

UNDER WRAPS

The Magical Work of

ALI CLIFT



Pucker Gallery * Boston

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FOR OVER FOUR DECADES, ALI HAS transformed fabric and thread into cloth paintings that act as windows looking into mysterious and enchanting worlds—worlds filled with circus performers, *ofrendas*, still life forms, abstract landscapes, and most recently, jackets. Painting with cloth provides Ali's work with a sophisticated sense of dimension; light reflects across threads and strategically placed tulle creates shadows, highlighting the visceral nature of her creations. Much like the physicality of Ali's works—comprised of intricate layers of fabrics and embroidery in a multitude of textures, colors, and finishes—the metaphorical spaces she creates are equally complex, channeling powerful emotions that are difficult to express with words alone.

Ali's jackets weave together themes from her lifetime of work in a way that is fresh and authentic, allowing her to engage with personal memories, literary and historical references, and recent sociopolitical events. By playing with continuous themes even when introducing new subjects, her body of work flows organically, as if the artist is in conversation with the viewer. Jackets are an unusual motif for an artist to employ to create such a deeply personal oeuvre. Jackets are typically worn in formal situations, as part of a suit or uniform, or to protect ourselves from natural elements. They are functional garments that contain and hide the inner person. Yet the jackets from Ali's magical wardrobe do the opposite by acting as frames that reveal intimate truths and questions about our world and how we inhabit it.

Ali's earliest jackets explore landscapes and visual memories inspired by her travels to Mexico and Central America. *On the Edge* (AC375) features a

desert landscape existing simultaneously in two moments of time: the jacket's navy and black exterior is speckled with cascading stars from the sky above while the jacket's gold interior is lit by a dim horizon that stretches into daylight. The contrast between night and day draws the eye to the interior of the jacket, where a lone red rose stands with petals falling toward tawny earth. The decadent red rose, a symbol of love, is on the verge of decay as the earth itself disintegrates into space. The barrier between night and day, so clear at the horizon, crumbles. Are light and love fading away or being revealed? Around the lapels is an undone necktie, furthering the sense of melancholy and unanswered questions. Is it being undone or was it interrupted whilst being tied?

Depths of Blue (AC381) is another landscape-esque work inspired by Mexico. A patterned lapis jacket is placed in front of a curved horizon, as if one were looking at the earth from space. The right side of the jacket morphs from a garment to a plethora of vivid blue butterflies, edged with black. From pre-Columbian ceramic vessels and carvings to contemporary paintings, butterflies are an iconic motif in Mexican art, with a range of symbolic meanings. Ali's butterflies not only reference personal memories, they connote transformation, renewal, and beauty. The color



COVER:
Juggling Time, 2020
Cloth painting and drawing
36 x 40"
AC387

and wing shape of the butterflies in *Depths of Blue* resemble that of the blue morpho butterfly, native to Mexico. Although these creatures are known for the iridescent color of their open wings, the underside color that appears when their wings are closed is an earthy brown with eyespots for protective camouflage, quite similar to the planetary ground that Ali has placed at the bottom of the painting. The morpho's camouflage is itself a jacket, protecting it from the world while hiding its interior beauty. When the morpho flies and these colors flash back and forth, the morpho appears to materialize and then vanish from the air, just as the right side of Ali's jacket does. Delicate constellations are embroidered in metallic thread throughout the painting, enhancing its dreamlike aesthetic.

The horizon line in *Depths of Blue* distorts the sense of time and space. In contrast, the continuous horizon line cutting through the interior of the white linen blazer in *Icarus* (AC379), as the ocean



meets the sky, places this piece simultaneously in two distinct times of day: dawn and dusk. The lightest point of the work is near the center with a darkening gradient towards the edges, resembling the effect created by a setting or rising sun. The breezy, tropical feeling of *Icarus* evokes Florida, where Ali spends the winter months. The sheer blue fabric that defines the water creates an illusion that the blazer is almost completely submerged in the ocean. Framed inside is a tiny, meticulously embroidered figure waist deep in the water. Its outstretched arms rejoice as seagull feathers float down from the heavens, casting shadows against the jacket. The oversized proportions of the feathers and jacket in comparison to the figure and pastel sky reflected in the water create the feeling of ethereality. However, the title of the work, *Icarus*, about Daedalus's son in the eponymous Greek myth, suggests something more sinister lurking beneath. In his attempt to escape from the island of Crete, Icarus made the fatal mistake of flying too close to the sun on a contraption made of wax and feathers. As the sun melted his wings, Icarus

plunged to the depths of the ocean below. Are the stretched arms a reference to Icarus's fate, or does the jacket serve as a symbol of protection? Perhaps this time, Icarus's landing was safe.

Continuing the nautical theme, *Jack's Jacket* (AC386) is a deeply personal work in which Ali pays homage to the paintings of her late husband, Jack Clift. Jack used corrugated tin rather than canvas, which he would cut into shapes and tack down in rows to evoke the riveted panels on an old tin boat, which he then layered over with paint. In this work, Ali uses a space-dye fabric layered with netting and touches of pastel crayon and charcoal to recreate the look of weathered tin panels. These panels create a wall enveloping the jacket, as waves wash it away and sunlight peaks through peeling cracks. The jacket is constructed from a luminous sparkling fabric giving the piece a metallic sheen. The interior of the jacket reveals the Statue of Liberty precariously placed on a rock and surrounded by crashing waves. Again, Ali adds a red flower with gently falling leaves, this time on the right lapel. The care Ali takes in these personal touches expresses a sense of nostalgia and wistfulness, feelings that are universal yet enigmatic.

The Statue of Liberty motif found in *Jack's Jacket* recurs in many of Ali's works from 2018 to 2019. *Mother of Exiles* (AC382), *Tempest-tost* (AC383), *Breathe Free* (AC384), and *I Lift my Lamp* (AC385) all bear titles that originate from the sonnet "The New Colossus," which was written in 1883 by an American Jewish immigration activist and is now inscribed on the statue's pedestal. Cleverly referential titles, contextual clues, and the placement of Lady Liberty herself in



each work captures a political climate rife with feelings of both hope and despair. This symbol is not invoked to lecture or proselytize but offers a clear representation of Ali's own emotions and reactions towards current events. She expresses frustration and anger at the hypocrisy of actions taken by Americans, actions she finds in contention with the highest values that we claim to define ourselves but there is always a sense of hope.



Mother of Exiles features Lady Liberty protected by a jacket that is surrounded by a wall of bricks and foreboding storm clouds. Despite what is happening on the edges of the work, Liberty stands triumphant, as if she is bursting through the cracks of a hastily built wall. *Tempest-tost* is darker and conveys desolation—Lady Liberty is still placed in the interior of the jacket although that layer of protection has started to come apart at the seams. The right sleeve is nearly gone completely, and as the jacket sinks into the sea amidst the setting sun, it appears to be taking Lady Liberty with it. By illustrating the jacket in a nearly destroyed state, Ali infers that jackets are vulnerable too, just like the people they protect. In contrast, *I Lift my Lamp* is a hopeful painting in which a pristine jacket, blue sky, and abundant flowers suggest that the storm has passed and hope blooms again. Lady Liberty has been moved to the outside of the jacket, cracked and faded yet still standing with her torch of welcome held high. She also appears to be slightly transparent, as if she were a ghost haunting the scene. Here she is free rather than confined. The jacket is again a strong symbol of safeguarding, although here it protects by confining the wall and an imposing, shadowy figure within.

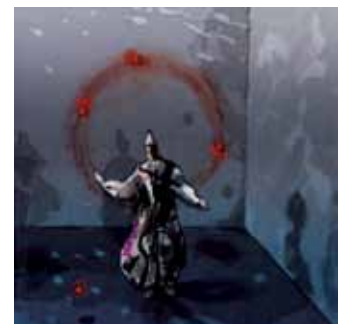
Breathe Free is inspired by a line in the sonnet that most directly addresses the plight of refugees: *Give me your tired, your poor. Your huddled masses*

yearning to breathe free. This work is Ali's response to the heart-wrenching stories of children separated from their parents at the southern border. The jacket, made for a child with its smaller proportions and a playful polka dot pattern, is suspended in air on a wooden hanger and cradles a carefree child on a swing between its lapels. In the foreground, a set of red, white, and blue patterned blocks are stacked and scattered, with fragments of Lady Liberty on various faces of each block. Ali employs a post-Cubist technique to abstract the image. As long as the child remains protected, there is hope that Lady Liberty may be rebuilt and breathe free again.

Ali created *Juggling Time* (AC387) when the early days of the coronavirus pandemic first brought the world to a halt. It explores the inner turmoil of our minds when, during times of uncertainty, we retreat to interior spaces. The title *Juggling Time* evokes the whiplash feeling of days that seem to both drag on and speed by during lockdown measures. This jacket is embroidered with hypnotic, metallic threads reminiscent of the springs in a broken clock. It is embellished with orphaned clock hands pointing indiscriminately into space. Framed in the interior, the viewer finds a clock intact and a juggler placed precariously above on a tightrope. This lone clock has been tasked with keeping all of time together, and the juggler must not make a single mistake or risk losing something—or themselves—into an abyss. The delicate nature of the interior, in contrast with the chaotic exterior of the jacket, encourages us to reconcile with the fragility of our own interior spaces. The tightrope theme inspired two smaller studies, *Don't Drop the Ball* (AC388) and *Skywalkers* (AC389), in which Ali revisits the circus performers that defined her earliest cloth paintings.



Ali merges her circus and jacket themes in *Curtain Call* (AC390) in which red theater drapes are drawn to reveal a tuxedo jacket layered over a backdrop of clouds



and shadowy leaves. The jacket hangs from a branch jutting out from the left, which also carries a clown's mask in the style of the Parisian Belle



Epoque circus costumes. Despite the mask's colorful makeup and exaggerated smile, tears fall from the eye. As the owner of the mask is absent, their true emotions are left obscured by the mask's contrasting duality of joy and sorrow. On



the interior of the jacket, the shadow of the mask looms silently, stoically. There are parallels between the mask, the curtains, and Ali's jackets; a mask hides one's identity similarly to how a jacket hides the inner person, while stage curtains obscure the technical aspects backstage by allowing an audience to immerse themselves in the fictional world of a show. These garments reveal only one dimension of the absent person—that they are an entertainer. Entertainment provides an alternative world in which we can lose ourselves to the emotions of the performers. When the magic of the entertainment ends, the viewer is left with no real understanding of the performers themselves, only the characters they have created. Ali captures this sense of longing to know more, a curiosity that is naturally human.

Ali's jackets series culminates with *Gift of the Tancho* (AC391), a piece that carries a rich, cross-cultural history. The jacket was originally a full-length kimono, given as a wedding present



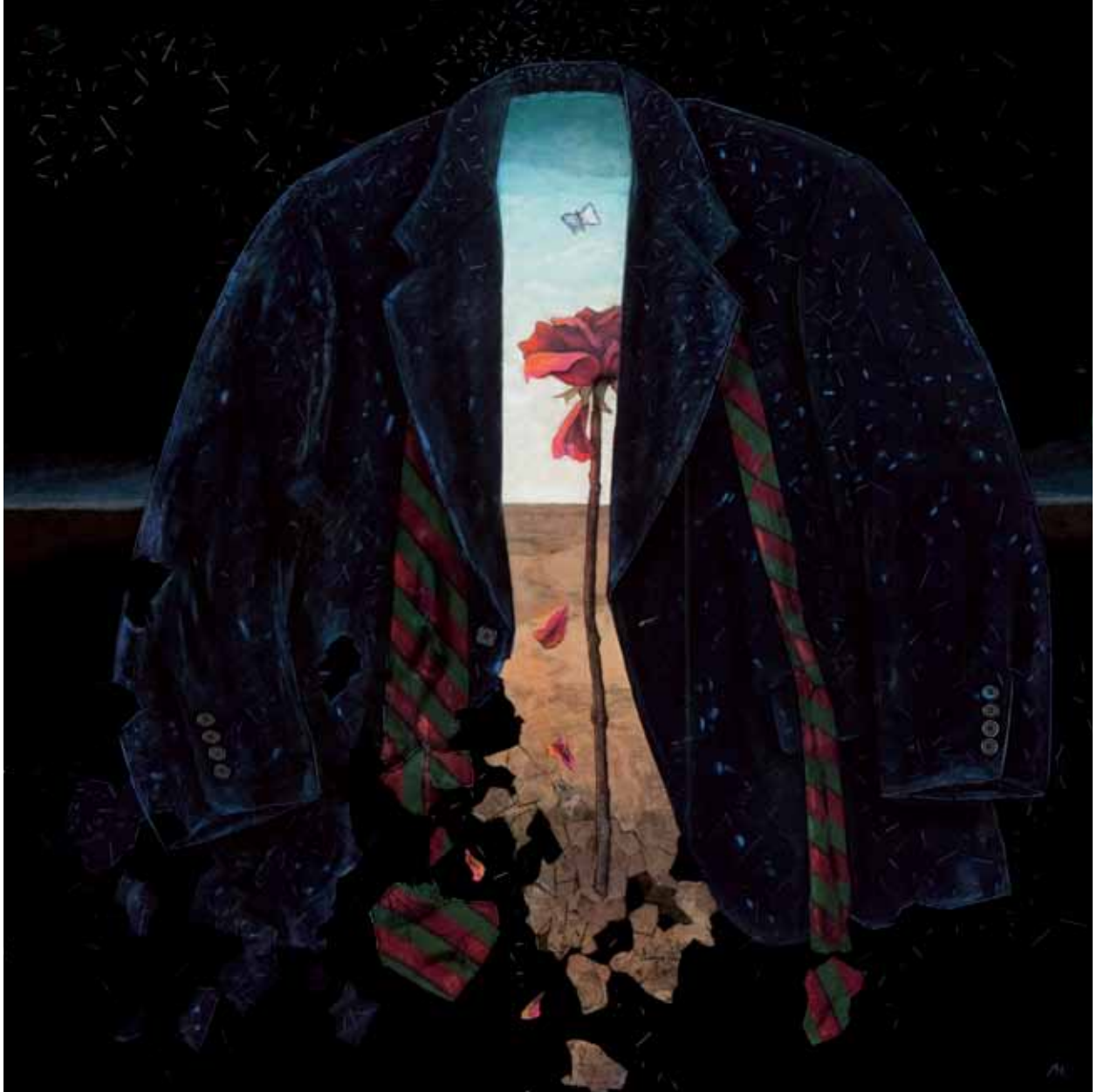
by a young Japanese woman to a young American bride. This was particularly remarkable as the wedding took place soon after the end of WWII. The two women had met in the late 1930s as undergraduates at Vassar College; their friendship took root during a transformative time in their lives, and in world history. Each young woman having returned home after

college, they were unable to stay in touch due to the increasingly adversarial relationship between their respective countries. Immediately after the armistice they began to search for one another and happily reestablished contact. The two women's interests and values were intertwined and informed each other's development throughout a lifelong friendship. The kimono was transformed into an evening jacket so that its Western recipient could wear it for special occasions. In due course this cherished possession was passed down to her daughter, who, after the jacket became too fragile to wear, asked her own dear friend, Ali, to transform it once more. And so, it became this breathtaking piece of artwork.

At first glance, *Gift of the Tancho* appears to be a departure from previous works as the jacket neither conceals nor reveals anything within its interior. Entwined amidst stalks of bamboo, the jacket instead acts as the connecting element between the left and right sides of the work, creating a sense of horizontal movement. The surrounding forest scene seems to spring forth from the seams of a luminous silk fabric. Shadows of smoke and flames emanate from the left, while a red-crowned crane (tancho) flies off toward the right. This crane literally has been cut loose from the original garment in which, restrained by exquisite embroidery, it previously had been confined. In *Gift of the Tancho*, Ali has released this graceful bird into the wild, giving it a chance to survive the flames against all odds, just as the friendship of two young women from disparate cultures survived the devastation of war. In Japanese tradition, the elegant red-crowned crane symbolizes fidelity, hope, longevity, and love, qualities for which the world may never have had a greater need than now.

By suspending her jackets in air, playing with scale, and creating improbable environments, Ali has created beautiful and borderline surreal works of art. The transformation of cloth into paintings captures a sense of magic and mystery unique to her work. Yet, they contained deeply embedded philosophical questions, personal meaning, and memories that capture specific moments in time, keeping the works grounded and authentic. Unlike garments that are eventually cast aside by their owners, Ali has preserved them and kept their mystery under wraps.

— EMILY FITZSIMMONS



On the Edge, 2017
Cloth painting and drawing
40 x 40"
AC375



Depths of Blue, 2018
Cloth painting and drawing
40 x 42"
AC381



Icarus, 2018
Cloth painting and drawing
40 x 41.5"
AC379



Mother of Exiles, 2018
Cloth painting and drawing
37 x 41.5"
AC382



Tempest-tost, 2019
Cloth painting and drawing
40 x 42"
AC383



Jack's Jacket, 2019
Cloth painting and drawing
38 x 39.5"
AC386



Breathe Free, 2019
Cloth painting and drawing
29 x 30"
AC384



I Lift My Lamp, 2019
Cloth painting and drawing
30 x 30"
AC385



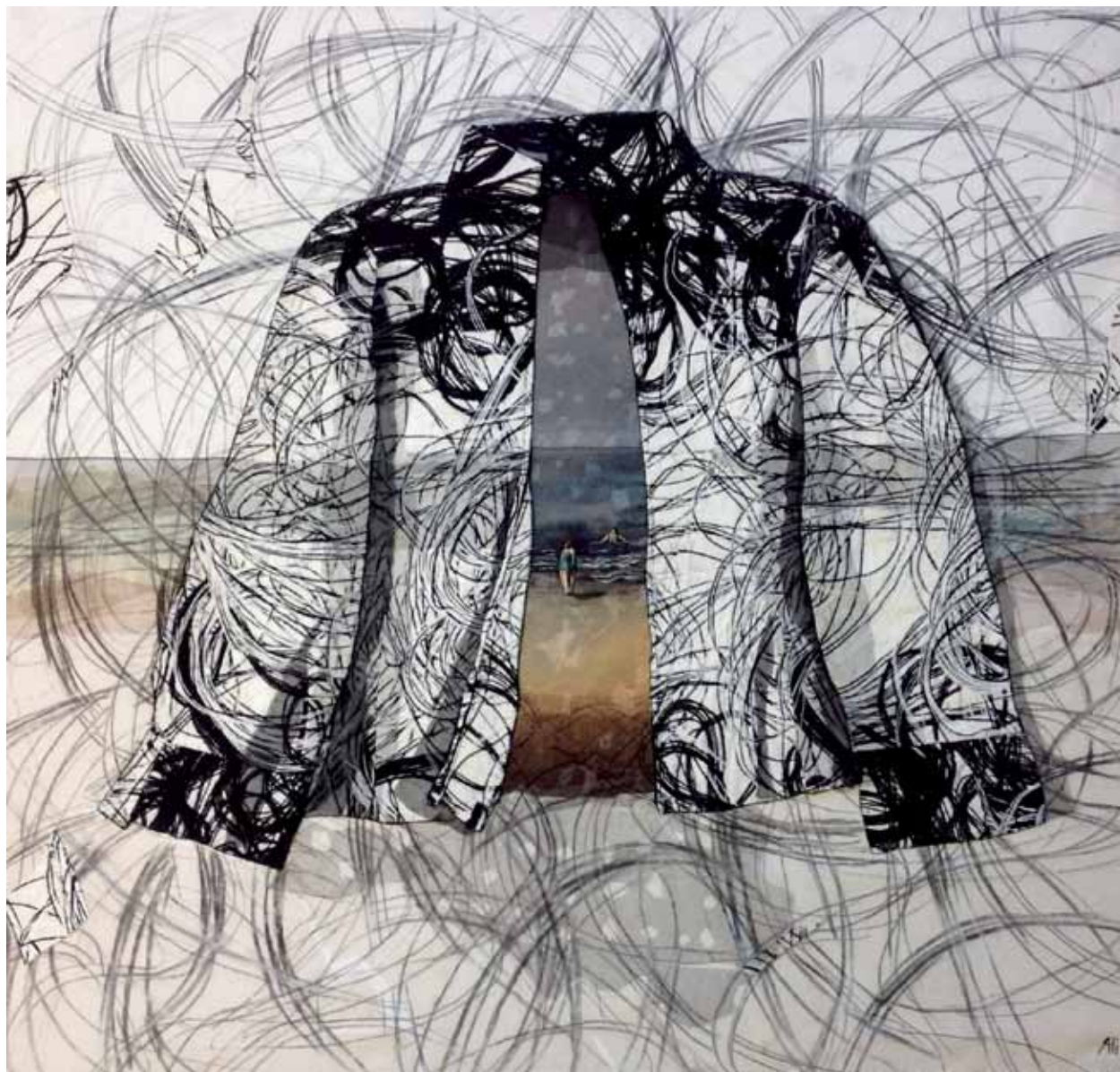
Gift of the Tancho, 2021
Cloth painting and drawing
43 x 52.5"
AC391



Rain Jacket, 2018
Cloth painting and drawing
41.5 x 36"
AC380



The Traveler, 2017
Cloth painting and drawing
40 x 40"
AC376



A Distant Shore, 2017
Cloth painting and drawing
40 x 40"
AC377



Sanctuary, 2017
Cloth painting and drawing
38 x 41"
AC378



Don't Drop the Ball, 2020
Cloth painting and drawing
16 x 16"
AC388



Skywalkers, 2020
Cloth painting and drawing
15 x 15"
AC389

ALI CLIFT

ALISON CLIFT'S UNIQUE AND MYSTERIOUS CLOTH PAINTINGS are delicately crafted using fabric. Born in 1949 in Nova Scotia, Ali is a graduate of Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Her first cloth paintings were inspired technically by a picture composed of small cloth pieces at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Throughout her artistic career, Ali has been fascinated by the challenge of creating an authentic sense of space through the illusion of fabric. As she continues to expand her creative process, each new body of work introduces distinct subjects and a notable change in her exploration of cloth as a medium for painting. An ardent and engaged traveler, she shares, literally and figuratively, fragments of her experiences in new environments. Ali's earlier works inspired by Mexico are featured in the book *Paintings of the Last Decade: Still Life*, which is the second publication featuring the artist. The first, entitled *Beyond the Big Top: The Cloth Paintings and Graphic Works*, explores her successful circus-themed works. Ali's art has been represented by Pucker Gallery since 1977 and is included in public collections in New England, New York, Canada, Israel, Vietnam, and Bali. She resides in Chelsea, Massachusetts and Naples, Florida.

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DATES:

24 April through 30 May 2021

ONLINE EVENTS:

Please visit www.puckergallery.com for a list of virtual gatherings and events accompanying **Under Wraps**.

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GALLERY HOURS:

Monday through Saturday

10:00 AM to 5:30 PM

Sunday 10:30 AM to 5:00 PM

We are open to all and taking the necessary precautions for visitor and staff safety. We welcome appointments to maximize visitor experience.

Pucker Gallery is a member of the Boston Art Dealers Association and the New

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Curtain Call, 2020
Cloth painting and drawing
38 x 48"
AC390

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