

MODERNPAINTERS



The man, the trees, the light,
2013. Oil on
linen, 57 x 45¼ in.

Hannah van Bart

The story behind an artwork, in the artist's own words

THIS PAINTING STARTED without the figure, beginning as a landscape. I wanted it to be like walking out into a damp, murky atmosphere with dim light and surrounding trees, that kind of space where the air is so moist you can feel the dampness on your skin. The idea was to capture that brief moment when you suddenly become aware that you are "outside of your mind." Not stuck within it but open rather. When faraway space feels intimate and unknown territory registers as almost familiar. How does a moment like this look? And how does that feeling of moisture clinging to your skin look? I placed the figure in the landscape to explore that.

I see a human figure, a portrait, as unknown territory. You can get close and think you know a face, only to find out that you don't. A face can briefly open up and show signs of the great part of life that is hidden and lived in dreams, but can

still all remain unknown. The man in this painting doesn't exist; I make imaginary portraits. I build my characters while I'm painting. Light and skin are as changeable and volatile as the clouds.

This figure went through so many different expressions and facial features before he became this man. I washed and sanded away many faces. I finally gained hold of him by focusing on those trees and the light. The area over his right shoulder has especially pushed his face into finding form and presence. The moment he looked real and compelling to me came as a big surprise. As though the whole painting suddenly had jumped into focus, into being. MP

Hannah van Bart's work is on view at Marianne Boesky Gallery in New York through June 14.