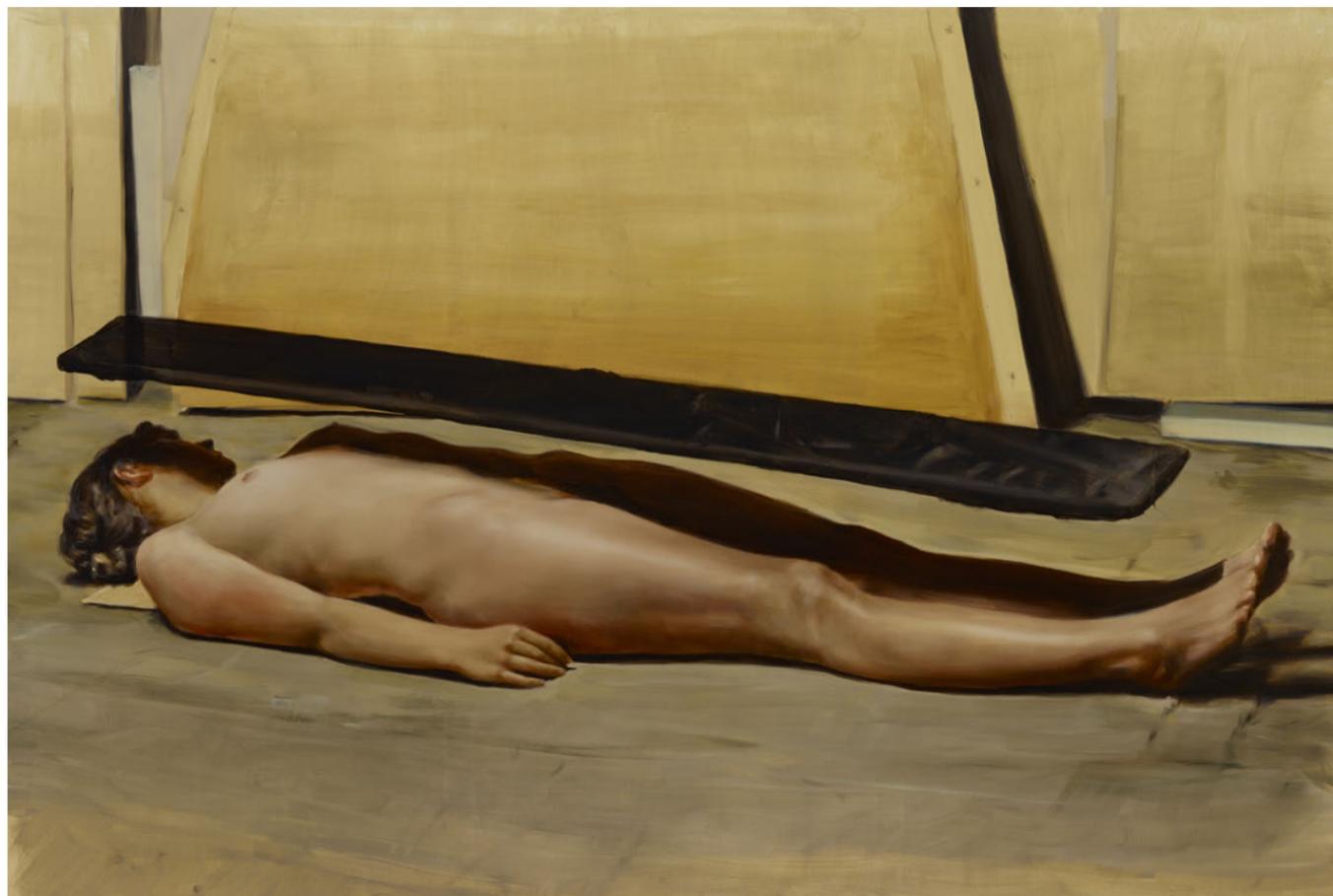


Michaël Borremans
The Hovering Wood, 2011
Oil on canvas
78 3/4 x 118 3/8"
Courtesy David Zwirner, NY / London & Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp



Boa constricted.

Our family was never very poor, but pretended to be, to keep the evil eye uninterested. Good health was met with knocks on wood. Bad health was welcomed like an irritating houseguest, with a begrudging hospitality. A long night's sleep was considered suitable for cats and other indulged animals that had nine lives to waste — you know, on rapid eye movement.

The older generations in our home would point to various nocturnal creatures as fine examples of living things with proper work ethics. The daytime sleeping patterns of those animals were struck from record, in lectures meant to motivate and probably shame. I never felt humiliated, however. I was eager to follow instructions and to please, so I took the lectures at face value and tried to emulate those animals that I thought burned the midnight oil, like horseshoe crabs, rats, owls, and opossums.

In short order, my nighttime prowls grew quite intolerable for my family. What did me in, I think, were all the seed and peanut shells I'd left around the home. Also, the rustling I liked to do while everybody else was giving way to bodily weaknesses, shutting their eyes and drifting into apneas, paralyses and other forms of stinky human rest.

For those few nights that I had acted as a rodent, I'd crept around our single-family home, thinking of all the things I could accomplish in my extra waking hours. Mostly, I snacked and watched TV. As morning rolled around, I usually found myself blinking awake in front of the early news broadcast. Perhaps upon waking, I did feel humiliated, though nobody was up early enough to catch me in my disappointed state. I was disgusted by my personal failure to control my sleepy, weepy body, and its susceptibility to routine, and to gum disease, early-onset heartburn and probably, at some point, to some other sort of chronic pain.

My father told me that if my hot prowls were to continue, that in all fairness — literal man though he was, and head of a literal household (those were different times) — the family would have no choice but to treat me like a house animal and not a feral one, because I did, after all, live in their house and exterminating me was not an option. In other words, he said, they'd have to have me immunized and spayed or neutered. At that age, I had already had several vaccinations and was no pussy when it came to needles and blood. But I did have to look the latter threats up in a dictionary. I still resent you for that fucking joke, old man.

Then in an act entirely out of character, I screamed that, if that's how they wanted it, then fine, then, fine, that I would turn myself in at an animal shelter so that a better family could adopt me there.

That may be memory playing tricks on me, actually. When and where this childhood took place, there were no shelters for used, abandoned animals, only streets and garbage dumps and alleyways and pounds. It's probably more likely that my act, entirely out of character, was screaming that I was going to run off to the streets like an outdoor cat and wouldn't they be sorry when I didn't come back home that night or ever, even though I could remember our address, and would for the rest of my living days. To which my family, phlegmatic but in unison, knocked on all the wood available to them in that very wooden house.