



MARCIN DUDEK
NEST, 2026

NEST | January 24 –April 4, 2026

Marcin Dudek was ten years old when the Polish People's Republic collapsed, and his childhood unfolded within the turbulence that accompanied Poland's transition to capitalism. In the social housing estates on the outskirts of Kraków, the dismantling of state industries and support systems produced conditions of scarcity, instability, and improvisation that shaped daily life for working-class families. Dudek's practice emerges from this environment, not as a retrospective illustration of hardship, but as a sustained inquiry into how social pressure, precarity, and endurance form subjectivity, memory, and imagination over time.

NEST gives this inquiry architectural form. Installed within the gallery is a reconstruction of Dudek's fifty-square-meter family apartment, where he lived with seven relatives across two decades. Visitors ascend a staircase and pass through a narrow corridor before entering a compressed domestic interior. Devoid of furniture, the space resists nostalgia or documentary reconstruction. Instead, it operates as a hybrid structure, part period room, part sculptural installation, part theatrical environment, in which memory is not represented but spatialized. The apartment functions as a psychological and social map, where artifacts, artworks, and gestures accumulate into an environment that feels at once intimate and unsettled, provisional and uncanny.

A taxidermied hoopoe (or *dudek*), suspended at the entrance, marks the passage into this charged interior. Echoing the artist's family name, the bird introduces a logic of doubling and slippage that recurs throughout the installation. Within the apartment, a radiator bears a sculpted hand chained to its surface, while a small painting nearby depicts a snake poised above a clutch of eggs. Meaning circulates between these elements without settling into fixed allegory. Dudek treats memory as mutable and relational, subject to condensation, displacement, and recombination. Trauma is neither narrated nor resolved, but reworked through metaphor, material juxtaposition, and a deliberate openness that allows play and ambiguity to coexist with gravity.



NEST, 2026. Installation view, Harlan Levey Projects, Brussels, 2026. Photo: Shivadas De Schrijver



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The installation preserves material traces of Dudek's youth, including windows, curtains, photographs scorched into the walls, court documents, early sketches, and magazines that once offered a mental escape. These remnants are interwoven with gestures and artworks that summon lived moments rather than reconstruct them: the glow of a television, the repetitive training of a brother in the living room, parcels of dry goods and coins sent through international aid networks, an early oil painting that once hung in the kitchen, the low acoustic presence of hunger and failing infrastructure. Four works from the *Klatka* series appear as altar-like structures that fold open like manuscripts or journals, recording fragments of life on and around the housing estate. Together, these elements form an environment where memory and imagination overlap, and where the past persists as an affective, dreamlike presence rather than a closed narrative.





Bidul greets visitors at the entrance, combining a radiator, a sculpted hand, and a small oil painting of a snake approaching a clutch of five eggs. The work evokes a formative and traumatic moment from Dudek's childhood, when social services removed his older brothers, binding them to this radiator under the supervision of militia. The young Dudek observed this scene from below, the figures looming like monsters, the radiator enormous, while his mother struggled to keep the children together. An adult now, the fixture doesn't seem so large, but it remains charged with memory, a heavy steel relic inside of the abstracted home. The snake and eggs evoke the precariousness and vulnerability of that household, translating lived experience into a metaphorical and symbolic narrative.

***Bidul*, 2026**

Steel, chain, oil on wood

Sculpture: 134 x 39 x 21 cm - 52 3/4 x 15 3/8 x 8 1/4 in

Painting: 23 x 17 x 0.5 cm - 9 x 6 3/4 x 1/4 in

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Scattered throughout or just outside of the apartment, the *Klatka* series unfold like small altar-like structures, manuscripts or folded journals, each recording fragments of life in the council estate.

Klatka VII Education maps Dudek's education as a sequence of imposed structures, detours, and gradual reorientations. At its center is a standard militia uniform belt. On Dudek's eighteenth birthday, he was struck with it eighteen times, a ritualized punishment marking a threshold into adulthood. In this work, the belt functions as both visual spine and timeline, measuring years of schooling through the language of authority, discipline, and institutional control.

The panel traces Dudek's path from primary school through his teenage years in the school for problem children (OHP), then on to technical school, and eventually to art studies in Salzburg and London. At each stage, he was placed into vocational tracks intended to determine his future. At OHP, he was assigned to the gardening program, and images of shoveling from instructional textbooks recur throughout the work. In practice, students were often sent to dig for roadworks rather than tend gardens. Later, at technical school, Dudek briefly trained as a car mechanic, another prescribed route that was ultimately abandoned.

A rigid grid structures the surface, echoing the lined paper of school notebooks that appears toward the lower portion of the panel. This formal order reinforces education as a system of repetition, discipline, and containment, one that simultaneously restricts and shapes its subjects. The work records not achievement but endurance, tracking how imposed knowledge, labor, and discipline accumulate over time.

Seen in this light, *Klatka VII Education* maps the least predictable part of Dudek's biography. It traces an educational trajectory that was never designed to produce an artist, and yet, improbably, did. The work stands as a record of that unlikely passage, and of the formative pressures that made his eventual practice not only possible, but necessary.

***Klatka VII Education*, 2026**

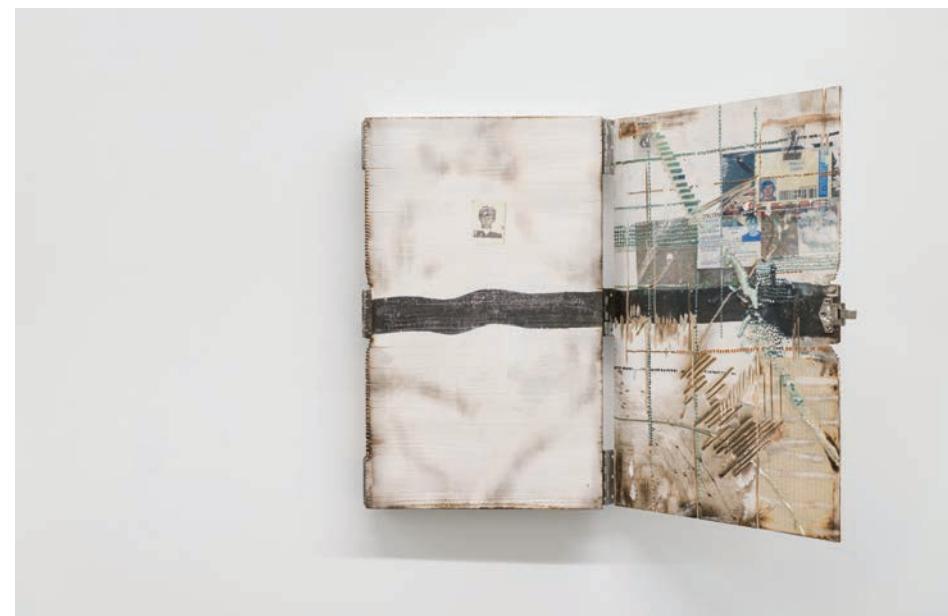
Acrylic paint, wood, steel, image transfer, paper mâché, medical tape, UV varnish

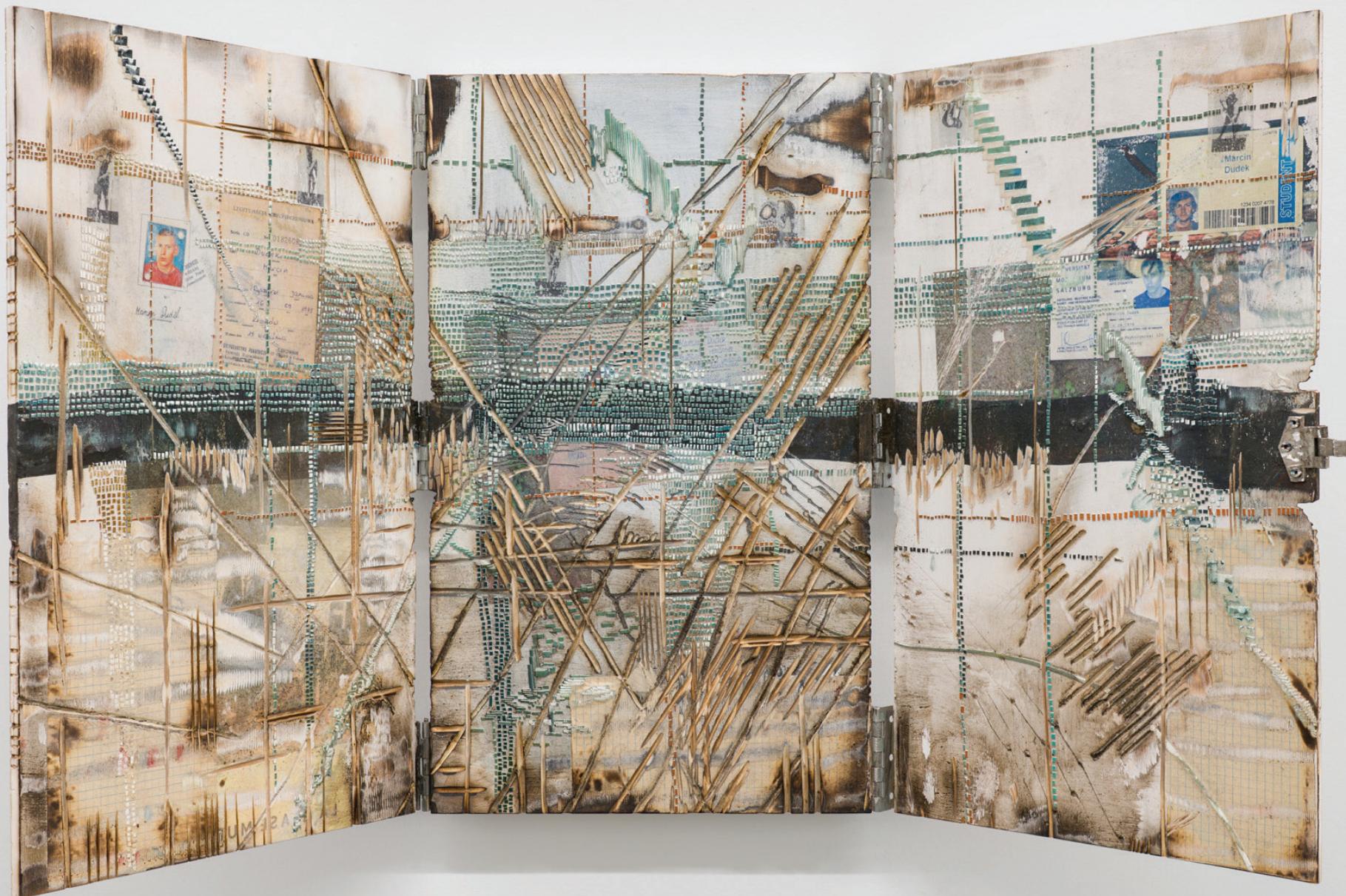
Open: 50 x 86 x 18 cm - 19 3/4 x 33 7/8 x 7 1/8 in

Closed: 50 x 30 x 5 cm - 19 3/4 x 11 3/4 x 2 in

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Photo: Shivadas De Schrijver





Klatka VII Education, 2026. Installation view, "NEST", Harlan Levey Projects, Brussels, 2026. Photo: Shivadas De Schrijver.

Klatka VI Here situates the council estate within a deeper temporal and material landscape. The land beneath the estate is imagined 25 million years ago as a tropical sea, accounting for salt deposits that shaped Dudek's father's work in the salt mines. Reflections of the estate in puddles, a graffiti-marked neighborhood map, amber fragments, and metallic inserts create a topography that merges natural and built environments. Steel dust coats the exterior, evoking the rich, layered soil beneath the surface.



Klatka VI Here, 2026

Acrylic paint, wood, steel, image transfer, paper mâché, medical tape, UV varnish

Open: 46 x 74 x 8 cm - 18 1/8 x 29 1/8 x 3 1/8 in

Closed: 46 x 24.5 x 4 cm - 18 1/8 x 9 5/8 x 1 5/8 in

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Throughout Dudek's childhood, the apartment remained in a state of flux. Sleeping arrangements shifted, inhabitants came and went, and privacy was limited. Toward the end of this period, Dudek shared a room with one of his brothers, an arrangement that introduced a fragile continuity. This modest stability made space for repetition and concentration. Drawing, copying, and sustained looking became daily practices, gradually transforming withdrawal into discipline. In *NEST*, the bedroom is reconfigured as an atelier, where new paintings are shown alongside historic documents and artifacts. Hung on the walls or stacked on the floor, these works reveal the persistence of figuration, narrative, and structure beneath surfaces that might initially appear abstract.

These compositions capture the atmosphere of Dudek's neighborhood bar, the infamous Café Cobra, depicting its regulars and the lives that intersected there. Friends and neighbors appear in abstracted portraits, their stories marked by hardship, resilience, and unexpected turns often leading to tragedy. Painted after a twenty-year hiatus from oil, these works reveal Dudek's singular fluency with brush and pigment, translating his rigor, inventiveness, and narrative layering from mixed-media collage into a strikingly immediate and refined painterly language.

***Tramwaj*, 2025**

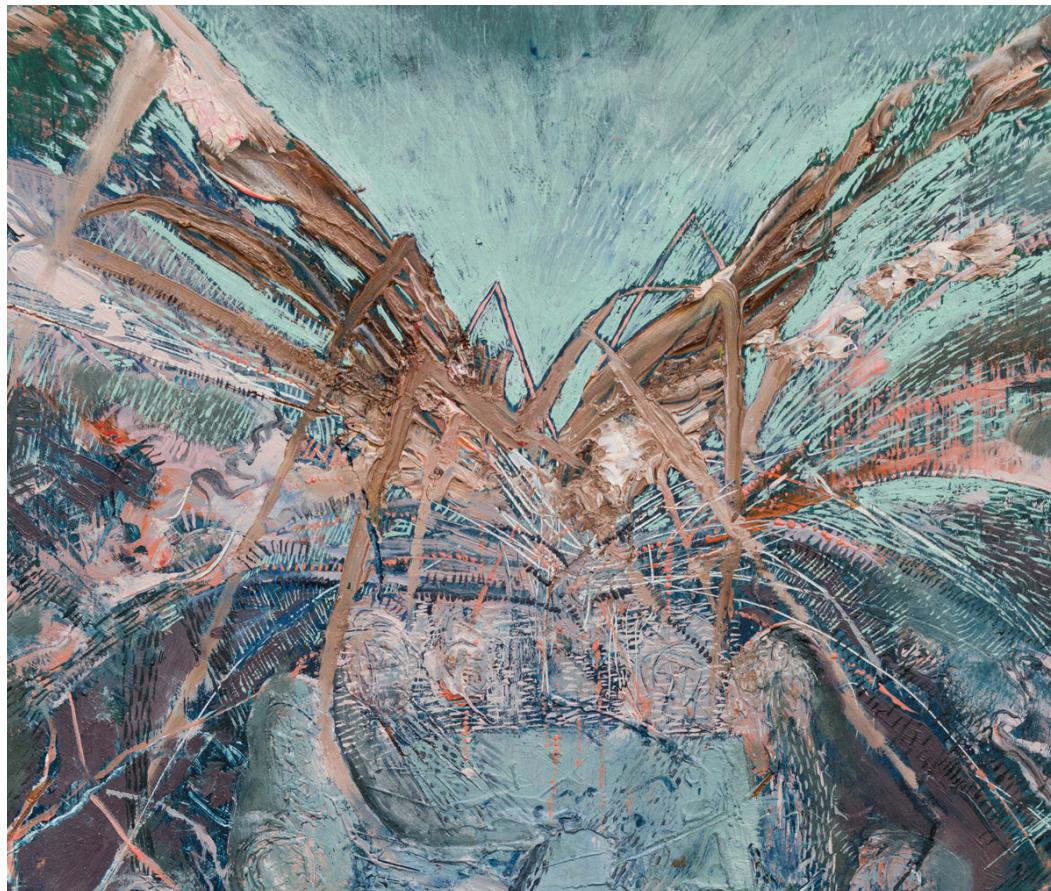
Oil on wood

36 x 27.5 cm - 14 1/8 x 10 7/8 in

Installation view, "NEST", Harlan Levey Projects, Brussels, 2026.

Photo: Shivadas De Schrijver





***The Last Supper*, 2025**

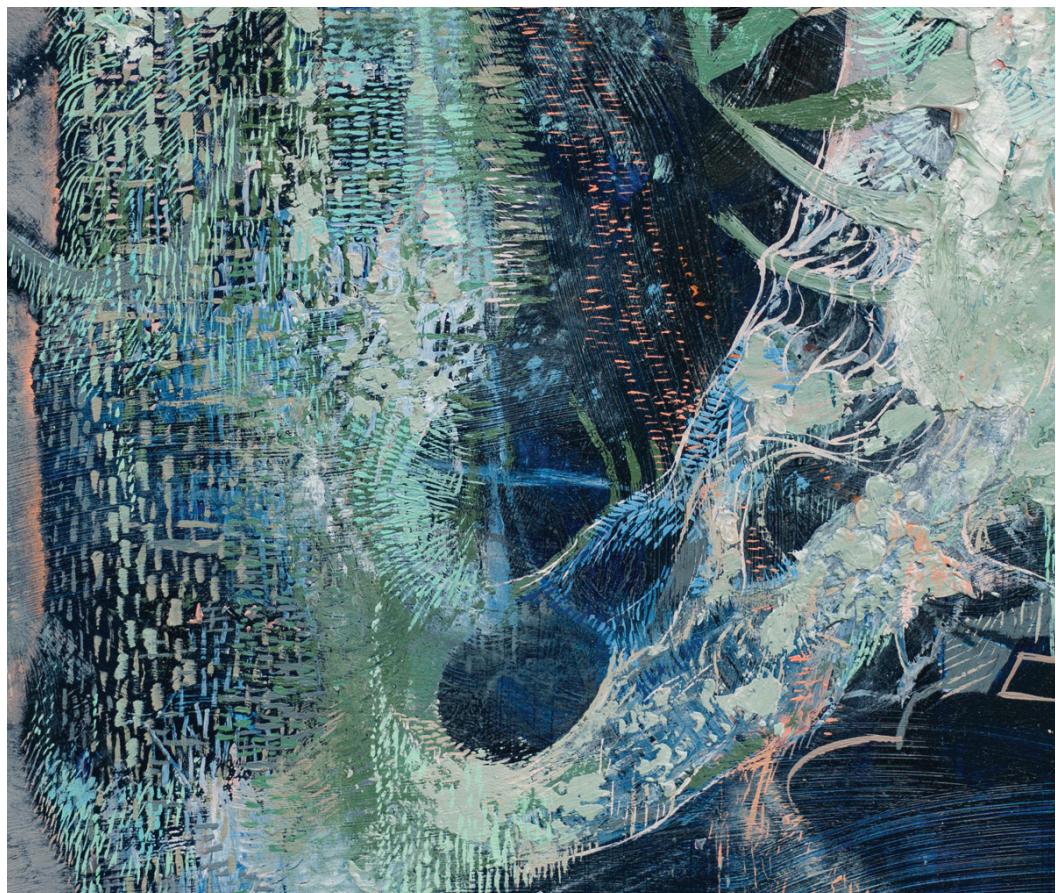
Oil on wood

29 x 27.5 cm - 11 3/8 x 10 7/8 in

Installation view, "NEST", Harlan Levey Projects, Brussels, 2026.

Photo: Shivadas De Schrijver





Biology, 2025

Oil on wood

36.2 x 25.4 cm - 14 1/4 x 10 in

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Exiting the apartment, visitors encounter a large painting depicting the surrounding housing estate as a single, looming form. It is painted over a panel that Dudek began working on in 2016, inspired by Roman Opalka's use of counting as a strategy for thinking through time, scale, and infinity. Dudek set out to apply one million individual cuts of medical tape to the surface, each one carefully counted, testing whether the panel could physically contain such an accumulation. The original vision did not reach its numerical conclusion: the work holds 270,000 cuts, all meticulously recorded, with notes preserved on the back of the panel. Rather than a failure, this threshold marked a turning point.

The buried labor of this earlier attempt remains embedded in the surface, its subtle relief now animating the painting. The cuts pulse like resilient bodies in motion, evoking density, repetition, and collective life. Over this field, Dudek layers a veil of white paint that recalls the cold grey concrete of social housing blocks he photographs wherever he travels. For some, this whitening softens and warms the image; for others, it reads as ice so frozen it appears on the verge of melting. The surface is ultimately heated from within, through burning, cutting, and abrasion, transforming restraint into pressure and stasis into movement.

While rooted in Dudek's own upbringing on a council estate, the work reflects a broader investigation into similar social structures encountered in Molenbeek, Paris, and Manchester. What emerges is not a specific place, but a shared architectural and social condition; monumental, fragile, and persistently alive.

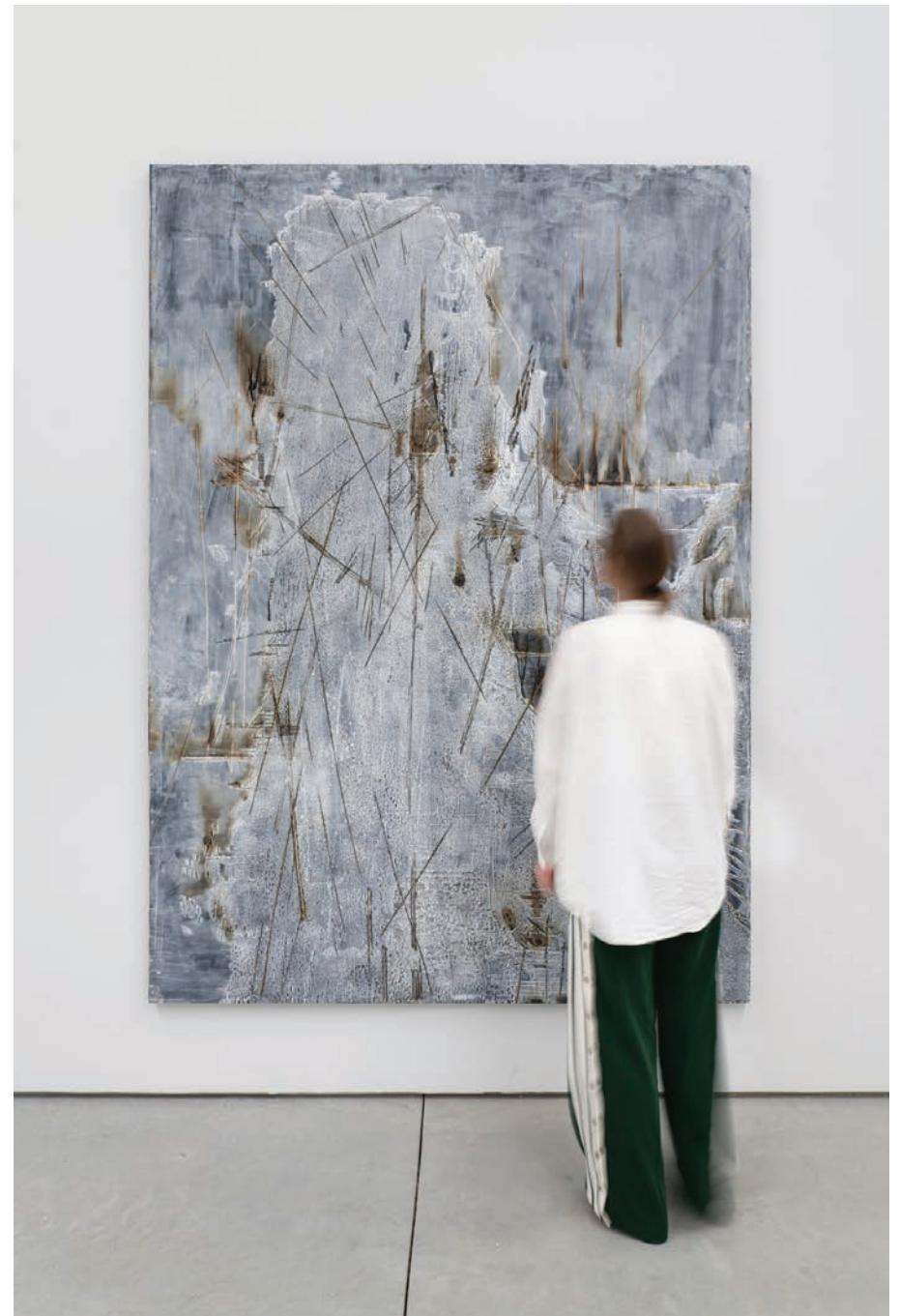
***Hotel*, 2026**

Acrylic paint, linen, wood, aluminium, medical tape, UV varnish.

244 x 175 x 3.7 cm - 96 x 68 7/8 x 1 1/2 in

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The exhibition concludes with a reconstruction of Café Cobra, an underworld bar from Dudek's former neighborhood. Like many such spaces embedded within social housing estates across different geographies, the bar operates as a site of informal community, social ritual, and cultural memory, even as it remains vulnerable to erasure.

In returning to Café Cobra last year, Dudek undertook a project without commercial or professional incentive, bringing together local residents, younger generations, and figures from the art world. Archival photographs were installed directly into the space, and new paintings were exhibited, shaped by the bar's atmosphere and social history. Within NEST, this gesture is preserved not as documentation but as continuation, emphasizing the resilience, solidarity, and forms of care that emerge under conditions of constraint.

COBRA incorporates archival images of the bar and a replica of its neon sign, originally produced during the 2025 project. Installed in the gallery as a performative, wall-based structure, **COBRA** opens onto a recessed void that marks the absent presence of the bartender, a symbolic locus of exchange, ritual, and memory. The work carries the social and emotional residue of the bar into the exhibition space, preserving its histories in an active, functional form.

COBRA, 2026

Wood, paint, image transfer, steel, aluminium dust, glass neon
Open: 95 x 144.5 x 24 cm - 76 3/4 x 56 7/8 x 9 1/2 in
Closed: 195 x 144.5 x 13 cm - 76 3/4 x 56 7/8 x 5 1/8 in
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Across painting, sculpture, installation, performance, sound, collage, and photography, Dudek articulates a singular visual language in which abstraction and figuration, process and image, remain inseparable. His practice resonates with the archival and site-specific approaches associated with Harald Szeemann, for whom lived experience functioned as a curatorial and artistic medium. In *NEST*, personal history becomes a lens through which broader social and historical forces are rendered visible, not as fixed conclusions, but as open, shared terrain shaped by memory, struggle, and imagination.

Above: Images from Café Cobra archive, circa 1999.

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