

MAY 2025

## **Mai Blanco: *I Crave to Be All***

By Raphy Sarkissian



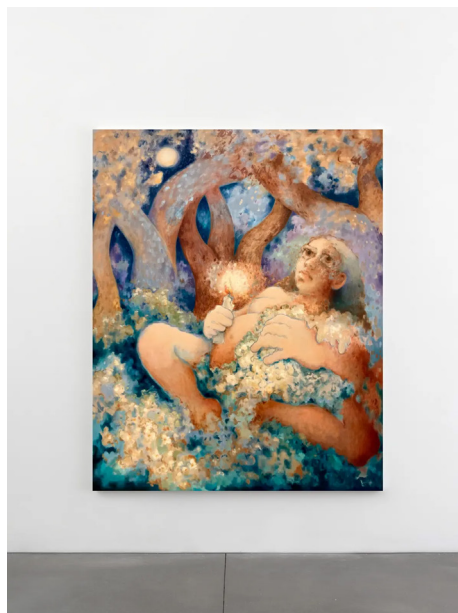
Mai Blanco, *Abundance*, 2025. Oil on linen, 78 ¾ by 63 inches. © Mai Blanco. Courtesy Mai Blanco and Nino Mier Gallery.  
Photo: Erin Brady / Dan Bradica Studio.

In *I Crave to Be All*, Mai Blanco's thought-provoking first solo exhibition in New York, the self-portrait embodies maternity as a lived experience. Here buildups of unconstrained brushwork culminate in buoyantly stylized and theatrical bodies, often positioned within semi-representational landscape settings. Encompassing the multifaceted and transformative journey of self-investigation, pregnancy, early motherhood and childcare, Blanco's thirteen oil-on-linen autobiographical paintings captivate us with their iconographic individuality, mythological subtexts, and art-historical evocations. Emblematizing raw corporeality and emotive content, these paintings come across as striking revelations of femininity, motherhood, and artmaking.



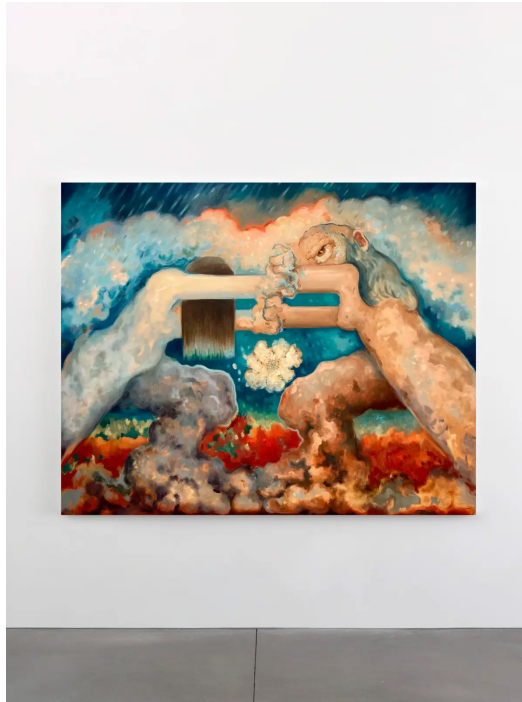
Installation view: Mai Blanco: *I Crave to Be All*, Nino Mier Gallery, New York, 2025. © Mai Blanco. Courtesy Mai Blanco and Nino Mier Gallery. Photo: Erin Brady / Dan Bradica Studio.

Blanco's gestural marks, sometimes terse and sometimes extended, convey impressions of staccato or legato musical notes. They accumulate into a distinctive mode of self-portraiture that foregrounds the dual roles of mother and painter. In *The Source* (all works 2025), which recalls Giorgione's *Tempest* (ca. 1508), Blanco appears sitting in the open air, partially submerged in a body of water, nursing an infant with her right arm and clasping the painter's brush in her left hand. The primordiality of nature surrounds Blanco's human figures—in this conjured tableau the sitter takes on the mythological stance of the Greek goddess Gaia: the primordial mother, the source of all life, and the personification of the Earth. Yet here the first goddess to emerge from Chaos is simultaneously a personification of the painter whose gaze arrests the beholder, as if demanding an aesthetic judgment. Blanco's work prompts us to reconsider the rather overdetermined divisions between such hierarchical typologies as folk art, naïve art, and the "primitivizing" avant-garde. A work of self-inquiry that operates between motherhood and art-making, between subsistence and imagination, *The Source* engenders an evocative exchange between life and art.



Mai Blanco, *Mourning*, 2025. Oil on linen, 78  $\frac{3}{4}$  by 63 inches. © Mai Blanco. Courtesy Mai Blanco and Nino Mier Gallery. Photo: Erin Brady / Dan Bradica Studio.

Blanco's *Abundance* refers directly to Peter Paul Rubens's painting of the same name: a woman with her head turned to the side wears a red-orange dress that exposes one breast in an iconographic reference to the Roman goddess Abundantia. In Blanco's version, a daughter clutches her mother's left arm and shoulder. Within a dynamic composition Blanco has also substituted the mythological cornucopia with a sundry of fruits cascading down her subject's garment. Notwithstanding its expressive immediacy and raw application of paint, the robust and rounded shapes of Blanco's *Abundance* call to mind Pablo Picasso's neoclassical figures, like those of *Mother and Child* (1921) at the Art Institute of Chicago. The radiant aureole behind the pair of figures in Blanco's painting heightens the allegorical iconography of plenty and fertility. Blanco's depiction of agriculture and a bountiful harvest comes across as a parable that engages maternity as both a theme in itself and a subject of pictorial representation.



Mai Blanco, *The Fight*, 2025. Oil on linen, 63 by 78 ¾ inches. © Mai Blanco. Courtesy Mai Blanco and Nino Mier Gallery.  
Photo: Erin Brady / Dan Bradica Studio.

In *Mourning*, Blanco depicts herself holding a flaming candle within an idyllic and phantasmic woodland, her gaze directed upward toward an unknowable space. This work evokes both existential inquiry and transformative experiences such as love, pregnancy, pleasure, sorrow, pain, loss, grief, and mourning. The exaggerated features of the artist's corporeal self and her milieu are balanced by an aura of luminosity and radiance. The beguiling chromatic palette here seems to thwart the painter's existential angst, perhaps emerging from the artist's negotiation between the demanding responsibilities of motherhood, its powerful gratifications, and the imaginative impulse, even overpowering urge, of self-expression through painting. Though wedded to pictorial tradition, Blanco's vocabulary remains equally engaged with coloristic abstraction: pale yellow and turquoise brushmarks imbue the likeness of the portrait with elements of nonfiguration.

*The Fight* finds itself the pièce de résistance of the exhibition due to its chaotic ferocity, surreal imagery, and forceful depiction of the artist's internal conflict. Like the two figures in Frida Kahlo's *The Two Fridas* (1939), *The Fight* personifies the duality of a fractured self. Recalling El Greco's swirling skies and otherworldly radiance, this painting exudes sensations of both instinct and introspection. The figure on the right displays an enormous eye—the painter's organ of sight, hyperbolized—imparting a measure of self-reflexivity to this playful, fluid, and chimerical image. The same could be said of the exhibition as a whole, which balances unrestrained expression with thoughtful investigation of the self and the history of representation.