

Ladies, Beautiful Ladies

Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson


Works from the series *Blonde Musicians*,
oil on LP covers, 2011–2014

Painted with oil on album covers from the 1960's, 70's and 80's, the ongoing series *Blonde Musicians* by Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson bears witness to the artist's longstanding engagement with the complex cultural image of the blonde. *Ladies, Beautiful Ladies* presents a selection of modified LP covers with their largely unknown models, chosen by virtue of their blondness and beauty. Once mere objects of desire, these women have been relocated from the social imaginary of the past and transformed into art through Birgisson's act of selection and his strokes of oil paint.

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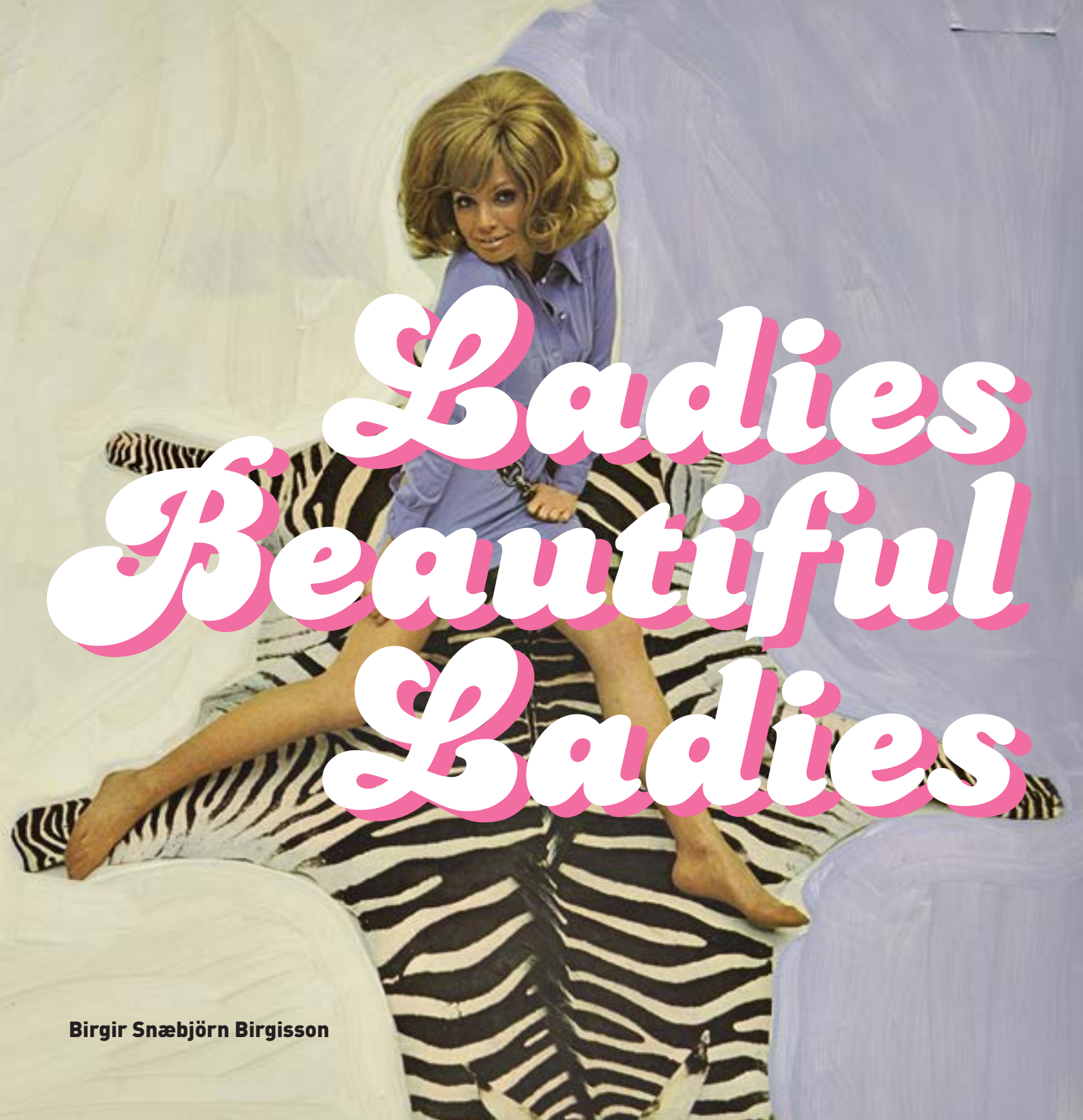
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See a Little Light

Looking At, Feeling For and Thinking With the Works of Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson

Hope. Sure, there is hope, always, right. But hope for what? For something better and successful? Perhaps, but not necessarily so. But: there is hope, always hope for something else, something different, in this case, something more beautiful. Let me repeat it: for something more beautiful.

And yes, this more, this increasing, this advancing, this intoxicating beauty is found in the content of the works with and within the practice of Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson. A practice that is both very specific and amazingly focused: it deals with not only beauty, but the beauty of blonde women.

This is then not to be understood as something objectified, kitschy or plain silly. There is no token, no formula, but a potentiality, a promise found and grounded in the everyday life and all the things and images surrounding it. This is beauty in process – the hearts and minds on the move, moving in and through their own groove. This is work in action that takes seriously the principle of the triple T’s: it translates, transforms and transmits.

Therefore, the beauty, against all odds, is no longer only located in the eye of the beholder. It is neither general, nor generic. It turns into a combination of a personal take with a common base: it becomes a singularity. It is situated in and committed to the works, their progress, their evolvment and emergencies. In clear and simple words: something that is beforehand neglected is now altered, changed and turned into something else, something beautiful.

In the works of Birgisson this “something else”, something that is more as in more beautiful, can take the shape of a painting, a sculpture or even a text, a story painted and told in watercolors. Or: it takes the shape and make of hundreds of modified LP covers, an ongoing series called *Blonde Musicians*, which started in the year 2011. These are the multiple yet individual covers of an almost by-passed technology that represent and promote beautiful blonde ladies in a wide variety of poses and costumes. Never dirty, never petty, but always beautiful – in their respective amazing and strange ways – not to forget: in their peculiar and hard-won grace.

Can you see a little light here? I thought so, too.

It is a series of album covers that he has been collecting, found objects, or gathered from the hemisphere of flea markets here and there and everywhere. That is the starting point. A cover with a blonde woman – and then something happens. Then the triple T’s take their cue. One by one, and constantly in a tightly interwoven interaction.

First of all, it is translated. Not copied, not imitated, it is moved from its original context – and it is made into something else. Before all action is taking place, there is the translation as in the wish to lift these nowadays seemingly weird and forlorn objects into yet another sphere and standard. It is not only about making these lost and not yet found objects into works of art. It is more, much more – the act of sky-lifting the inherent

beauty of the covers into the level that they deserve. It is a deep-seated beauty that contains all the necessary disappointments, shortcomings and contradictions of our lives as mixed-up complex personalities, not as consumed and consulted neat and tidy products. Its beauty shines so bright precisely because it is constantly aware of its darker moods and its embedded temporality.

Certainly, they are and remain album covers. Nothing there to that, no. But, at the same time, they gain another integrity, another identity. Yes, another intensity. The past of the object is clearly and by necessity present. A past that, I would assume, most of us have contact and connection with.

These were objects of desire, but of a very mundane kind. Most of the albums – even if among the over 400 ladies, beautiful ladies in the series there are a handful of well-known figures from the world of pop music – depict not the unknown soldier, but the unknown model, the representative for being blonde, and well, for sure, beautiful. They were photographed quickly and cheaply, outside of the limelight, and then used for the covers of albums that most of the time did not plan to reach to the top or to be remembered eternally as milestones in music. They were covers for albums that were fast and furiously produced for the market as openly second rate, often furnished with covered hits of the time by bands that – just like the girl on the cover – nobody really ever would know anything about. Not their names, not their wishes, their wants and vanities.

They were there, and then no longer there. But now they are back. Can you see it, too – the light?

I remember these covers, oh yes I do. I remember them from my parents’ so-called record collection. Searching, diving for musical pearls there was a task that was predetermined not to be a success. But you still tried, kept on going on – harassed and intimidated by the obvious contradiction between the content and the cover, the promise and the not-to-be-happening delivery.

They remind me of a past that is gone – and also of a time and sensibility that has certainly nowadays changed. Yet it is not sticky nostalgia, nor mourning for an imaginary past where things were pleasant, controlled and cared for. There is the catch, and the pitch – the connecting of dots between then and now. It is a bruised connection that does not break even, but grows either too high or digs deeper, floating over or freezing under.

Meaning: Did they really look as tacky then as they do now? Cheap, lazy – even in their semi-sexist take and texture?

I do not know, but what I do know is that everything is changed when they are translated as an idea, and made to move from something to something else – and then transformed. They are painted over. Carefully, so very caressingly.

There is a distinguished distance – gained and composed.

An anecdote from Birgisson highlights this move and movement from the original to the work of art. When he started the process, he intended to follow a strategy that would be as accurate and authentic as possible. Thus, when he began painting the albums, he was, in fact, listening to the albums themselves – a strategy that soon proved to be filled with pure agony. Too many badly covered songs in the molded soundscapes of cheap production are something no oil paint can reduce or force to fade away.

Therefore, the distance and the translation, the movement from there to here was necessary. It is the move from a silly object to a seriously beautiful work of art. A work that is both/and, both pretty and, for sure, ugly. It is a promise of a future with a reminder of its past, the tracts and the paths of its tears and fears. And yes: all this achieved in a couple of strokes of oil paint, with the minimal strategy of making less to become more, much more.

This is the process where we see the difference. Now it is what it is – a relic of consumerism from the 70’s with routes and roots to and from suburbia – and then it becomes something completely different. It becomes a celebration, so to say, of the power and ability of the act of transforming.

What we see, in their newly found re-location, are the women in their poses, in their summer hats and attires. They might look coy, or aching in their mission to please, but they are real. Not lost but found. The setting and

the background are no longer the social imaginary of the time that has long gone. These ladies, these images have gained a new time – and place.

For sure, they are what they are. Not innocent, not naïve. They are objects of desire that serve us well – and that give us more than we might even be prepared for. Because as newly established works of art, with a new touch and style, they raise the stakes and they become active – they move away from the objectified passivity and turn into works of art that challenge us. They challenge us in terms of what we see and what we remember – how we want to carry on and what we try to forget but somehow cannot.

All of a sudden the past becomes present, and it cuts like a diamond, oh yes it does. The shadows of these smiles, these mental sensitive mountains that are higher than high and lower than low. It is a series that throws us off balance and leaves us with an ache. The assumed cuteness and silliness has disappeared. Instead, what we have is something that stares back at us. And yes, it stares hard back at us.

Luckily, there exists a song, appropriated for this connection and context, that connects the dots. A song called “Feed the Tree” that bites back and annoys while it entertains and keeps us safe and sound, wide awake and willing for more. It is a song by a group called Belly, an indie band with lead singer and songwriter Tanya Donnelly, from the East Coast of the United States and making waves in the early 1990’s. Its refrain says what

it needs to say: Take your hat off boy when you're talking to me and be there when I feed the Tree.

To repeat: Take your hat off boy when you're talking to me and be there when I feed the Tree.

Thus, I believe, we are getting closer and closer. We all can see a little light. It feels good, it feels great – the warmth and the empowerment encapsulated in it. And now, on top of that, we can see that light in action when it feeds the tree. Oh yes we can. Something is growing, organically and cleverly.

We can witness and treasure it – when we are lucky enough to confront these translated and transformed vehicles of desire in their transmitted environment. This is a site called the exhibition. We face a wall. A full, fulfilled wall of beautiful, translated and transformed women in their transmitted pose and perfection. It is a wall of pleasure, no pain, but a wall of questions, give-and-take searchlights for what, where, how and when – and why not.

The transmission is meticulously performed. The albums do not hang an inch out of their dedicated positions. Their internal dance in unison, their choreography is by their natural character partly contingent, partly serving the needs of the composition that gives a chance both for every single one of the album covers and yes, for the whole as a wall, too.

It is a wall that invites us to be with, to look at, to feel for and to think with. A beauty that takes and that demands – but also sends us back again asking for more and more. For the interaction of the triple T's: translated, transformed and transmitted – and returned back to the action in and through our experiences.

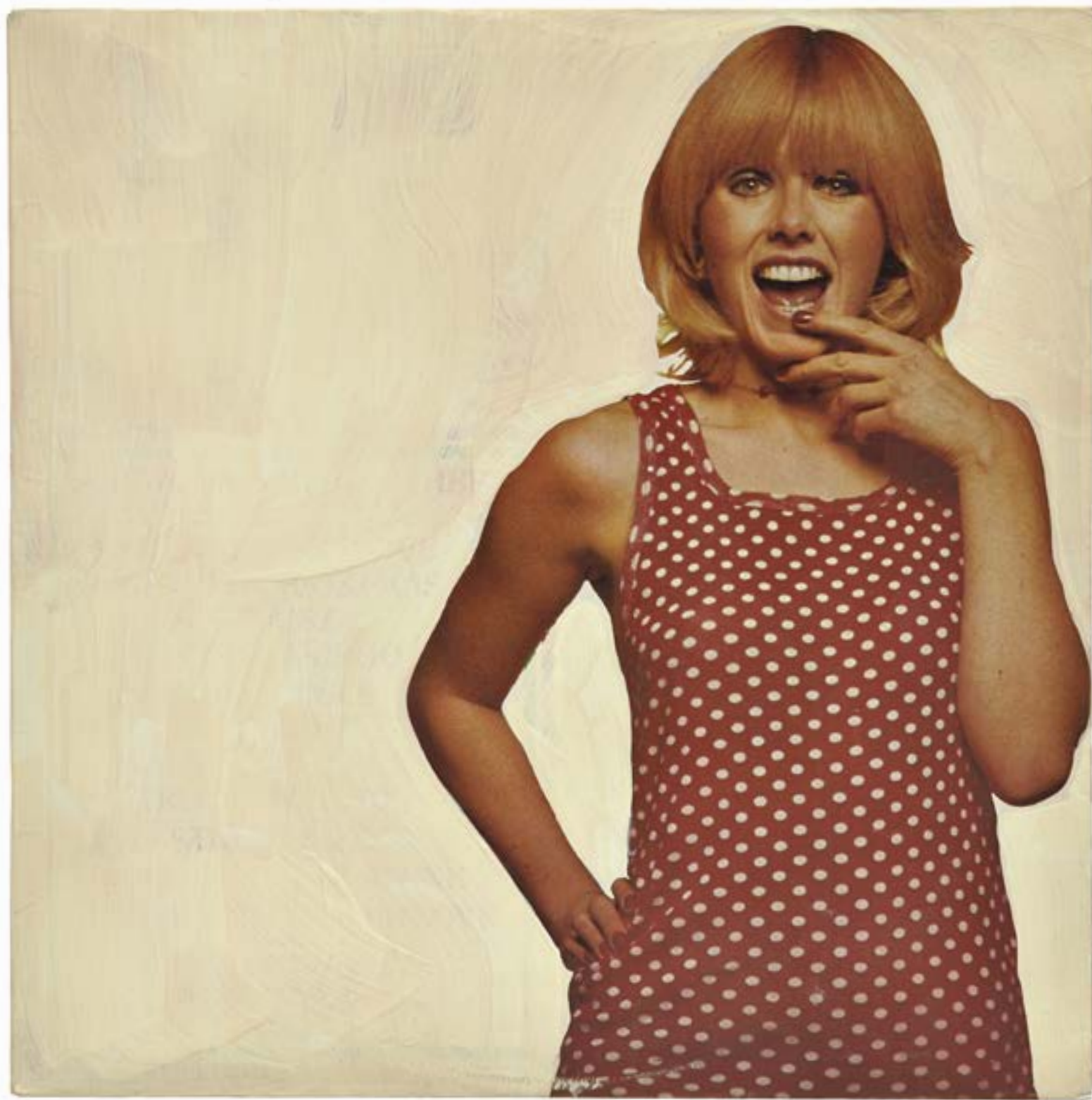
And yes. It is also an invitation to laugh. Not at, no, never at, but with – to laugh with. With the ladies, the beautiful ladies, the desired objects that are composed and distorted, so very helping and hurting, saving and losing in their inner gravity, in their complementary greatness.

It is an invitation, especially, to laugh with ourselves, with all our not-so-tender preys and far-from-perfect modalities – with the past that becomes present and exceeds all the boundaries, because it gives us more. It gives us more light, more energy, more hope, more beauty to and for where it is needed – to and for the everyday, the everyday.

Mika Hannula

























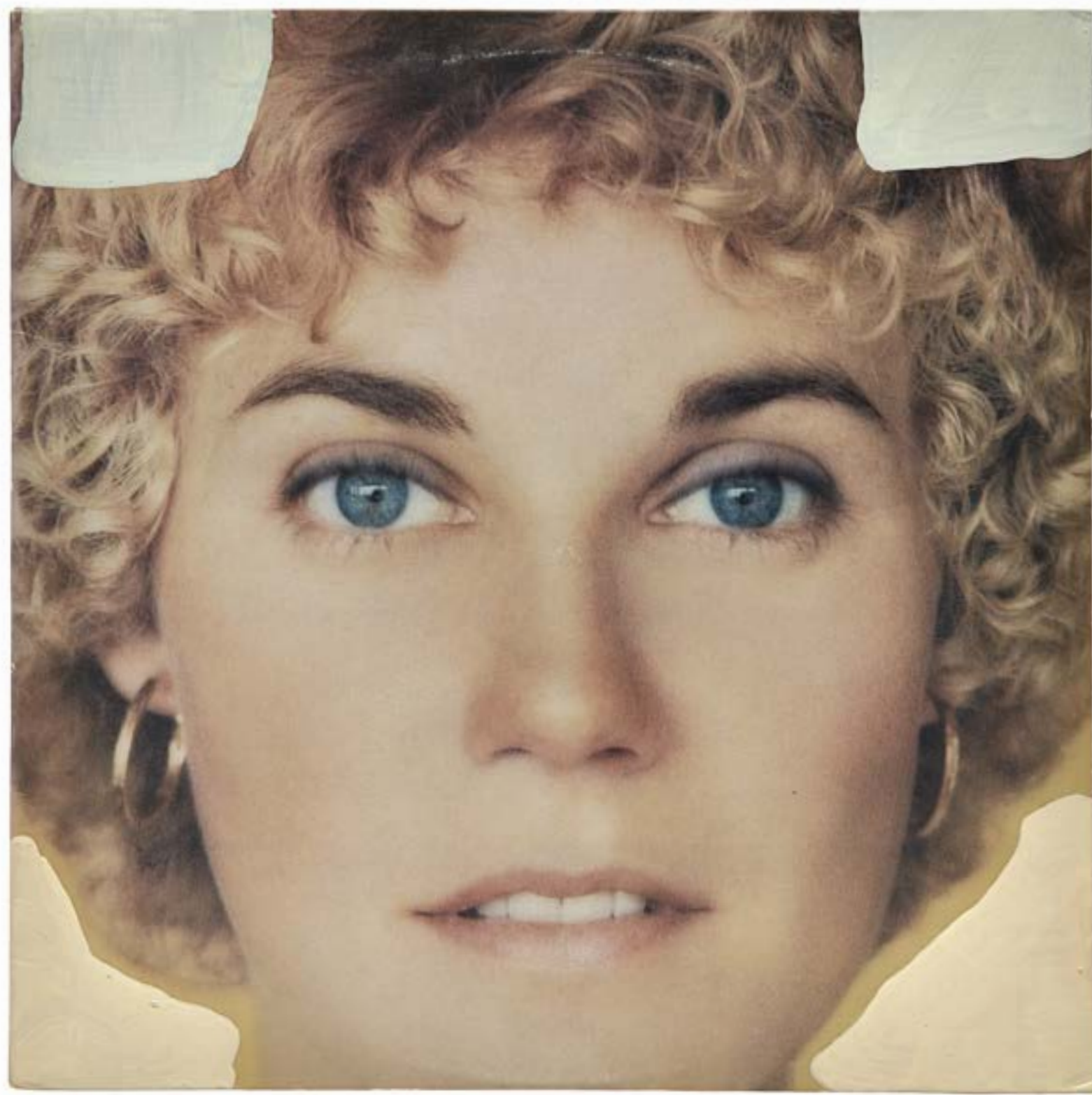
















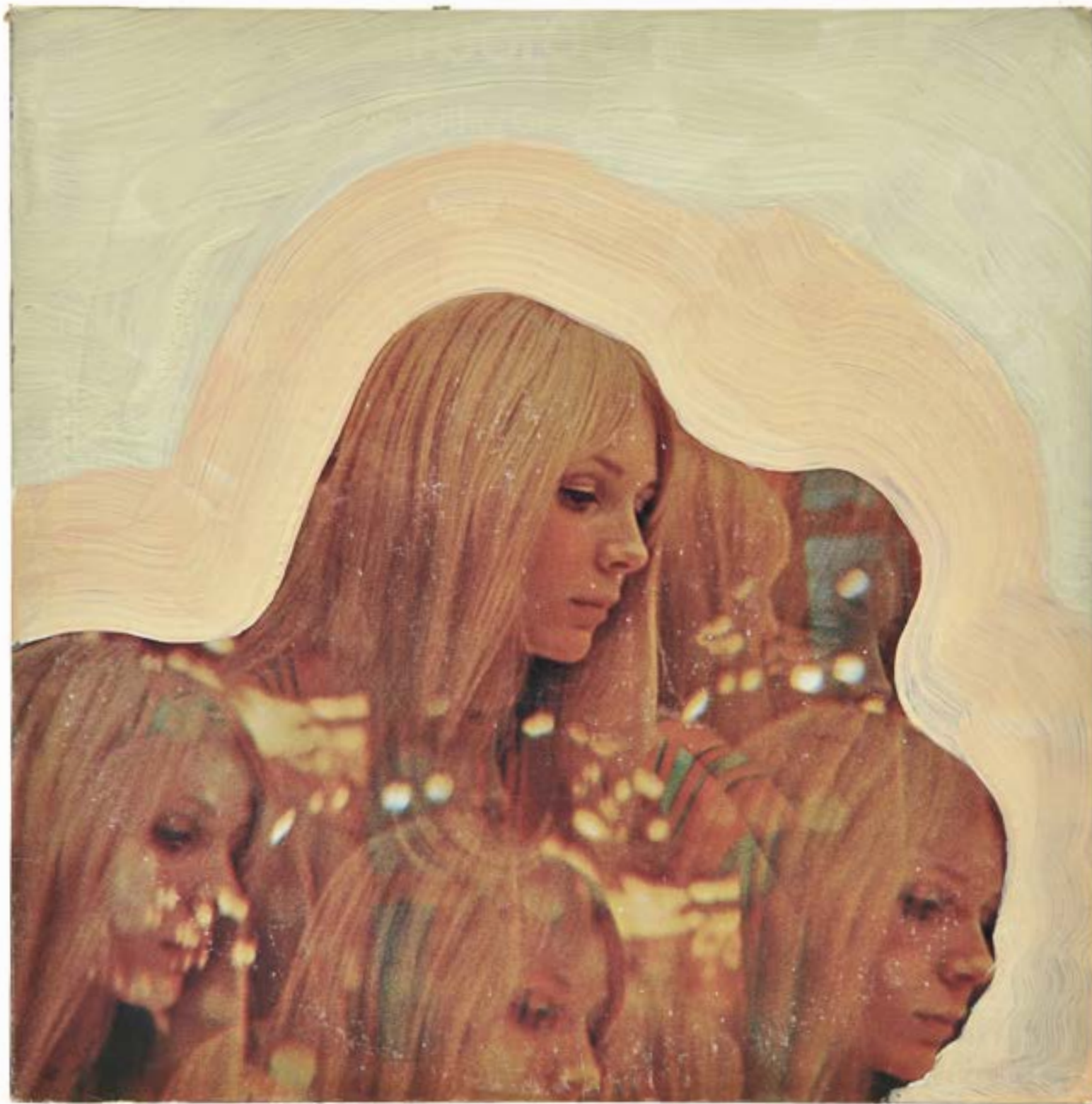








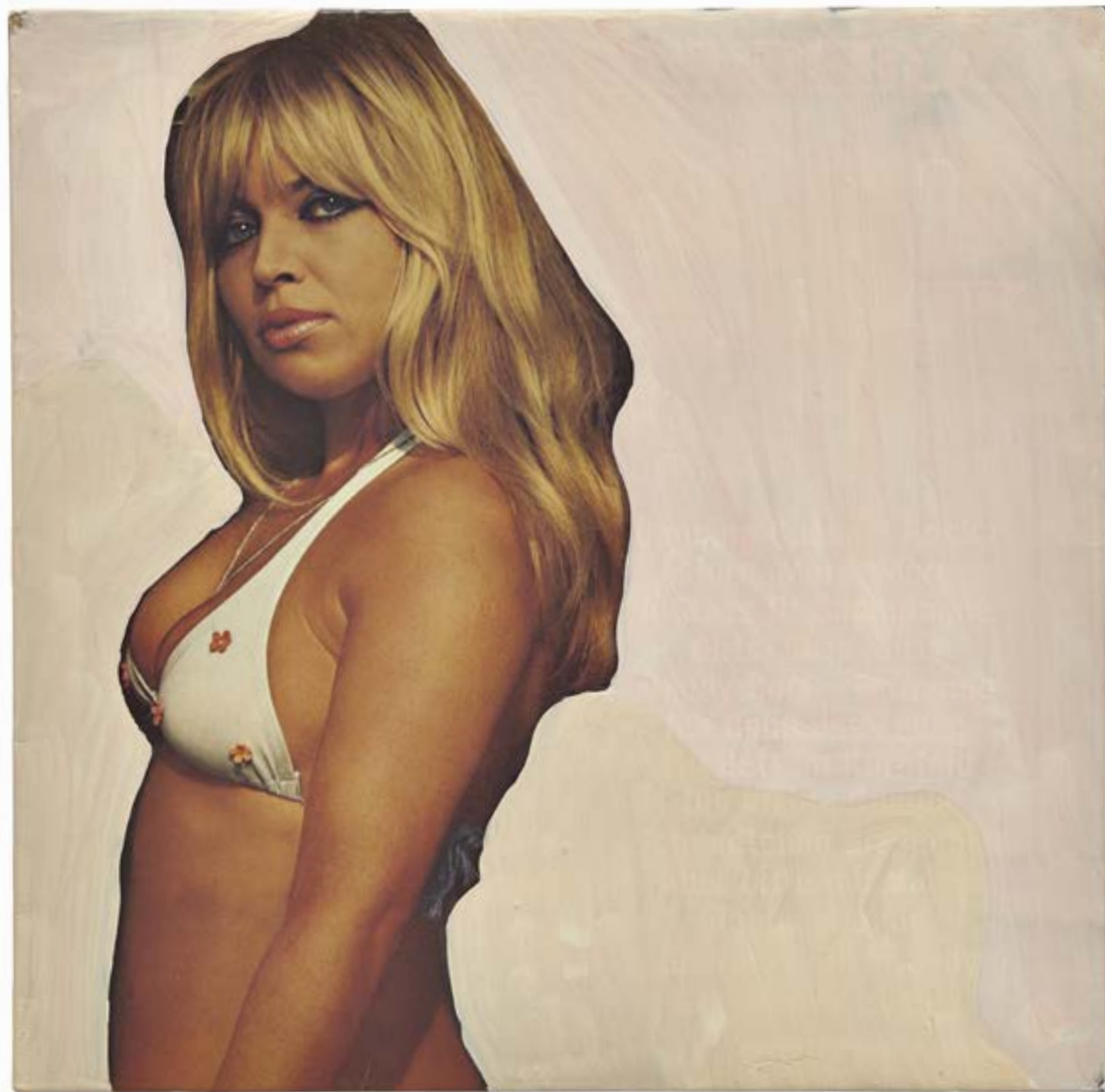






















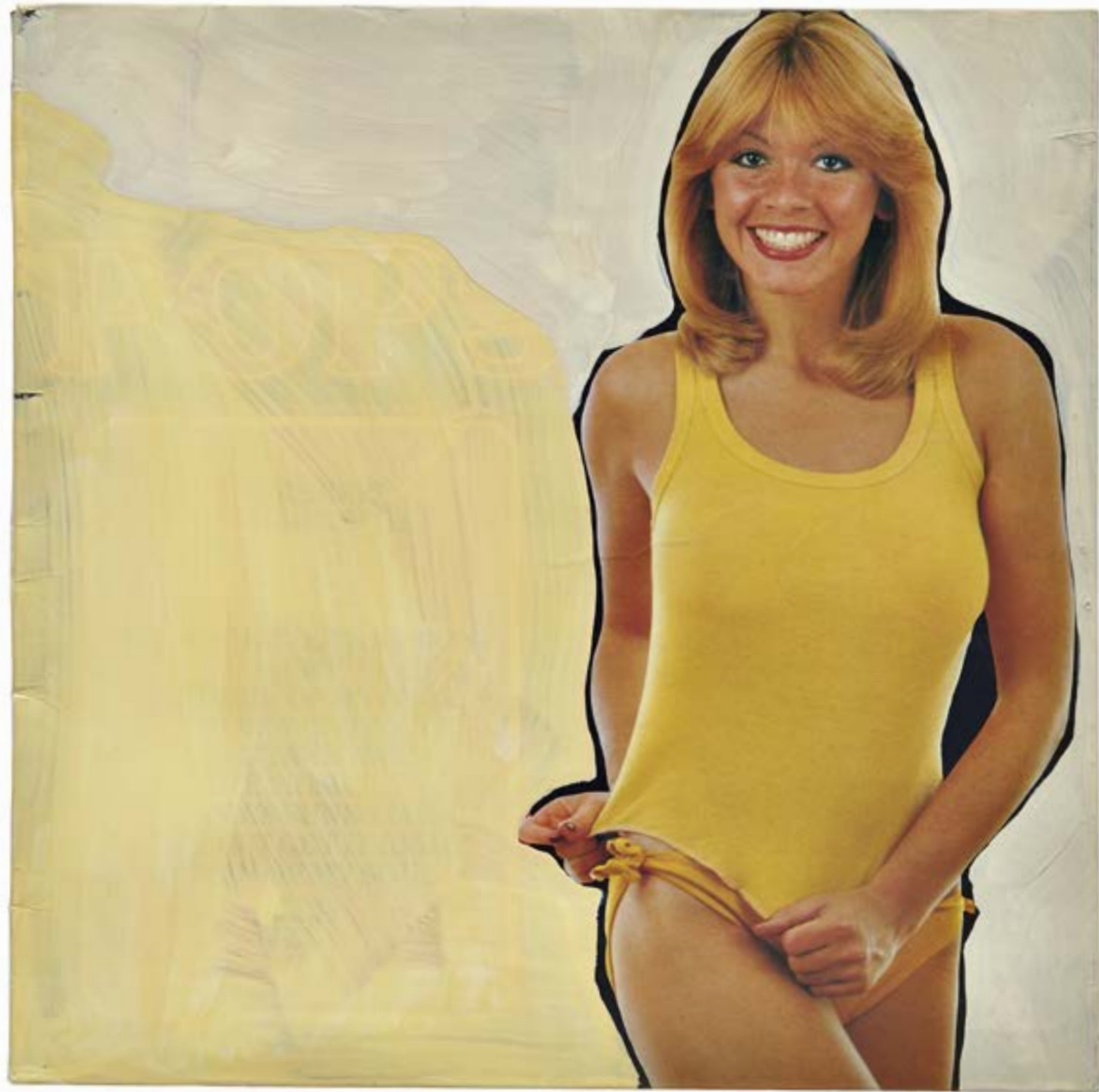






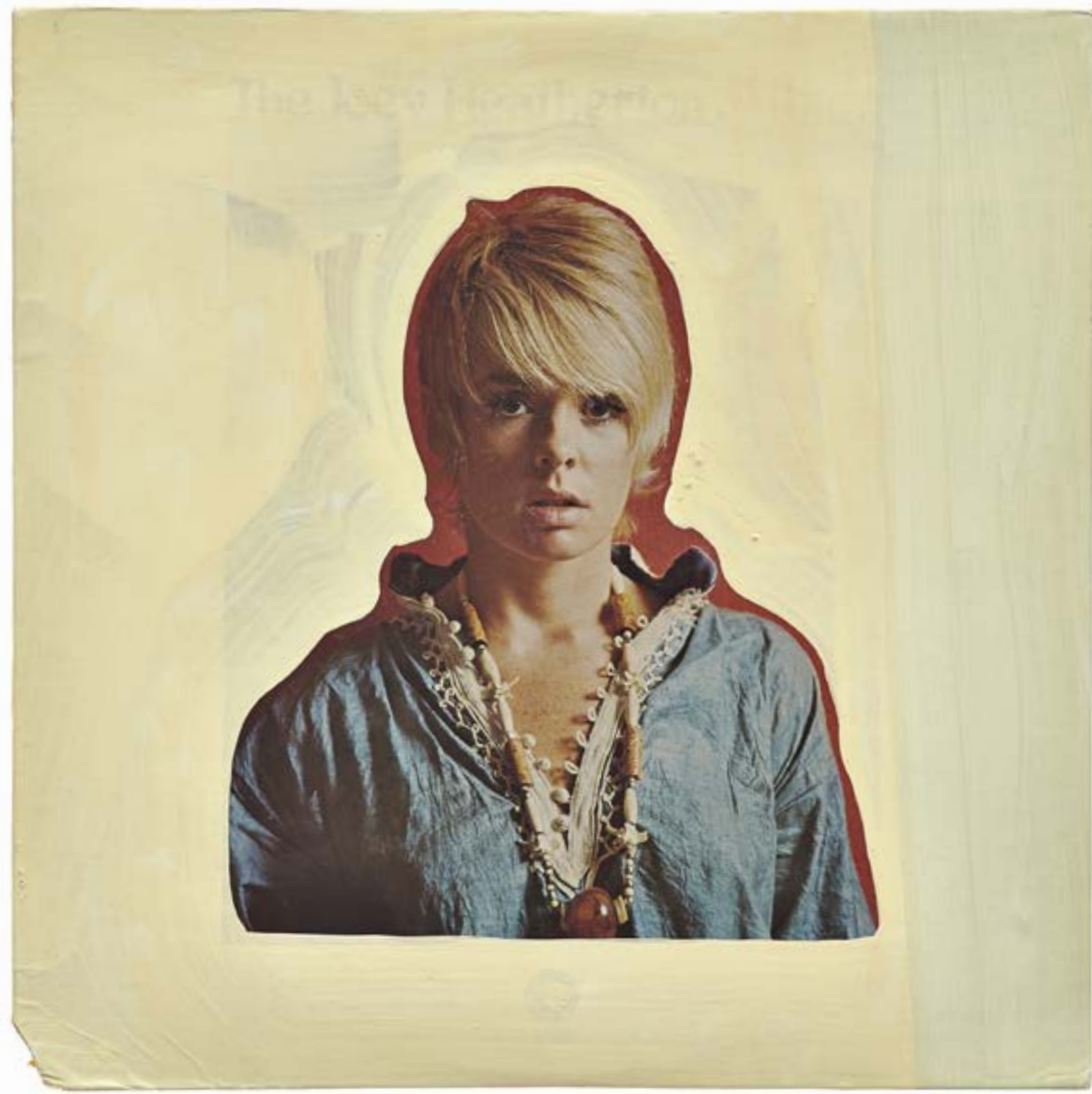














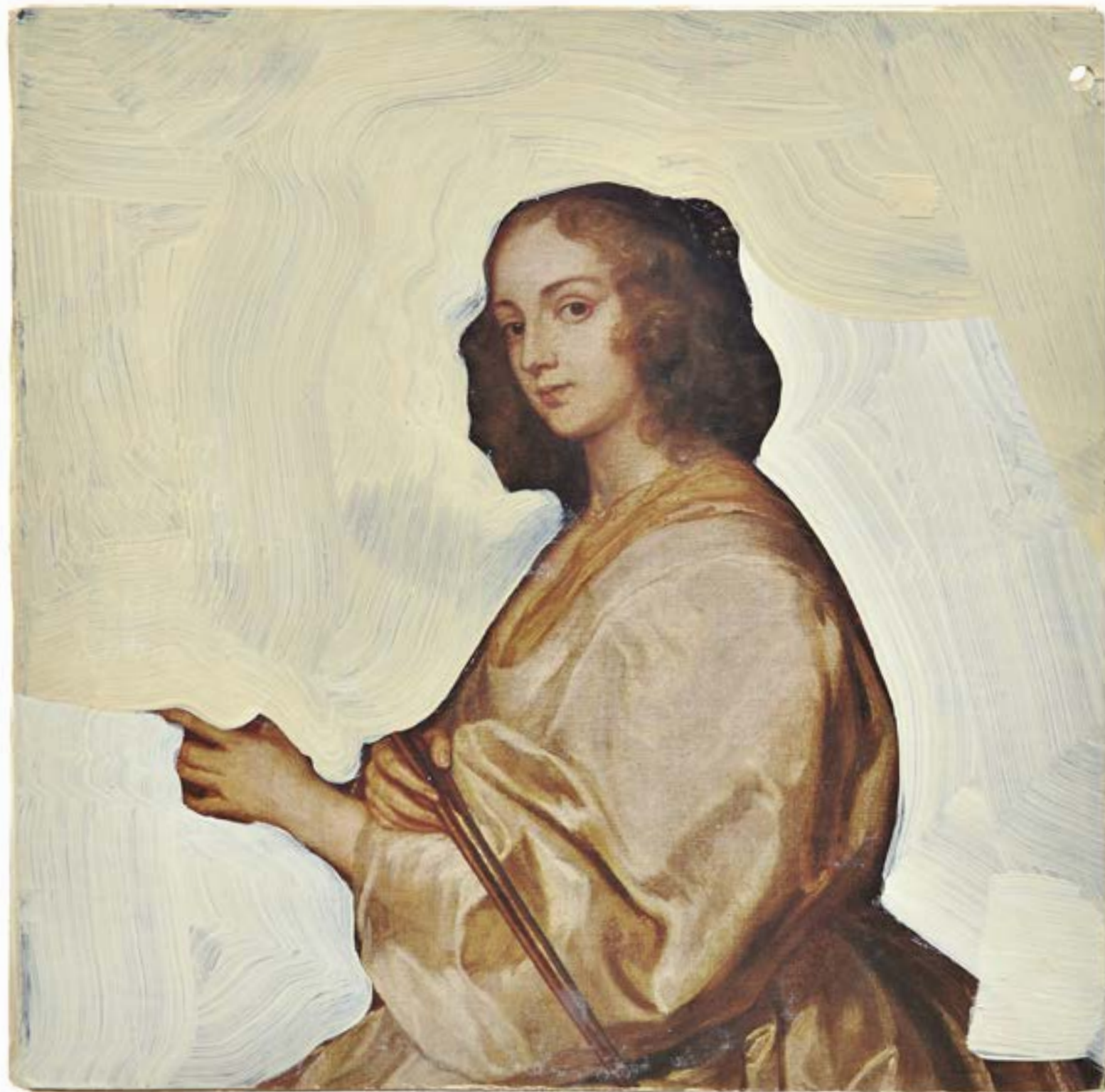
































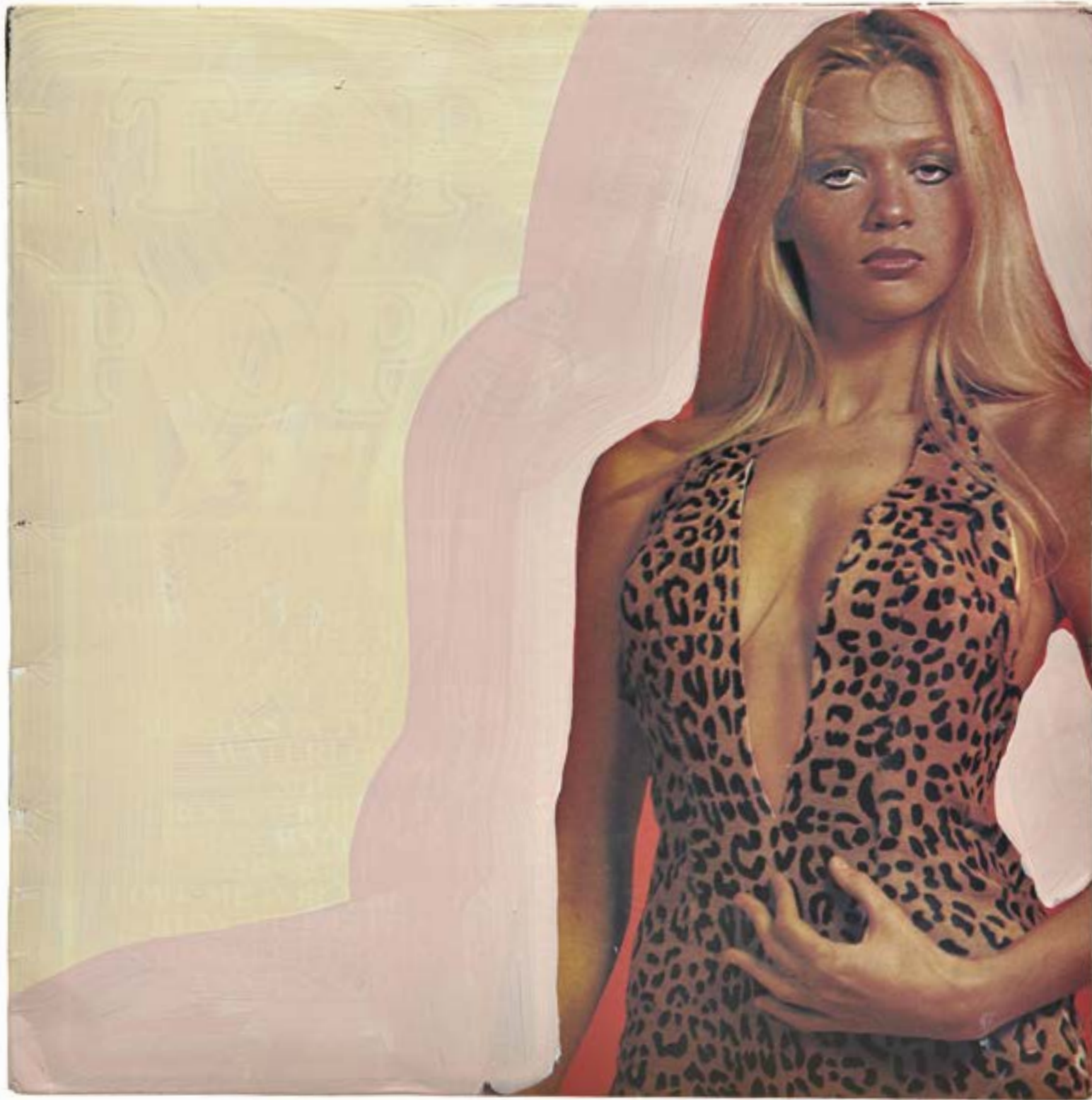










































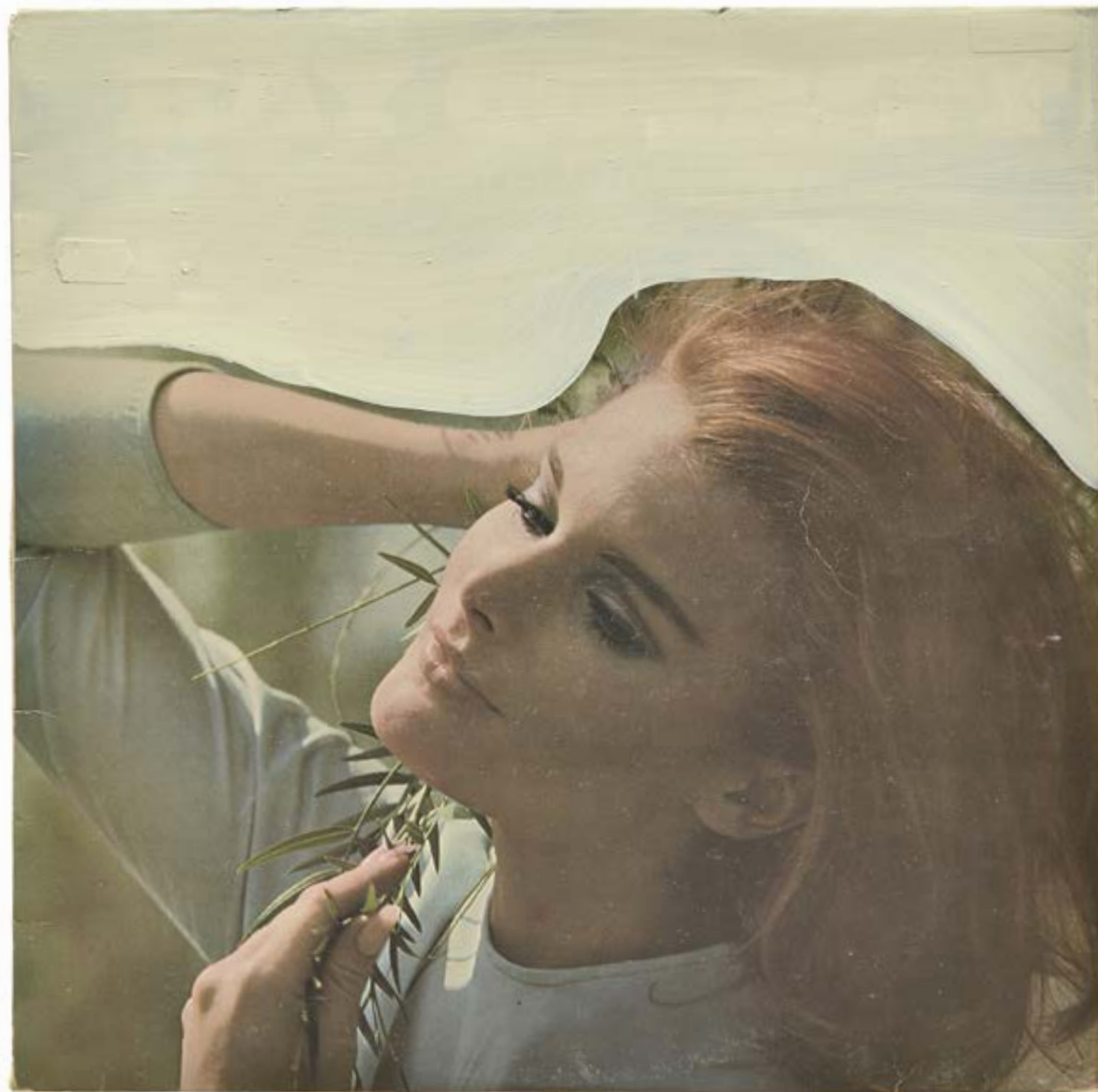














































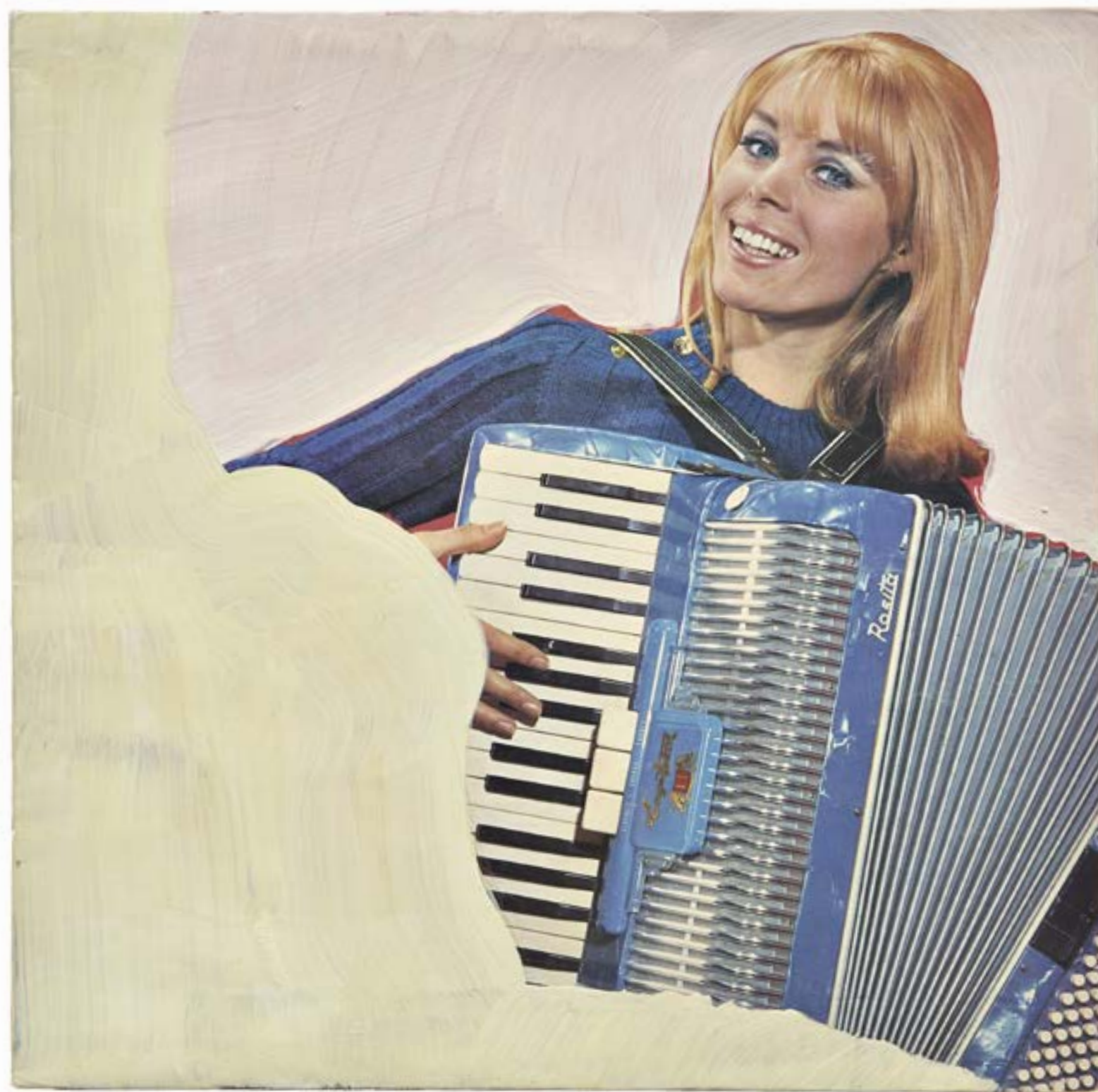
























































































B.B.



Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson was born 1966 in Akureyri, Iceland. He studied art at the Icelandic College of Art and Crafts and École des Arts Décoratifs in Strasbourg, France. He lived for a while in London, but lives and works now in Reykjavík.

www.birgirsnaebjorn.com

Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson and Mika Hannula, curator, writer, lecturer and critic, have worked together in various projects since they first met in 2002, when taking part in a group show called *Stop for a moment – Painting as Narrative*, Proje4L, Istanbul Museum of Contemporary Art. They have collaborated in shows such as *Painting Space and Society*, *Happy Together* and *The Pleasure Principle*.

Hannula curated Birgisson’s exhibition *Blonde Miss World 1951–*. He will also curate the two upcoming solo exhibitions, *Ladies, Beautiful Ladies*.

Selected solo exhibitions

Ladies, Beautiful Ladies
Helsinki Contemporary, Helsinki, Finland, 2014

Ladies, Beautiful Ladies
ASÍ Art Gallery, Reykjavík, Iceland, 2014

Humility
Gallery Turpentine, Reykjavík, Iceland, 2008

Blonde Miss World 1951–
Reykjavík Art Museum, Iceland, 2007

Portraits on the Edge
Gallery Boreas, Pittsfield, MA, USA, 2006

Blond Professions
St John’s Church, Notting Hill, London, UK, 2006

Touching
Kópavogur Art Museum, Iceland, 2005

Blonde Nurses
Kópavogur Art Museum, Iceland, 2001

Hopscotch and Other Games
Gallery Hlemmur, Reykjavík, Iceland, 2001

Four Monitors
Gallery 20 m², Reykjavík, Iceland, 1998

Drawings
The Corridor Gallery, Reykjavík, Iceland, 1997

Two Dimensions Two Visions
The Living Art Museum, Reykjavík, Iceland, 1997

Selected group exhibitions

Points of Contact
LÁ Art Museum, Hveragerði, Iceland, 2014

Icelandic Portraiture
Akureyri Art Museum, Iceland, 2014

The Pleasure Principle
Björkholmen Gallery, Stockholm, Sweden, 2012

The Pleasure Principle
Kling & Bang Gallery, Reykjavík, Iceland, 2011

Into the Tussock
North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks, ND, USA, 2010

Wistful Memory
National Gallery of Iceland, Reykjavík, Iceland, 2010

Stripped Away
Tintype Gallery, London, UK, 2010

Happy Together
Tallinn Art Hall, Estonia, 2009

Painting Space and Society
Gothenburg Konsthall, Sweden, 2007

Tiere auf Grasshockern
Kunsthalle, Bremerhaven, Germany, 2006

Cold Climates
A.P.T. Gallery, London, UK, 2004

One Day
The Corridor Gallery, Reykjavík, Iceland (also curator), 2004

This book was published to accompany the two solo exhibitions *Ladies*, *Beautiful Ladies* by the artist Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson at ASÍ Art Gallery, Reykjavík, Iceland and Helsinki Contemporary, Helsinki, Finland, in 2014. Its title is borrowed from a song by Lee Fields and his band the Expressions, from their album *My World*, 2009. The book contains works from the series *Blonde Musicians*, oil on LP covers, 2011–2014.

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Ladies, Beautiful Ladies

Birgir Snæbjörn Birgisson

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