

BACKBONE
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by
BAYU
UTOMO
RADJIKIN



BACKBONE

The Backbone is the structure that keeps the body standing. It carries weight and protects what is vulnerable. Yet beyond its physical function lies an unseen force—the strength that holds a life, a family, and a society together.

In my recent figurative works, I use Backbone as a metaphor for the man: the one expected to carry, to provide and to remain standing. His body becomes a site where responsibility accumulates and every vertebra holds a fragment of memory, struggle and sacrifice.

The Backbone becomes both pillar and wound, anchor and burden—a silent architecture of survival.

- Bayu Utomo Radjikin

26 September - 17 October 2026
G13 Gallery, Kuala Lumpur

FOREWORD

In 2017, G13 Gallery had the pleasure of presenting Gejolak, a solo exhibition by Bayu Utomo Radjikin. Nine years later, we are proud to welcome him back with Backbone. This occasion marks a meaningful continuation of our relationship and an opportunity to share the latest work of an artist whose commitment to his practice continues to inspire us.

What we deeply admire about Bayu is his determination to keep creating and challenging himself. Throughout his artistic journey, he has continued to refine his visual language, explore new possibilities, and engage more deeply with the questions that shape his life and practice. This enduring spirit of inquiry gives us much to look forward to with each new body of work.

In Backbone, the spine becomes a powerful metaphor for strength, responsibility, and sacrifice. Through the human figure, Bayu invites us to consider the burdens we carry, the resilience required to remain standing, and the vulnerability that often lies beneath an appearance of strength. These concerns speak to shared experiences of caring for others, providing support, and navigating the uncertainties of everyday life.

As a gallery, we believe in supporting artists as their practices evolve, giving space to both their achievements and their continued explorations. Hosting Backbone is a privilege, and we are delighted to bring these works to our audiences. Bayu's contributions, through his own art and his sustained involvement in nurturing the wider artistic community, make this collaboration especially meaningful to us.

We extend our sincere appreciation to Bayu for placing his trust in G13 Gallery once again. We also thank everyone who has contributed to this exhibition, alongside the collectors, friends, and art enthusiasts whose continued support makes such presentations possible.

We hope Backbone offers an opportunity to engage more closely with Bayu's work and to reflect on the strength that allows us to stand, persevere, and support one another.

Kenny Teng,
G13 Gallery



ARCHITECTURE OF SURVIVAL

The visit to Bayu’s studio on that hot, humid afternoon was my first. Despite knowing Bayu for over a decade, I have never been to his studio. The usual meet-ups would either be at one of the exhibitions he was organising (as the founder of HOM art Trans, or at one of the exhibition launches in the busy art scene of Kuala Lumpur. Bayu is a visible figure in the Malaysian art world, and can be considered one of its elder statesmen by now.

Scattered on one side of his studio in Denai Alam are some paintings from his upcoming solo exhibition – the main purpose of my visit. Some were already completed while some were perhaps, on the same trajectory and needing that final spark of inspiration. In times like these, usually that final push comes in the form of a ‘deadline’ rather than the ideal ‘inspiration’. Hence my mind floated towards my own assignment, “What would be mine?”

At first glance, the canvases were filled with the male figure, mostly faceless and in various anatomical poses. As we continued catching up and chatting about our respective lives, I noticed - from repeatedly glancing around – that most of the anatomical paintings revolved around the spine or the backbone. “So you moved with the whole family here? Is your wife working too?” Bayu asked like many others. “She wants to rest after many years of lecturing and for now, prefers to spend more time with the kids.” I replied. We then continued chatting about the usual topics – juggling family life while maintaining our own respective professional practices, amidst the increasingly hectic local art scene.

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(Bayu Utomo Radjikin, September 2026)

Bayu’s concluding line in his artist statement that he shared above, hit quite differently this time. As a father who just uprooted his whole family from their settled existence in Singapore to move to Kuala Lumpur, I have encountered much cynicism from industry peers back home. From ‘currency conversion’ jokes to questions about the art scene here, I realised that most of these sentiments were coming from concerns about the unfamiliar, assimilating into a new environment or even the unpredictability of a much larger art scene here. In the past weeks, the anatomical images from Bayu’s canvases begin to gradually make sense to me.

Bayu’s solo appearance at HARTA last year titled ‘Resonance of Souls’, was already hinting at a more introspective approach towards his practice. While the figures were similarly faceless, the protagonist was mostly depicted in full glory – male figures prancing around the canvas, either in jubilance or contemplation. For this year’s edition titled ‘Backbone’, Bayu has directed our gaze to be more focused. There is almost an urgency in his plea for us to pause and encounter these images with more intent.

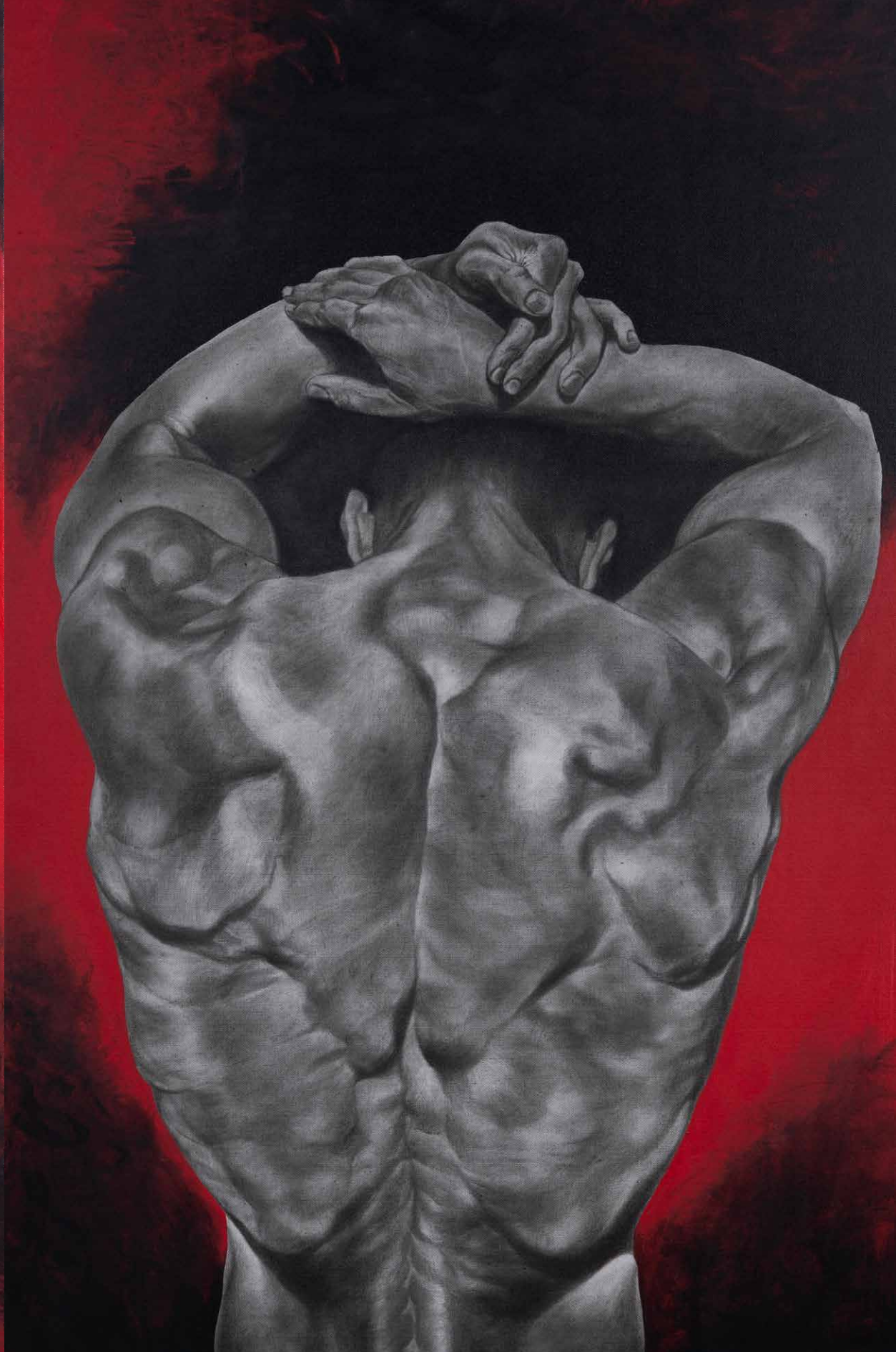
The ferocity of ‘Bujang Berani’ in the 1990s has led us to the meditative bodies of the 2000s. While Bayu’s protagonists continue to lead us across the arc of his artistic development, he has never really been one to reveal much about his deepest pre-occupations. Perhaps it his way of returning the agency to this audience? In a world that is increasingly saturated with images and information, I recall his own words from his solo exhibition in 2001 titled ‘Diri: Bayu Utomo Radjikin’:

“Setiap siri tersebut mewakili sebuah perjalanan seni yang mencari bentukannya sendiri. Dan sebagai pengkarya saya tidak boleh menghalang bentukan ini dari mencabang mengikut rasa hati.”

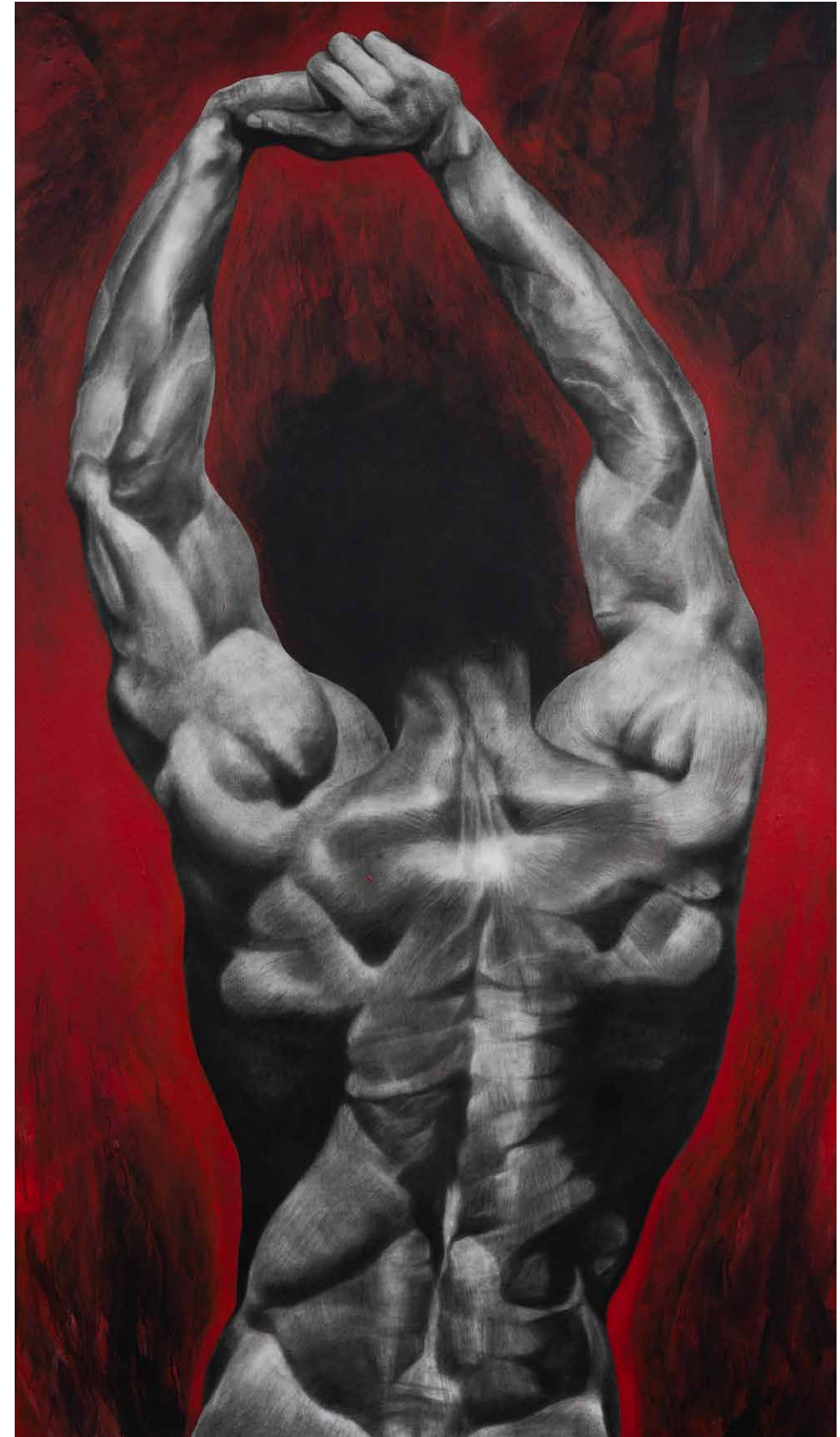
However ‘Backbone’ might also be seen in a more biographical light as mentioned by Bayu in his current statement above: ‘a metaphor for the man’. As a father with a young family, I cannot help myself but identify with the ‘struggle and sacrifice’ he mentioned. Of course it would be foolish to think solely about a father’s own sacrifice in a family unit but therein lies the ‘burden’ that Bayu is alluding to – shouldering not just his own burden but also the burden of other family members. The stereotype of the ‘Asian father’ might be outdated but unsurprisingly, social expectations still allude to the image of the stoic breadwinner as the chief provider of both material and financial security for the family.

Whether Bayu’s protagonists are juxtaposed in a contemplative stance (‘The Last Hope’) or against the deck of cards (‘Playing with Fate’), they are perhaps reflective of the uncertainties that we all encounter as fathers, mothers, even care-takers of loved ones. Sometimes, we tend to lose sight of our original direction as we negotiate our daily struggles with life and its challenges. Bayu’s ‘Backbone’ is thus a timely invitation for us to pause, reflect and ultimately renew our personal convictions against the backdrop of an increasingly uncertain and fragmented world.

Syed Muhammad Hafiz is a curator and art historian who has previously worked with museums in Singapore and contributed to various exhibitions and art publications around the region. He is currently based in Kuala Lumpur and works for LM Studio.



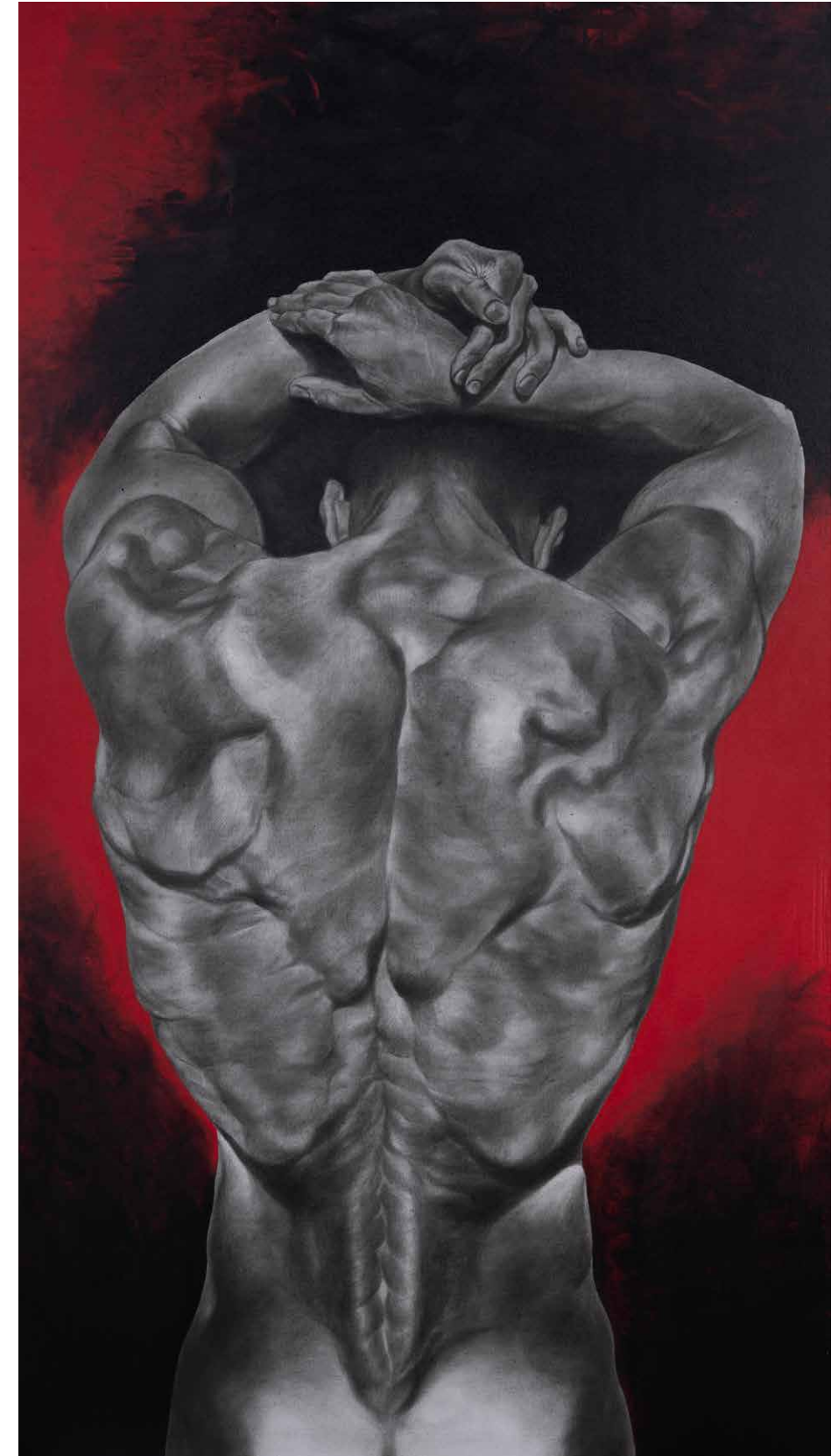
Backbone : Lelaki
Charcoal & acrylic on canvas 170 x 95 cm 2026

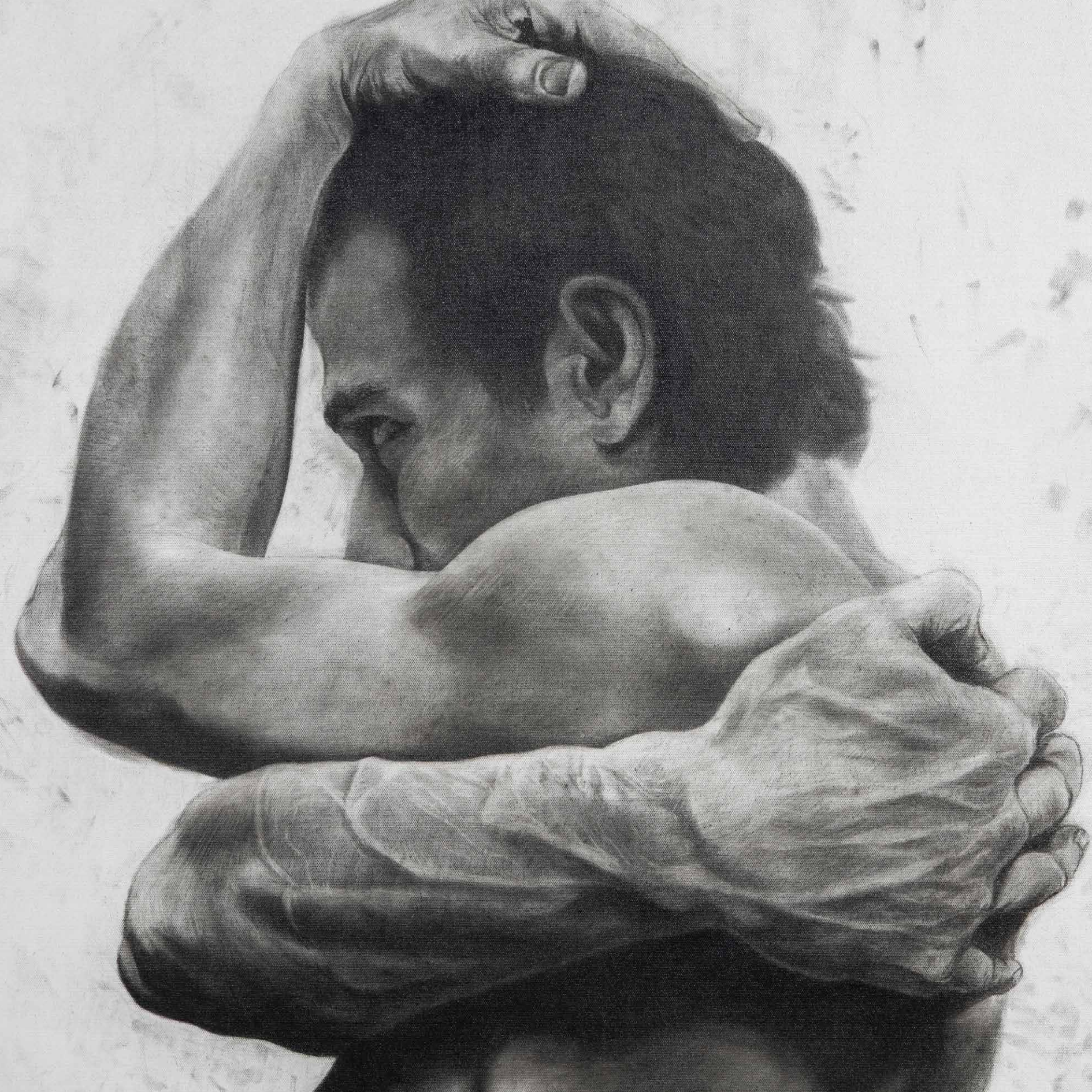


Backbone : Man
Charcoal & acrylic on canvas 170 x 95 cm 2026

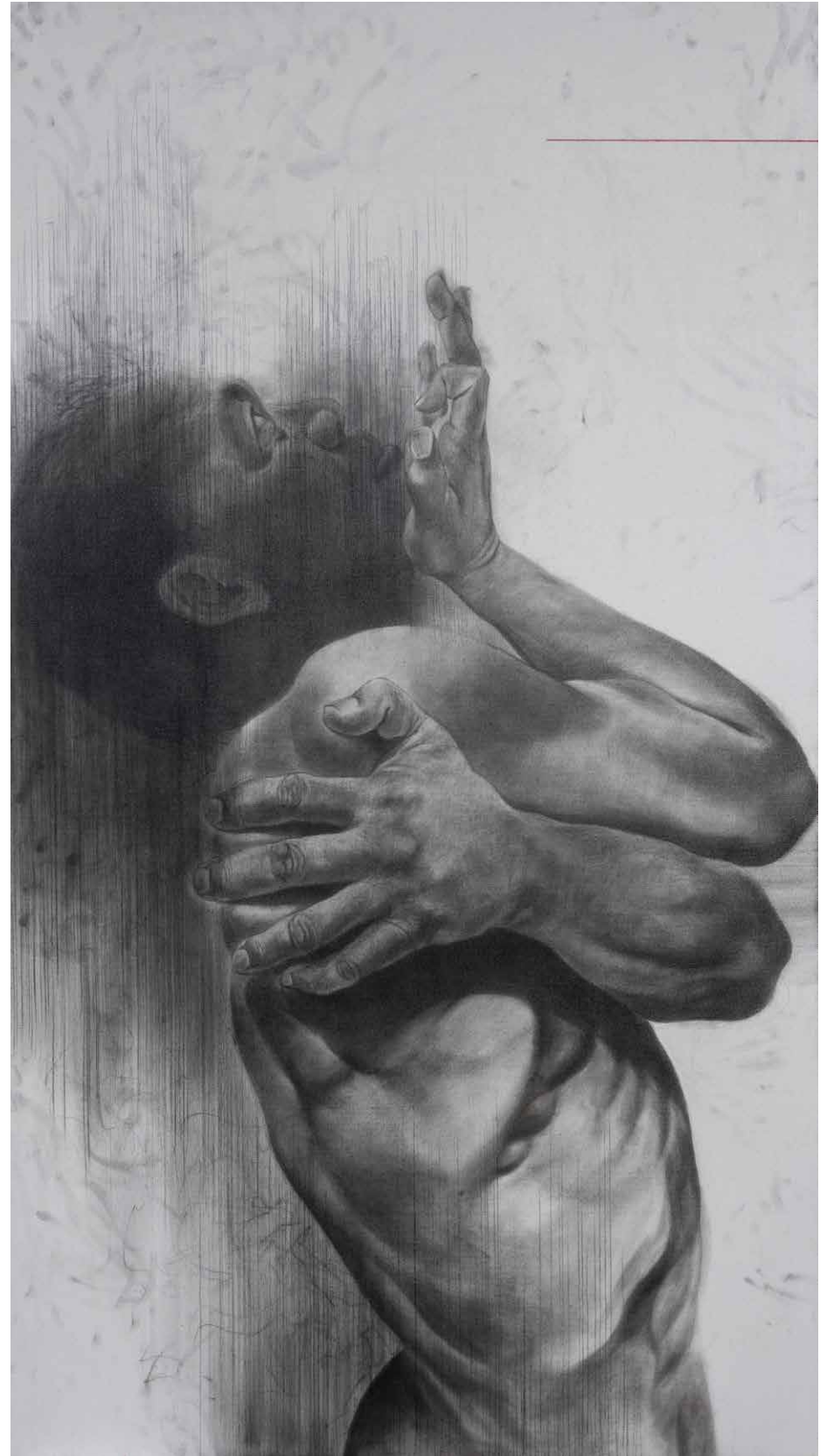


Backbone : Lanang
Charcoal & acrylic on canvas 170 x 95 cm 2026

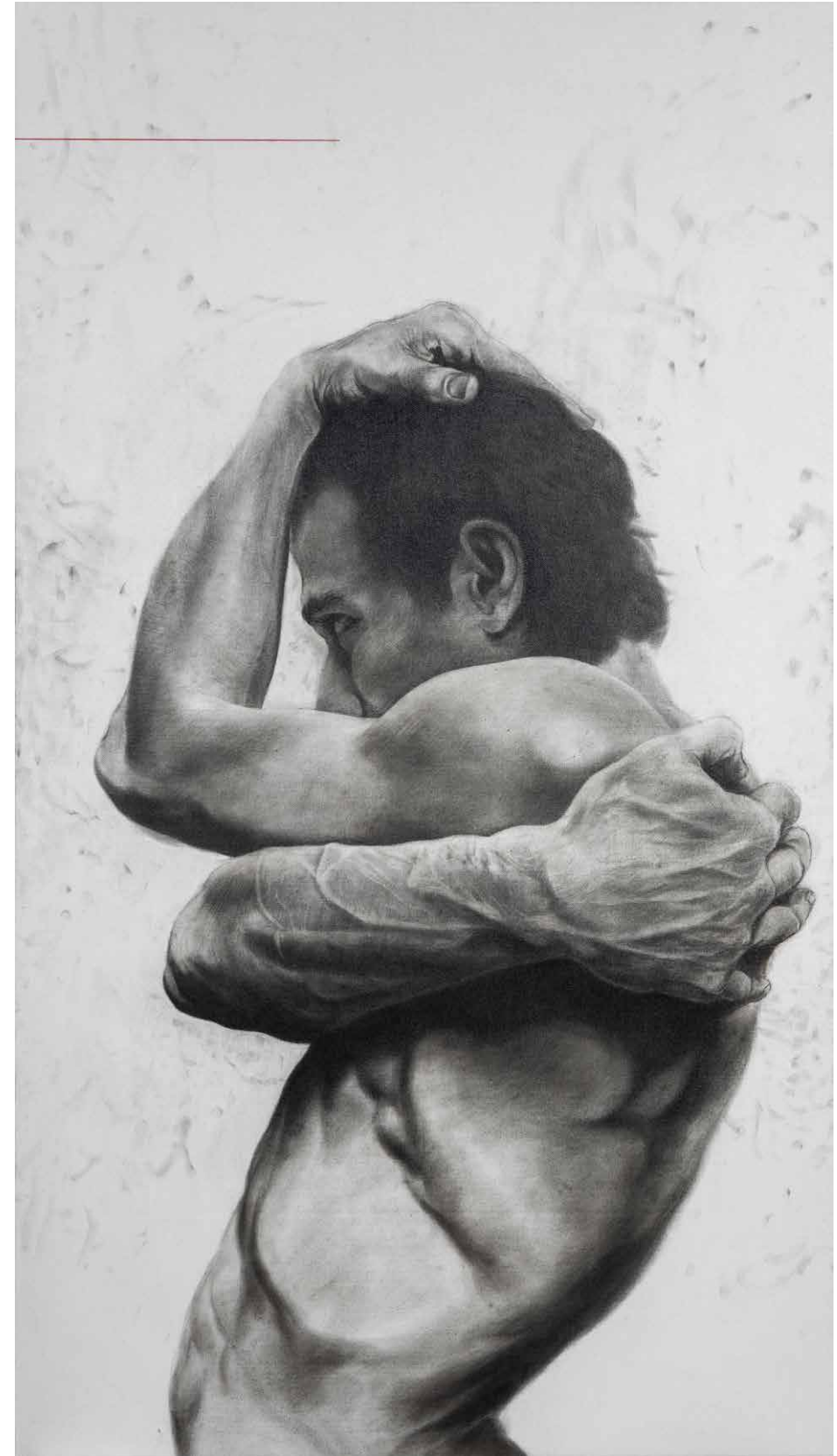




Backbone : Way Out
Charcoal & acrylic on canvas 170 x 95 cm 2026



Backbone : Introspective
Charcoal & acrylic on canvas 170 x 95 cm 2026

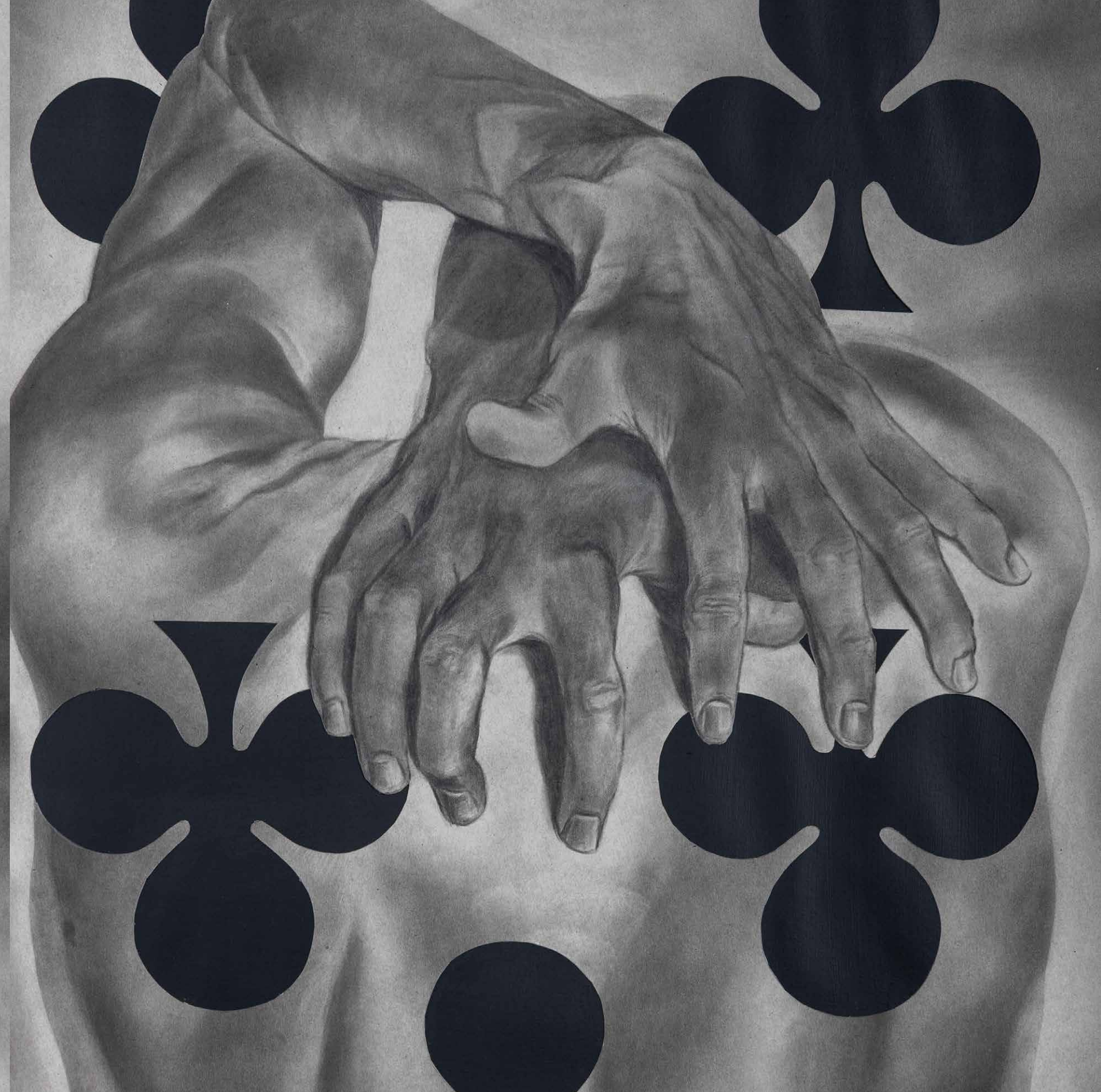
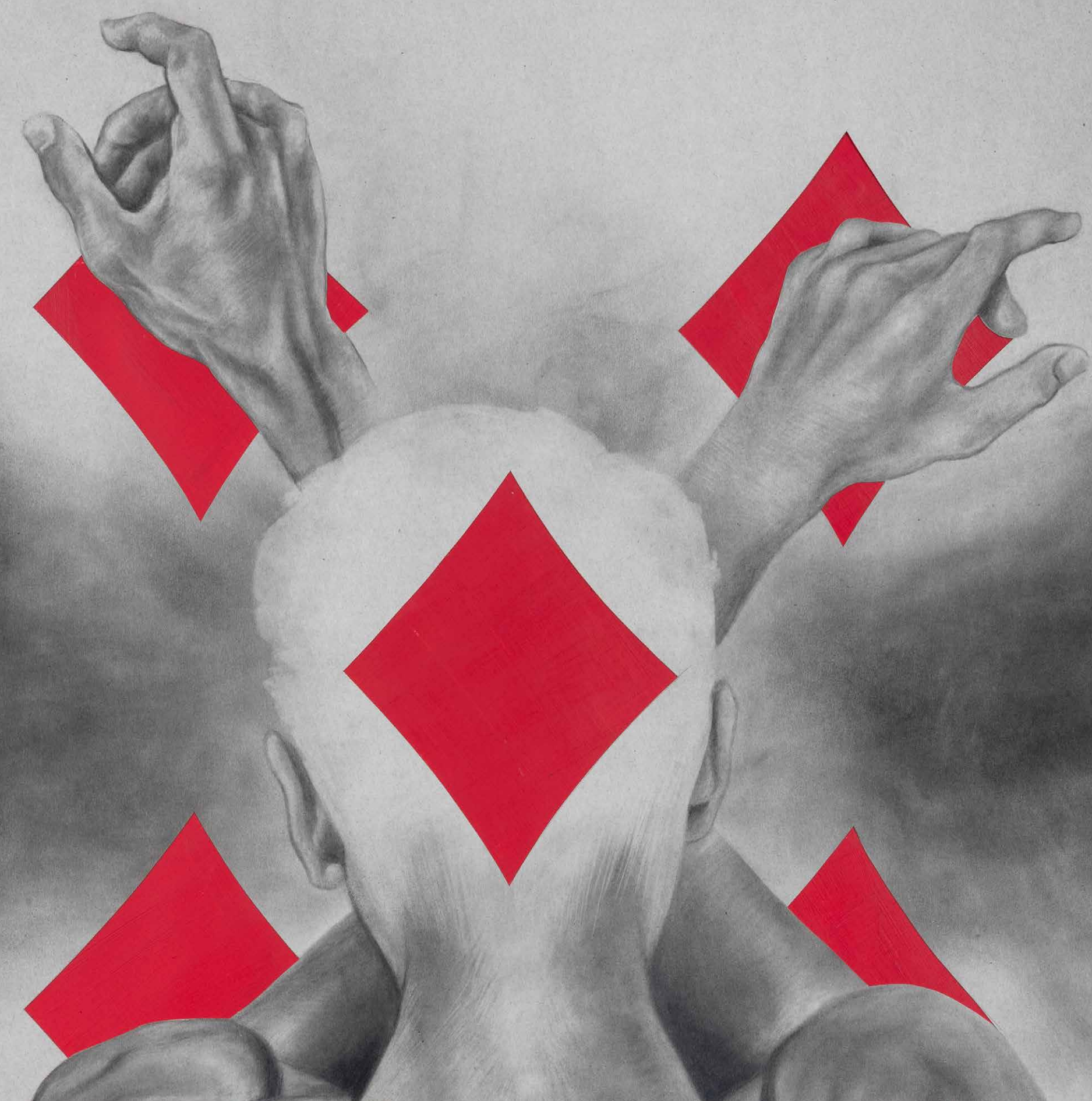


The Attachment
Charcoal & acrylic on canvas 166 x 88 cm 2026

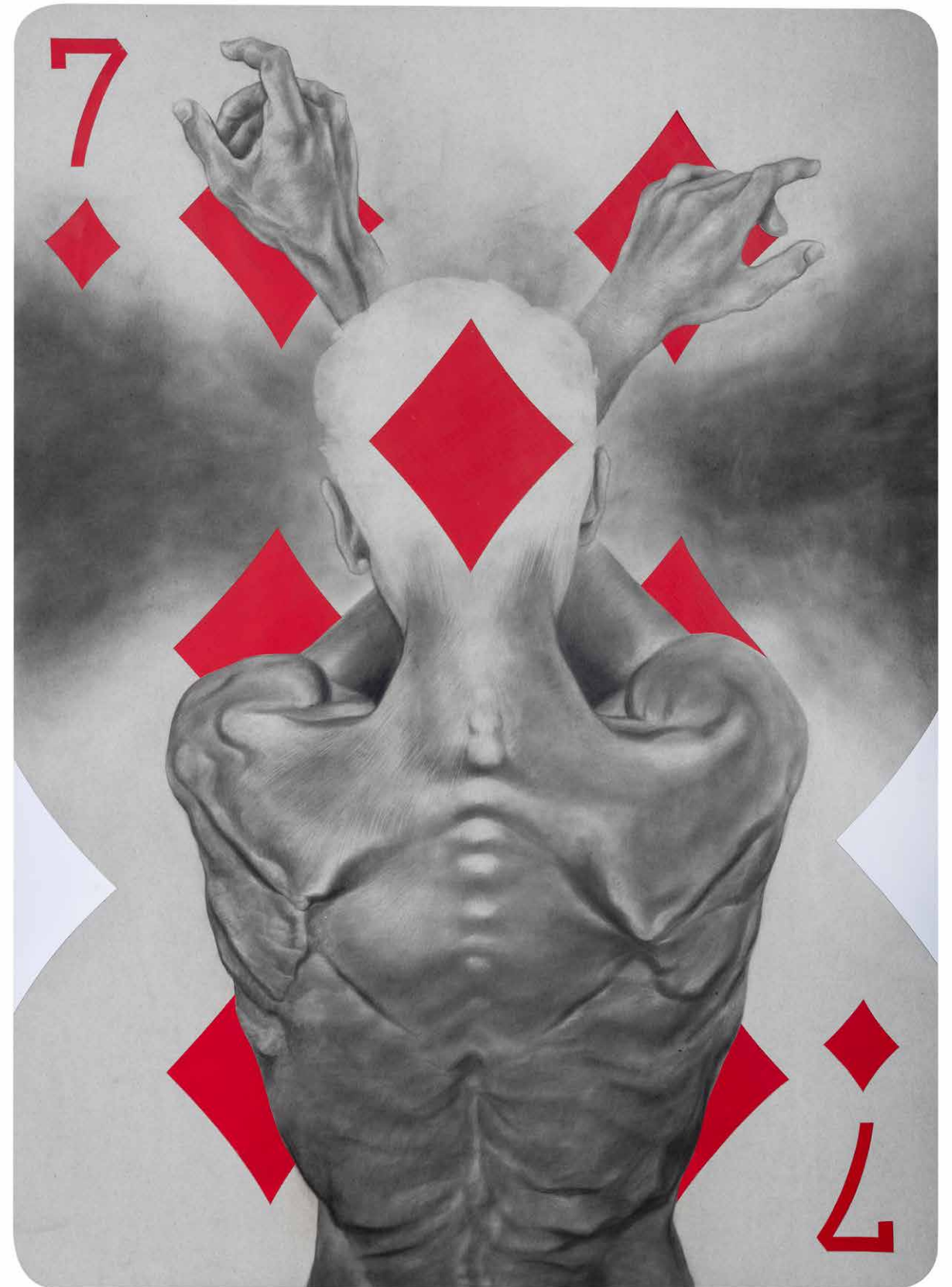


Backbone : Unknown
Acrylic on canvas 150 x 89 cm 2026





Playing with Fate - 7 Diamonds
Charcoal & acrylic on paper 107 x 77 cm 2026



Playing with Fate - 7 Clubs
Charcoal & acrylic on paper 107 x 77 cm 2026



The Last Hope
Charcoal, acrylic & red thread on canvas 150 x 89 cm 2026



BAYU UTOMO RADJIKIN

Bayu Utomo Radjikin was born in Tawau, Sabah, in 1969. He received his formal education in fine art from Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam. Since the late 1980s, he has cemented a prominent presence in the Malaysian contemporary art, particularly through his expressive figurative works that explore the human condition, identity, memory, and the physical body.

Bayu has held numerous solo exhibitions, including Bayu Utomo Radjikin: Solo Exhibition of Paintings at the Creative Centre, National Art Gallery (1996); Diri: Bayu Utomo Radjikin at MADC (2001); Tuboh at GaleriCitra (2003); MIND THE GAP: From KL to London and Back at Wei-Ling Gallery (2007); Unnamed at HOM Art Trans (2010); Cintakasih at HOM Art Trans (2011); Face Without Name at The Substation Gallery, Singapore (2011); Ada Apa Dengan Tengkorak at ChanHampe Galleries, Singapore and HOM Art Trans (2015); Gejolak at G13 Gallery (2017); Kelopak Rasa at HOM Art Trans (2021); and Resonance of Souls at HARTA Gallery, Kuala Lumpur (2025).

He has participated in many major group exhibitions both domestically (such as at the National Art Gallery, Galeri PETRONAS, ILHAM Gallery, Wei-Ling Gallery, and Rimbun Dahan) and internationally (such as in Singapore, Chennai, New Delhi, Vienna, Liverpool, Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Bali and Bandung). He is one of the founders of MATAHATI, an art collective that has had a profound impact on the development of Malaysian contemporary art since the early 1990s.

Bayu has earned several prestigious accolades, including the Major Award at the Young Contemporaries (1991), the Special Award (One World - No War), the Minor Award at Salon Malaysia (1991/1992), and Honourable Mentions at the Philip Morris Art Awards (1994 and 1995). His works are held in numerous institutional and private collections. These include the National Art Gallery Kuala Lumpur, the National Art Museum of Singapore, the Sabah State Gallery, Galeri PETRONAS, ILHAM Gallery, Bank Negara Malaysia, UiTM, Maybank, and the Japan Foundation. Bayu plays a pivotal role in nurturing the local art ecosystem through HOM Art Trans and Chetak 17.

He co-founded Chetak 17 alongside Samsudin Wahab and Faizal Suhif as a dedicated printmaking studio designed to support art production, provide technical facilities, and foster artist collaborations while driving the growth of the Malaysian contemporary printmaking community. Additionally, Bayu is the co-director of TheFklub—an artist collective exploring the human figure as its central theme—and co-director of MARS (Malaysian Art Archive and Research Support), which archives printed materials documenting Malaysian visual arts.

In his artistic practice, Bayu approaches the human body as a symbolic field steeped in emotion, conflict, energy, and personal history. His figures possess a raw psychological intensity that exposes the delicate intersections of flesh, memory, trauma, and human resilience. Working across painting, drawing, print and sculpture, he utilizes a deeply expressive visual vocabulary to forge a bold, dramatic, and profound artistic language. This unique approach firmly establishes him as one of the important Malaysian contemporary artists.



This catalogue is in conjunction with Backbone, a solo exhibition by Bayu Utomo Radjikin from 26 September - 17 October 2026 at G13 Gallery.

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