PRONAOS

by

Francesco Gillia

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Art

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

November 2012

©COPYRIGHT

by

Francesco Gillia

2012

All Rights Reserved

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Francesco Gillia

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citation, bibliographic style, and consistency and is ready for submission to The Graduate School.

Dr. Regina Gee

Approved for the School of Art

Vaughan Judge

Approved for The Graduate School

Dr. Ronald W. Larsen

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Montana State University, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

If I have indicated my intention to copyright this thesis by including a copyright notice page, copying is allowable only for scholarly purposes, consistent with "fair use" as prescribed in the U.S. Copyright Law. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this thesis in whole or in parts may be granted only by the copyright holder.

Francesco Gillia

November 2012

LIST OF IMAGES

Images Page

1. Installation Helen E. Copeland Gallery 8

2. Installation Helen E. Copeland Gallery 9

3. Installation Helen E. Copeland Gallery 10

4. Installation Helen E. Copeland Gallery 10

5. #1 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 11

6. Detail - #1 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 12

7. #3 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 13

8. Detail - #3 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 14

9. #5 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 15

10. #6 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 16

11. Detail - #6 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 17

12. Detail - #6 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 18

13. Detail - #6 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 19

14. #8 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 20

15. Detail - #8 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 21

16. #10 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 22

17. Detail - #10 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 23

18. Detail - #10 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 24

19. #11 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 25

20. Detail - #11 oil on canvas 48” x 72” 26

LIST OF IMAGES – CONTINUED

Image Page

21. #12 oil on canvas 48” x 72”.....27

22. Detail - #12 oil on canvas 48” x 72”.....28

23. #16 oil on canvas 48” x 72”.....29

24. Detail - #16 oil on canvas 48” x 72”.....30

25. Detail - #16 oil on canvas 48” x 72”.....31

26. Anatomy studies, charcoal pencil on paper 32

27. Anatomy studies #7, charcoal pencil on paper 9” x 12”.....33

28. Color studies, oil on canvas 16” x 24”.....34

26. Detail - color studies, oil on canvas.....35

ABSTRACT

I want to put the viewer in a transitional place defined by a state of tension between the sacred perception of our being and the sexuality of the subject, a contemporary version of the classical dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. My painting installation, *Pronaos*, is a series of fifteen oil paintings of large-scale frontal female nudes with an arguably confrontational focus on each subject's pubic area or groin, presented at the viewer's eye level. The relatively closed form combined with the regular rhythm of the repetition transform the bodies into organic architecture. They are the human translation of the colonnade of a Doric Greek temple. My focus on female genitalia is not configured as erotic as constructed and disseminated in contemporary culture. As sacred architecture made flesh, their bounded surfaces resist entry and offer no implicit invitation to sexual possession and voyeuristic penetration. Within this visual context, does the frank nakedness emphasize human vulnerability in contrast to the enduring presence of classical marble and stone or does it elevate the body towards a closer association with the gods by referencing their divine space?

Pronaos refers to the inner area of the portico of a Greek or Roman temple. A transitional space, it mediates between the colonnade's implied boundary and the sacred space belonging to the Naos or Cella. My painting installation, *Pronaos,* is a series of fifteen oil paintings of large-scale frontal female nudes with an arguably confrontational focus on each subject's pubic area or groin, presented at the viewer's eye level. These out-sized female figures are compositionally cropped at the level of their calves. Their missing feet, if reconstructed or added would stand on the gallery's floor level, and my intent is that the nudes share, or possibly "invade" the viewer's space. The painterly surface and glowing light created by oil on canvas invites the viewer to move across the surface, looking up and down, but then the urge for a complete comprehension of the body is simultaneously denied by the compositional cropping. Additionally, the relatively closed form combined with the regular rhythm of the repetition transform the bodies into organic architecture. They are the human translation of the colonnade of a Doric Greek temple. As their massive vertical forms recreate the architectural boundary marker between the profane and sacred, the installation space itself then becomes the pronaos, the place of mediation or passage between the two. As the title of my installation suggests, I want to put the viewer in a transitional place defined by a state of tension between the sacred perception of our being and the sexuality of the subject, a contemporary version of the classical dichotomy between the sacred and the profane.

I craft the tension I want the viewer to experience through a series of choices intended to exist in uneasy juxtaposition. The sensitive handling of the paint and romantic glow of the light directly contrasts with the confrontational anatomical focus, absence of head and limbs, and, perhaps most importantly but the sheer obsessive intensity represented by the number and scale of the paintings. My focus on female genitalia is not configured as erotic as constructed and disseminated in contemporary culture. In a deliberate contrast to the history of the female nude in the west—think of Venus reclining with a mirror and a smile—these females which other female body parts are highly charged with an exploitable sexuality. As sacred architecture made flesh, their bounded surfaces resist entry and offer no implicit invitation to sexual possession and voyeuristic penetration. Although I am not participating in the current language of eroticism in terms of how the female body is imaged for consumption, does not mean I am not addressing the subject of sex. My choice is to look at the part of the female body defined by her regenerative organs, regardless of what constructions of "the sacred" I imbue it with. My interest is in the female body as physically changing, visceral and vulnerable. I am not interested in the contemporary view of the body as arena for the politics of identity, nor the popular culture view of the body as canvas to be modified through the use of piercing, tattoos scarification or other means.

Standing in the middle of the installation the viewer is surrounded by depictions of different female nudes, unified by cropping, similar posture and a consistency in dimensions and framing. The intent of the installation is to generate an experiential effect where the sum is greater than the individual parts; the paintings accumulate

strength and depth through proximity and repetition, resulting in a more complete and complex vision of the idea.

I am strongly influenced by those Greek and Roman marble statues of antiquity which survive today only as fragments, and in particular by how the absence of limbs—and the attendant fascination with what is missing—gives the surviving parts a more powerful presence. This fascination with the fetishistic power of presence versus absence began quite early for me; as a boy growing up in Rome I was captivated by the Torso del Belvedere, baffled by how a fragment could condense such presence. What is left to the observer is accentuated by the power of the absence, by the possibility of reconstruction. At the same time, and I saw an example of this with the famous Torso del Belvedere as Ajax contemplating suicide (Raimund Wünsche 1998), a generated reconstruction is ultimately dissatisfying and saps power. My compositional effects of image cropping, and specifically how it affects human perceptions of the relationship to the painted body, is strongly influenced by my former experience as product designer and graphic designer. My design work taught me how cropping can manipulate spatial relationship to generate unease to allowing for a more extreme close up and suggesting a disconcerting closeness. If my experience viewing fragmentary ancient marble bodies combined with my commercial design work informed the cropping of the paintings, the Renaissance sculptures that still adorn cities I love, Rome and Florence in particular, influenced the scale of the pieces. These gigantic marbles and bronze sculptures were commissioned by a powerful elite, usually male, with a demonstrable understanding of larger than life scale and its power over people. The word “monumental” comes from the Latin *monere* which

means “to remind” or “to warn”. This idea again returns me to the power and authority of the ancient colonnaded temple, the physical marker of the *templum* or “sacred space” that often used overwhelming scale to impress and inspire awe. My paintings are intended to work collectively as a higher presence, demanding attention as well as acknowledgement of the sacred qualities of the human, here specifically female, body.

My ambitious scale and lush surface treatment owe a clear debt to those painters representing the western European tradition along the timeline from Michelangelo to Rubens. A marked departure in my work, however, is that I don’t necessarily invest in keeping the viewers’ attention exclusively inside the frame. I offer the opposite to the viewer: reason for the gaze to leave the frame by means of the wide cropping and the presentation of outsize female genitalia at eye level. The canvas, my chosen surface, must be visible and also must be enhanced by the colors that cover it. I crave the visual and tactile qualities of canvas, in particular its elastic response to the pressure of the brush stroke; it is a pleasure to the eye and the touch. As a medium, the consistency of oil-based pigments can recreate the greasy “carnal” feel of the skin and flesh. As Pavel Florenskij in *Iconostas* beautifully tells us, “oil colors want to surpass the limit of drawn matter to reach the immediate sensation.” Moreover, I like the analogy of the oxidation process within the oil and the aging of the human body. When I look at the painting I search for compositional relationships between light and dark obviously but also the abstract relationship between spaces, the smooth one, the cross hatched or striated one and gritty, scumbled-on textured space. Of special interest are the passages and

combination of those spaces. My main interest as a painter is the manipulation and transformation of those spaces.

I borrow suggestions by any old master, contemporary artist or designer: I am inspired by Lucian Freud's handling of the paint, paint that result so dense as to be sculptural. I am intrigued in his merciless representation of naked humans in which idealization is out of the question. Spencer Tunick interests me for his treatment of the nude and even his use of photography. However, he repeats the same idea of the group nude over and over, in the way in which I investigate the revealed genitals over and over. Repetition and rhythm provide meaning and structure to the idea and to the exhibition. He takes a snapshot, essentially, and I explore through extended time the subjects. He uses hundreds of nudes to make a single image; I use less than an entire person for each piece. I appropriate that aura or glow reminiscent of the old master paintings, hoping that it will evoke for a moment attention in the viewer. Mark Rothko seems to me a painter consciously competing with the old masters; however, he was lacking the foundations and he was a mediocre draftsman. In "Rothko and Belief" of Peter Schjeldahl writes "As often at retrospective of the abstract expressionist one is struck by the unpromising look of the early work" but in Rothko the drive is there, the message, the myth, the medium and some materials of the old masters, he had gotten rid of everything except color, color relation, light and atmosphere. Rothko solution is simple, simple not easy, with a result of the same intensity of the masters, same sublime quality.

Acknowledging that my being a white male, grown up in Italy has shaped my view on the female body, I find myself trying to negotiate a space within the history of

the traditional representation of the nude in Western art and a place between the polarities of sterile neoclassical revival and ironic postmodern response. The bodies in my work, being depiction of several different body types, do not conform to Western preconceptions of beauty. For reasons that I am not conscious about the depiction of the nude female that always captured my attention were the one in which the female figure had a strong inner power like the Venus of Willendorf,

One of the tensions that I crave from the viewer of my installation is the same tension I have when I am in a session with a model; I am confronted with the ambivalence between analysis and voyeurism. The energy of the session with the model creates in my mind a perceived personality feeds a constructed idea of the painting to be. I do several drawing and color studies to find the one light and color scheme I will use. Along with the memory of the model and those studies I use hundreds of of pictures as reference to paint a large canvas. A strong component of the *Pronaos* installation is the tension that the viewer is forced to face. I provide the model with a mirror to see what I see, to understand and appreciate the light and shadow shapes that her body movement creates. I cannot avoid that the model will judge her-self when looking at her body under such a strong light.

The depiction of so many different body types generates in different people and in the same people in different times opposite emotion: empathy and judging. Empathy is present when the viewer finds her/himself “at home” and “at peace” with the subject or at times the viewer identify with the depicted bodies. Judgment when the viewer mentally

or verbally cannot help to express opinions about the body shapes, judging based mainly on our cultural construct of beauty, health or sexual attraction.

This last point brings in light the main juxtaposition of the installation: worship and consumption. I look at the body as architecture and as a surface capable of accumulating and reflecting light, I consider the figure as design strategies, determined through shape, value, highlight, shadow, abstraction, and the handling of the paint, all the above aesthetic strategies enables me to strengthen those bodies with a sense of "beauty" of the human design, beauty of truth and gravity. I believe the viewer feels my effort and in part participate in this belief, worshipping the incredible complexity of our bodies, at the same time consuming with gaze of curiosity a selection of bodies offered to be analyzed.

Will the absence of the head, the missing of being gazed back accentuate out invitation to look and explore what is not there?

Within this visual context, does the frank nakedness emphasize human vulnerability in contrast to the enduring presence of classical marble and stone or does it elevate the body towards a closer association with the gods by referencing their divine space?



Image 1 – Installation Helen E. Copeland Gallery



Image 2 – Installation Helen E. Copeland Gallery



Image 3 – Installation Helen E. Copeland Gallery



Image 4 – Installation Helen E. Copeland Gallery

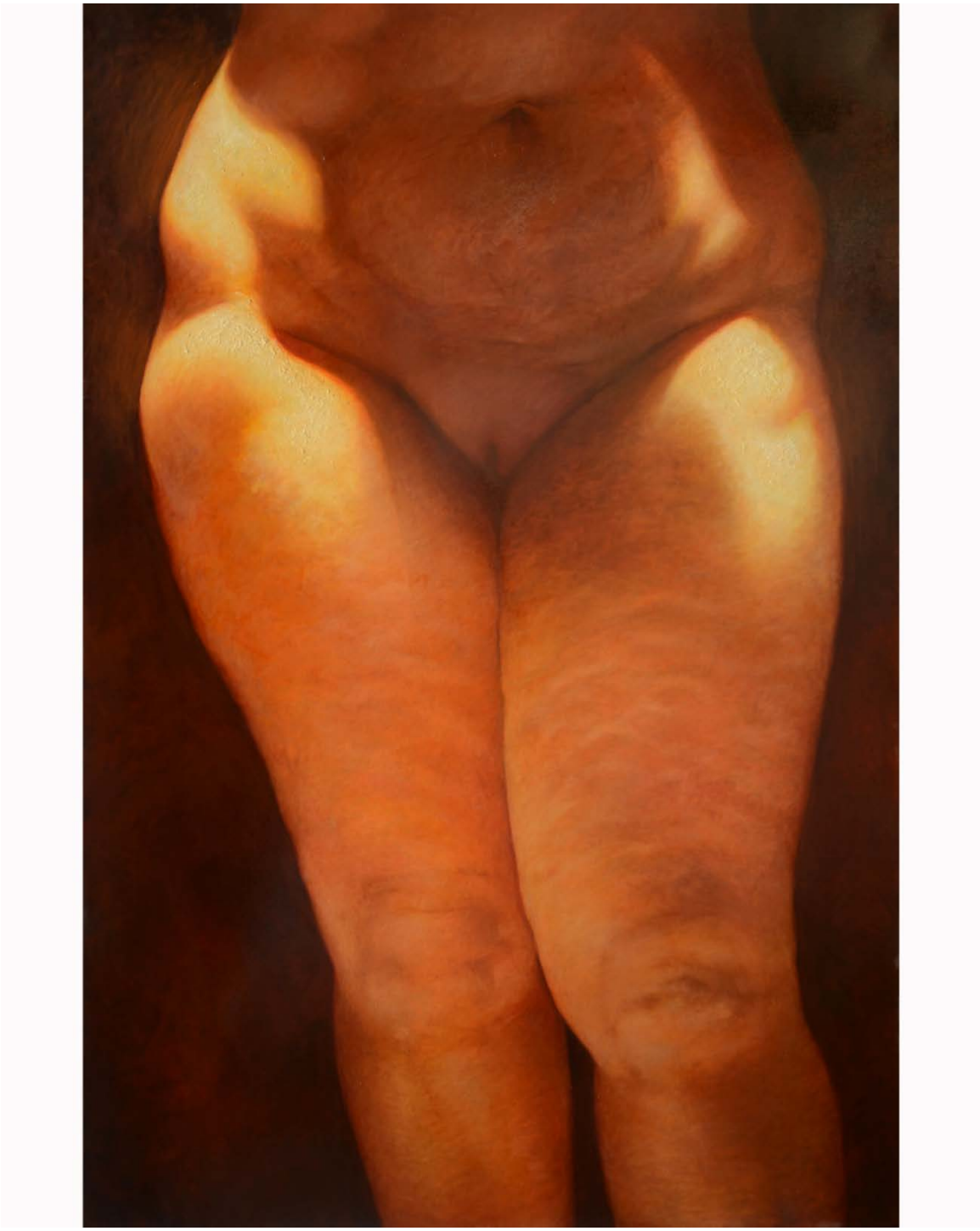


Image 5 – #1 oil on canvas 48” x 72”



Image 6 – Detail #1oil on canvas 48” x 72”

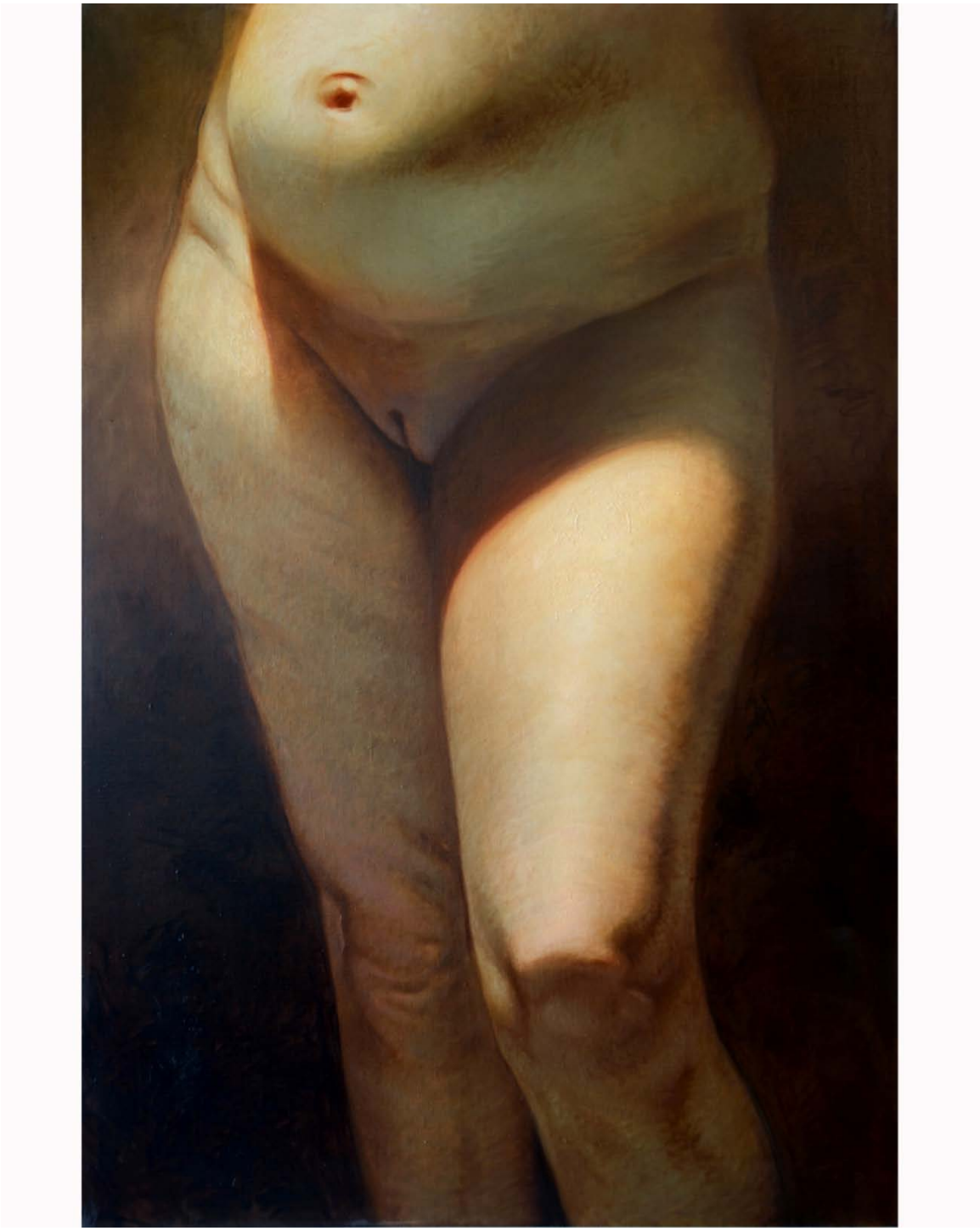


Image 7 – #3 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

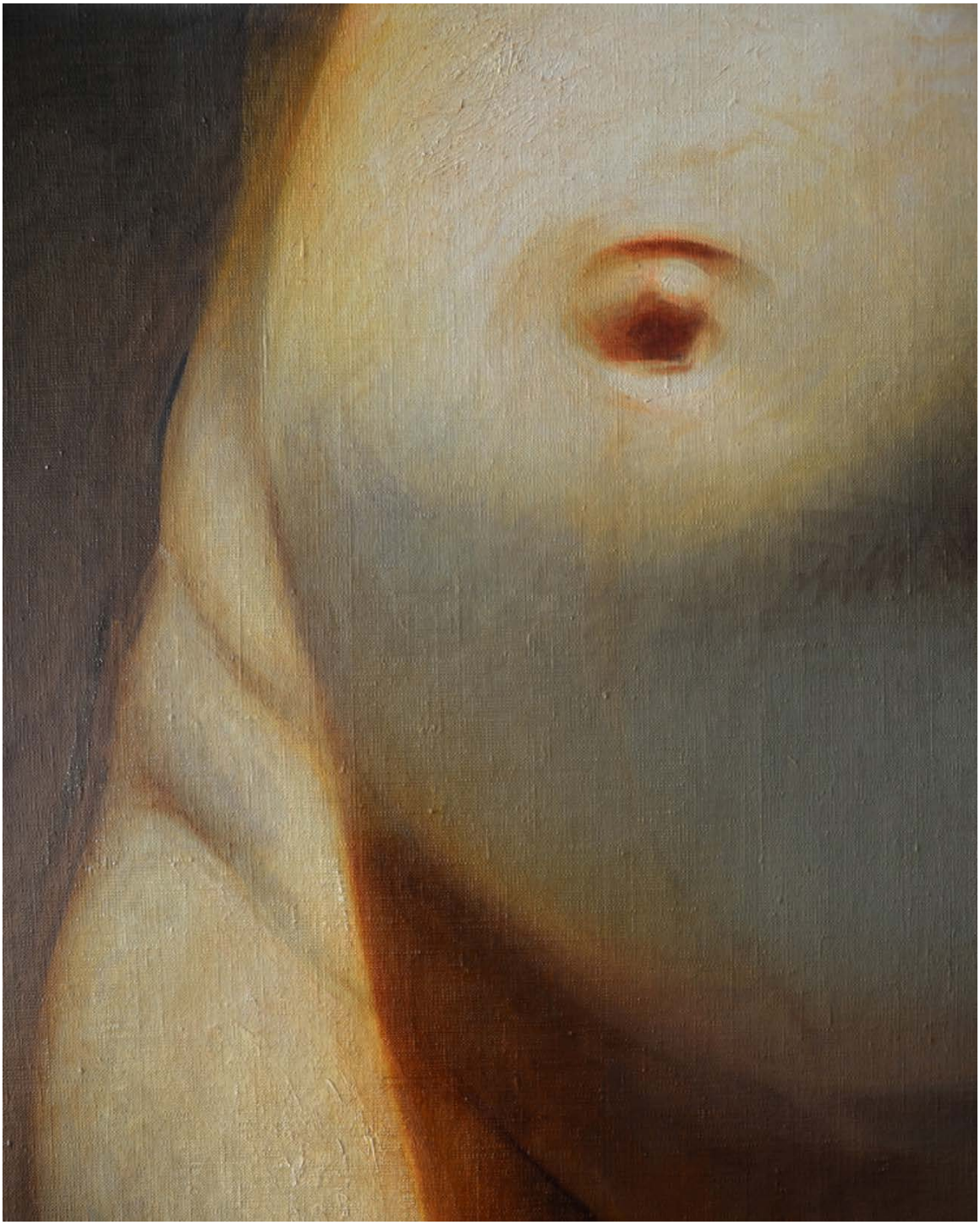


Image 8 – Detail #3oil on canvas 48” x 72”



Image 9 – #5 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

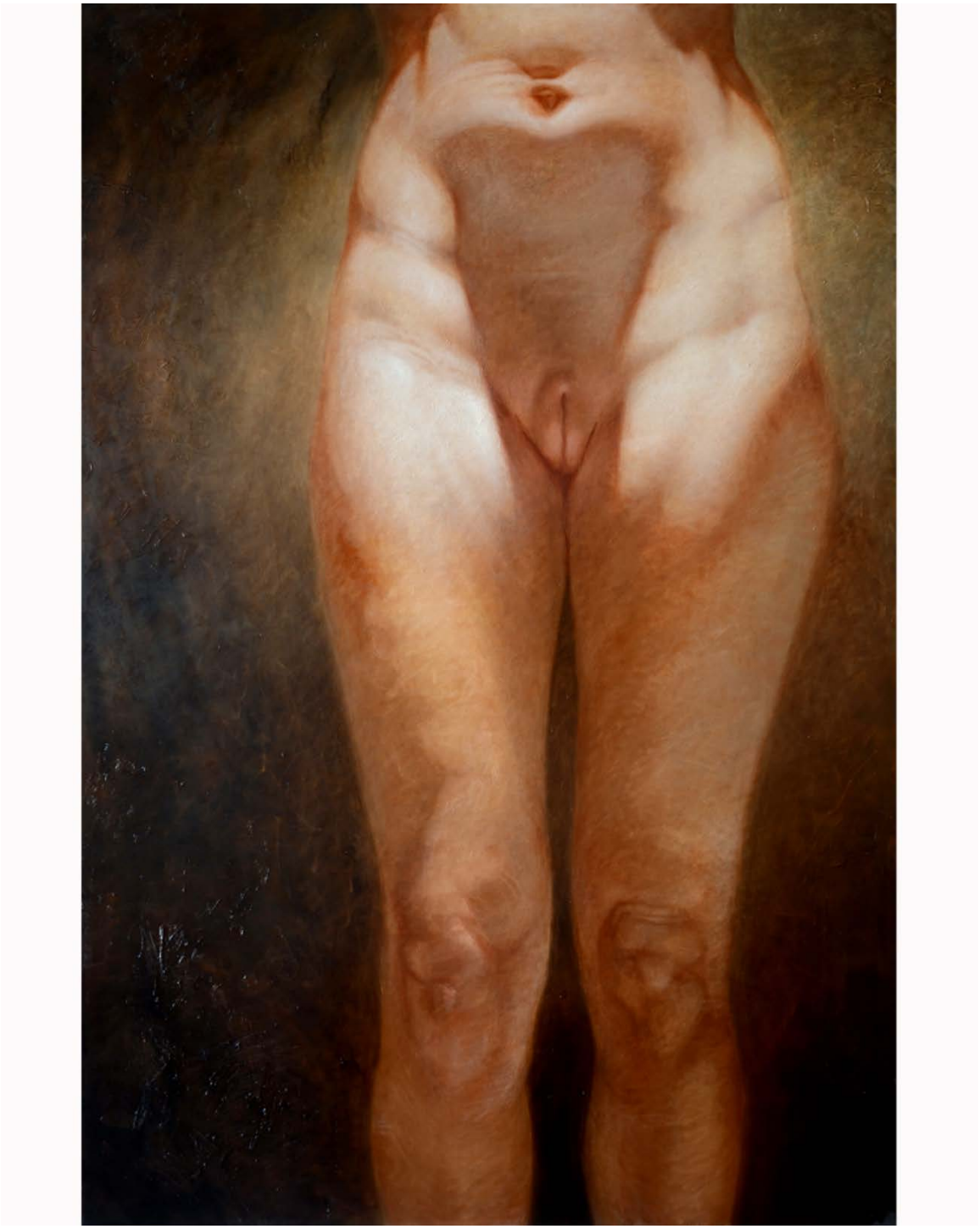


Image 10 – #6 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

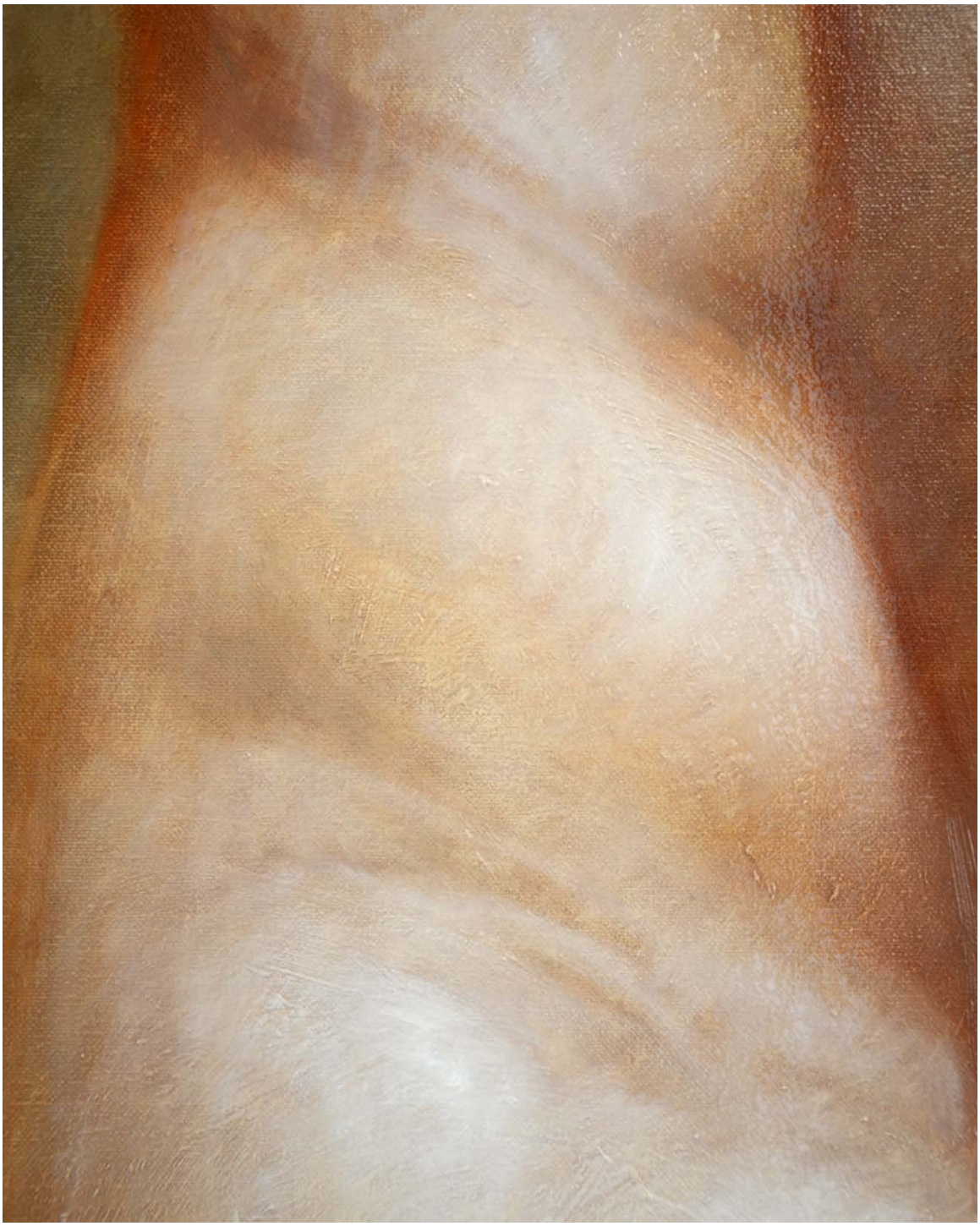


Image 11 – Detail #6 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

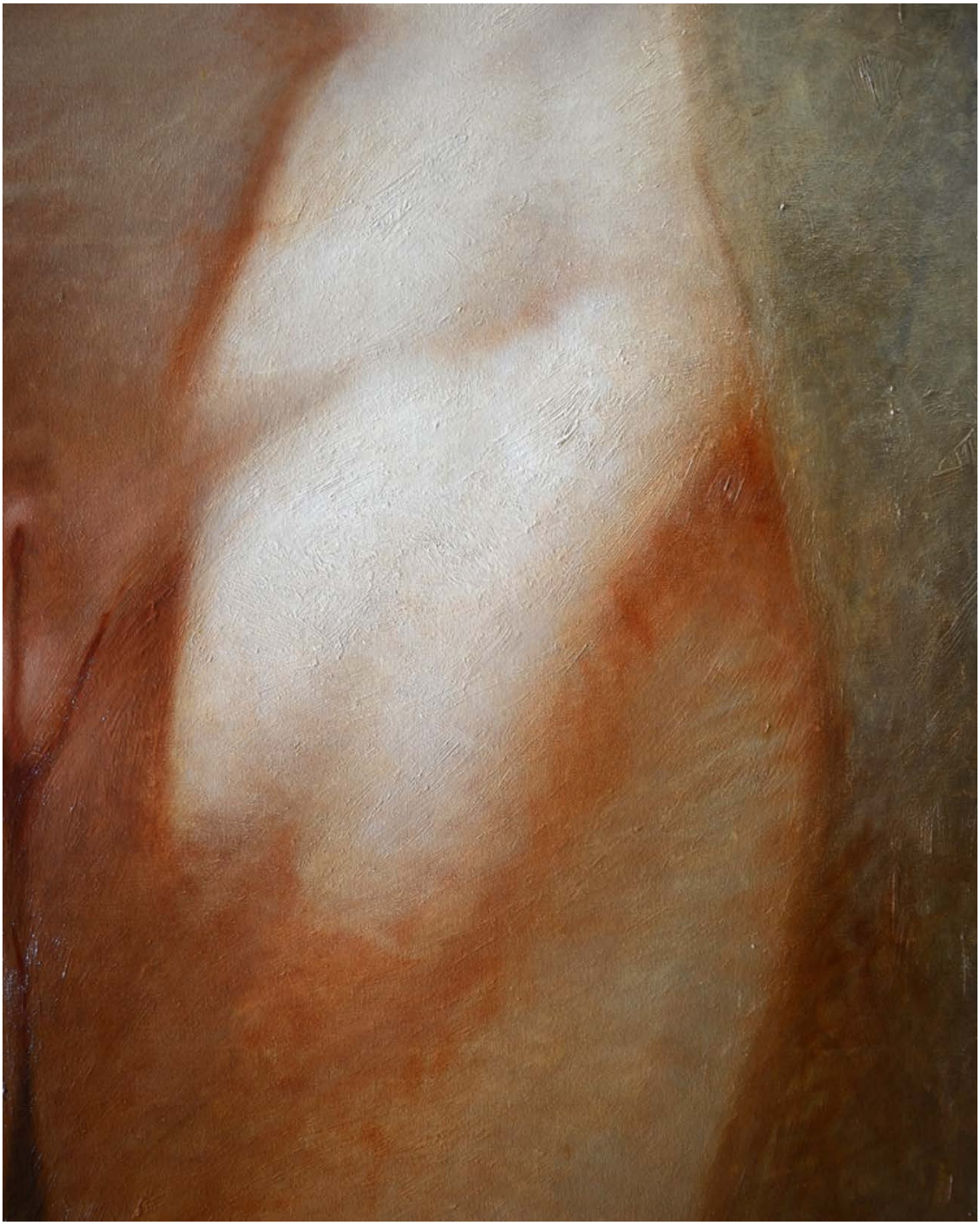


Image 12 – Detail #6 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

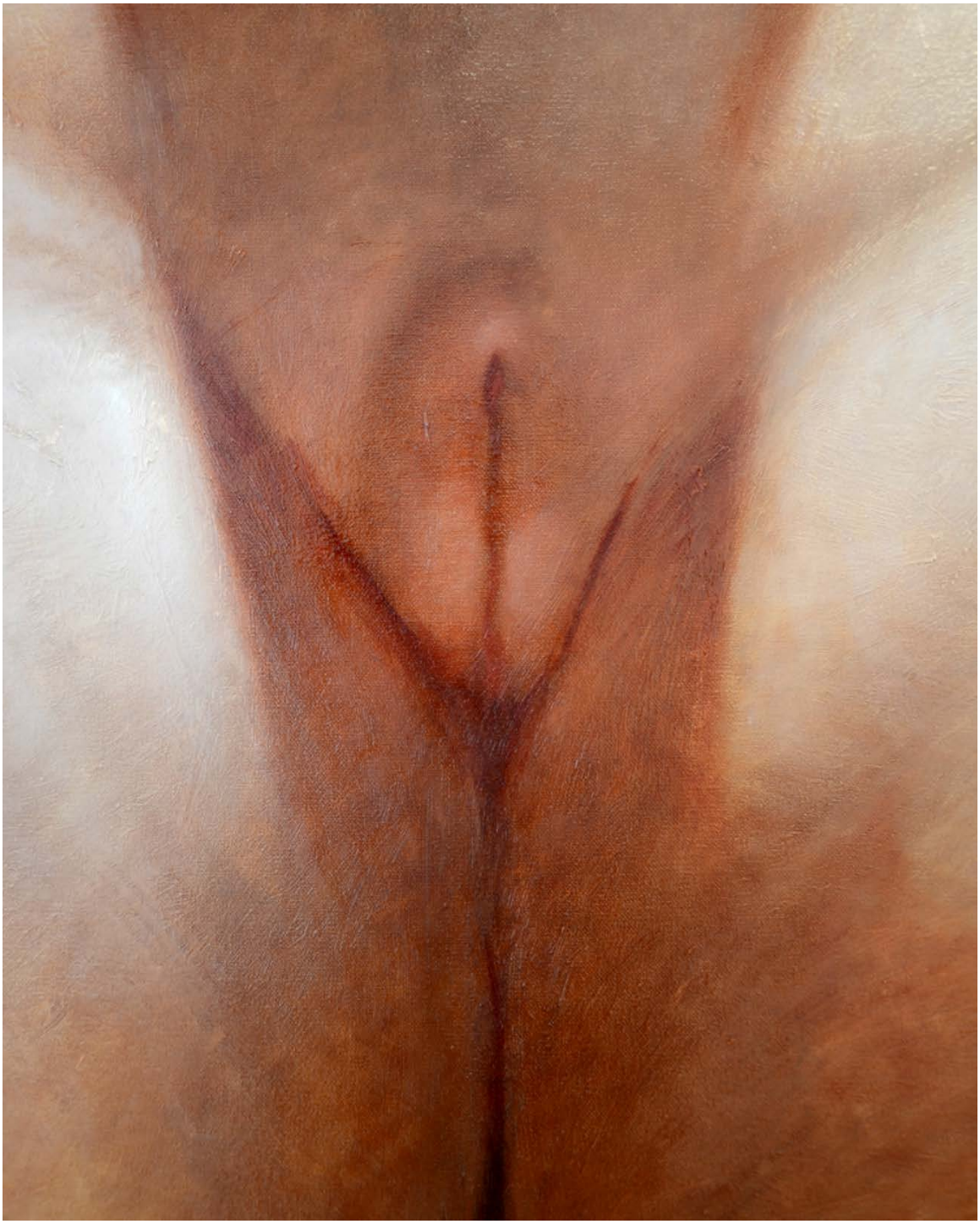


Image 13 – Detail #6 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

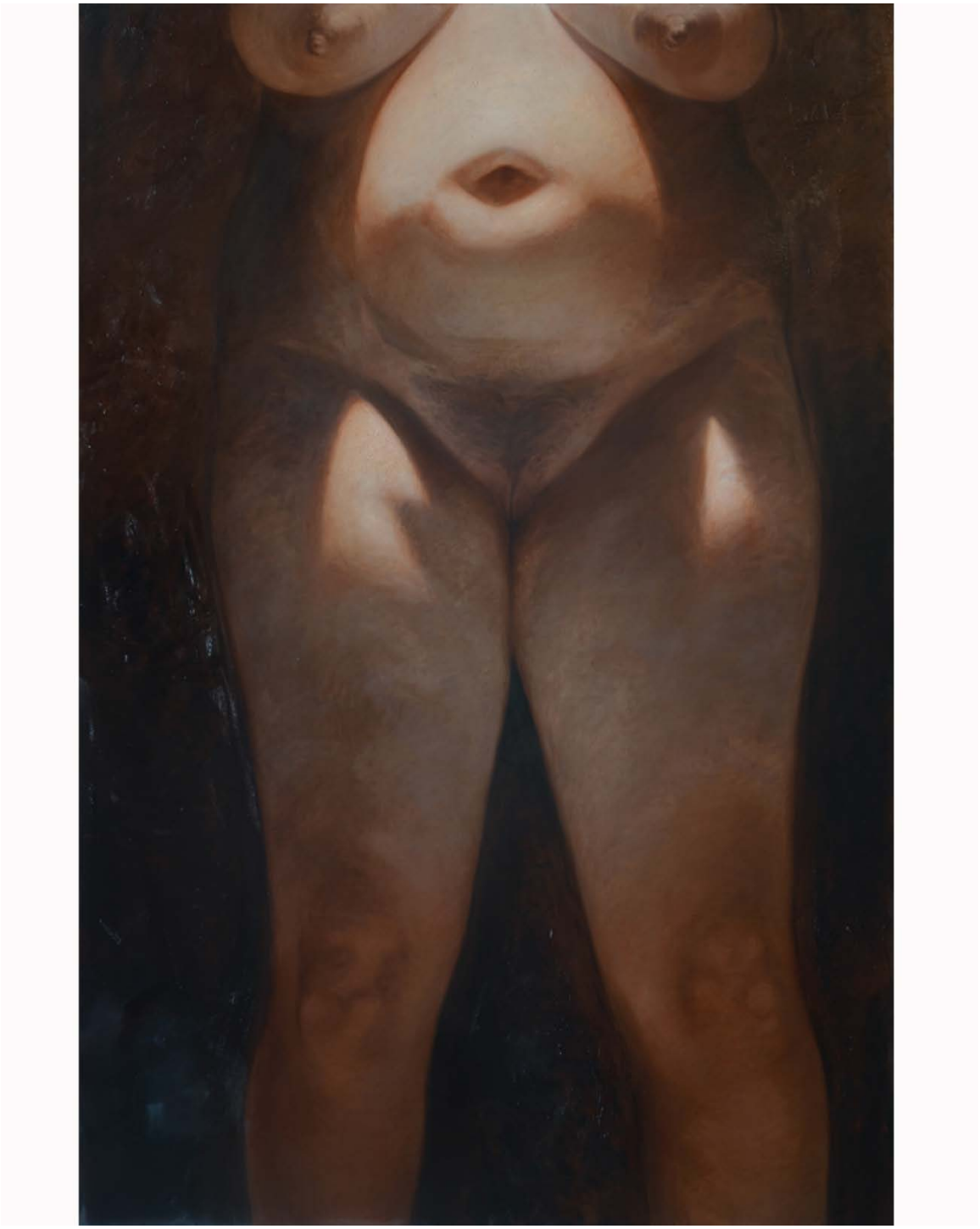


Image 14 – #8 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

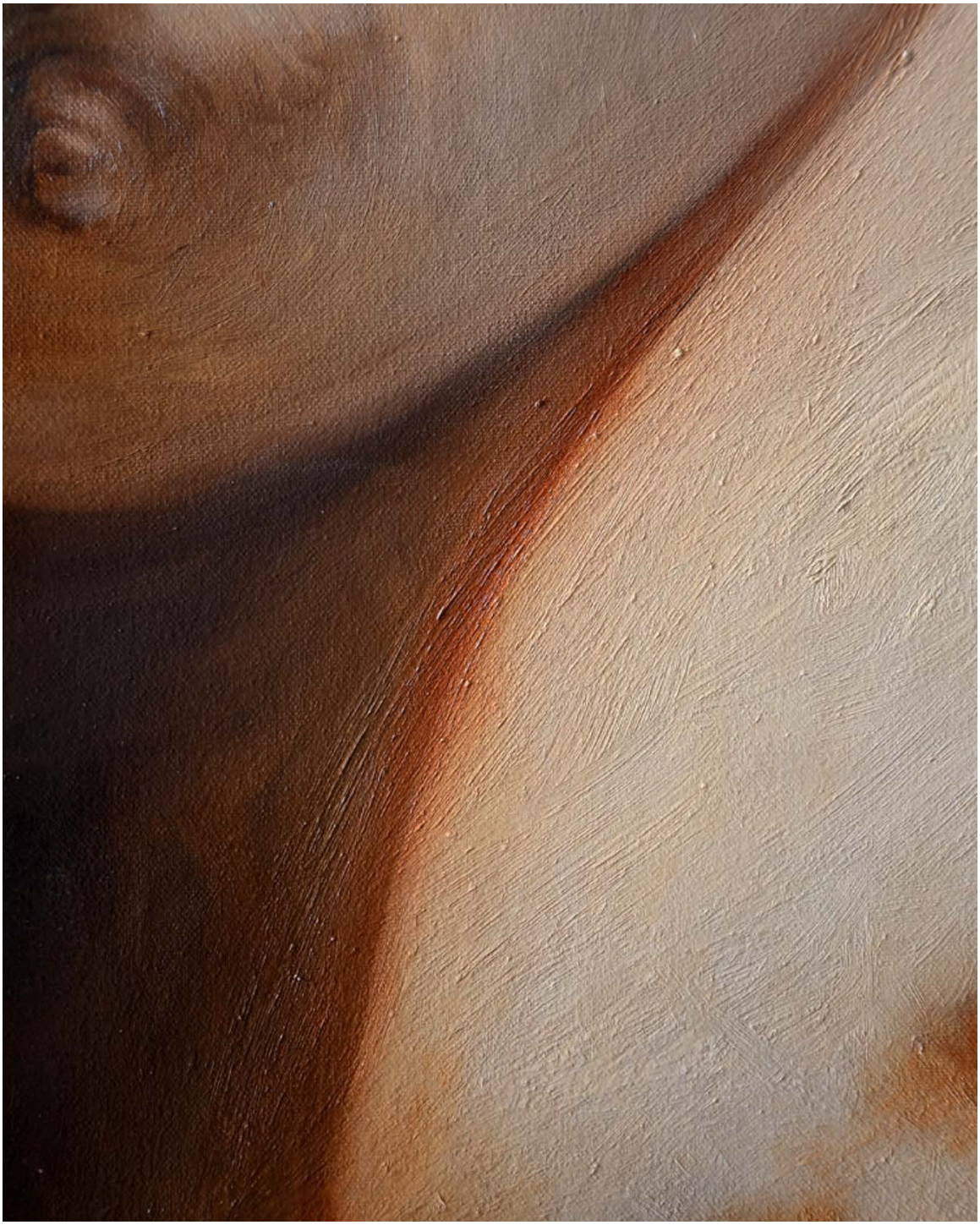


Image 15 – Detail #8 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

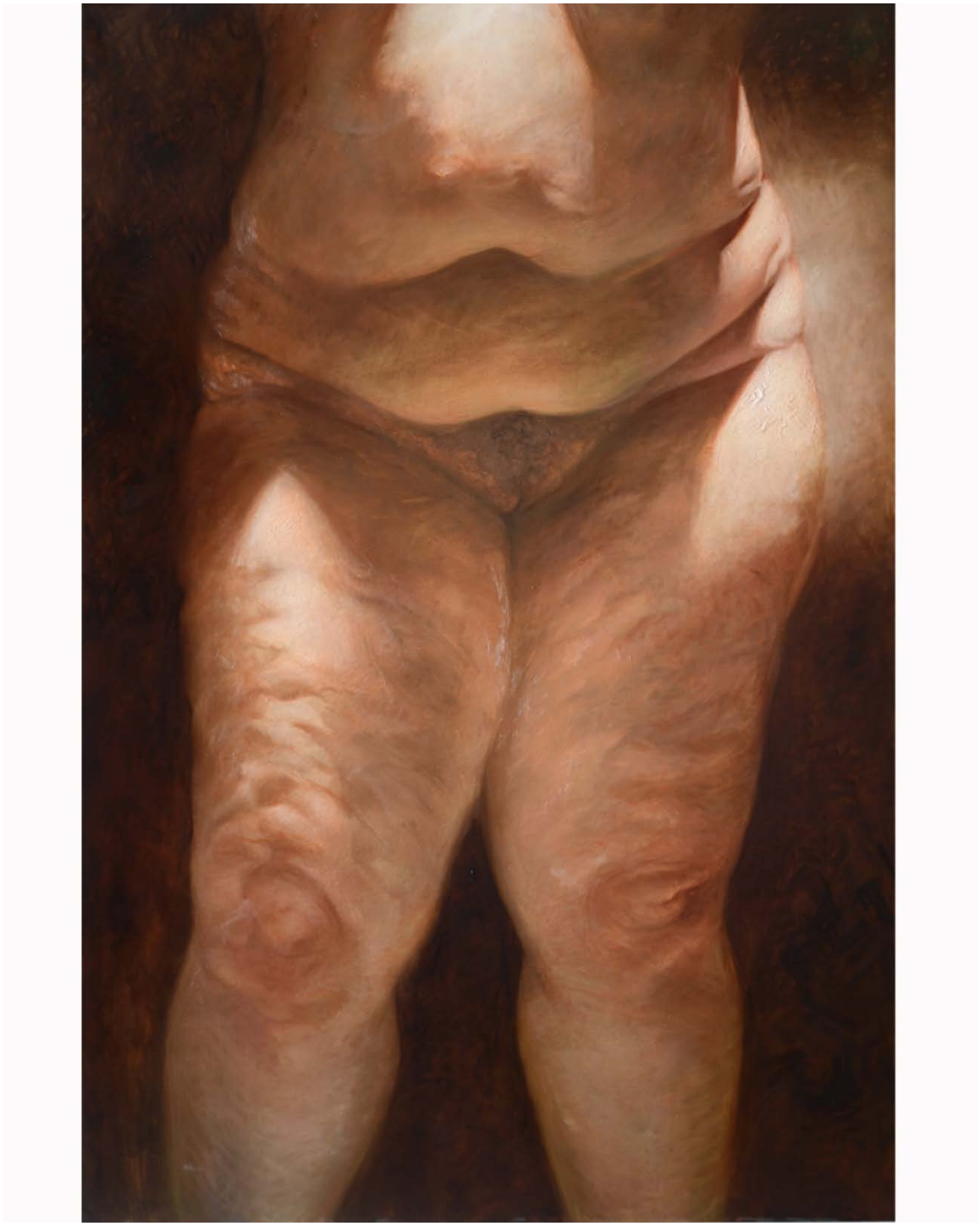


Image 16 – #10 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

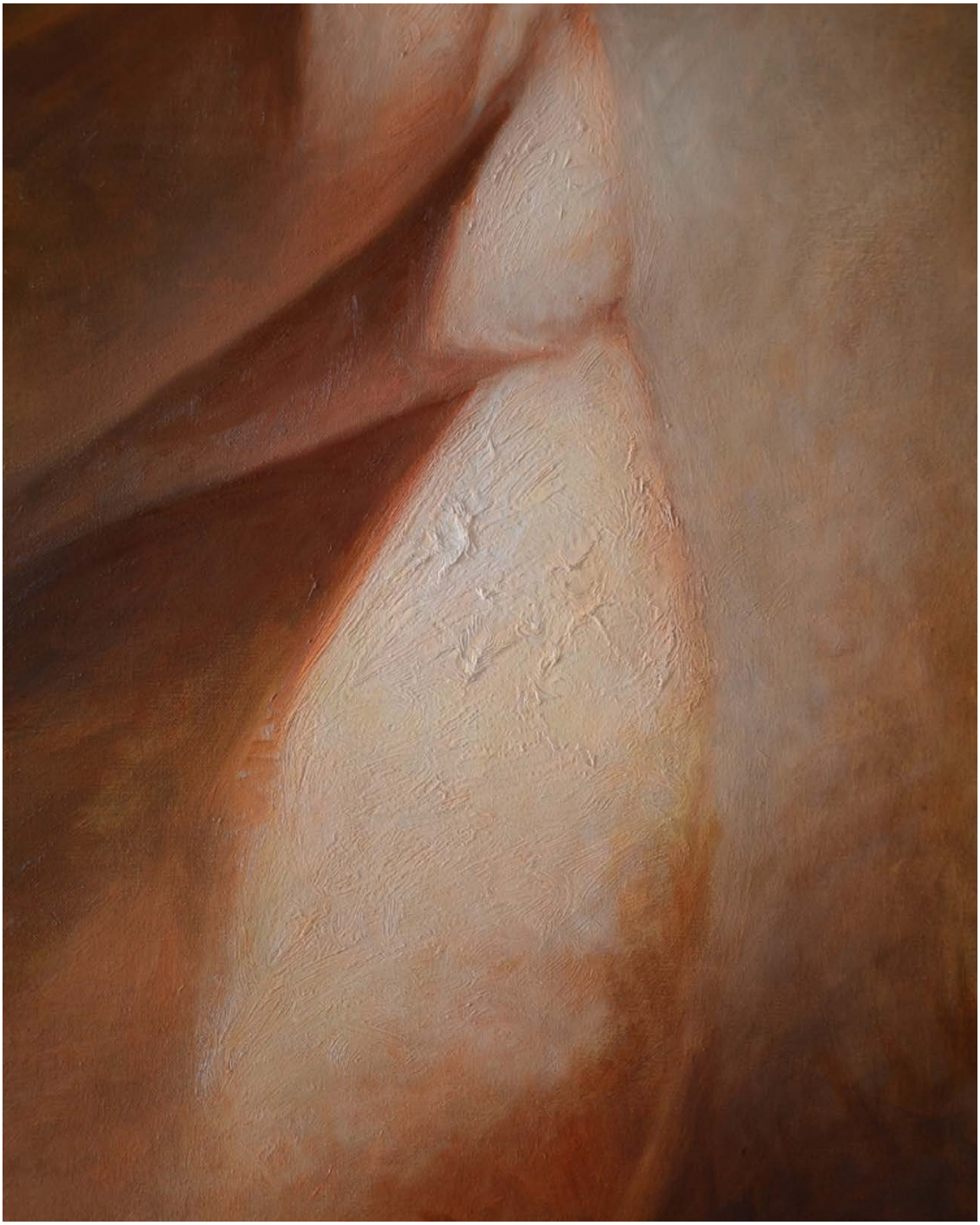


Image 17 – Detail #10 oil on canvas 48” x 72”



Image 18 – Detail #10 oil on canvas 48” x 72”



Image 19 – #11 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

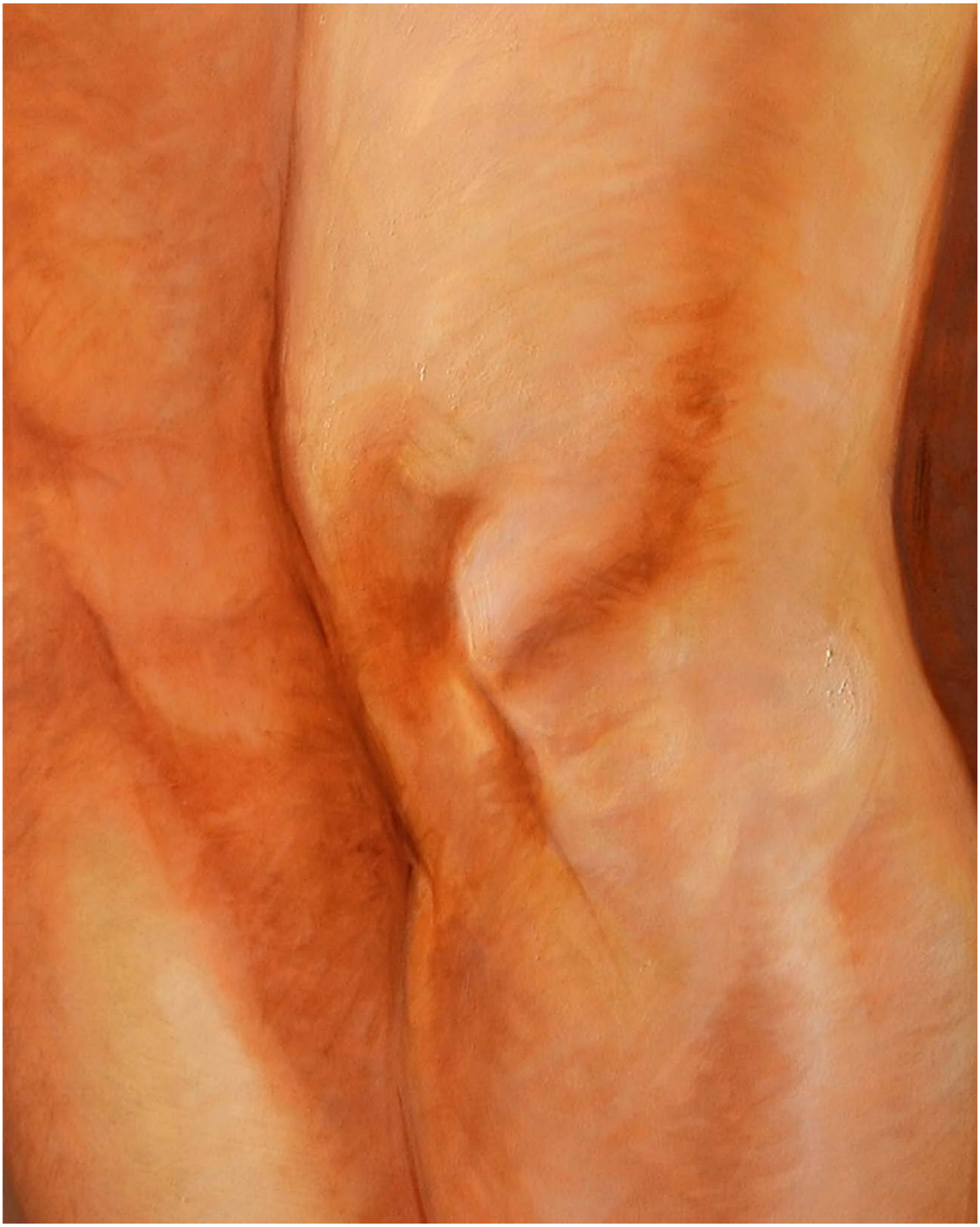


Image 20 – Detail #11 oil on canvas 48” x 72”



Image 21 – #12 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

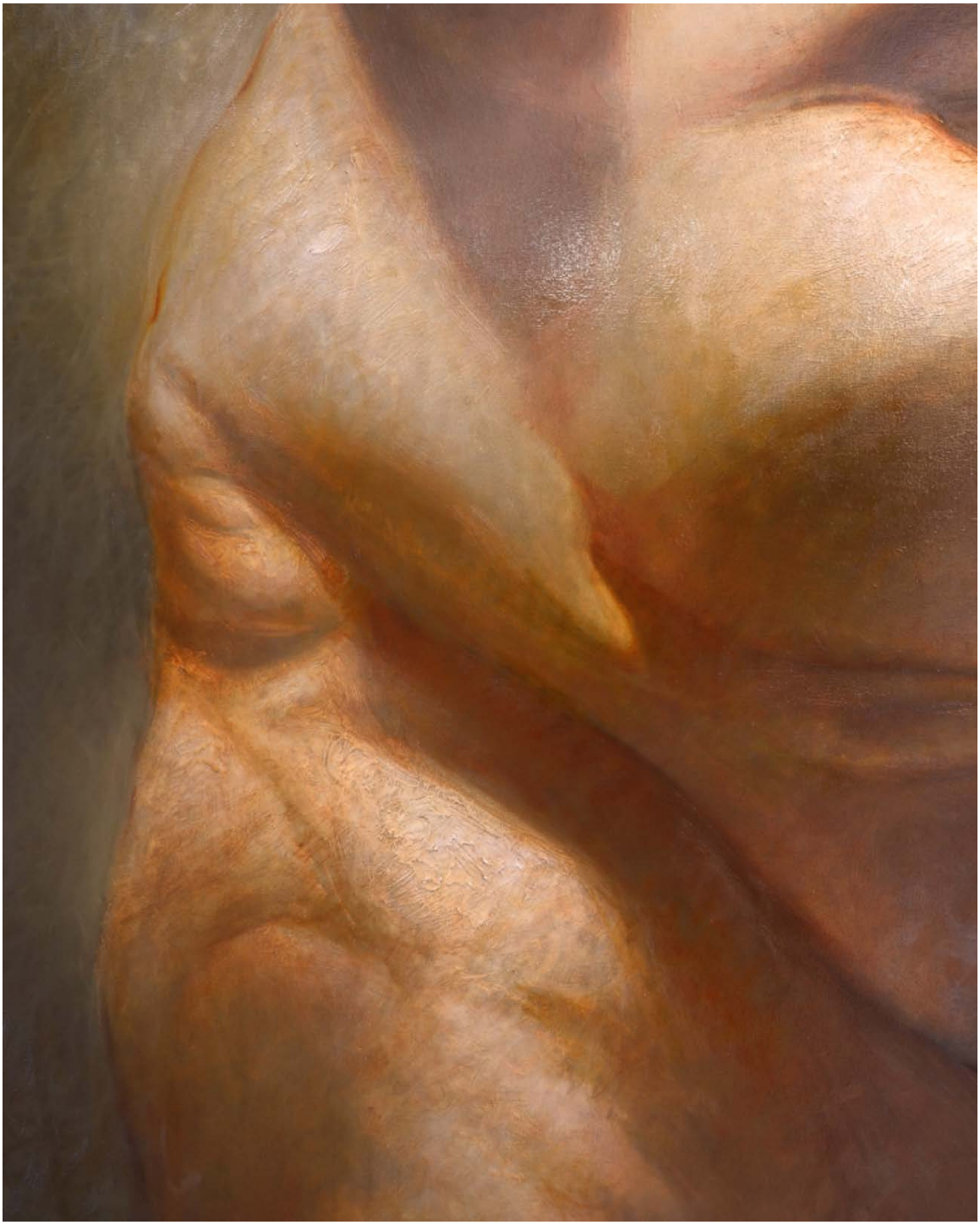


Image 22 – Detail #12 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

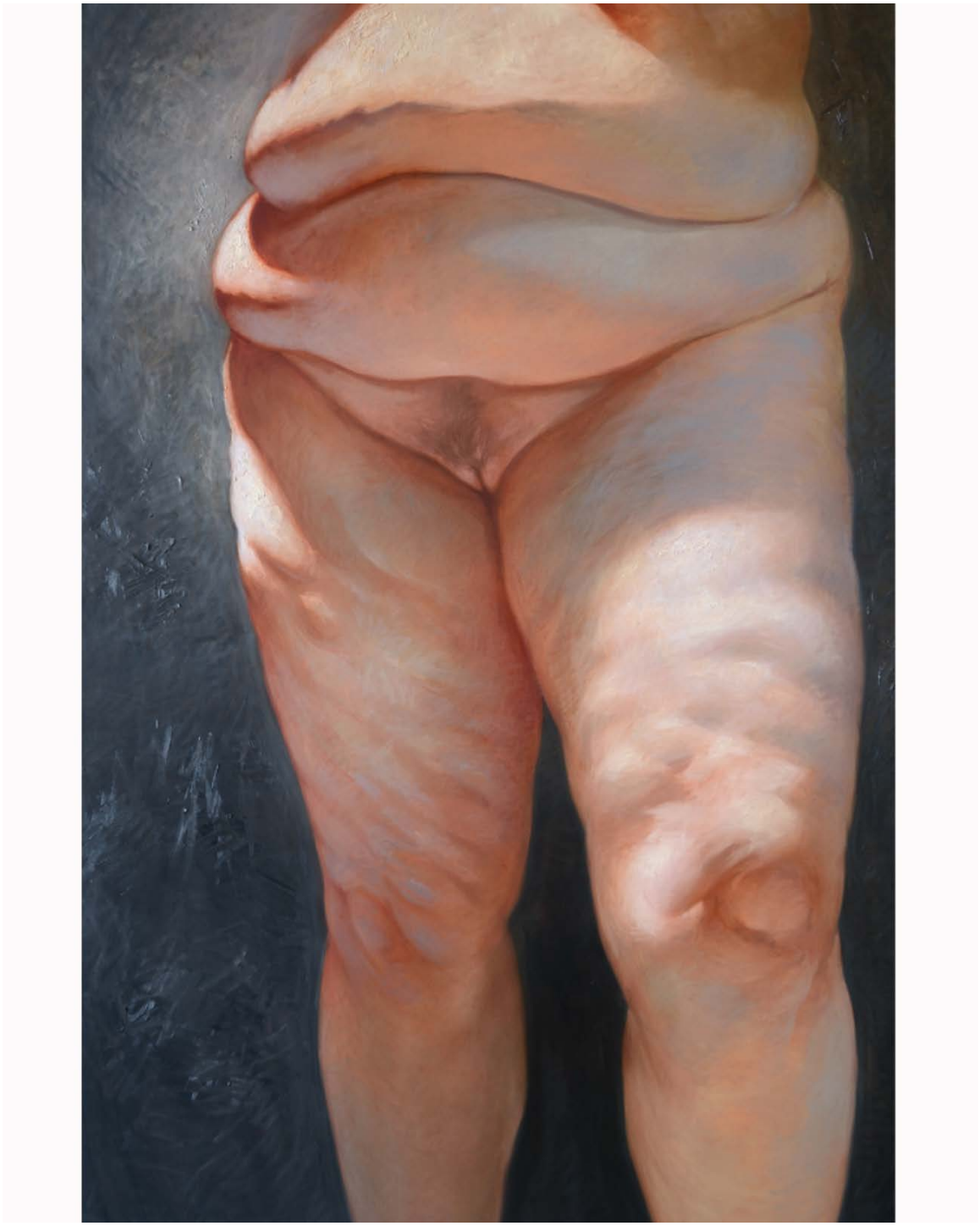


Image 23 – #16 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

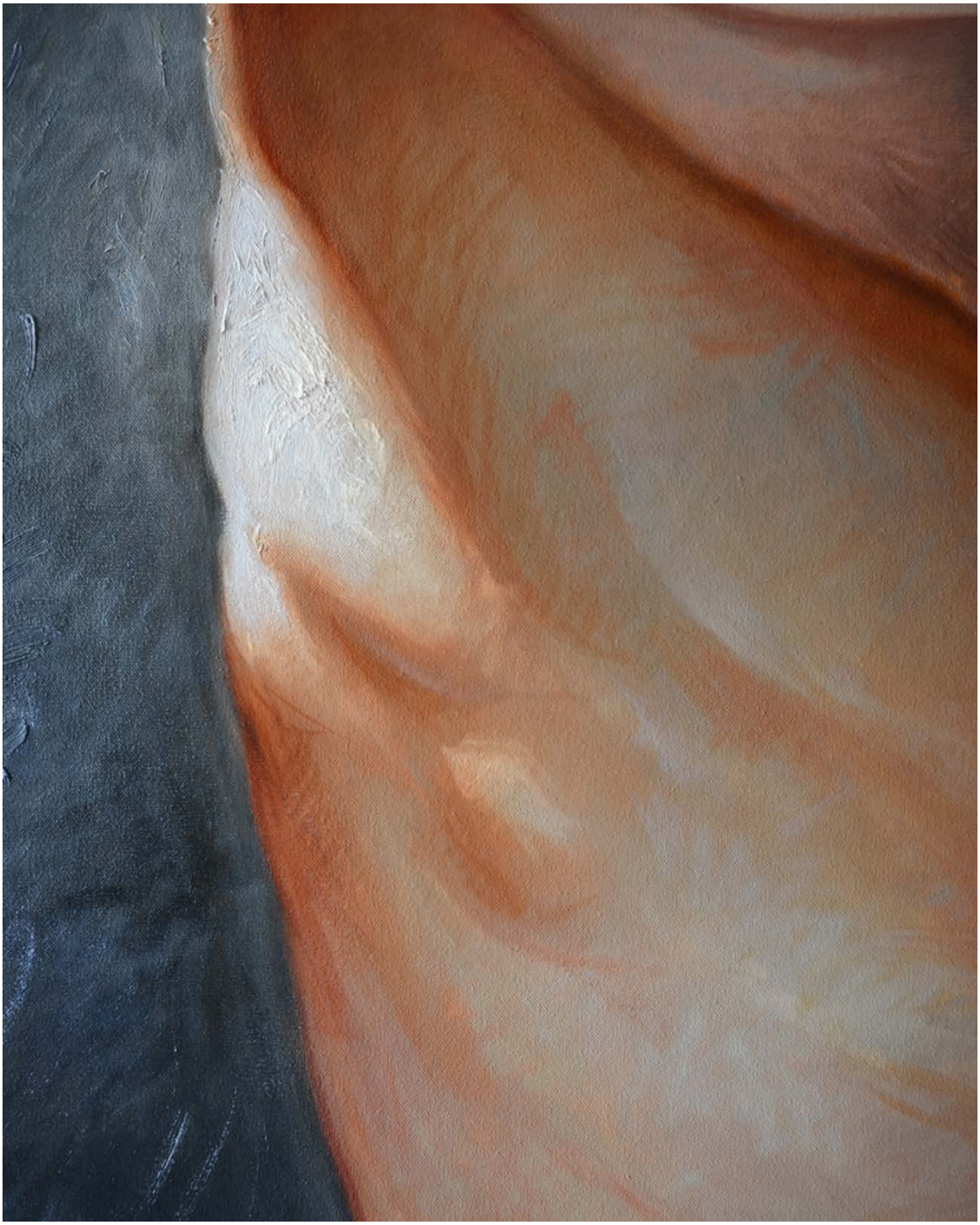


Image 24 – Detail #16 oil on canvas 48” x 72”

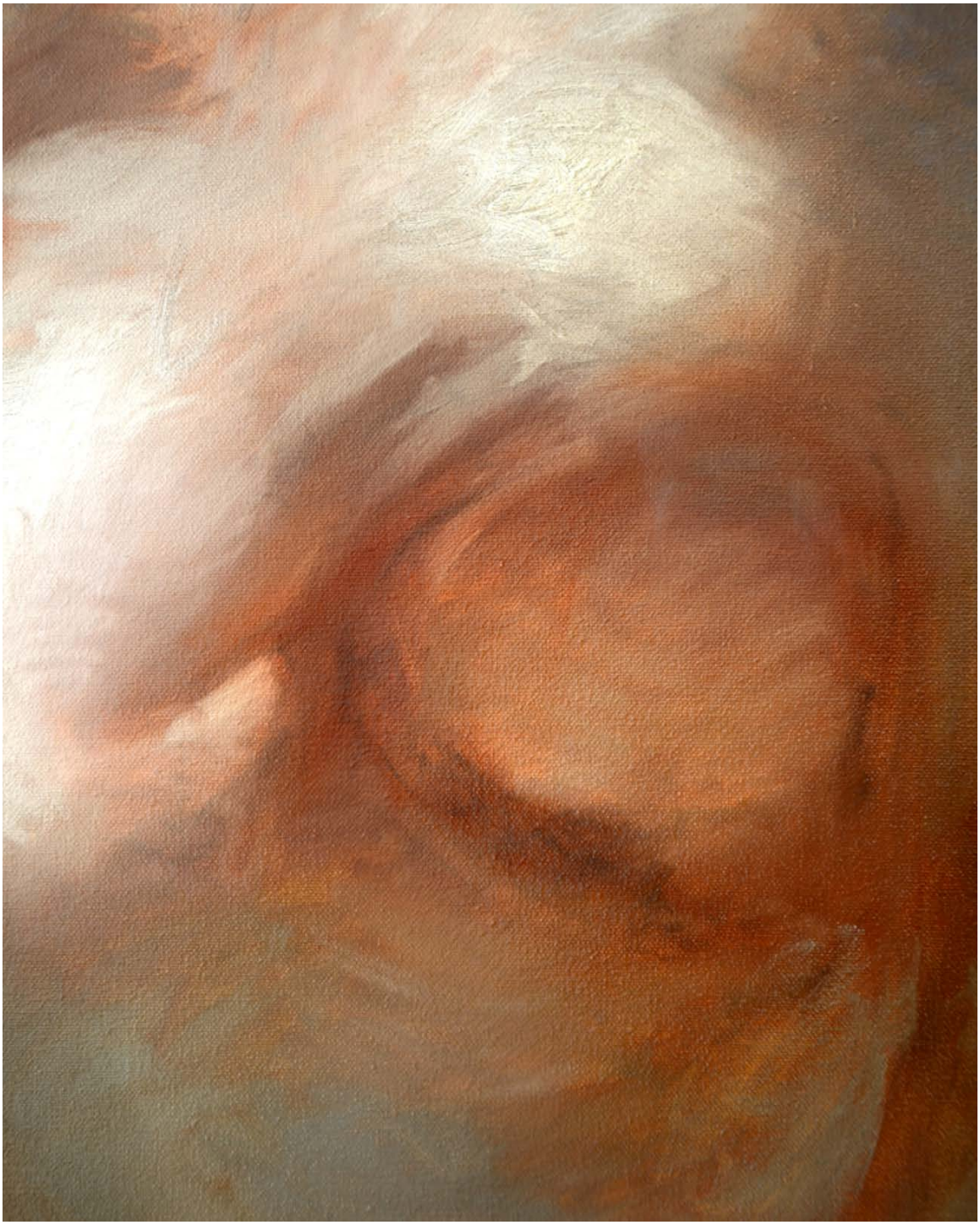


Image 25 – Detail #16 oil on canvas 48” x 72”



Image 26 – Anatomy studies, charcoal pencil on paper 9” x 12”

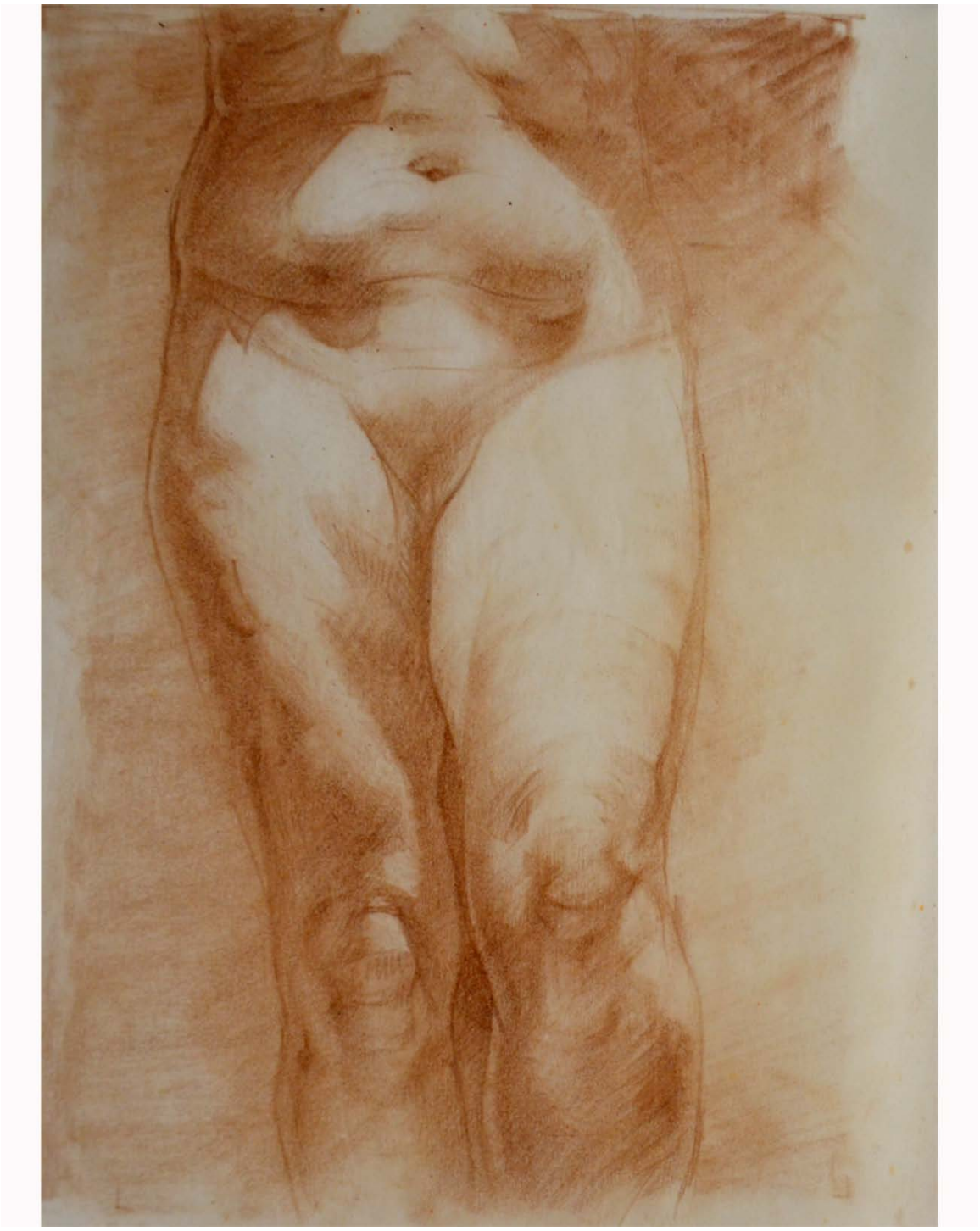


Image 27 – #7 Anatomy study, charcoal pencil on paper 9” x 12”

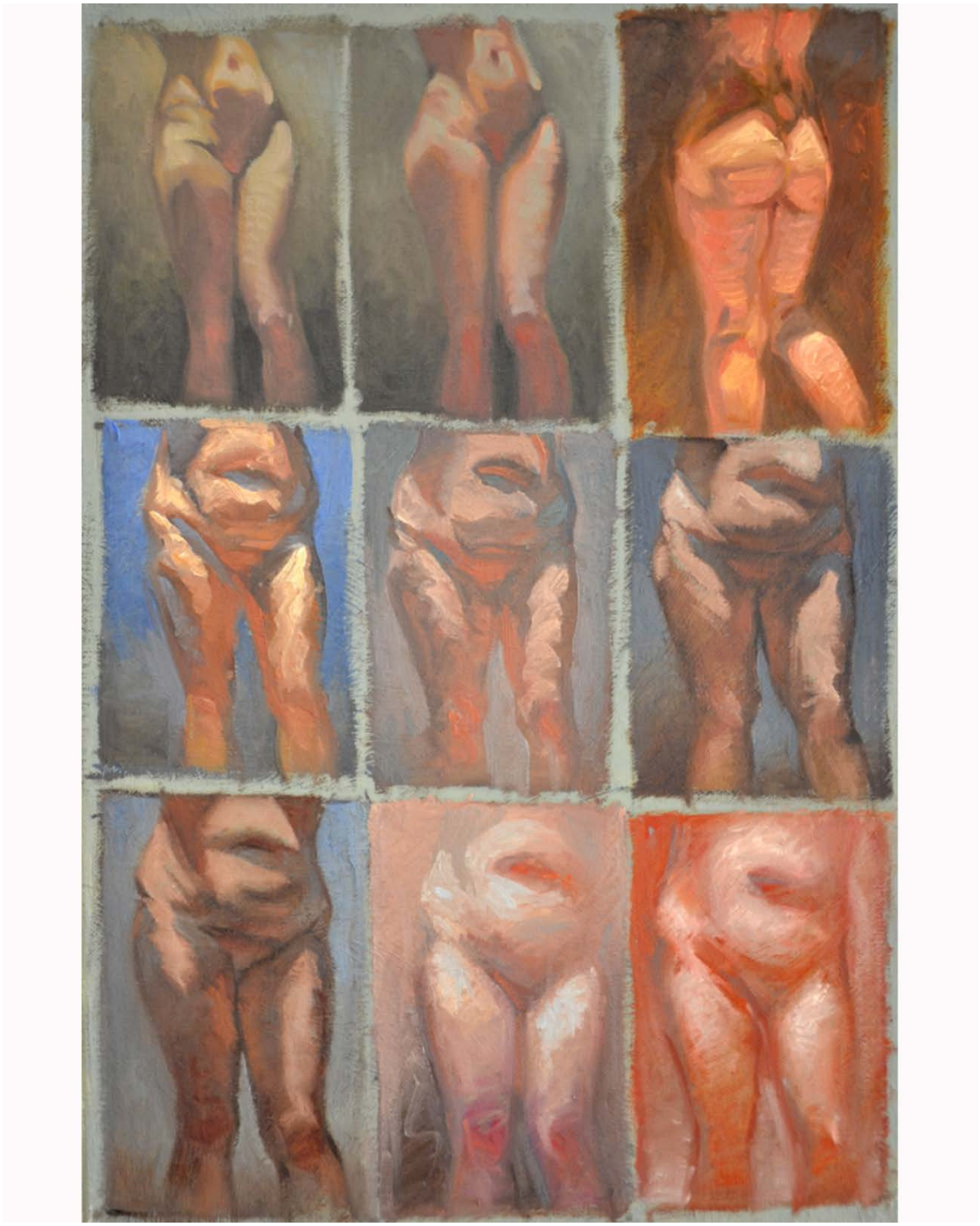


Image 28 – Color studies, oil on canvas 16” x 24”

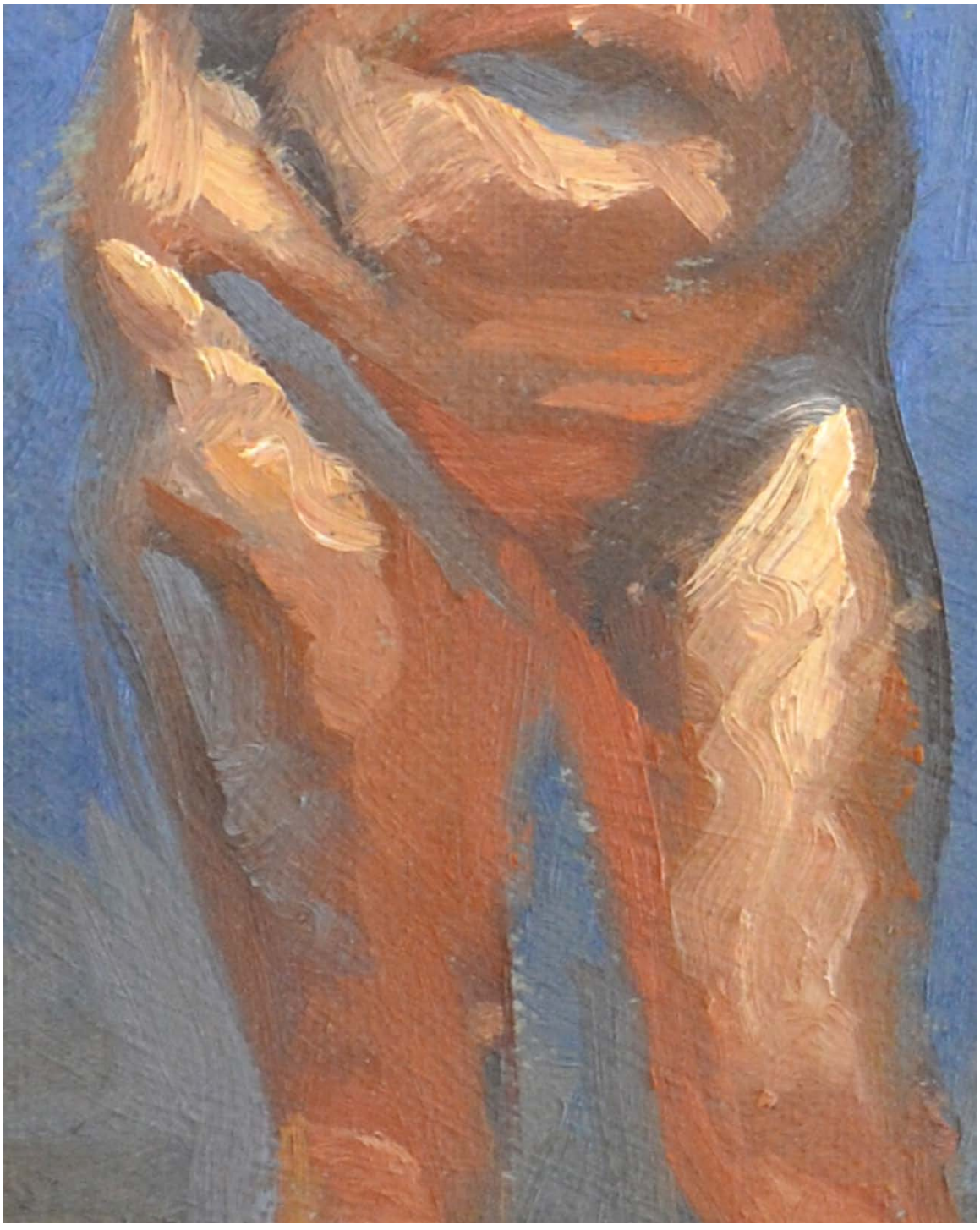


Image 29 – Detail color studies, oil on canvas 16” x 24”