegaard, 2014, p. 85). *Unbound* revisits these questions nearly two-hundred years later – during which time advancements in science, and particularly the rise of evolutionary biology, propelled a paradigm shift away from religious dogma and towards rationality.

The Hebrew word Teshuvah has several, interconnected translations: it can mean 'return', 'repentance', or simply 'answer'. In Judaism, 'Lahzor B'Teshuvah' (or 'La'asot Teshuva') is a term used to describe a person who comes closer to repentance by embracing a religious belief-system. In following God's word, he then returns to a sense of having answers.

Conversely, the Hebrew term for secularisation, 'Lahzor B'She'elah', literally translates to 'returning to a question', and is used to describe one's scepticism of the biblical text and religious lifestyle.

Fear and Trembling properly illustrates this dichotomy: Kierkegaard grapples with his own rational scepticism, and praises Abraham for lacking the common human doubt. To Kierkegaard, Abraham's faith in the absurd is superhuman ('greater than all'); relentless dogmatism is his greatest virtue. In a statement that encapsulates the rationalists' aversion to religion, he declares: "Faith begins precisely…where thinking leaves off" (Kierkegaard, 2014, p. 82).

While seeming rather absurd to a rationalist today, Kierkegaard's inclination to turn to the biblical text as the primary source for answers to his grandest of inquiries was not a unique modus operandi. Most major pre-modern philosophies postulated that "everything important that there is to know about the world was already known," and that this knowledge lies in the minds of great individuals or deities and is summarised in holy books (Harari, 2014, p. 69). The scientific revolution is, therefore, regarded as the most

significant paradigm shift away from traditional philosophies not in light of the discovery of specific knowledge per se, but rather by the acceptance of human ignorance and the limitations of subjective knowledge (Harari, 2014, p. 69).

Kierkegaard was seeking to understand his world rationally through the bible, yet the absurdities ingrained in biblical texts pushed him to a dead end, bringing him to declare the incompatibility of his faith with rational thinking (Kierkegaard, 2014, p. 85). While he was turning inwards to his own philosophical intellect for answers, another seminal scholar, operating during the very same era, was turning outwards – to observation-based research.

Only a decade and a half after *Fear and Trembling* was released, Charles Darwin published *On The Origin of Species* (1859), a book that would tilt the cultural scale away from theistic beliefs and in favour of rationality.

The theory of evolution through natural selection offered a scientific explanation for earth's biodiversity, and for the appearance of life in general, without relying on the existence of an almighty creator. Darwin's theory did not only threaten the idea of God; it has been challenging all traditional and anthropocentric philosophies ever since (Dennett, 1996, p. 18).

Unbound moulds Darwin and Abraham into a single figure: a caricature of a bearded, old man on a journey to an origin. The perplexed-looking man carries Isaac's still-conscious head; his quest focuses on answering his son's single, looming question: 'why father?' As *Fear and Trembling* illustrates, this question extends beyond the writer's personal narrative, beyond Judaism or Christianity, and beyond a specific point in time. It is a reflexive doubt regarding one's priors, justifications, and ethos. This is what *Unbound* seeks to unpack. *The Gospel of John* opens with the iconic verse: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' It is not by coincidence, then, that *Unbound* remains wordless.

Figure 6: *Unbound*, ending scene: “Am I?”
Ink on paper

On Dinosaurs And Other Mythical Creatures

Before I address Darwin, who provided us with the scientific tools for understanding the origin of all biological species, I would like to step outside the realm of scientific truth and realism, and indulge in a tale about mythical creatures: dinosaurs… I am, of course, being facetious when I refer to dinosaurs as mythical, as opposed to 'real' biological species – yet only two and a half centuries ago, the outlandish title of this chapter would not have been controversial at all. This anecdotal chapter exemplifies the clash between mythical and physical origins through the case-study of extinctions.

Dinosaurs roamed the earth for over 150 million years, and humans have been finding their fossil remains all throughout the world. Yet, if you asked a random Westerner in the wake of the 18th century whether dinosaurs ever existed, the response would have likely been 'no' – and not only by common people, but also by the scientific community. It is perhaps a strange thought today that the notion of extinction seemed absurd to most scientists only three centuries ago. Despite the abundance of dinosaur bones and other evidence discovered, the idea that God would let a species go completely extinct was sufficient reason for many scientists to determine that this could not have been the case. Instead, scholars offered these common explanations for the sheer wealth of massive, unfamiliar bones they unveiled (Kolbert, 2014, pp. 24-47):

1. They belonged to gigantic versions of familiar creatures.
2. A peculiar-looking skeleton did not belong to a single animal, but rather consisted of several species that died in proximity to each other.
3. A peculiar-looking skeleton could have belonged to a single species, yet this animal is not extinct – it must still roam in the wild but has yet to be discovered by humans.

Only an observation from one of the world's most respected scientists, the French naturalist George Cuvier, swayed the academic community to entertain the idea of species that once existed and have gone extinct through a catastrophic event. Cuvier, who worked at the French National Museum of Natural History, had inspected and classified animal bones on a routine basis. His exceptional familiarity with the physiology of living animals earned him global recognition as one of the field's leading voices.

During the 18th century, Cuvier received a growing number of unfamiliar bones for his inspection. These skeletal oddities, sent from America

by European settlers, eventually convinced Cuvier to determine that some bones must have belonged to a “lost species [...] no longer to be found” (Kolbert, 2014, p. 29). Hence, a new and unsettling theory had been formalised: an entire species could perish from the earth through a catastrophic extinction event. Cuvier’s theory of extinction has quickly become scientific consensus, and the field of palaeontology, dedicated to the study of fossils, has emerged.

Today, Dinosaur bones and fossils fill museum displays all over the world, and the story of a prehistoric earth occupied by these animals has made it into school curricula in many countries. Dinosaurs have been popularised by blockbuster films such as Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940), Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* (1993), and many more, bringing extinction theory from academic circles into common knowledge.

Once Cuvier established extinction as a fact, a scientific understanding of an original baseline for life on earth had shifted radically and immediately. His contribution to the study of origins, however, was only the prelude to Charles Darwin’s crescendo.

Drawing The Baseline: A Lesson From Darwin About Origins

"We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life" — Charles Darwin (1859, p. 33).

Figure 7: *Unbound,* spread illustration: "Precarious Land"
Ink on paper

Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection, as laid out in *On the Origin of Species*, quickly became a foundational idea in the field of biology. Yet, despite what the title suggests, the notion of 'origin' became slippery as a result of his study. Darwin postulated that species evolve constantly in reaction to their environments, which circumstantially 'selects' for the individuals best suited for survival (Darwin, 1859). Hence, evolution clearly demonstrates how an ecosystem remains forever in cycles of

reactionary flux. It is far less obvious, however, that constant evolutionary change has rendered traditional ideas of 'the base state of nature' largely meaningless.

Even within the scientific community, consensus around 'original states' is hardly attainable. An ecosystem's 'baseline' is the scientific community's attempt at establishing 'original' ecological conditions to which conservationists should adhere. The word 'nature' itself, in fact, has often been used to reflect an original state, a harmonious point of reference that exists before disruptive changes unravel its integrity (Marris, 2013, p. 3).

For instance, a few decades ago, American conservation scientists used to set ecological baselines to the time before the arrival of European settlers, believing that these settlers seriously offset the balance of their environment upon colonising the continent. Yet, when research unveiled the significant impact of early Native American societies on their environments (such as the mass extinction of American megafauna, which correlated with the arrival of humans to the continent), the baseline was moved thousands of years back, to the point before the first humans migrated to the Americas (Marris, 2013, p. 3). Science writer Emma Marris points to an unsettling and poignant paradox: if 'nature' is confined to a specific ecological baseline determined by conservationists and scientists, yet ecosystems are in a state of constant flux, then 'nature' in its current definition is all-to-easily doomed to disappear completely.

Ideas of 'pristine nature' (often referred to as 'ecological integrity' by environmental scientists) usually describe an ecosystem that is "minimally influenced" or not influenced at all by human activity (Rohwer and Marris, 2021). If some do insist on accommodating human societies into the term, they often draw the line no further than early neolithic societies (a distinction that provided the basis for racist theories among Western colonisers, who viewed neolithic and palaeolithic societies as peoples closer to 'nature' than to 'human culture'). Aiming to preserve ecological integrity brings about a paradoxical position for any person looking to participate in the act of conservation, as attaining an ecosystem free of human activity – would in fact necessitate a great degree of human intervention in the form of ecological management. While the academic debate around conservation is more nuanced in its aims, unfounded ideas of ecological integrity and pristine nature still plague the public discussion and influence environmental policies.

One course of action would be to follow conservation scientists as they draw these baselines, and amplify our actions to curate and manage

ecosystems. This solution appealed to me throughout most of my life, and yet, it is not without practical and ethical flaws. The pursuit of ecosystems in which human activity is scarce or non-existent fosters an artificial conceptual division between 'human' and 'nature'. In addition, the common approach to conservation easily overlooks novel ecosystems that may not only arise alongside human societies, but also thrive thanks to direct and indirect anthropogenic influence (Rohwer and Marris, 2021).

Hence, Marris offers a second path to consider: letting go of traditional and arbitrary definitions of 'natural baselines' and ecological integrity, and instead, learning to see 'nature' in a new light, which accounts for constant flux, as well as for human factors (Marris, 2013, p. 3). This raises a series of questions: to what degree can we account for human activity in a new definition of 'nature', and what might happen if we let go of traditional ideas of a baseline? Where would we draw the line between natural and artificial, and what might happen if we render these terms meaningless altogether?

Darwin's theory demonstrated how an understanding of an original state can instantaneously and drastically shift in light of new discoveries. He unveiled the mechanism of constant reactionary flux between interconnected species and environments, through which no objective definition of an ecological baseline could hold. This unnerving realisation begs the question: is the idea of 'nature' a scientific concept at all, or rather a remnant of theistic, homocentric philosophies?

Unbound grapples with these questions by generating a semi-documentary, semi-imagined Levantine landscape, where boundaries of ecological baselines become blurry; It teeters between prehistoric and post-apocalyptic; it is as realistic as it is fantastical. In this atemporal panorama, Abraham, Isaac, and the viewer encounter various species of flora and fauna one could have come across in the now-Israeli landscape throughout history. Some of these featured species, such as the Persian fallow deer and the Arabian oryx, went extinct in the wild in the region, yet have been rehabilitated and returned to the wild by Israeli conservationists within the last couple of decades. Ironically, the campaign for ecological restoration of extinct species in Israel often recites the Hebrew bible as the main source for determining the country's ecological baseline. That is, even secular Israeli scientists work today to restore and rehabilitate the species of fauna and flora mentioned in the Old Testament, using the biblical texts to inform and support their scientific activities.

Other species, such as the cyclamen flower, the striped hyena, and the Nubian ibex, either first evolved in the region, or spread there from other regions and survived there long enough to have been labelled 'native'. The striped hyena, for instance, had first evolved in Africa from the ancestor *Hyaenictitherium Namaquensis*, and migrated to the Mediterranean much later. This is largely evident through the lack of fossil records of striped hyenas in Eurasia (Rohland *et al.*, 2005). The species spread north-east from Africa to Eurasia during the Pleistocene, and has prospered in the Mediterranean long enough for scientists to classify it as native.

Upon moving further back in time, however, evidence shows that *Hyaenictitherium Namaquensis*'s ancestor did in fact first emerge in the Eurasian forests over 20 million years ago, and slowly migrated from there to Africa, before modern hyenas evolved and spread back to Eurasia (Rohland *et al.*, 2005). This case study of a species' origin and determination of its nativity illustrates Marris's critique, and leads to the following conclusion: the demarcation of baselines is, evidently, at the hands of the classifier.

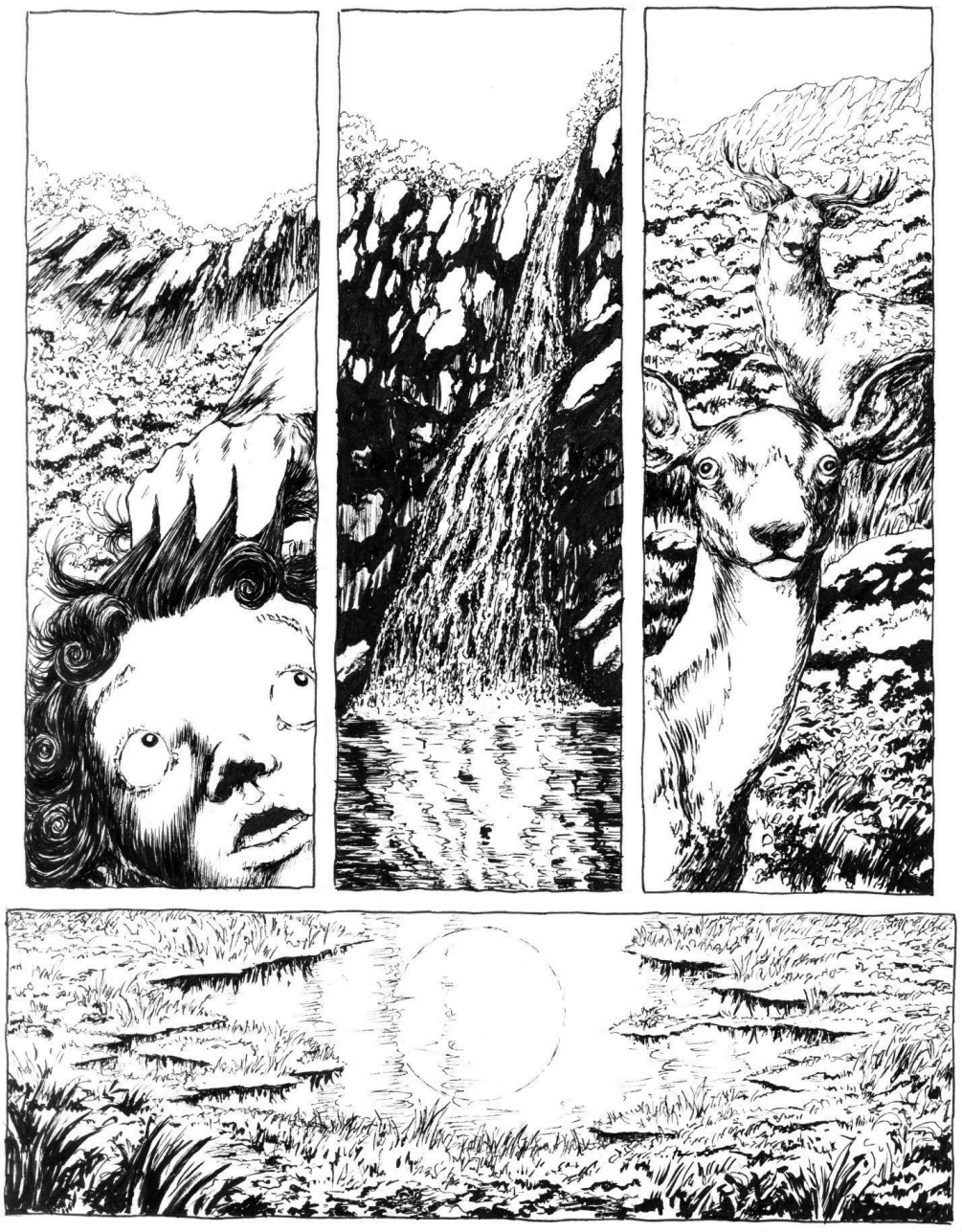


Figure 8: *Unbound*, journey scene: Abraham and Isaac pass a pair of Persian fallow deer. Ink on paper.

Inventing Moriah

Iconoclastic philosopher Michel Foucault points to the manner through which classification systems manipulate perception, and unveils the power of the classifier in dictating cultural norms. The classifier's action, Foucault argues, can easily be overlooked, and hence, the order he imposes would be mistaken as objective (Foucault, 2010, pp. 303-344). Who, then, holds the role of the classifier and determines the order of things? Perhaps no place symbolises the debate around this question better than Mount Moriah itself.

Mount Moriah, on which Abraham proves his monomaniacal faith in God (and in the Absurd, according to Kierkegaard), is also the epicentre of a battle over a point of origin in the modern era. Over the years, the iconic Land of Moriah became the site on which ancient Jerusalem was built, and archeologists estimate that on that very same mountain where Abraham nearly slayed his son, the first and second Jewish Temples stood. It was after the erection of the first temple that Mount Moriah is believed to have received its new name, Temple Mount, for which it is still known today. The contentious Temple Mount has been standing at the heart of an ongoing cultural war between Jews, Muslims, and Christians over the determination of its original baseline. Throughout the centuries, the site has gone through a series of conquests, during which both Jewish temples were eradicated, and most recently, Al Aqsa Mosque was built.

The mosque, which towers over the Wailing Wall (the remaining part of a wall built by king Herod around the second Jewish temple), demonstrates the rather absurd complexity of the battle of baselines: The site, which stands in the heart of Jerusalem in a territory currently controlled by Israel, is managed by the Jordanian Waqf (an Islamic trust), yet claimed by Palestinian leadership as imperative for any territorial negotiations and sovereignty. While general visitors are allowed to visit Al Aqsa under heavy scrutiny from both Israeli and Jordanian forces, a precarious policy, known as the 'status-quo' agreement, prevents non-Muslims from legally praying on site, and forbids any state from displaying any national flag. Hence, Moriah was, and still is, a stark and brutal demonstration of the imposition of a mythical origin over the physical landscape. In this uncanny existence of a land torn between the physical and the mythical, *Unbound* reflects on the slippery pursuit of original baselines.

Despite being conquered and ruled by Canaanites, Israelites, Asyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Fatimids, Seljuk Turks,

Crusaders, Egyptians, Mamelukes, Islamists and others (History.com Editors, 2021), The Land of Moriah exists as modern-day Israel on the grounds of a return to an origin. It may also formally exist as Palestine in the future – propelled by the same notion of reviving a lost baseline. But neither of these is truly a restoration of an original state. In fact, nothing could ever be. The Darwinian picture unveils a conclusion hard to digest, proving there are no original baselines – only reactionary flux.

Figure 9: *Unbound*, morning scene: Common cranes passing over Abraham and Isaac. Ink on paper.

Until the mid - 20th century, the common crane was rarely seen nesting in Israel. In the 90s, however, cultivation of the Hula Valley in northern Israel and the establishment of the Hula Nature Reserve began attracting the migrating cranes, which found the site perfectly suited for nesting and sustenance during winter months. Within a decade, the park became an annual congregation site for tens of thousands of common cranes, alongside an array of other bird species.

Private Lexicons & Postmodern Mythmakers

If a conclusion can be made about the determination of original baselines being largely a subjective, cultural, or theistic imposition of the mythical over the physical, where does it position me, the artist, as a cultural mythmaker? I am not merely an observer or a passive documentor (if such a thing exists), but rather, I am an intentful narrator, an actant, and one might even say – a culprit.

In his 1970 exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery in New York, Philip Guston shocked his audience when he unveiled a series of cartoon-like figurative paintings depicting Ku Klux Klan hooded figures in strangely mundane situations. These enigmatic paintings, distinct from Guston's abstract expressionist style for which he became famous, fused politically-charged history together with the artist's own personal narrative.

Despite being a master representational painter, Guston unhinged himself from the sober documentation of political events in favour of crafting his own imaginative visual lexicon (fig. 10-12). These symbols of personal significance, functioning like pictograms in a hieroglyph, became the vocabulary from which he constructed his commentary on the atrocities of his time.

Philip Guston, assorted small works. Guston would use these iconographic subjects as his private lexicon, from which he composed his large-scale narrative paintings.

Figure 10: *Shade* (1972), oil on panel, 27.9 x 35.6 cm
Figure 11: *Untitled (Light Bulb)* (1968), oil on panel, 30.5 x 35.6 cm
Figure 12: *Untitled* (1969), oil on panel, 61 x 67 cm

A similar use of personal iconography as a platform for cultural storytelling exists in William Kentridge's 2017 *Lexicon* series (fig. 13). Like Guston, Kentridge develops a self-referential visual vocabulary and creates a cryptic private language of signifiers. His lexicon invites viewers to decode the artist's personal relationship to the public history of a racially-divided South Africa (Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 2019).

Figure 13: William Kentridge, *Lexicon, Paragraph I* (2017), bronze, 135x180x15 cm, ed.⅞

In emphasising their positions as subjective narrators, Guston and Kentridge align themselves with Foucault's Postmodern philosophy, which criticises the hidden narrator as a hegemon attempting to impose systems of knowledge as objective.

Guston, for instance, emphasises his subjective relation to public history in numerous of his works: In *Black Sea* (fig. 14), an ambiguous monolith floating in an empty black landscape quickly alludes to the artist's own family fleeing from Odessa – the Ukrainian port city in the Black Sea. In the painting *Nile* (fig. 15), a pyramid floating on a black sea next to a sphynx-like female cartoon ties his family's persecution in Ukraine and immigration to America with the suffering of enslaved Israelites in ancient Egypt. At the bottom of the

painting, Guston adds his own presence to the scene through the smoked-cigarettes he often used as a self-portrait substitute.

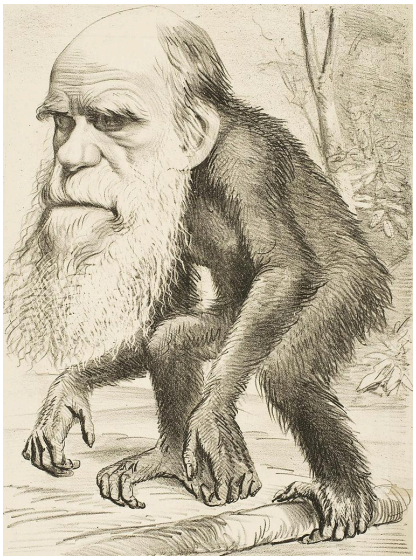
Figure 14: Philip Guston, *Black Sea*(1977), oil on canvas, 173x297cm

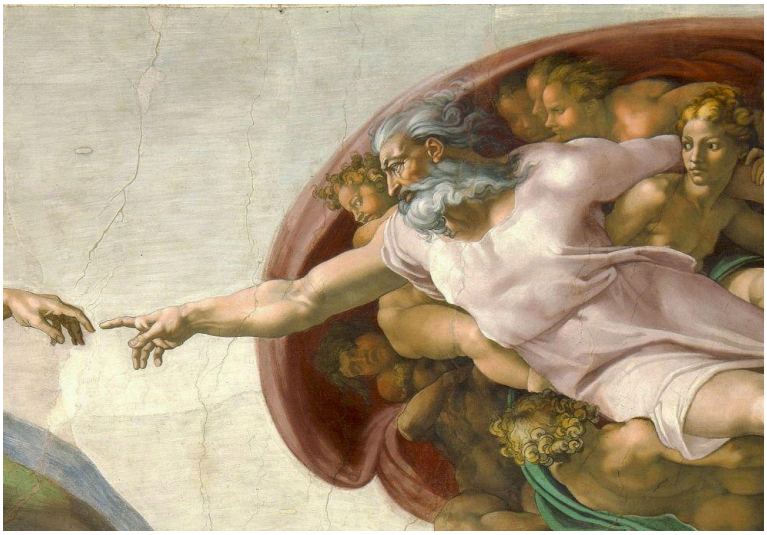
Figure 15: Philip Guston, *Nile* (1977), oil on canvas, 173x241cm

Yet perhaps the most notable reference to the artist's role as a teller of public history appears in his 1969 painting *The Studio* (fig. 16). In this composition, the painter is seen in front of his easel painting a hooded Klansman figure, while he himself is hooded in white Klansman attire. This is not to suggest his alignment with Ku Klux Klan ideology in any way. Rather, it alludes to the artist's immense responsibility in his position of power as a cultural narrator.

Figure 16: Philip Guston, *The Studio* (1969), oil on canvas, 122x107cm

Inspired by these postmodernist mythmakers, *Unbound* utilises a private lexicon of symbolic elements, which recur as guiding motifs throughout the project: the animated head (sometimes Isaac's, sometimes Abraham's), the blade, the rock, the stick/branch, the apple, the snake, the eagle, the flower, the dog mask, and more. Perhaps no single element, however, commands more attention than the iconic, bearded old man, who functions as the main protagonist throughout this project. Responding to common depictions of mythical patriarchs in art history (fig. 17-20), the caricature in *Unbound* serves as a doubting response to an established icon of authority (fig. 21).





Famous visual depictions of iconic, mythical patriarchs:

Figure 17: Editorial cartoon depicting Charles Darwin, the father of Evolutionary biology, as an ape (1871)

Figure 18: Caravaggio & Bartolomeo Cavarozzi, *Sacrifice of Isaac* (1598-1603)

Figure 19: Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam* (1508-1512)

Figure 20: Michelangelo, *Moses* (1513-1515)

Figure 21: *Unbound,* The Mythical Patriarch: an Abraham, a Darwin, a deity. *Untitled* (2022), oil on canvas, 170x180cm

The diffusion of the public and the private into a single, disjointed narrative grants the artwork a degree of ambiguity and, therefore, universality. According to art scholar Daniel Morris, relating to public history through a private lexicon gives an artwork germinative properties, which situate it beyond the specificity of the events to which it responds (Morris, 1996). This very same idea has been guiding the creation of *Unbound*.

If visual icons (such as the rock, the blade, or the naked patriarch) function as words in a lexicon, then the use of colour serves as the tone and cadence in which these words are said. The colour-palettes of *Unbound* are rather 'bipolar': from austere, black-and-white ink drawings, to high-chroma, colourful oil paintings. The novel remains graphic and stark, appearing like a

wordless text on paper. Its bareness allows the viewer to imagine the possibilities of colour.

The large paintings, on the other hand, rely on colour relationships in order to activate some relatively uneventful scenes. In the painting *Polar Opposite* (fig. 23), for instance, the naked figure is caught sitting idly on the ground, partially hidden by the remains of a wall, grazing on a flower bunch. Yet, an intensely bright and fiery colour-palette generates a heightened sense of drama and action in an otherwise mundane composition. The painting *Redemption* (fig. 22) meditates on a similar use of vibrant colour.

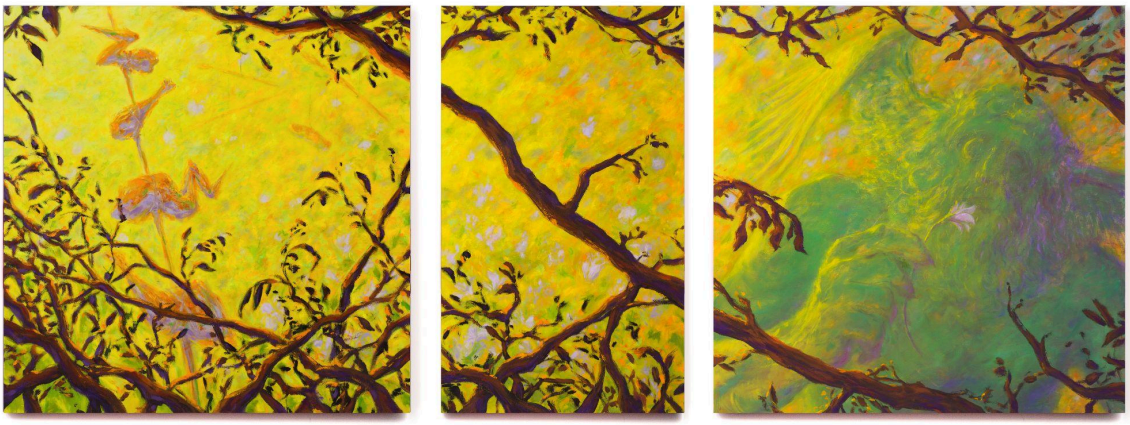


Figure 22: *Redemption* (2022), oil on canvas, 100x280cm

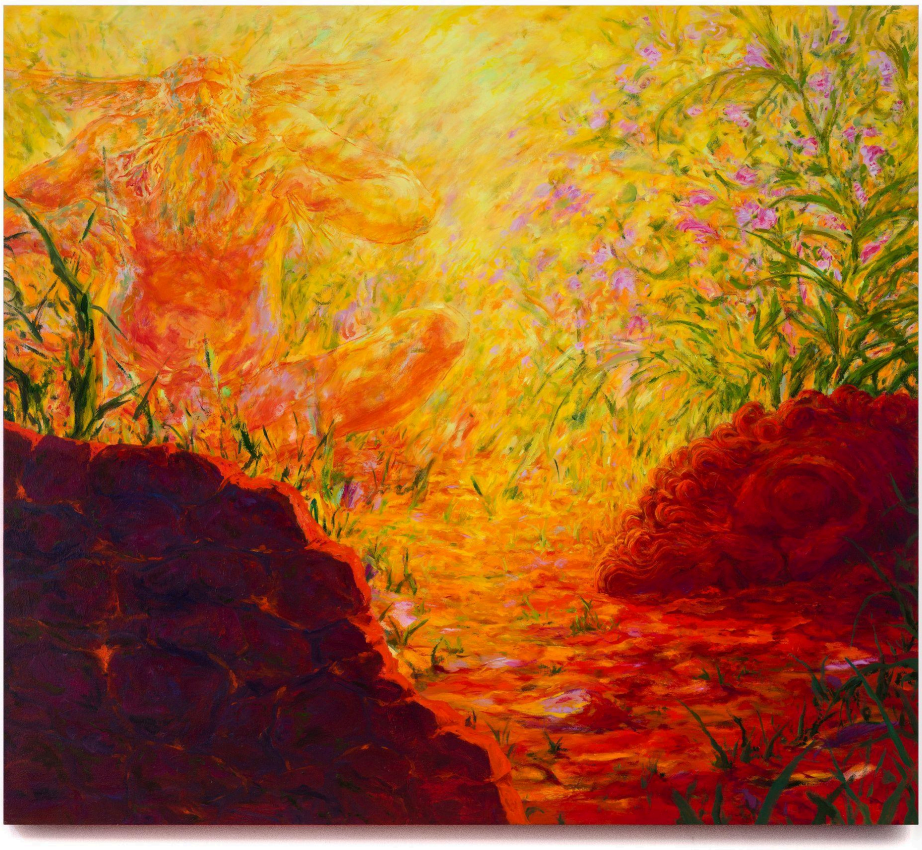


Figure 23: Polar opposite (2022), oil on canvas, 170x190cm

The painting *Truth In A Sense* (fig. 27) takes this effect a step further: in this figure-less scene, I employ strategies used by Monet in his later works, and materialise atmospheric light though frenzied brushstrokes and colour relationships to counter the stillness of the rocky landscape.

Figure 24: *Truth In A Sense* (2023), oil on canvas, 185x235cm

Figure 25: *Father's Barnacle Collection* (2023), oil on canvas, 63x63cm

Unreasonable Painting

When anthropologist James Suzman observed the Ju/'hoansi hunter-gatherers in Namibia, he noticed how members of the community extracted extensive information from reading marks in the sand and subtle disruptions in the bush. In effect, these signs, mostly indiscernible to an outsider, functioned as an elaborate visual vocabulary, allowing its readers to decipher who or what walked where, when, how, and with whom. These terranean clues could even reveal the temperament of a person or animal at a given point, and much like a 'story' on a social media app, recap an entire narrative about the events of the day (Suzman, 2017, p. 168).

Tracks in the sand are a form of abstract visual language. Like other animals, early sapiens developed the ability to read these graphic clues and translate this useful information into meaningful narratives. For instance, by recognising the shape of a track in the ground, one could identify the species of animal it belongs to; the size of a track could indicate the animal's age; the space between each track could signify the pace at which the animal moved; the clarity of the track may suggest the time in which the action happened; the depth or shallowness of a track could suggest the age and weight of the animal, and so on.

In a 2012 lecture at Oxford University about memetics, Daniel Dennett elaborates on the process of developing a new language through the following example:

> *"If you've ever taken some courses in pottery and watched a good ceramics instructor show you techniques, after a while you pick up a sort of alphabet of techniques. Then you look at a pot and you can see...how (it) was made. (In this process)... you've begun to 'speak pottery'- you've got a vocabulary of norms"* (Dawkins and Dennett, 2012).

Marks on a canvas (or any other surface for that matter), much like tracks in the sand, also comprise a vocabulary of norms, which form the intersubjective visual language of painting. While meaning itself is an interpretive task, the *capacity* for imagining and constructing a narrative from visual evidence is innate, and therefore inseparable from the reading of an artwork. It is the ability to look at a Pollock splatter painting and decipher the series of actions that brought upon its visual result; or rather looking past

the images of Philip Guston, and noticing the layers of searching and erasure, the neurotic application of chunky brushstrokes, the dirty mixing of colours painted alla prima in a haste, and so forth. These clues arouse the viewer's tacit, intuitive knowledge, and allow her to gather the narratives beyond the image itself. She could then begin to extract meaning through the reading of actions, process, and intent.

Perhaps no physical artwork illustrates this point better than Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning* (1953) (fig. 26) – which presented its viewers with a 'blank' paper, after Rauschenberg erased his contemporary's drawing from it. The artwork remains an iconic one in the canon of art history, proving that while de Kooning's image may have been erased, the evidence of the two artists' actions would not be removed from the object.

When Paul Delaroche declared the death of painting in 1840 upon seeing the first photographic print, he seemed to have neglected the inseparable weight of the process of making from the object it eventually produces. Nearly two centuries since his apocalyptic prediction, with painting still alive and thriving as a medium, it is clear that Delaroche was mistaken, while Dennett was correct, and that an image is never simply read as the subject-matter it depicts, but also as the accumulation of actions through which it is generated: a vocabulary of norms.

Figure 26: Robert Rauschenberg, *Erased De Kooning* (1953)

None of the observations I am making in this section so far are novel. Yet, throughout my practice as an artist and educator, I am often reminded that this claim needs to be argued anew. It would also serve as my point of departure as I delve deeper into my painting practice as it differs from the process of illustrating my graphic novel.

While my thematic investigation of *Unbound* extends through my entire studio practice, I distinguish between two separate yet complementary creative processes through which I explore my subject-matter: In no specific order of importance, the first mode refers to the making of the graphic novel – a carefully composed and largely controlled process, allowing me to plan for a desired outcome and translate it into operable steps. The creation of my graphic novel follows a traditional practice of comic book illustration, starting with careful storyboard layouts of each page. In the ideation phase, every panel goes through a process of editing, until the desired composition is achieved. Selected sketches are then pencilled onto a larger drawing paper, detailing the composition before inking it with an array of traditional tools (i.e. brushes, pens, nibs and stencils). The finished illustration is then scanned and later edited into a book format. This traditional workflow allows for a great degree of control over the desired outcome. The process of sketching, doubting, erasing, and redrawing remains hidden from the viewer, who receives a polished end result.

The second mode refers to my painting practice, which can be characterised by a long process of search and erasure, a considerable lack of control over the medium, and unpredictability of result. My canvases are often large, dwarfing my movement, forcing my entire body to participate in the act of stretching brushstrokes across the surface. The strenuous effort of wielding heavy-duty brushes and pushing viscous paint against a large-scale canvas often simulates a real sense of resistance from the medium. This physical engagement does not only dictate a certain pace to each and every painting, but also leaves its trail of evidence on each finished work – traces which, as previously argued, become as meaningful as the subject matter they compose.

Furthermore, I wish to reveal to my reader yet another, 'hidden' layer of distinction between my comic-book illustration and painting processes. This dissimilarity may not seem apparent to the viewer upon inspecting the exhibition of this project, yet nonetheless, I lay this information here as I find it relevant for the framing of my creative decisions. I will first address my graphic illustration practice: I regard drawing to be my very first language,

and like many painters, it was a language I developed long before I engaged with painting. As a toddler, before I could express myself verbally, I would pick up a pencil, a marker or a pen and draw obsessively. Yet, even by the time I learned to talk, drawing was already my established language of choice, as it enabled me to access a wider vocabulary than spoken language could at the time. My early childhood teachers, to whom I am still grateful today, noticed my relative proficiency with drawing and urged my parents to send me to art classes from the early age of three – and my supportive parents complied. Drawing was, and still is, my most immediate and intuitive mode of expression.

Oil painting, on the other hand, is a practice I engaged in much later in life. Although I experimented with painting numerous times in school, I only immersed myself in the medium during my senior year of undergraduate, at the age of twenty-seven. At that time, painting with oil was a battle, and I struggled to translate my fluency in drawing into this newly acquired medium, which presented many more variables to consider. In fact, I decided to pursue painting precisely because it presented a challenge of expression I found highly stimulating. The medium behaved in ways I did not know how to control, and therefore, my painting practice began as a rather chaotic, unpredictable, and humbling process. In a sense, it still is. Over time, I have learned to embrace the medium's uncertainty and allow it to guide my making.

Therefore, my paintings go through major changes in the process of being completed: They are never pre-planned or sketched as compositions onto the canvas, and more often than not, the search for the image that resonates would go through a multitude of doubting, erasures, and covering. Painting became my 'unreasonable' language, which has been forcing me to relinquish cerebral control and simply trust its process – urging me to put my faith in The Absurd. As this project stems from a meditation on doubt, I find it meaningful to express my conceptual inquiry through both the familiar and controllable medium of graphic illustration, as well as the sceptical process of painting.

My choice to exhibit large-scale oil paintings together with comic book illustrations might seem odd to the viewer, who may view these practices as visually and methodologically separate. Yet nothing seems more fitting to me than to present these two distinct processes as an echo of the two competing-yet-complementary epistemes that stand at the chore of *Unbound*. Moreover, as the notion of 'origins' sits at the heart of this inquiry, I

find it most appropriate to realise this project through my 'acquired' language of oil painting, alongside my 'native' language of narrative drawing.

Between these two languages, the viewer finds a series of medium-sized works on canvas, bridging the small, monochromatic ink drawings and large, colourful oil paintings. Inspired by Philip Guston's *Roma* series (1971), I used a limited palette of deep red and muted tan to produce several faster-paced paintings. By restraining my palette, I could focus on the medium's additional properties (such as texture, surface, viscosity, paint application, and so on). The limited colour and relative control enabled me to explore new ideas quickly, and thus further develop an iconography in *Unbound*'s visual lexicon.

This series of painterly drawings, titled *Fugue*, teeters between graphic illustration and realistic trompe l'oeil. One painting, depicting a stone wall in its foreground, is painted with a thick and grainy texture, simulating the surface of the object it depicts (fig. 27). In this work, oil paint and primer mixed with earth and small stones break the barriers between painterly imitation and the 'thingness' of the object. In another, a stick casts its shadow on the painting's flat surface (fig. 28), and in the next, only its shadow remains on the 'canvas wall' (fig. 29). These optical illusions and the fragmented narratives they allude to function as playful materialisations of reflexive doubt.

Figure 27-31: *Fugue* (series) (2022-23), oil on canvas, dimensions variable

Epilogue

Notions of origin exist in nearly every society, and in some cases, provide the very foundation on which a culture is built. The omnipresence of such narratives and the societal role they play may conceal their subjective properties, and thus dissuade public scrutiny. In my reflection on these concepts of origin, I created *Unbound*. As the name of this project suggests, my inquiry has been a sustained practice of 'unbinding' baselines – first the personal, through the societal, to the ecological.

Until the end of the 18th century, theistic ideas of a divine creation functioned as the common baseline for the question of biological origins. It was only after George Cuvier established his theory of extinction that the academic community began an extended process of rethinking these foundational assumptions.

Following Cuvier's footsteps, Charles Darwin upended centuries-long dogma about the emergence of species, and thus became the most influential modern scholar to redefine the concept of origin. The theory of evolution replaced traditional understanding of baselines by unveiling the biological mechanism of constant reactionary flux.

Seeking to implement Darwin's conclusions, science writer Emma Marris proposes to neglect ideas of ecological baselines and ecosystems' integrity. Instead, she posits to redefine 'nature' in a manner that accounts for constant flux. Such implementation does not only apply to ecosystems, but also to human culture, as it rattles concepts of association through nativity and indigeneity. Moreover, it exposes the gaps between physical and imagined communities.

Doubting an established baseline can become a dangerous task, and The Land of Moriah keeps on demonstrating the perils of such an affair. Intersubjective baselines provide a collective narrative on which a culture could grow, and thus, challenging such narratives can be perceived as a threat to a culture's foundation.

Unbound confronts these questions by dissolving established myths of origin and fusing new ones. Following Foucault's deconstruction techniques, I call to question seemingly-objective classification systems and the baselines they establish. Hence, *Unbound* becomes a practice of reflexive scepticism, through which my viewer is encouraged to question her own ethos.

Plato excluded artists from his ideal *Republic* – due to art's deceptive mimetic properties, 'incapable of serving as a medium for the transmission of

objective ethical knowledge' (Janaway, 1998). As I move away from idealistic notions of original baselines, I shall carry *Unbound* with me proudly into exile.

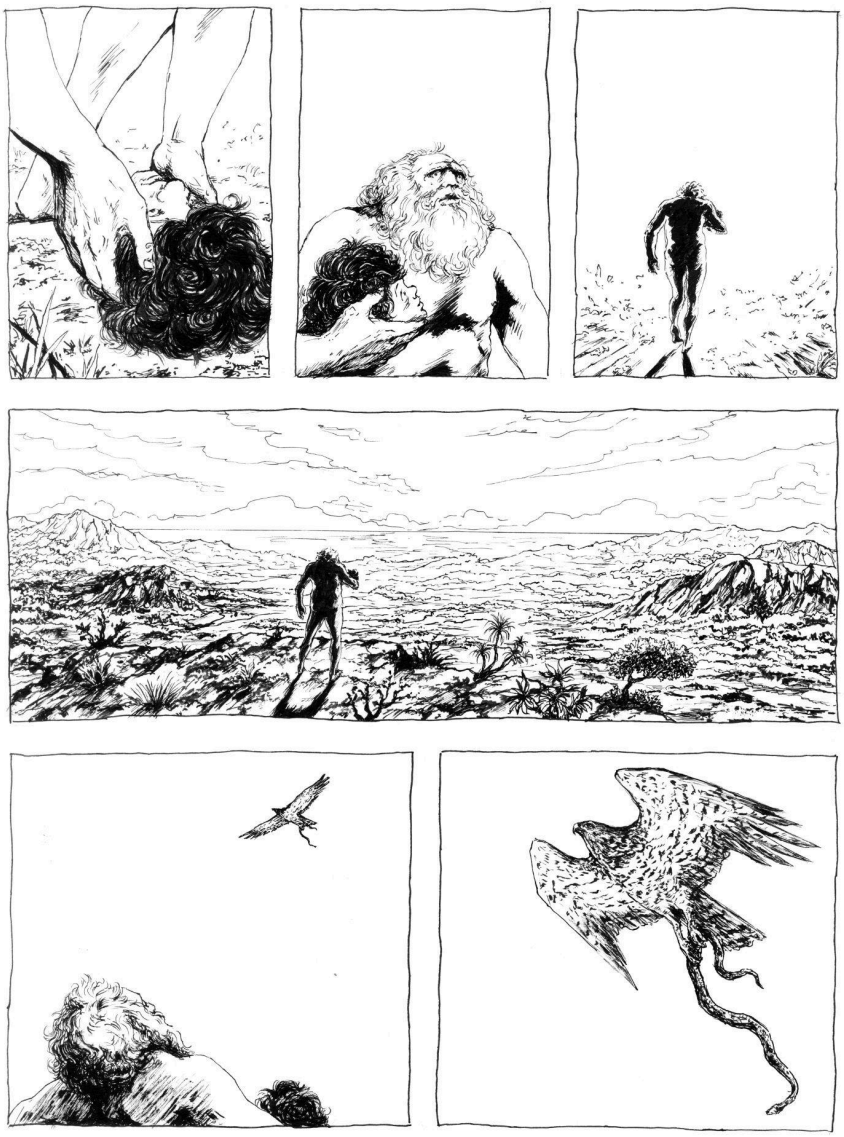


Figure 32: *Unbound*: Journey's end. Ink on paper
At the end of their three-day journey, Abraham and Isaac approach the edge of a cliff, from which they scope the Mediterranean horizon. The sun is now setting. Abraham and Isaac look to the sky and notice a short-toed snake eagle flying with a coin-marked snake trapped in the bird's talons. Predator and prey exchange roles once again.

Unbound: **Featured Species List**

Sorted by their order of appearance in the graphic novel:

- *Homo Sapiens* (modern human)
- *Dama Mesopotamica* (Persian fallow deer)
- *Cyclamen Persicum* (Persian cyclamen)
- *Schistocerca Gregaria* (desert locust)
- *Laudaika Stellio* (roughtail rock agama)
- *Apus Apus* (common swift)
- *Senecio Vernalis* (eastern groundsel)
- *Apis Mellifera* (western honey bee)
- *Misumena Vatia* (flower crab-spider)
- *Upupa Epops* (Eurasian Hoopoe)
- *Malus Sieversii* (wild apple)
- *Hemorrhois Nummifer* (coin-marked snake)
- *Circaetus Gallicus* (short-toed snake eagle)
- *Carduelis Carduelis* (european goldfinch)
- *Coccinella Septempunctata* (seven-spot ladybird)
- *Pycnonotus Xanthopygos* (white-spectacled bulbul)
- *Iris Palaestina* (Palestine iris)
- *Oryx Leucoryx* (Arabian oryx)
- *Corvus Tristis* (hooded crow)
- *Foeniculum Vulgare* (fennel)
- *Adesmia Abbreviata* (pitted beetle)
- *Caracal Caracal* (caracal)
- *Anemone Coronaria* (poppy anemone)
- *Grus Grus* (common crane)
- *Capra Nubiana* (Nubian ibex)
- *Hyaena Hyaena* (striped hyena)
- *Theba Pisana* (sand hill snail)
- *Onychognathus Tristramii* (Dead Sea starling)

Figure 33: *Stroller* (2023), oil on canvas, 230x235cm

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