



JAKE AIKMAN
Janus (Atlantic)

[selected works]

*Wildness, wild places and wild energies
in Jake Aikman's paintings*
by Sean O'Toole



SUBURBIA CONTEMPORARY

Contemporary art gallery representing established and emerging artists. Granada, Spain. Our exhibition program includes internationally renowned artists, as well as our 'Up and Coming' and 'Archivo de Artistas' platforms, which give emerging artists much needed exposure and development opportunities. Suburbia is also a space for personal growth and community participation in a broad spectrum of contemporary art practices. Suburbia's focus is firmly rooted in the advancement and development of contemporary art projects of the highest quality.





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Black Sea, Kiev
Photograph by Iryna Kanishcheva / Art United Us

BIOGRAPHY

Jake Aikman was born in London in 1978 and currently lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa. He obtained his Masters of Fine Arts (specialising in painting) in 2008 from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, after completing his Bachelor of Fine Arts in 2005.

Aikman had his first solo exhibition, *This Must Be The Place*, in 2006 at Everard Read gallery, Cape Town. Since then, he has presented six solo exhibitions including *Echoes* in 2009, *Proximity* in 2011 and *At the Quiet Limit* in 2013 at SMAC Gallery. His solo exhibition *Confini Velati/Veiled Boundaries* was presented in 2014 in Rome following a residency in Trevignano Romano in Italy, which was facilitated by the Centro Luigi Di Sarro. Aikman presented his sixth solo exhibition *Haunt*, at SMAC Gallery in Johannesburg, earlier in 2017.

In 2009 Aikman exhibited in *L'Anima Del Acqua: The Spirit of Water* an exhibition presented as part of the 53rd Venice Biennale. He was also an invited artist for the 4th Beijing International Art Biennale and exhibited in *Paralleli*, an official exhibition to the 2nd Sabbionetta Biennale in 2010, and the Olympic Fine Arts exhibition Creative Cities Collection that was held at the Barbican Centre in London in 2012.

Jake Aikman recently took part in the ArtUnitedUs urban art project, where he painted a striking three - story mural on the side of a building in Kiev, Ukraine.

The art project collaborates with communities to raise public awareness of issues around war, aggression, and violence. In 2017 was included in SMAC Gallery's presentation at the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair in London.

In May 2018 Aikman presented a solo exhibition in Granada, Spain at Suburbia Contemporary Art in the historic centre of the city. Suburbia Contemporary Art presented a series of new works by Aikman at The Others art fair in Turin, November 2018.





Adrift, 2017. Oil on linen, 152x152 cm

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The centrepiece of Jake Aikman's exhibition with Suburbia at Arte Fiera Bologna is a newly painted diptych titled Janus (Atlantic), 2018, in which each panel depicts a generically identified mass of rippled water and is a mirror image of the other. The scene is rendered in a realist style using a reduced palette dominated by varying tones of blue, grey and green. Aikman's realism is exacting, as opposed to obsessive. His seascapes share with French realist painter Gustave Courbet a loose fidelity to the coastal landscapes that inspired them – they are in other words translations, images “based on, but not subordinated to, objective observation of nature,” to quote art historian Linda Nochlin. Unlike Courbet, however, Aikman habitually shuns the solidity of a shoreline prospect, that quintessential terrestrial vantage of modernist maritime paintings, favouring instead an oblique view that fully immerses the viewer in water and wet.

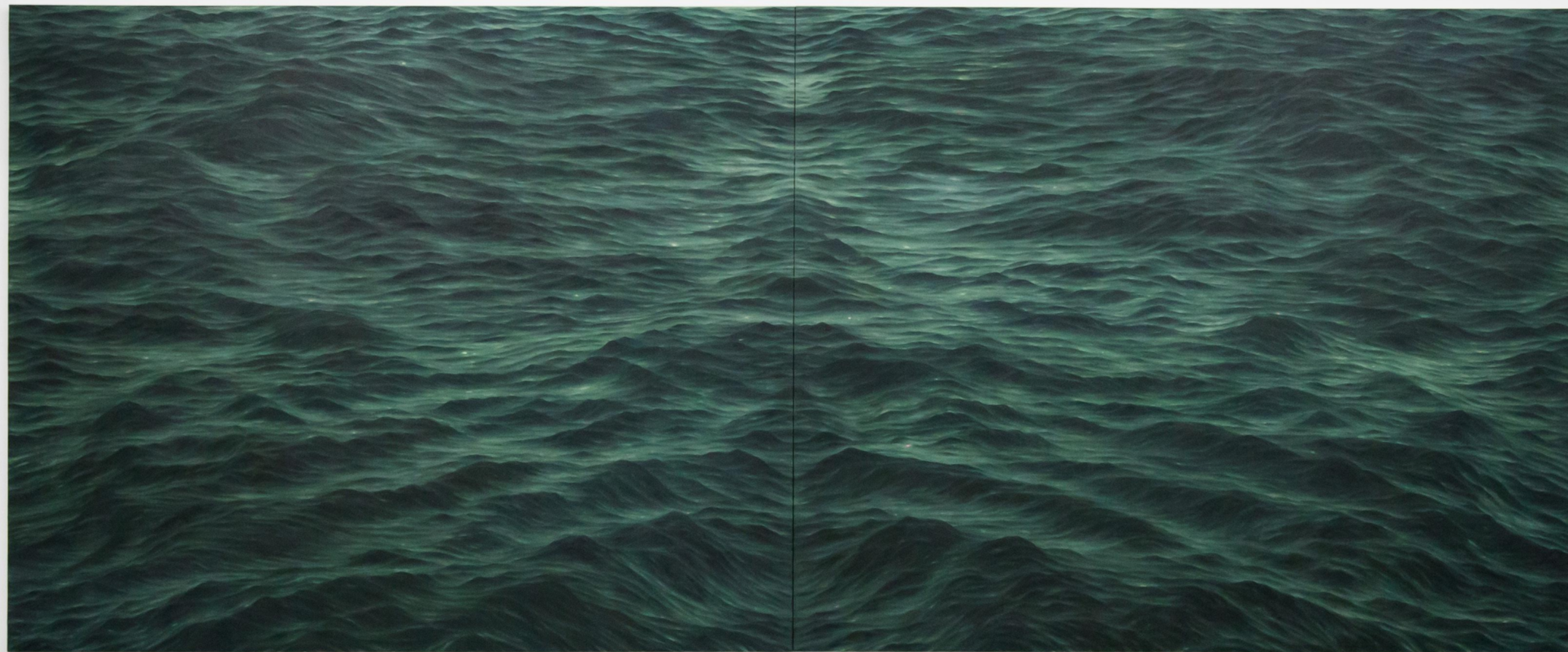
Close-ups can be disorientating. Compositionally, Aikman's marine study shares kinship with Latvian-American artist Vija Celmins's photorealist graphite work, Untitled (Ocean), 1970, notably in the way he eliminates surplus and focuses on precisely rendering a salty water mass without invoking a horizon point. On one level, Janus (Atlantic) can be read as a formal exercise in colour and pattern; context and place are, it would seem, of secondary significance. And yet this work is irreducibly linked to place. Janus (Atlantic) traces its origins back to a month-stay stay at Lake Bracciano, a large freshwater volcanic reservoir northwest of Rome. Aikman's stay at this was, in many respects, felicitous.

The artist's 2014 visit to Italy remains an important touchstone for his current working concerns, particularly in relation to his Janus series of diptychs. Painted in 2017, Janus (Lago di Bracciano) is a precursor to Janus (Atlantic); the mirrored diptych figures Lake Bracciano, at least parenthetically, in its bracketed title. The series title, Janus, invokes the two-faced Roman god of beginnings and transitions. Aikman recognised in this deity of past and future time a duality that, looking back, enabled him to think more expansively about his time at Lake Bracciano, in particular the distress when his life partner broke off their engagement shortly after his return to Cape Town.

Despite the break-up curdling fond memory of an Italian summer, the period around his 2014 residency in many ways felicitous and, professionally speaking, marked a period of consolidation. After nearly a decade of constantly working at his maritime paintings, in 2013 Aikman made a breakthrough with a series of works portraying densely thicketed coastal shorelines and volcanic clouds. The scenes were observed during a surfing trip to Nicaragua and El Salvador, some rendered from photographs, others from memory. Gathered on his 2013 exhibition At the Quiet Limit, the work heralded a maturing vision.

Aikman's early painting often referenced human subjects. Over time, he came to regard the human figure as a source of narrative distraction and identitarian complexities. His landscape paintings of Central America were mostly unpeopled; his subsequent work has completely forsaken human subjects. His technique also evolved. Since 2013 Aikman's colour palette has been limited to French ultramarine, burnt sienna, sap green and very occasionally Prussian blue. The outcome of this self-imposed restraint is a body of work marked by an austere elegance. During this period of transformation his brushwork also changed. The wavy horizontal lines of blue used to render the sea in early serial paintings like Set Adrift I & II, both completed in 2007, yielded to a more delicate, gauzy technique.

Aikman's mature work is entrancing; his expansive marine scenes are also humbling in their gossamer evocation of the sublimity of wild places. Aikman's growing interest in figuring ephemeral sensory experiences, of light and haze and the insubstantiality of vision, has seen him explore more abstracted ways of representing the sea. His work is now less indebted to the verity of photographs, or for that matter human presences and man-made things. Speaking about his visit to Central America and the transformations he experienced in the studio after, including a warming towards abstraction, Aikman told me: “I lost almost all references to trees. They were just green, misty, dense forest images. I think that is when I



Janus (Lago di Bracciano), 2017. Oil on Canvas, 165x400 cm



N10.84222. W85.87555, 2013. Oil on canvas, 165x165 cm
Beacon, 2017. Oil on canvas, 30x30 cm

told myself that it is okay to let go of the figure, to let go of references and just convey the feel or atmosphere of a scene. In those abstracted works [portraying Central America] I found a way to move past painting waves and ripples, but still convey the same feeling."

Aikman has continued to explore ways of reducing and decomposing the familiar into painted images. Constant winnowing and refinement has led Aikman to jettison the ornamental and superfluous. His Arte Fiera Bologna exhibition includes canvases featuring thick, horizontal bands of colour. Works like *Midnight* (blue), *Outlier* (grey), *Yellow window III* and *Atlantic* all use colour as an optical tool to imitate realism, while at the same time resisting it. In these works colour not only signifies the sea and land but is also the framework and form of the things he is describing. Instinctual reasoning is all; gone is the precision of the hand labouring to reproduce a photograph.

Aikman, however, remains a phlegmatic painter rather than ecstatic recorder of experience. *Janus* (Atlantic), with its sublimated meanings and cryptic references to past experiences, is also genre study of a minute fraction of an immense ocean. Large masses of water have been the source of rich impression for artists. They are savagely bountiful spaces. But human fascination with the sea is not reducible to a single cause, although British writer Robert MacFarlane, writing in *The Wild Places*, 2007, hints at a credible version of unified theory when he describes wildness, which the oceans and large water masses unavoidably are, "as process, something continually at work in the world, something tumultuous ... joyous".

This joy – like the flighty theory I am improvising – is provisional, at best contingent. Writing in his 1915 epic poem, *Maritime Ode*, modernist Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa describes the sea as a place that encompasses "crimes, horrors, ships, people, sea, sky, clouds, winds, latitude and longitude, outcries –." The sea is a plurality. As a terrain of human encounter, the sea is near and distant, knowable in its immediacy yet also receding, an infinite horizon, an "abstract distance" as Pessoa put it. Maritime museums and bric-a-brac shops are filled with hoary paintings that reduce this abstract distance to a layer-cake confection of land, sea and sky.

Although prompted to start painting maritime scenes after he posed his father for a photograph in a tidal pool on the False Bay coastline for an undergraduate painting project, by the time of his 2009 exhibition *Echoes* Aikman had forsaken the shoreline as a reliable vantage on the sea. Aikman's interest in maritime painting was prompted, in part, by an encounter with seeing Peter Doig's *Canoe-Lake*, 1997, on the *Triumph of Painting 1*, 2005, at Saatchi Gallery, London. "I was blown away." Gerhard Richter was another early touchstone. Aikman's 2009 exhibition *Echoes* included a quivering seascape titled *Sea-Sea* after Richter, 2007; the purposefully incomplete work was copy of Richter's *Seascape* (Sea-Sea), 1970. In a further rehearsal of his conceptual interests in repetition, appropriation and copying, Aikman also reworked Richter's seascape to include Doig's *Island Painting*, 2000-01. The resulting painting, *Canoe Sea* (Doig vs Richter), is cute – in an over-anxious sort of way, when influence and awe prompts "self-saving caricature of distortion" and "perverse, wilful revisionism," to quote literary critic Harold Bloom.

Aikman has long since worked through his anxiety of influence. He has also moved on in other ways. In a 2004 interview, photographer Allan Sekula described the sea as "absolutely a space of contemporaneity". Rather than being an unadulterated, primordial space, a place devoid of cargo ships and tons of plastic waste, Sekula regarded the sea as lived space, a mapped world of transnational trade and military economies, in effect a social geography. Aikman's early work includes studies of military submarines (for example, *Where I End and You Begin*, 2008) and beached ships ready for shipbreaking, as is commonplace on the beaches of Chittagong, Bangladesh. But his mature work eschews presenting the sea as a trafficked space of wilful plunder and careless ruin. Instead, and by slow increments, he has allowed the mythic to triumph.



Aikman is well aware of the sea's literal complexity and metaphorical plenitude. A keen surfer since his teens, Aikman frequently speaks about the sea's "atavistic" qualities when relating his concerns as a painter. In a 2017 interview he stated: "The sea always seemed to be like a veil, concealing everything underneath. This is particularly the feeling you get if you are sitting on it bobbing – you can't see what it is below it." Aikman's paintings aim to convey his sense of vulnerability and awe in the face of the sea's overwhelming scale and delicate mystery. "The sea reminds us that we are not in control of the forces of nature, and linked to that reminder are the trials and tribulations of the individual's (viewer) life."

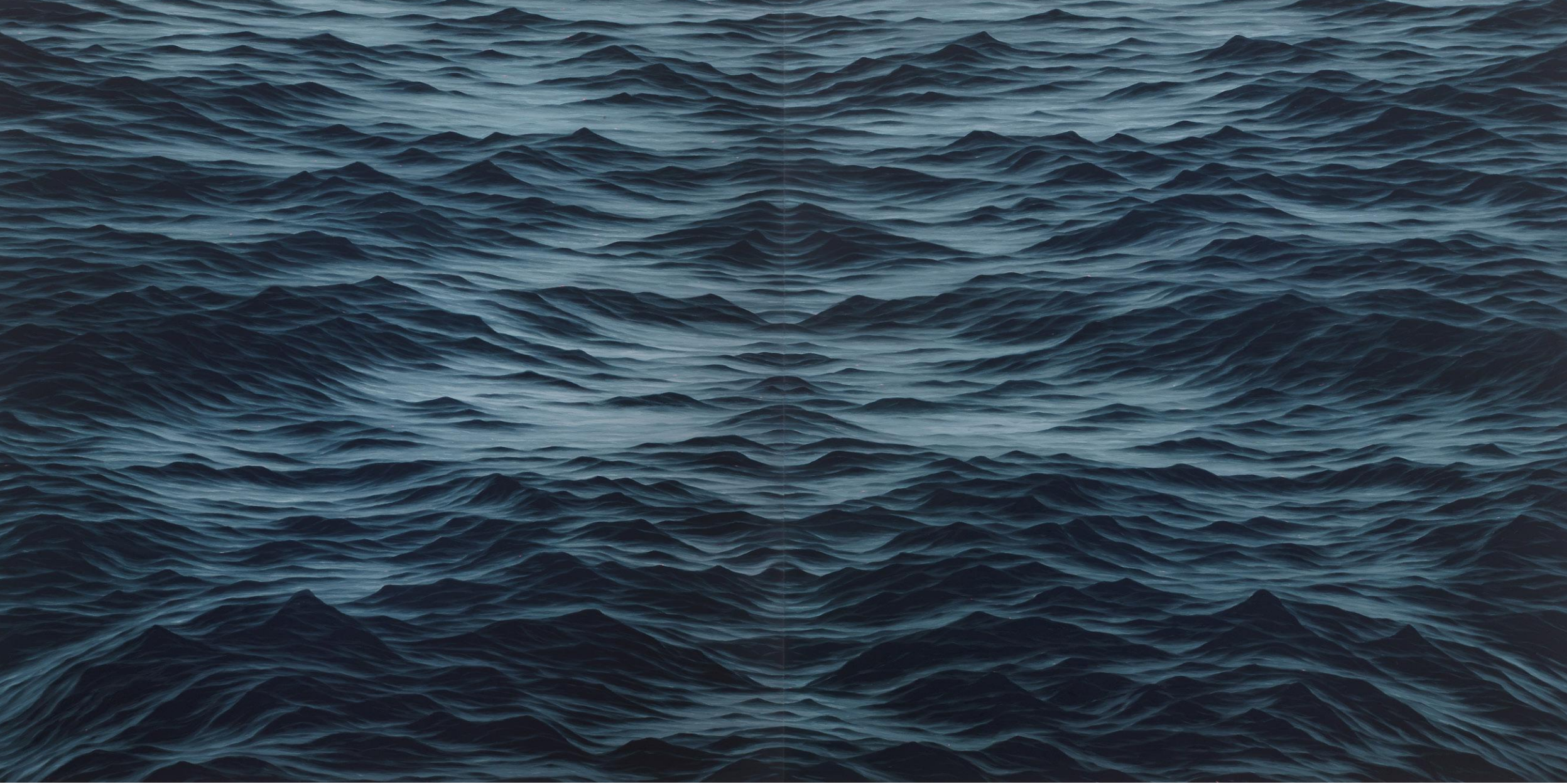
Aikman's implication of the viewer here is important. His ambitions as a painter are principally focussed on evoking visceral psychological responses in his viewers. "My goal is to get under the skin or behind the veil of the purely visual experience of the image. Ultimately, my wish is for the viewer to engage with what lies beneath the surface within themselves." Aikman's stay at Lake Bracciano reinforced his sense of humankind's primal sensibilities and psychological responses towards wild places, especially those adjacent large bodies of water. "The lake's weather can change drastically, and it can, in turn, change the mood of the people," Aikman recalled in a 2018 interview. "The locals often spoke to me about how that body of water affected their emotions."

Aikman's interest in evoking strong emotional responses to his work locates him in a woke romantic tradition that is too easily dismissed as "namby-pamby" – Byron's response to Wordsworth's ecstatic poetry of wild places. Never mind the cynics. His affective paintings restate the irrepressible nature of the sublime. If that is too bold a claim for his work, maybe it is better to say they aspire to acknowledge the existence of wildness, wild places and wild energies on a planet increasingly being refashioned with concrete, steel and plastic to be manmade.

Sean O'Toole is a writer and editor living in Cape Town



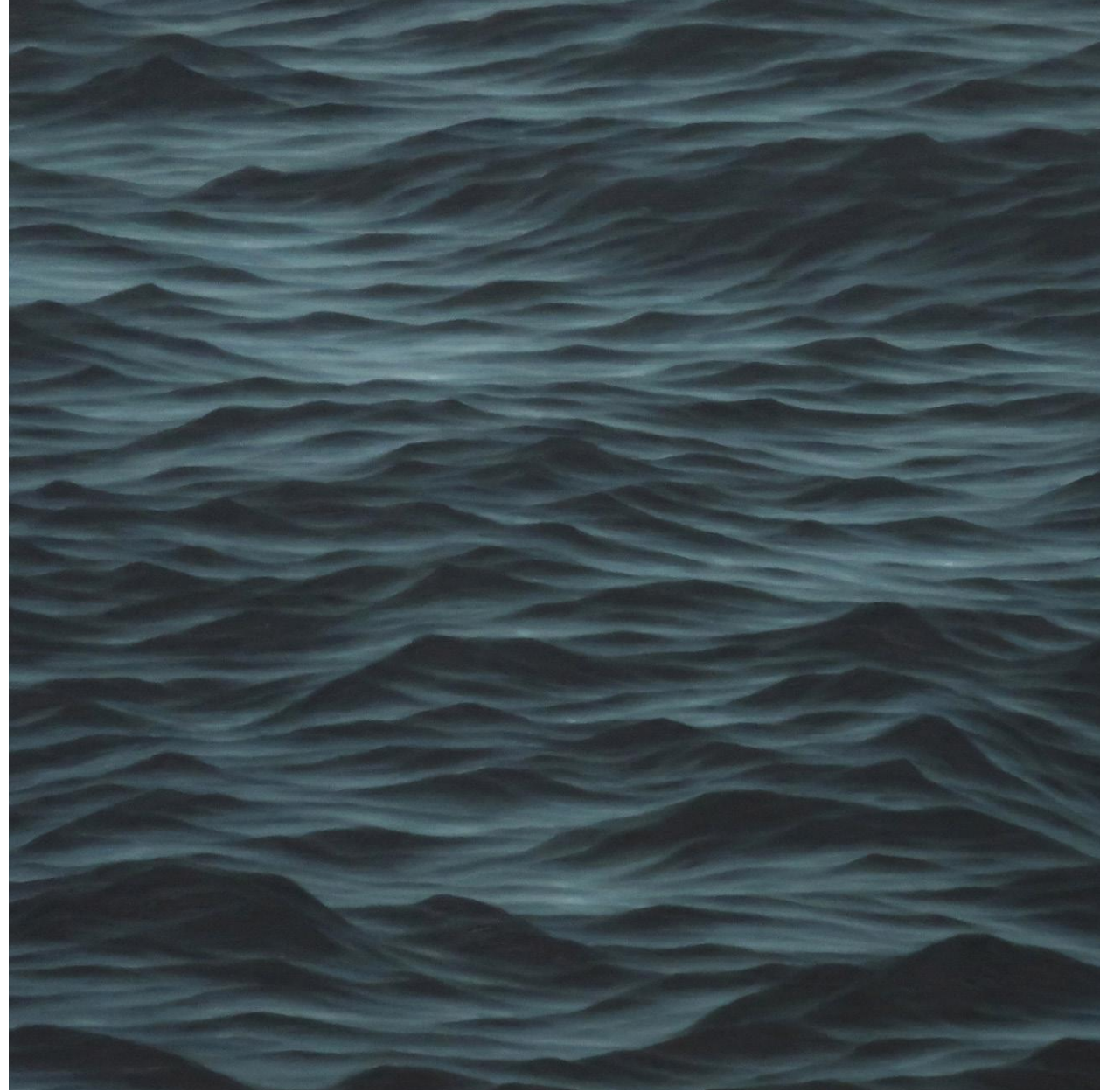
Cloudbank, 2018. Oil on linen, 150x150 cm
Midnight (blue), 2018. Oil on linen, 53x53 cm



Janus (Atlantic), 2018. Oil on linen, diptych (150x150 cm each)



Placid body, 2018. Oil on canvas, 50x50 cm



Sirena (solo), 2018. Oil on linen, 100 x 100 cm



Vestiges, exhibition view



Sirena II-I, 2018. Oil on linen, 100x100 cm



Sirena II-II, 2018. Oil on linen, 100x100 cm



Sirena II-III, 2018. Oil on linen, 100x100 cm



Blue yonder II, 2018
Abyss (blue), 2018
Yellow window III, 2018
Atlantic, 2018



Blue window, 2018
Linger, 2018
Portal (blue), 2018



Heatwave, 2019. Oil on canvas, 25x25 cm



Glider I, 2018. Oil on canvas, 92x92 cm



Glider II, 2018. Oil on canvas, 92x92 cm



Glider III, 2018. Oil on canvas, 92x92 cm



Glider IV, 2018. Oil on canvas, 92x92 cm



Seascape Aggregate, 2017-2019. Oil on board, 35x30 cm



