



Celia Paul

This is the first in a series of three exhibitions, authored and curated by Hilton Als, highlighting contemporary British artists at the Yale Center for British Art. Als is a staff writer and theater critic for the *New Yorker* and Associate Professor of Writing at Columbia University. A Pulitzer Prize winner for Criticism in 2017, he is the author of *White Girls* (2013) and *The Women* (1996). He has specially selected these works in collaboration with Celia Paul.

*Celia Paul* will remain on view at the Yale Center for British Art from April 3 through August 12, 2018.

## Celia Paul

This selection of the artist Celia Paul's most recent paintings are redolent of her great subjects: memory, family, and the inner lives of women. Born to missionary parents in 1959 in Thiruvananthapuram (formerly Trivandrum), South India, Paul's family returned to their native England when Paul was still a child; the artist subsequently lived with her parents and siblings in southwest England and Yorkshire.

As a young student, Paul's interests turned from writing poetry to portrait painting; her first subjects were elderly women in care homes, and her family. She has always worked from life. When she was sixteen, Paul was accepted into London's prestigious Slade School of Fine Art; her precocity was noticed by a number of instructors, including the distinguished German-born, British-based painter, Lucian Freud, who was then a visiting professor at the fabled school. From the first, Paul's style was her own. Inspired by Gwen John and others, Paul's visual vocabulary was deep and psychological, poetry that has alchemized as paint. Between 1977 to 2007, Paul's work concentrated on her mother and sisters and, eventually, loss. Since her mother's death in February 2015, Paul has painted the sea and other bodies of water believing that if her mother is anywhere, she is there.

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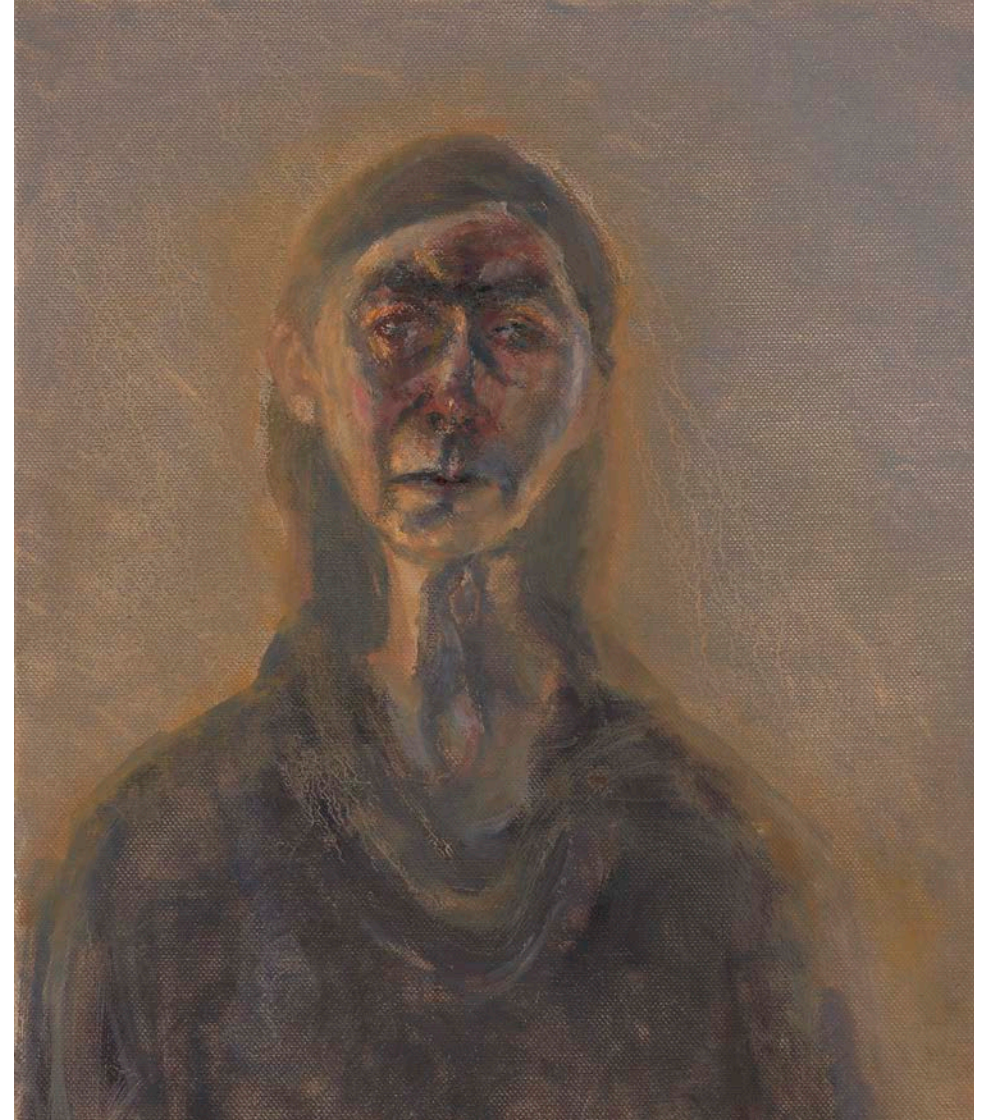
For most of her life as an artist, Celia Paul has been an astute viewer of painting and a reader about the history of painting. Her English enthusiasms have fortified her and provided inspiration throughout her career. A selection of Paul's favorite artists is on display in the Long Gallery on the fourth floor. These artists share a similar emotionalism and interest in rendering the intensity that comes with having a vision, particularly when it comes to portraiture and landscape.

## My Sisters in Mourning

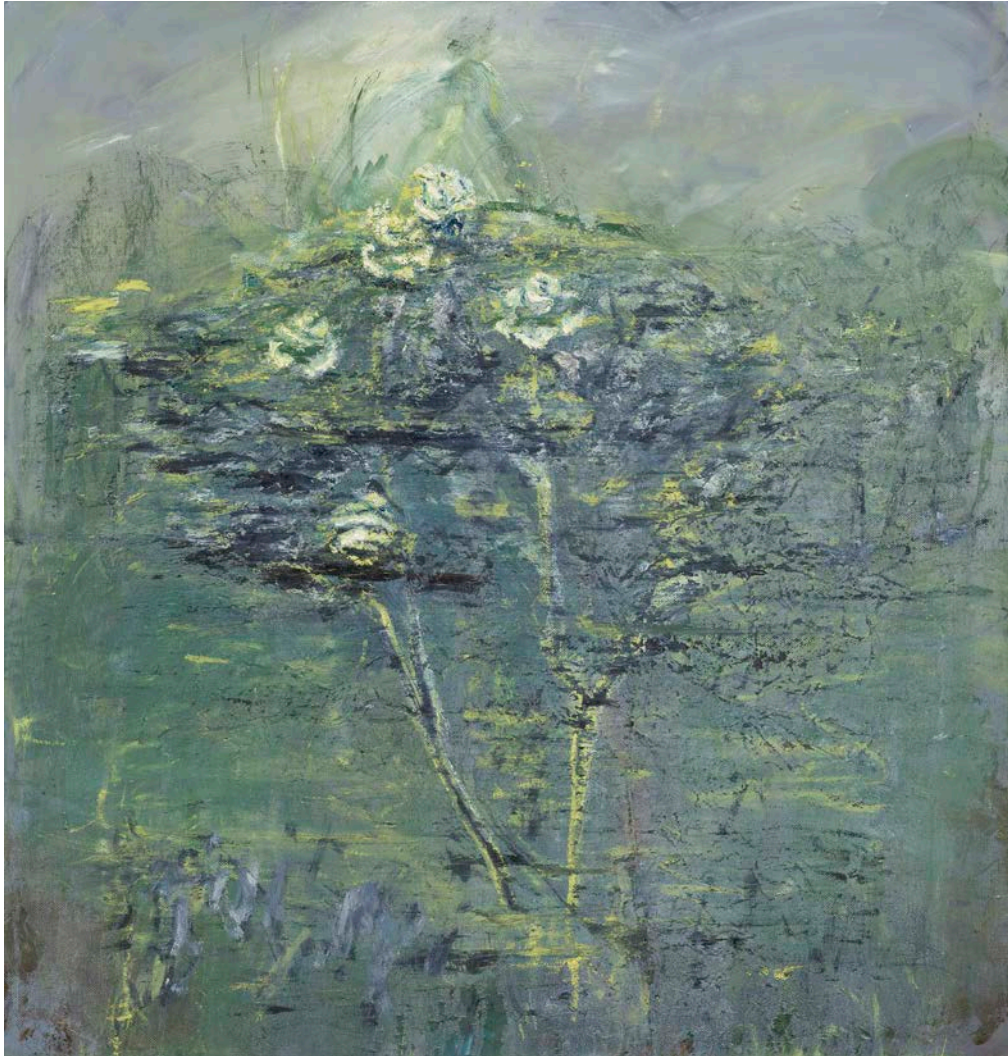
In July 2015, on the thirty-second anniversary of her father's death and five months after her mother died, Celia Paul organized a sitting with her four sisters, two of whom—like their parents—are involved in the Anglican Church. (Her sister Jane, third from the left, is, in addition to being a prominent theologian, the wife of Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. Paul's sister Mandy, a vicar, is to the far left.) Completed in October 2016, after many sittings, this painting commemorates her mother and also relates to a previous work, *Family Group* (1984–86), a memorial to her father that depicts her mother and sisters. Painted in dense colors, the sisters sit in relief to the background in white gowns that do and do not merge with the pictorial plain, like angels paused between heaven and earth. The paint seems to weep with loss while also being bathed in the celestial. The artist is present by virtue of her brush, arrangement of the sitters, and her shared grief and hope.

## Self-Portrait, March

Celia Paul says that she only started painting self-portraits successfully when she was in her fifties; as a younger woman she was too self-conscious to render her image truthfully. Generally she paints her self-portrait once a month because she is interested in the process of aging—and of light. So doing, the artist joins those English masters from the past, ranging from Gwen John to Stanley Spencer, who kept challenging themselves as artists by grappling with their self-image. Paul lives and works in a flat directly opposite the British Museum, and the space is often bathed in the pearly gray light that is particular to London. By facing herself, Paul faces her various sitters with a similar alacrity and interest; the light that changes from day to day changes what she sees, including herself.



*Self-Portrait, March*, 2017, oil on canvas, courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice, © Celia Paul 2018



### Rosebush, Magdalene Garden

Magdalene garden at Cambridge University is one of the college's great natural wonders. Beautifully tended yet wild, the garden is overseen—as Magdalene College is—by Celia Paul's brother-in-law, Rowan Williams, who is the college's master. Here, as in other of Paul's paintings, a family connection plays an integral role in what she has chosen to represent: the five roses may signify, to some degree, the five Paul sisters. The rosebush's floral extravagance does not belie the plant's ghostly delicacy or transparency. Indeed, Paul's painting could be viewed as a portrait of nature in flux, a moment when the lush reminds one of its next turn—decay.



*Shoreline*, 2015–16, oil on canvas, courtesy of the artist  
and Victoria Miro, London/Venice, © Celia Paul 2018



**The Brontë Parsonage (with Charlotte's Pine and Emily's Path to the Moors)**

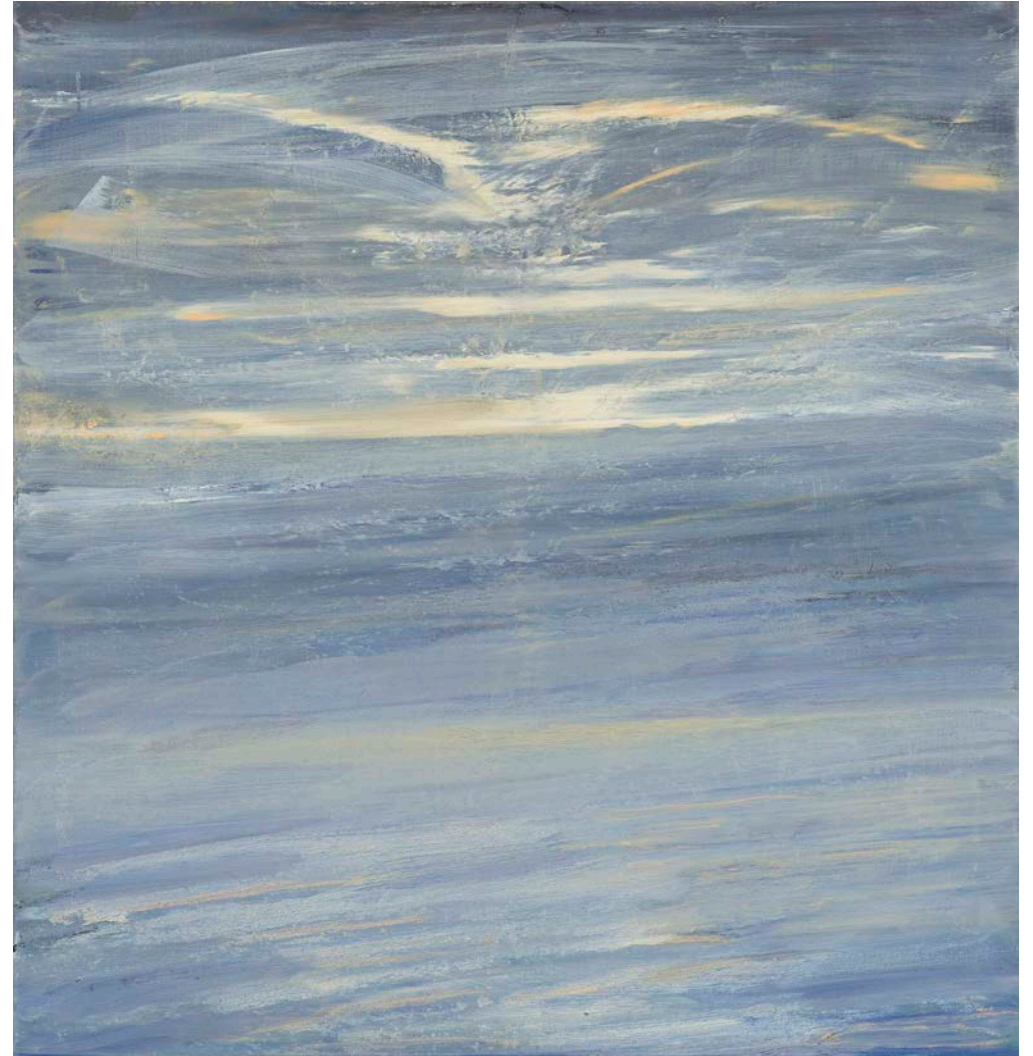
This extraordinary recent work brings together many of Celia Paul's interests as a painter: the effect of light on vision, what constitutes artistic vision, family, and religion. Paul spent part of her youth in Yorkshire, near the Brontë parsonage, where the Reverend Patrick Brontë raised his extraordinary brood in rather reduced circumstances. But the Brontë children—his son, Branwell, and daughters Charlotte, Emily, and Anne—famously survived the harshness of their lives through great creative productivity, which included drawing, painting, and, of course, writing. It is impossible not to see parallels between this nineteenth-century English family and the Pauls, with their joint interest in faith, and the transformative power of making.

*The Brontë Parsonage (with Charlotte's Pine and Emily's Path to the Moors)*, 2017, oil on canvas, courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice, © Celia Paul 2018

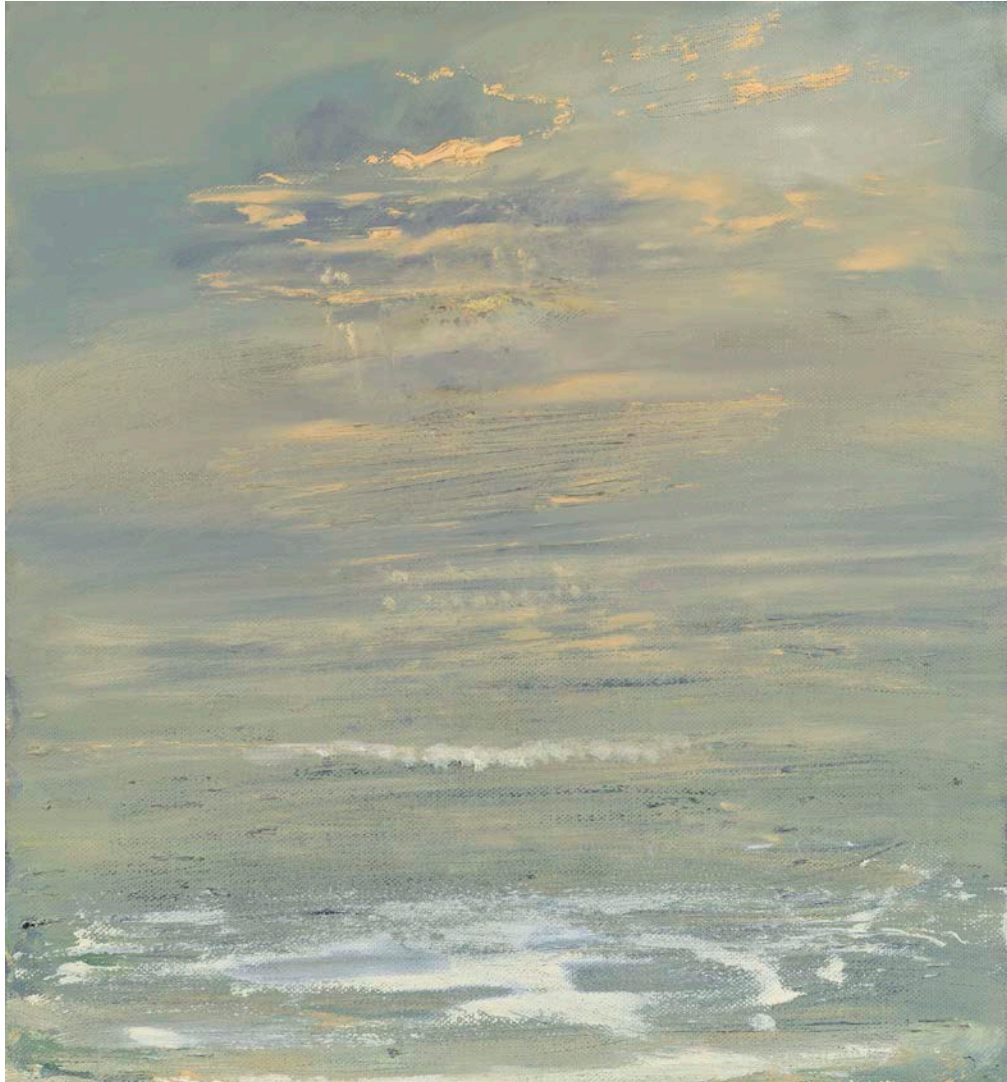
## Seascapes

From the time she was eleven until she was seventeen, Celia Paul lived with her family at Lee Abbey—an evangelical religious community on the Exmoor coast. There, the artist absorbed the surrounding landscape and studied the ways of the waves. Every year Paul returns to the Lee Abbey grounds, staying in a little hut in the woods. While there, she contemplates the water once again, recording her impressions in brilliantly executed drawings and paintings. But, Paul says, she has watched the waves at Walberswick, East Anglia, on the Suffolk coast, closely as well. When her son, Frank, was growing up, the artist used to stay in the region with her child and mother in a converted summerhouse in the grounds of the family home of her former partner, Lucian Freud. Called “The Hidden House,” it was meant to replace the place where the Freuds vacationed on the Baltic coast before the war. In Walberswick, Paul, a master naturalist, has observed that the waves are “flatter, wider, and windier.” Like Virginia Woolf

before her, the painter’s renderings of water are also a portrait of time, ever shifting, and of family or, more specifically, places Paul associates with family. The artist has said that her “sea paintings are never really of any particular sea, but sort of dreamed up.” But, in what might be the credo for all her work, she adds: “I don’t think I could have painted the sea if I hadn’t lived near it.”



*View from the Tower*, 2017, oil on canvas, courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro, London/Venice, © Celia Paul 2018



#### WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Celia Paul (born 1959)

*My Sisters in Mourning*  
2015-16, oil on canvas

*Self-Portrait, March*  
2017, oil on canvas

*Rosebush, Magdalene Garden*  
2017, oil on canvas

*The Brontë Parsonage (with Charlotte's  
Pine and Emily's Path to the Moors)*  
2017, oil on canvas

*Shoreline*  
2015-16, oil on canvas

*View from The Tower*  
2017, oil on canvas

*Clouds and Foam*  
2017, oil on canvas  
Rachofsky Collection

All images courtesy of the artist  
and Victoria Miro, London / Venice



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