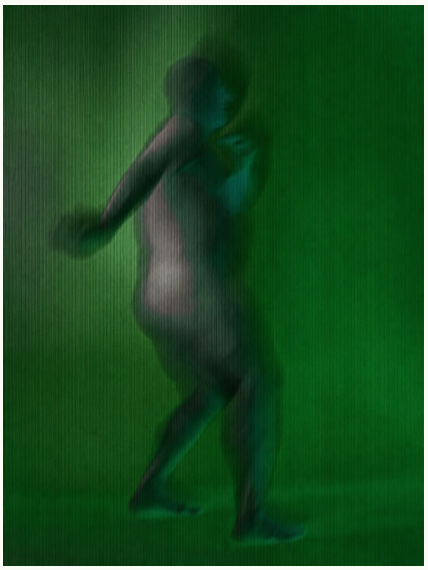
Visibility Without Knowledge

Marina Smith

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Visibility Without Knowledge

I am interested in the moment when familiarity with a person's public image begins to feel like knowing the person. We may recognise their body, their way of posing, their professional role. This familiarity lends conviction to our conclusions: it seems that what we see has already explained who they are.

In my practice, this question is connected to the desire to appear before others. I photograph people working in the adult industry, for whom bodily visibility becomes part of their profession. They participate in creating their public images. A sexual role may be carefully constructed and personally meaningful. Yet as it circulates publicly, it can easily acquire the force of a ready-made definition of the person.

What matters to me is the desire to be seen, and what happens to an image once it appears. Public visibility makes it possible to encounter others, arouse desire and leave a trace. It also brings other people's explanations, which take on lives of their own. The person continues to change, while the idea of them may become fixed.

I approach this tension through portraiture. A photograph retains its connection to a particular body and a particular shoot. At the same time, it creates its own way for the person to appear. The distance from the camera and the moment selected already affect what can be known. Blur and noise change the relationship between the recognisable figure and the surface on which it appears.

In this series, bodily exposure coexists with an unstable image. The body remains recognisable and retains its sensual force. Faces lose definition; different positions of a body overlap. Colour and scale alter its relationship to space. I work with the gap between the presence of a body and the confidence with which that presence is turned into an explanation of a person.

Édouard Glissant's concept of opacity helps me frame this question. His thinking emerges from the history of colonial relations and considers how another person or culture is accepted through being reduced to our own terms of understanding. Opacity preserves the other's irreducibility within a relationship. What matters to me here is that encounter and participation remain possible without complete understanding. This offers a way to consider bodily exposure as a form of relation that leaves room for what is unknown.

In Rethinking Art and Visual Culture: The Poetics of Opacity, Asbjørn Grønstad connects damaged and indistinct images to a broader problem: an image has a structure of its own, even when it seems to offer direct access to what it depicts. His account helps me consider how visual difficulty can make that construction perceptible. This gives me a more precise way to describe my photographs. Blur and noise intervene in the way a figure emerges. They help to create the portrait alongside what remains discernible.

In Flesh Noise, two figures appear in overlapping outlines. Torsos and arms remain discernible, while faces and gestures resist settling into stable poses. The overlapping forms make it difficult to fix either figure in a single appearance. Here, the difficulty of choosing one expression that could seem to define a person becomes especially apparent.

In Small Figure on Red Ground, the body has a fairly definite outline. Its bent posture is legible, though the face loses detail. The vast red field leaves the figure almost without an explanatory setting. The pose may suggest vulnerability or concentration, but there is little basis for attributing either state to the person. Space and scale intensify the body's expressiveness while keeping its situation uncertain. Attention has to move between the figure and the way it is presented.

Contact combines a figure with a large, blurred image of a body. A relatively discernible fragment sits alongside patches of colour and unstable contours. Different degrees of clarity coexist within a single portrait. There is no simple progression in which more detail gradually reveals the person. The image is built from relationships between appearances of the body that do not coincide.

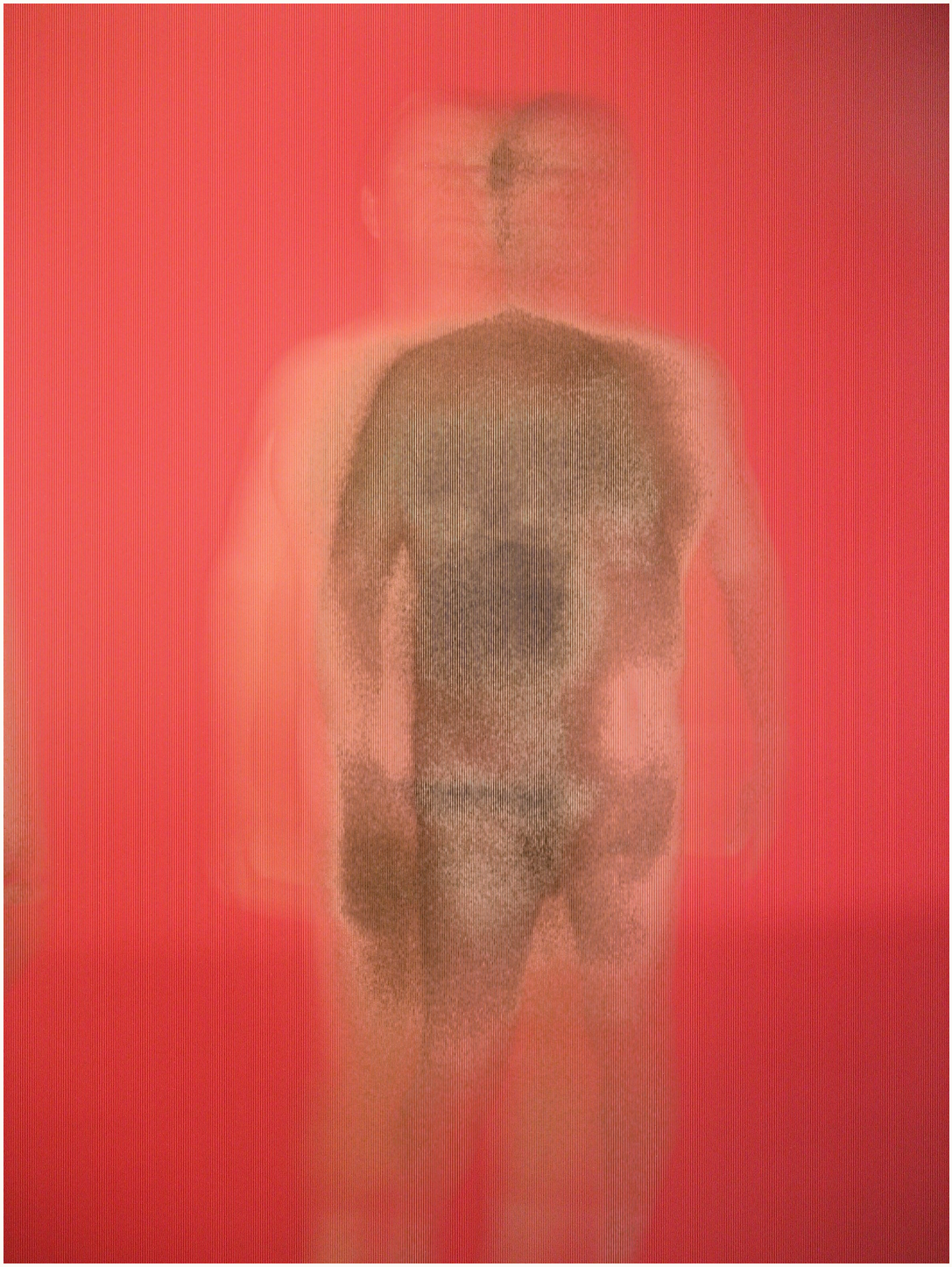
In Falling, a small figure occupies a large dark field. Its position can suggest suspension; the title directs that sensation towards falling. The word helps construct an event that the photograph leaves uncertain. This matters across the series: an explanation also comes from text, even when we seem to derive it directly from the visible body.

Dark Room retains a recognisable setting: a nude figure on a sofa, a pose, the depth of a room. Darkness and grain can heighten the feeling of intimate observation. In this photograph, an imperfect texture becomes part of the sense of closeness. The image's sensual appeal enters into the tension at work throughout the series: attraction to a person coexists with the limits of what we can conclude about them.

My own position forms part of this tension. I select the photographs and give them form. By stating in this essay that I photograph people from the adult industry, I bring their profession into the way the portraits are seen. This creates expectations before the images are encountered. The category that the work examines is also present in the way I introduce it to the reader.

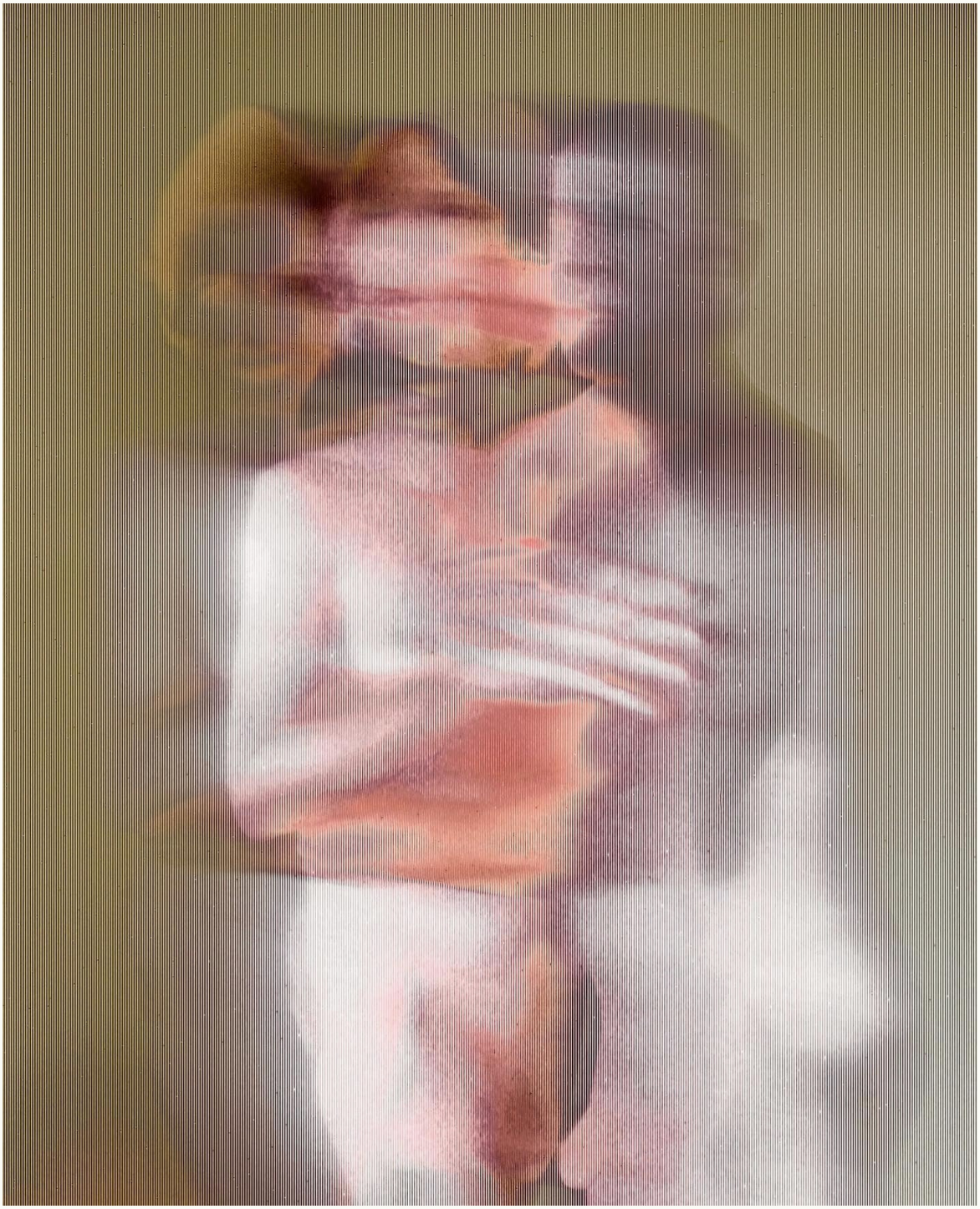
The question therefore also concerns how I construct an image of another person. The way I construct the photograph makes me part of how that person appears. Even when a face is difficult to distinguish, the photograph continues to present a figure in a particular way: they may seem ghostly, desirable or lonely. Such meanings arise between the body, the construction of the image and our experience. Their persuasiveness does not make them properties of the person depicted.

For me, Visibility Without Knowledge names the gap between a visible figure and a definitive account of a person. The photographs tell us a great deal. They retain features of the body and traces of staging, and give rise to a sense of encounter. I examine the moment when this information and these experiences begin to acquire the force of a definitive portrait. I use the instability of the image to keep that transition open.



Before the Face

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.



Flesh Noise

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.



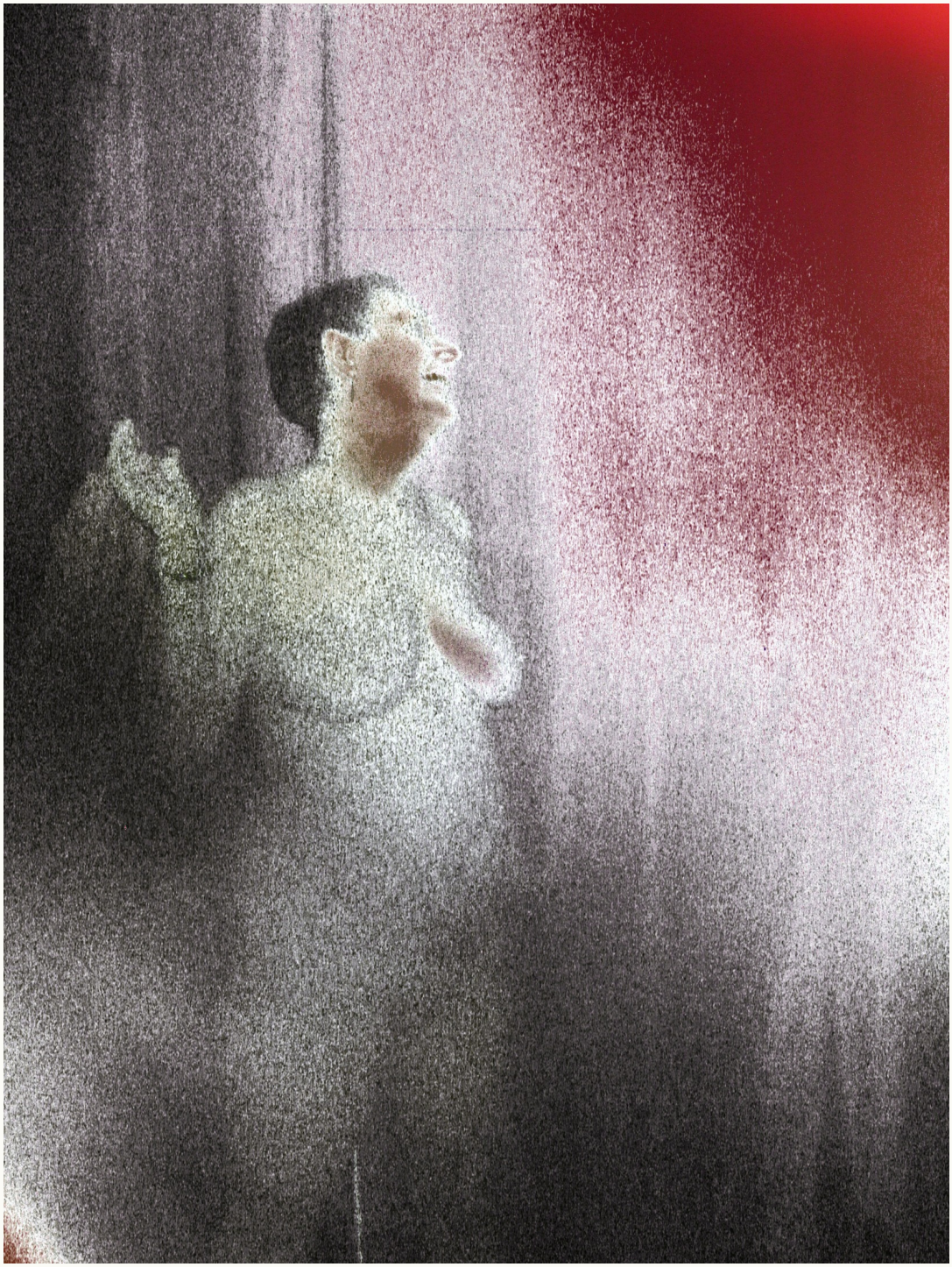
Small Figure on Red Ground

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.



Dark Room

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.



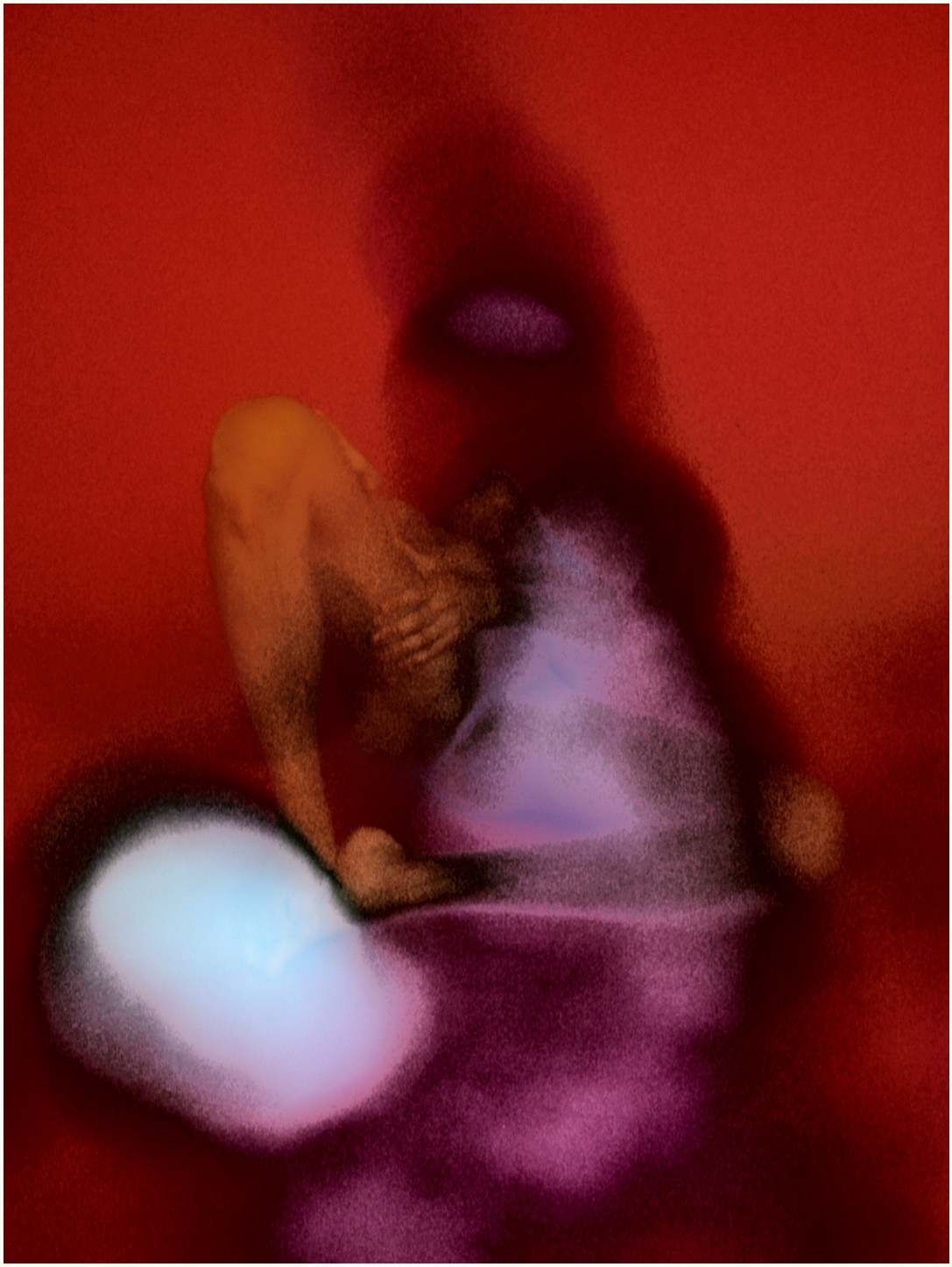
Looking Away

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.



The Giant

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.



Contact

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.



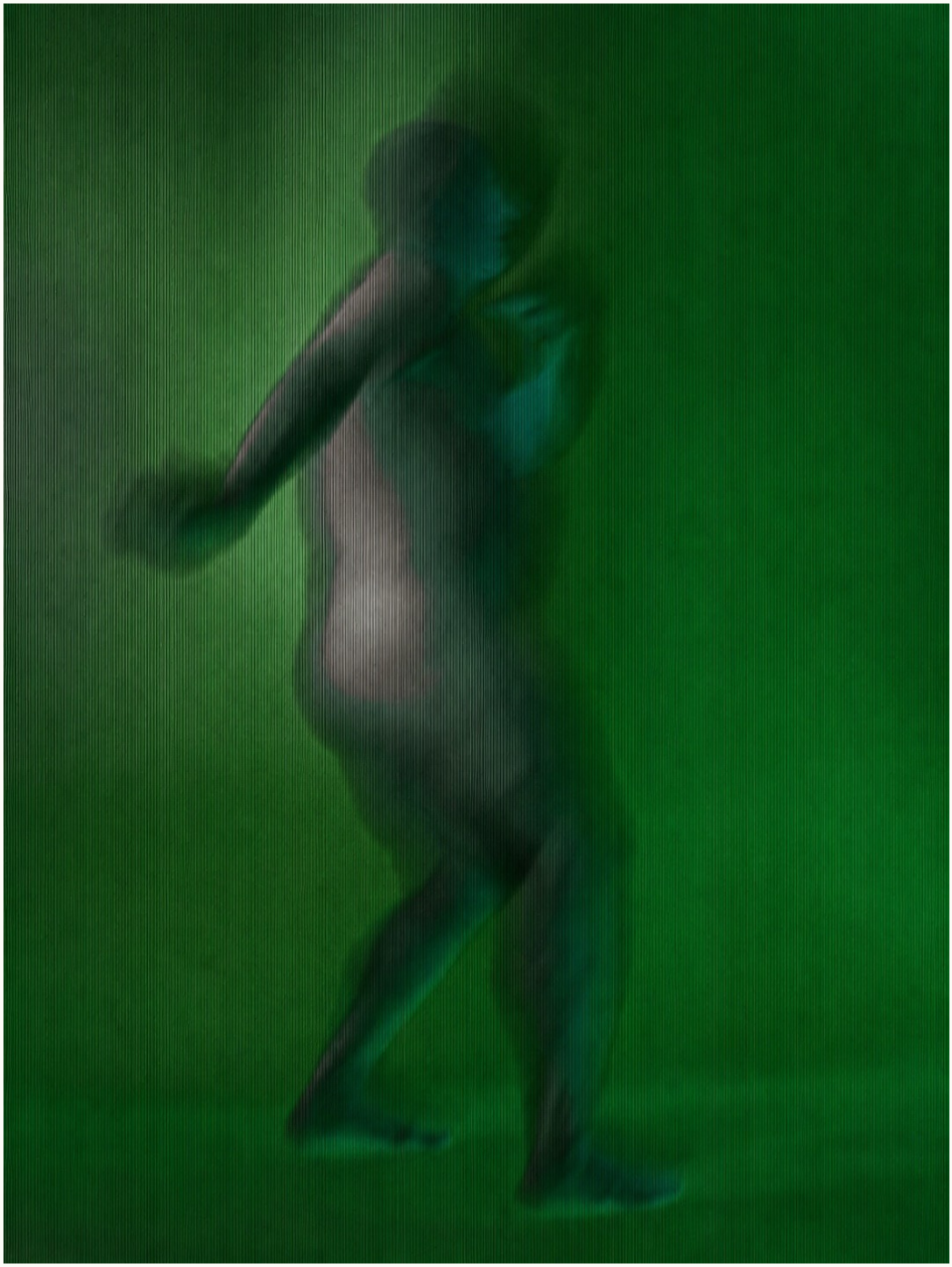
Is it what you’re looking for?

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.



Falling

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.



A Nude Without Presence

Marina Smith, 2026. Digital photograph.