



Christina Forrer



Alfred Döblin

The Murder of a Buttercup



At first, the gentleman in black had counted his footsteps, one, two, three, up to hundred and back, as he climbed the wide spruce-lined path to St. Ottilien, and swung his hips to the right and the left with every movement, so violently that he sometimes stumbled; then he forgot.

His light brown eyes, bulging in friendly fashion, stared at the ground sliding away under his feet, and his arms swung from his shoulders, making his white cuffs slip down halfway over his hands. When a yellow-red evening light between the tree trunks made him blink, he flinched his head, his hands made quick disgusted defensive movements. The thin walking stick in his right hand waved back and forth above the grass and flowers at the side of the road and disported with the blossoms.

As the gentleman continued calm and heedless on his way, it got caught in the sparse weeds. The serious gentleman did not stop, he only pulled lightly on the handle as he kept walking, then turned back to look, wounded, when his arm wouldn't move, yanked in vain at first, then successfully freed the stick with both fists and, breathless, with two quick glances at the stick and the meadow, walked back so that the gold chain on his black vest jumped.

The fat man stood there a moment, beside himself. His stiff hat was pushed back over his neck. He fixed his eyes on the overgrown flowers, only to lunge at them with stick upraised and face blood-red and beat wildly at the silent growth. Blows whipped left and right. Stems and leaves flew across the path.

Puffing out air, eyes flashing, the gentleman walked on. The trees strode quickly past him; the gentleman was not paying attention to anything. He had an upturned nose and a flat, beardless face, an elderly child's face with a sweet little mouth.

At a sharp curve in the uphill path, he had to pay attention. As he marched more calmly and irritably wiped the sweat from his nose with his hand, he felt that his face was totally contorted, that his chest was panting violently. The thought that someone might see him, maybe one of his business colleagues or a lady, terrified him. He rubbed his face and convinced himself with a furtive movement of the hand that it was smooth.

He walked calmly. Why was he panting? He smiled, embarrassed. He had leapt at the flowers and slaughtered them with his walking stick,



yes, struck with the same violent but well-aimed movements of the hand that he was accustomed to use to strike his apprentices when they did not deftly enough catch the flies in the office and present them to him, sorted by size.

The serious man shook his head many times at the strange occurrence. "The city is bad for the nerves. The city makes me nervous." He swayed his hips pensively, took off his stiff English hat, and fanned the fir-scented air onto his tufts of hair.

After a short while he was once again counting his steps, one, two, three. One foot stepped ahead of the other, arms swung from his shoulders. Suddenly Herr Michael Fischer saw, as his eyes roamed emptily over the side of the road, a stocky figure, himself, stepping back from the grass, lunging at the flowers, and slicing a buttercup's head clean off. What had earlier happened on the dark path was palpable before him. This flower here was exactly like the other one, down to the last detail. This one called to his eye, his hand, his stick. His arm went up, the stick whipped down, whish, off flew the head. The head somersaulted into the air and disappeared into the grass. The businessman's heart beat wildly. Now the detached plant head sank awkwardly down and burrowed into the grass. Deeper, ever deeper, down through the layer of grass into the soil. Now it started to speed down into the center of the earth where no hands could hold it anymore. And from above, from the stump of the body, it was dripping, white blood spurted from the neck and ran down into the hole, at first only a little, like the saliva running out of the corner of a paralyzed man's mouth, then in a thick current, slimy, with a yellow froth, it ran at Herr Michael, who tried in vain to get away, hopped to the left, hopped to the right, who tried to jump across it, whose feet it was already surging and beating against like the sea.

Herr Michael mechanically put the hat back on his sweat-covered head and pressed his hands, holding the stick, to his chest. "What's happened?" he asked after a while. "I'm not drunk. The head can't fall, it has to still be there, still be there in the grass. I am convinced that it is right now lying there calmly in the grass. And the blood.... I don't recall this flower, I have absolutely no idea about anything."

He was amazed at himself, disturbed, suspicious. Everything in him was fixated on this wild excitement, brooded aghast on the flower,

the fallen head, the bleeding stem. He was still jumping over the slimy flow. What if someone saw him, one of his business colleagues or a lady.

He drew himself up, Herr Michael Fischer, clutching the stick with his right hand. He glanced at his jacket and his posture stiffened. He'd soon prevail against wayward thoughts. Self-mastery. He, the boss, would energetically bring this disobedience under control. This population had to be decisively confronted. "Who is serving whom here? We are not accustomed to such behavior in my firm. Valet, throw the rascal out!" He stood and waved the little stick around in the air. Herr Fischer had put a cool, repudiating look on his face; he would just have to see about that. His superiority went so far as to make him ridicule his timidity, up there on the wide paved road. How silly it would be if a red poster were put up on all the placard-pillars in Freiburg tomorrow morning: "Wanted for the murder of an adult buttercup, on the path from Immenthal to St. Ottilien, between the hours of 7 and 9 p.m. The suspect is" etc. So scoffed the flabby gentleman in black, enjoying the cool evening air. Down below the little girls, the couples, would find what his hand had wrought. There would be screams and cries, horrified hurrying home. The police would think about him, the murderer, cleverly laughing up his sleeve. Herr Michael shivered wildly at his own daring—he never would have thought he was so depraved. Down below, though, for the whole city to see, lay proof of his energy and vigor.

The shaft sticking straight up into the air, white blood oozing out of its neck.

Herr Michael stuck out his hands, a little defensively.

It congeals on top, all thick and sticky, making the ants get stuck. Herr Michael rubbed his temples and loudly exhaled.

And next to it in the grass, the head rots. It gets squished, dissolved by the rain, putrefied. It turns into a yellow stinking sludge, greenish, yellowish, shimmery, slimy like vomit. It picks itself up, alive, runs toward him, right at Herr Michael, it wants to drown him, the current slaps against his body, spurts and splatters at his nose. He jumps, hopping on his tiptoes.

The sensitive gentleman recoiled. He felt a sickening taste in his mouth. He was too disgusted to swallow, he couldn't stop spitting. He tripped and stumbled, hopped anxiously on, with blue pale lips. "I



refuse, I most firmly refuse, to enter into any relationship whatsoever with your firm.”

He pressed his handkerchief to his nose. He had to get rid of the head, cover up the stem, stamp it out, bury it. The forest reeked of plant corpse. The odor accompanied Herr Michael and grew more and more intense. Someone needed to plant another flower in that place, sweet-smelling, a carnation garden. Get rid of the cadaver in the middle of the forest. Rid of it.

The moment when Herr Fischer wanted to stop, the thought ran through his head that it was ridiculous to turn back, more than ridiculous. What did he care about that buttercup? Bitter rage flared up within him at the thought that he had almost been caught off guard. He hadn't controlled his temper. He bit his index finger: "Careful, you, I'm telling you, look out you damned villain." At the same time, gigantic fear ambushed him from behind.

The scowling fat gentleman looked nervously around, reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a pocketknife, and flipped it open.

Meanwhile his feet walked on. His feet started to hurt. So now they too were trying to set themselves up as master; their willful pushing onward appalled him. He'd soon tame these little ponies. They'd get a taste of him. One hard jab in the flanks would break them in a hurry. They continued to carry him forward. It almost looked like he was running away from the scene of the murder. People mustn't think that. A rustle of birds, a distant whimper, filled the air and rose up from below. "Stop, stop!" he screamed at his feet. Then he plunged the knife into a tree.

He hugged the trunk with both arms and rubbed his cheeks against the bark. His hands fingered the air as though kneading something. "We're not going to Canossa." With anxiously furrowed brow the deathly pale gentleman studied the cracks in the tree, hunched his back as though something was about to jump on him from behind. He heard the telegraph connection between him and the scene of the crime clatter again and again, even though he was trying to tangle and crush the wires with kicks. He tried to conceal from himself that his rage was already paralyzed, that a gentle lasciviousness was flaring up inside him, a wanton desire to relent. Deep down, all the way back, he lusted for the flower and the murder scene.



Herr Michael bounced up and down with his knees, desperate to do something, sniffed the air, listened in every direction, anxiously whispered, "I only want to bury the head, that's all. Then everything'll be fine. Quick, please, please." He shut his eyes unhappily, turned apparently inadvertently on his heels. Then he strolled, as though nothing had happened, straight downhill, in a nonchalant saunter, with a soft whistle that he infused with a careless tone, caressing the tree trunks along the path with his palms while exhaling, liberated. He smiled as he walked, and his little maw became round like a hole. He loudly sang a song that suddenly came to him: "The little bunny lay in the ditch, fast asleep."* He imitated his earlier prancing, hip-swaying, arm-swinging. He had guiltily shoved the little stick far up into his sleeve. Sometimes, at bends in the road, he hurriedly snuck back to see if anyone was watching him.

Maybe she was still alive. Yes, right, how did he know she was dead? The thought darted into his head that he could heal the wounded thing if he propped her up with a little splint of wood and wrapped a bandage or something around her head and stem. He started to walk faster, forgot his posture, ran. Suddenly he was trembling with anticipation. And he crashed full-speed into a fallen tree trunk at a bend in the road, hitting his chest and chin so that he groaned out loud. When he picked himself up, he forgot his hat in the grass; the shattered stick shredded his sleeve from inside; he didn't notice. Hoho! They wanted to stop him? Nothing would stop him, he would find her yet. He clambered back down. Where was the place? He had to find it. If only he could call the flower. But what was her name? He didn't even know her name. Ellen? Maybe her name was Ellen, yes, definitely Ellen. He whispered into the grass, he bent over to push the flowers aside.

"Is Ellen here? Where's Ellen? Well? She's hurt, a head injury, a little below the head actually. Maybe you haven't heard. I want to help her—I'm a doctor, a good Samaritan. So, where is she? You can trust me, don't worry."

But how was he supposed to recognize her, she whom he had broken apart? Maybe he was just then holding her in his hand, maybe she was sighing her last breath right next to him.

That must not be.

He bellowed, "Surrender her! Don't make me suffer, you dogs. I'm a Samaritan. Don't you know German?"



*A common children's rhyme. The next lines are: "Poor little bunny, are you sick, why can't you hop? / Hop, bunny, hop, bunny, hop!"—Trans.

He stretched out on the ground, searched, eventually rummaged blindly around in the grass, crumpled up and clawed at the flowers, while his mouth hung open and his eyes looking straight ahead flickered. He pounded the ground before him for a long time.

“Surrender. Conditions must be set. Preliminaries. The doctor has a right to see the patient. The law will have to be brought in.”

The trees stood all around, deep black in the gray air, along the path and everywhere. It was also too late; the head was surely dried up by now. The thought of death with its finality appalled him and shook his shoulders.

The black round figure stood up from the grass and staggered downhill along the edge of the path.

She was dead. By his hand.

He sighed and rubbed his brow, brooding.

They would come at him from all sides. And let them, he didn't care anymore. It was all the same to him. They would cut off his head, tear off his ears, place his hands on burning coals. There was nothing more he could do. He knew it would all be fun and games for them, but he would not make a sound to give the vicious hangman's henchmen any satisfaction. They had no right to punish him; they were depraved themselves. Yes, he had killed the flower, and it was absolutely none of their business, he had every right to do it and would defend that right against every last one of them. He had the right to kill flowers and felt no need to justify himself further. As many flowers as he wanted, he could kill them all, in a radius of a thousand miles, north, south, west, east, never mind their smirks. And if they kept laughing like that he would go for their throats.

He stopped, looked poisonously into the heavy darkness of the firs. His lips were filled to bursting with blood. Then he hurried on. He should probably offer his sympathies here in the forest to the sisters of the deceased. He pointed out that the tragedy had occurred without his having done practically anything, reminded them of the sad exhaustion he was suffering under as he ascended. And the heat. In any case, when it came right down to it, he didn't care about buttercups.

He desperately shrugged his shoulders again. “What else will they do to me?” He rubbed his cheeks with his dirty fingers; he couldn't get his bearings.



What did all this mean—for God's sake, what was he doing here?! He wanted to sneak away on the shortest path, diagonally down through the trees, and reflect on everything perfectly clearly and calmly. Slowly, point by point.

So as not to slip on the smooth ground, he feels his way from tree to tree. The flower, he thinks cunningly, can just stay on the path where it is. There are enough dead weeds like that in the world.

Horror seizes him, though, when he sees a round pale light drop of resin coming out of a trunk he touches; the tree is crying. Fleeing in the dark down a footpath, he soon realizes that the road is getting strangely narrow, as though the forest is trying to lure him into a trap. The trees are gathering to judge him.

He has to get out.

Again he runs hard into a low fir; it knocks him down with its raised hands. Then he violently forges ahead, blood streaming down over his face. He spits, flails around, kicks the trees with loud screams, skids downhill sitting and rolling, finally runs headlong down the last hillside at the edge of the forest toward the lights of the village, his shredded frock coat thrown over his head, while the mountain hisses threateningly behind him, shaking its fists, and a cracking and snapping of trees can be heard everywhere, running after him, scolding him.

The fat gentleman leaned motionless against the gas lamp in front of the small village church. He was hatless; there were pine needles and black soil all over his disheveled shock of hair, which he did not shake out. He was breathing heavy. As warm blood ran down the ridge of his nose and dripped onto his boots, he slowly lifted a coattail with both hands and pressed it against his face. Then he raised his hands to the light and marveled at the fat blue veins on the backs of his hands. He rubbed the thick nodules and could not rub them off. As the electric streetcar burst into song and howls he staggered off, down narrow alleys, toward home.

Now he was sitting stupidly in his bedroom and he said out loud, “Here I sit, here I sit,” and looked desperately around the room. He paced up and down, pulled his things out and hid them in a corner of the wardrobe. He put on a different black suit and read the newspaper on his chaise longue. He crumpled it as he read; something had happened, something had happened. And he felt it full force the next day, sitting





at his desk. He was petrified, he could not swear, and a strange silence enveloped him everywhere he went.

He frantically told himself it must have all been a dream—but the scratches on his forehead were real. In that case, some unbelievable things must be true. The trees had lashed out at him, a wail had gone up for the dead creature. He sat there sunk in thought and, to the amazement of his staff, did not even bother about the buzzing flies. Then, glowering darkly, he bullied the apprentices, neglected his work, and paced back and forth. Several times they saw him beat the table with his fist, puff out his cheeks, scream that he would clean house here in the company once and for all. They'd see. Nobody would make a fool out of him, nobody.

When he was doing the books the next morning, though, something unexpectedly insisted that he credit ten marks to the buttercup. He was startled, fell into bitter brooding about his powerlessness, and asked his authorized signatory to do the rest of the accounts. That afternoon, in icy silence, he personally put the money in a special box; he was even made to set up a private account for her; he was tired, he wanted his peace. Soon it impelled him to make offerings to her from his food and drink. Every day a little saucer was set out for her next to Herr Michael's place. The housekeeper had thrown up her hands when he had demanded this extra place setting, but the gentleman had broken out in an unprecedented rage and forbidden any criticism.

He atoned, atoned for his mysterious guilt. He conducted church services with the buttercup, and the placid businessman now claimed that everyone had their own religion, we all have to adopt our own personal stance toward God the inexpressible. There are things that not everyone can understand. A suffering look had come over his serious little monkey face; his corpulence, too, had gone down, his eyes sat deep in his skull. The flower watched over his actions like a conscience, rigorously, from the largest acts to the smallest everyday behavior.

During that time the sun often shone on the city, the cathedral, the castle hill, shone with all the fullness of life. Then, one morning, the hardened man burst into tears at his window for the first time since his childhood. Cried all of a sudden, his heart almost breaking.

All this beauty stolen from him, by Ellen, the accursed flower—with everything beautiful in the world she accused him. The sunshine

gave light but she did not see it; she could not breathe the scent of the white jasmine. No one would come visit the site of her pitiful death, none would say a prayer there: So she had every right to throw it all in his face, however ridiculous it was and however he wrung his hands. It is all denied her now: the moonlight, the bridal bliss of summer, the peaceful coexistence with the cuckoo, the people strolling, the baby carriages. He pressed his lips together; when people went to climb that mountain he wanted to hold them back. Let the world go under with a sigh, as long as it shut the flower's trap. He went so far as to contemplate suicide—anything to still the torment at last.

In the meantime he treated her bitterly, contemptuously, shoved her against the wall with a running start. He betrayed her in little things: knocked over her saucer with a quick push, as though by accident; made math errors to her disadvantage; sometimes acted devious toward her, the way he did to competitors. On the anniversary of her death he pretended he didn't remember anything. Only when she seemed to insist more urgently on a silent ceremony did he devote half a day to her memory.

One time, at a social gathering, the question went around about people's favorite dishes. When they asked Herr Michael what he most liked to eat, he replied coldly and deliberately, "Buttercup. Buttercups are my favorite food." Everyone broke out in laughter, but Herr Michael huddled in his chair, teeth clenched, listened to them laugh and savored the buttercup's rage. He felt like a monstrous dragon that calmly gulped down living beings; he thought about wild Japanese things, *hara-kiri*. Even as he secretly awaited a harsh punishment from her.

He waged this guerrilla war with her uninterruptedly; he uninterruptedly swung back and forth between deathly anguish and rapture; he anxiously feasted on the furious screams he sometimes thought he heard her make. Daily he devised new traps; he often retreated from his office to his room, in a state of great excitement, to hatch his plans undisturbed. And so the war raged on in secret, and no one knew what it was about.

The flower was his, was part of the comfort of his life. He thought back in amazement to the time when he had lived without the flower. Now he often went for walks to St. Ottilien through the forest, with a defiant expression on his face. And one sunny evening, while he was





relaxing on a fallen tree trunk, the thought flashed into his mind: Here, exactly where he was sitting, his buttercup, Ellen, had once stood. It must have been right here. Wistful, timid reverence gripped the fat gentleman. The turns everything had taken, from that evening to this! Rapt in thought, he let his kind, slightly darkened eyes roam across the weeds, Ellen's sisters, maybe her daughters. After he had mused for a long time, his smooth face twitched mischievously. Oh, his dear little flower had it coming now. If he dug up a buttercup, a daughter of the dead one, planted it at home, and lavished tender loving care on her, then the old flower would have a young rival. Yes, now that he thought about it, he could expiate the death of the old one completely. For he was saving the life of this flower and thus making up for the death of her mother; otherwise this daughter would just rot and die here, most likely. Oh, he would make the old one mad, leaving her out in the cold like that. The businessman, conversant as he was with the law, recalled a paragraph on compensation for damages. He dug out a little plant nearby with his pocketknife, carried it carefully home in his bare hands, and planted it in a gilded porcelain pot that he placed on a mosaic side table in his bedroom. He wrote in charcoal on the bottom of the pot: "§2043 par. 5."

Every day the happy man watered the plant with spiteful devotion and sacrificed the dead one, Ellen. She was legally compelled, on pain of possible police measures, to resign herself; she received no further dishes, no food, no money. Often, lying on the sofa, he thought he heard her whimpers, her long, drawn-out groans. Herr Michael's self-confidence grew in unforeseen ways. He sometimes practically had fits of megalomania. Never had his life passed so cheerfully.

One evening, after he had contentedly strolled back from his office to the apartment, his housekeeper told him, calmly, right at the door, that she had knocked over the little table while cleaning up and the pot had broken. She had thrown the plant, that nasty piece of garbage, into the trash with all the shards. The matter-of-fact, slightly contemptuous tone in which this person reported the accident made it clear that she was in full sympathy with the proceedings.

Rotund Herr Michael slammed the front door shut, clapped his stubby hands, loudly squeaked with happiness, and lifted the startled female into the air by her hips, as high as his strength and the length of

her body permitted. Then he went sashaying down the hall and into his bedroom, eyes flashing, unutterably excited; he panted heavily, stomped his legs, his lips twitched.

No one could say anything against him; he had not wished for the death of this flower with a single, most secret thought, not granted it the smallest fingertip of a thought. The old one, the mother-in-law, could curse and rail and say whatever she wanted. He had nothing to do with her anymore. They were divorced. He was free of the whole buttercup brood now. Law and Fortune and Justice were on his side. There could be no doubt.

He had duped the forest.

He wanted to set out for St. Ottilien at once, climb up into that grumbling, stupid forest. In his mind he was already swinging his little black walking stick. Flowers, polliwogs, toads too—look out. He could murder as many as he wanted. He didn't give a damn about any and all buttercups.

The fat businessman Herr Michael Fischer, irreproachably dressed, rolled from side to side with laughter and schadenfreude on his chaise longue.

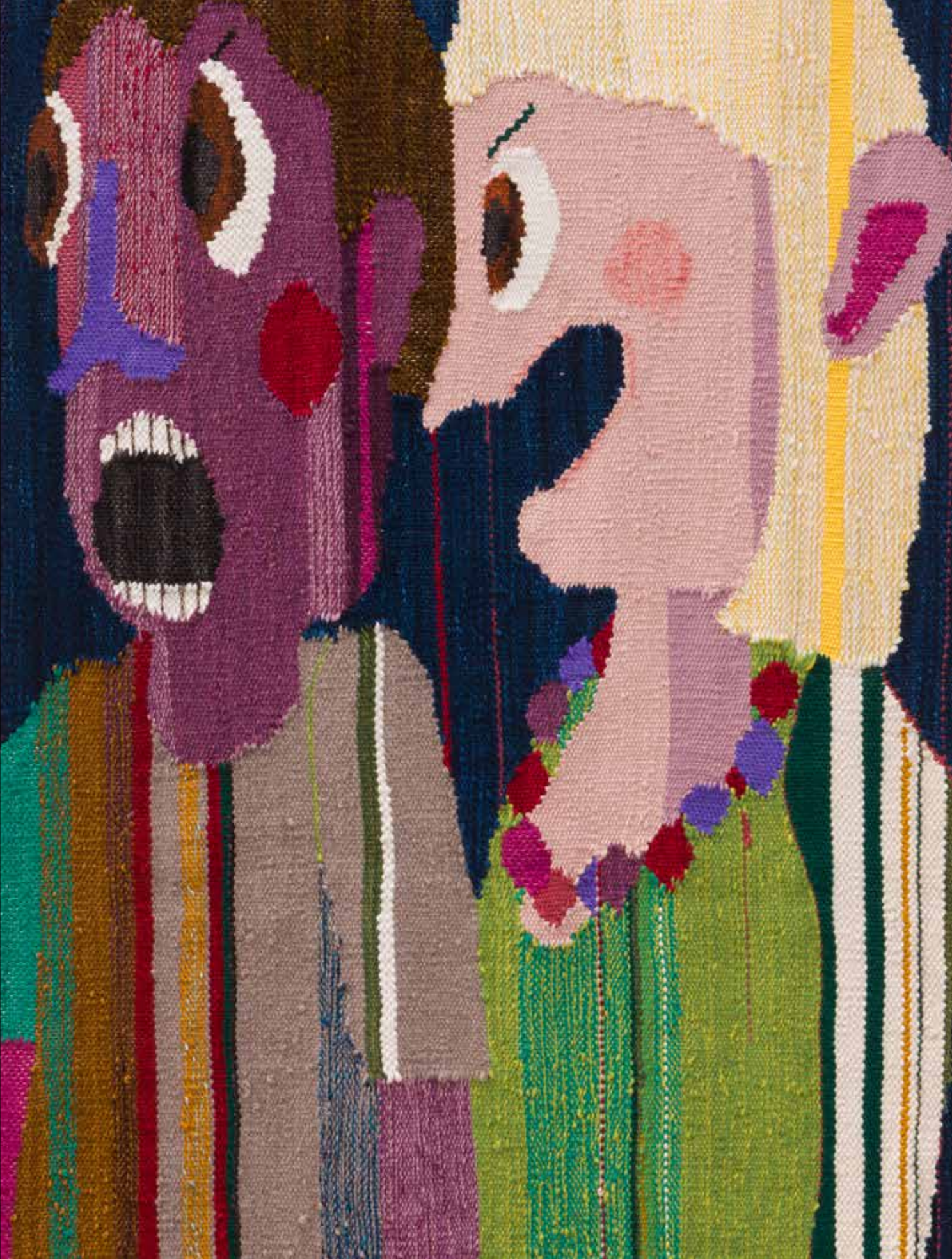
Then he leapt up, shoved his hat onto his head, and stormed past the astonished housekeeper, out of the house, onto the street.

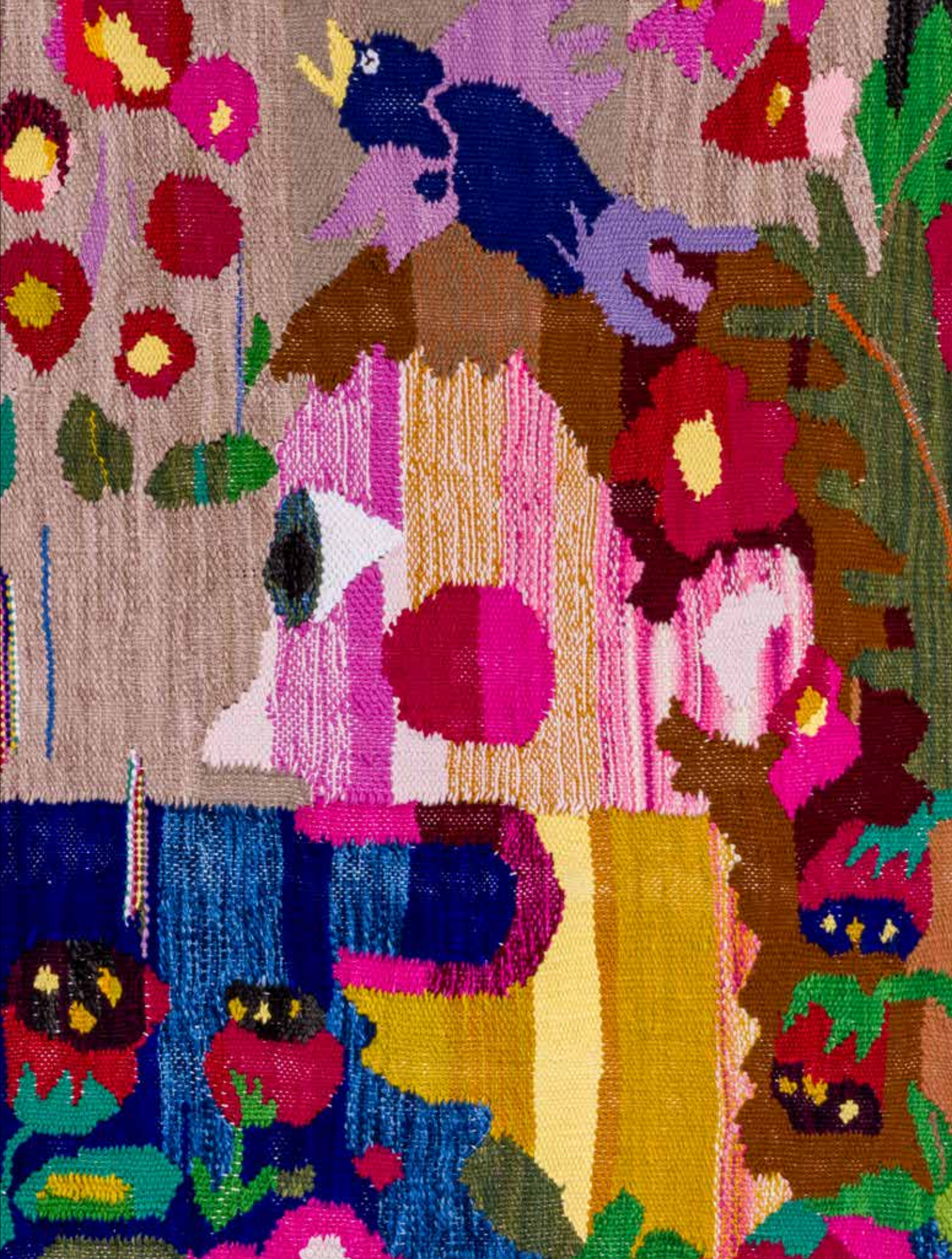
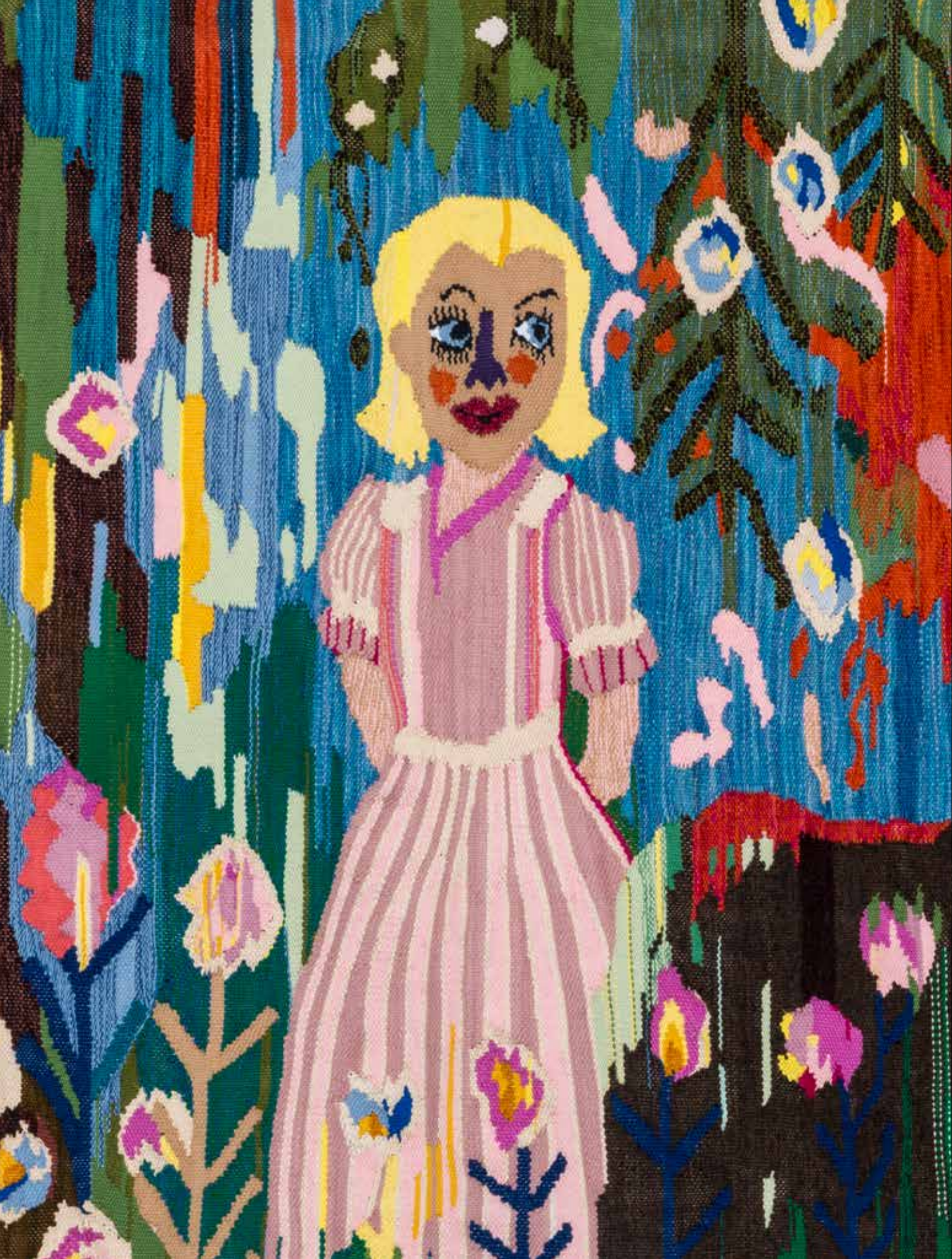
Laughing and snorting loudly is how he disappeared into the darkness of the mountain forest.





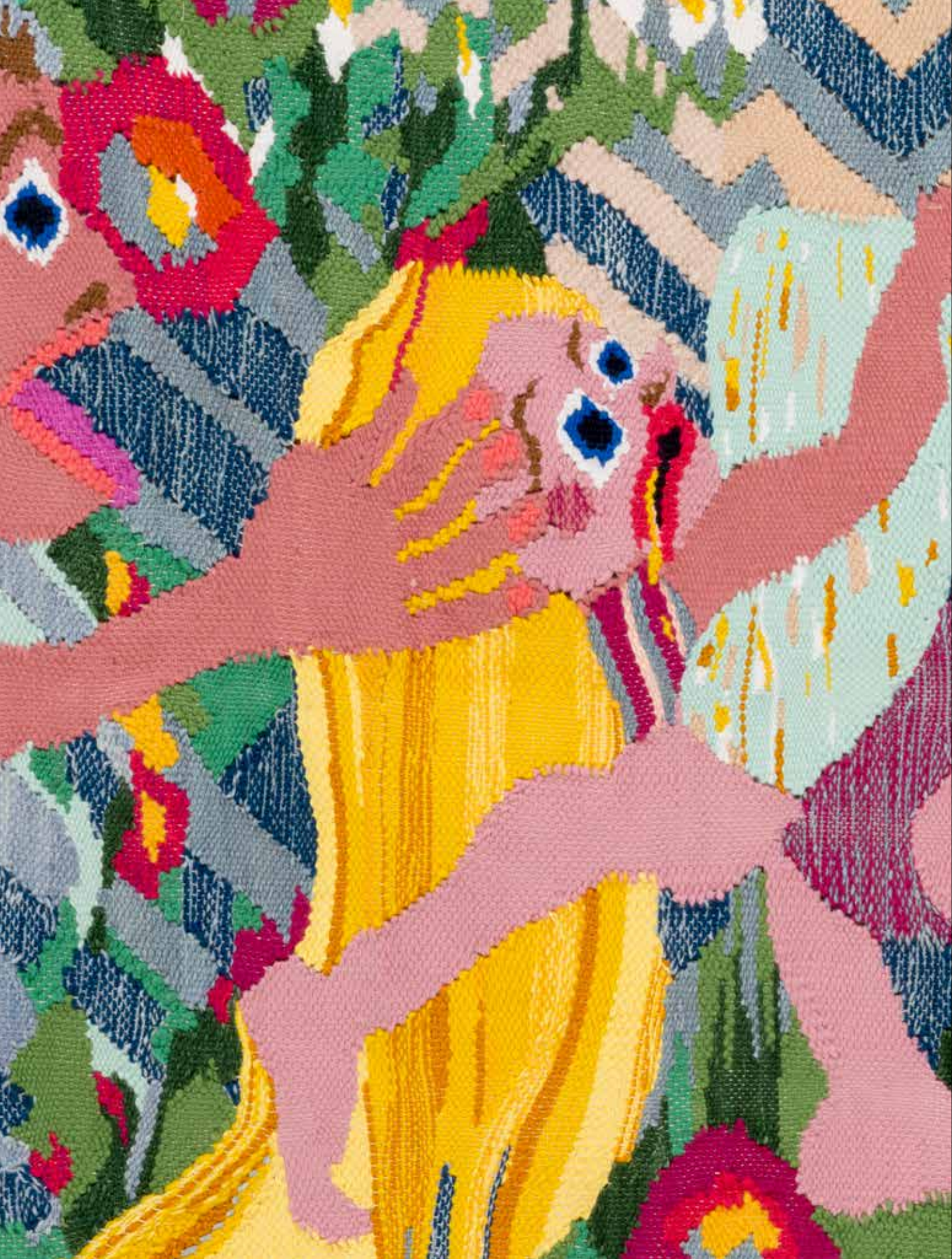








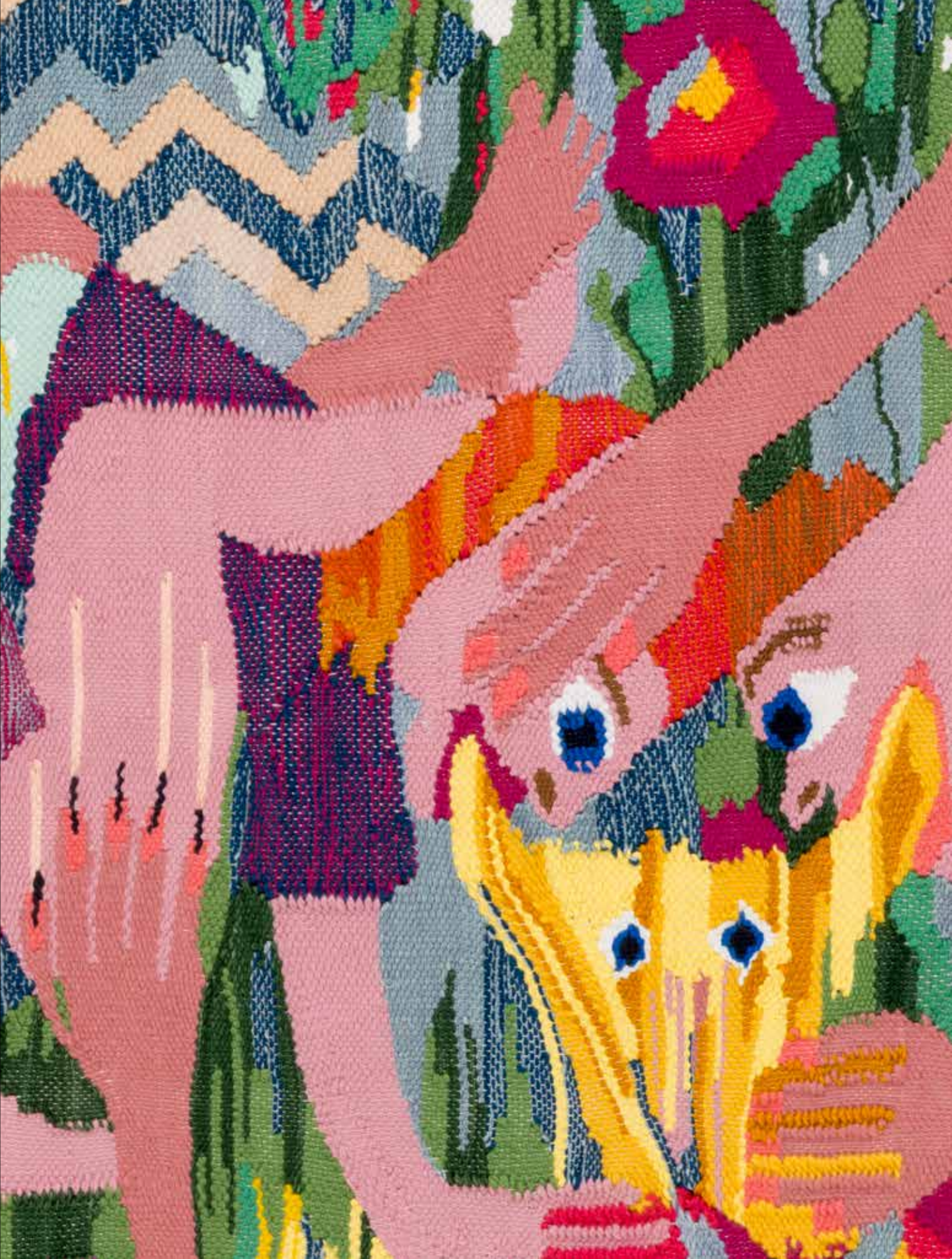
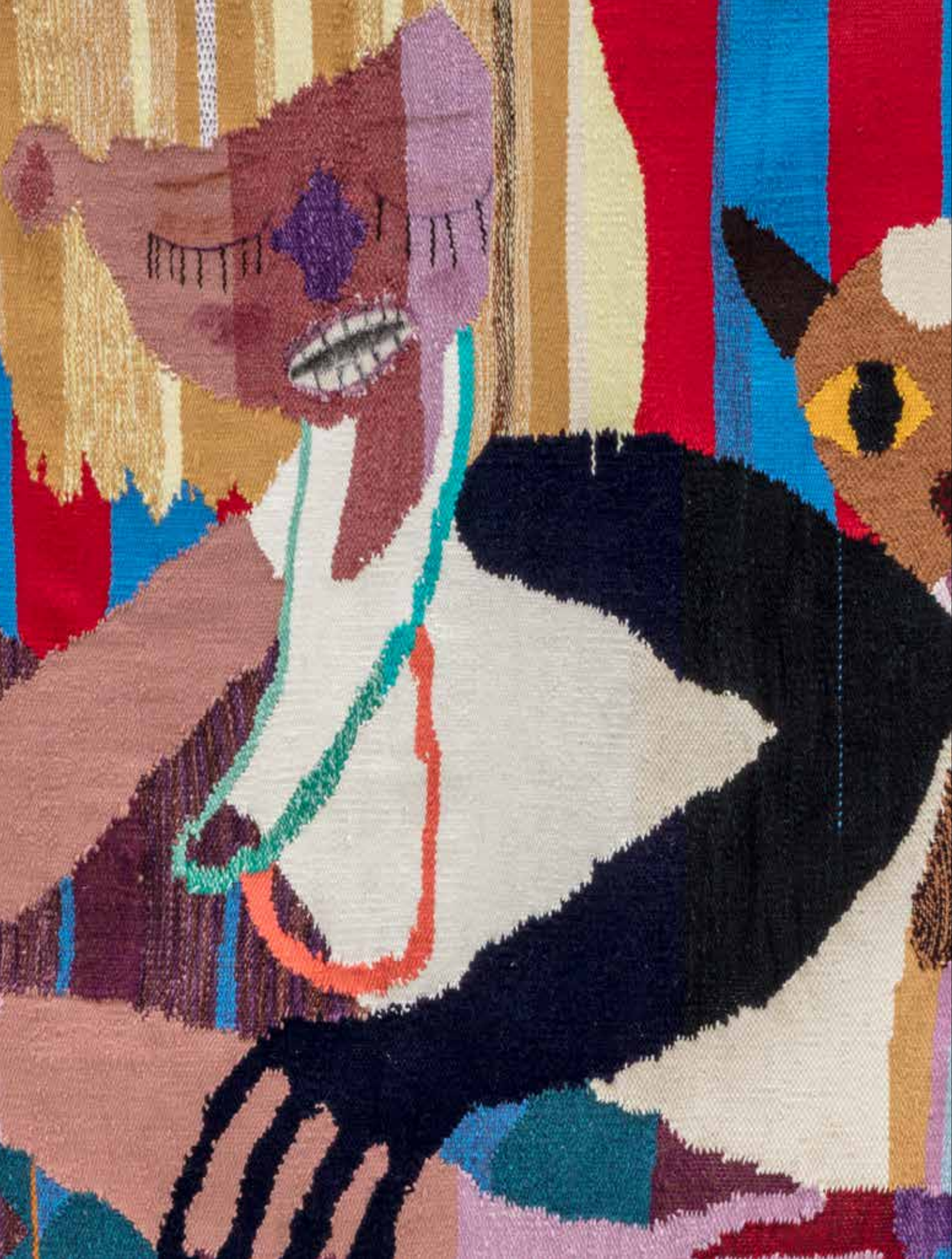








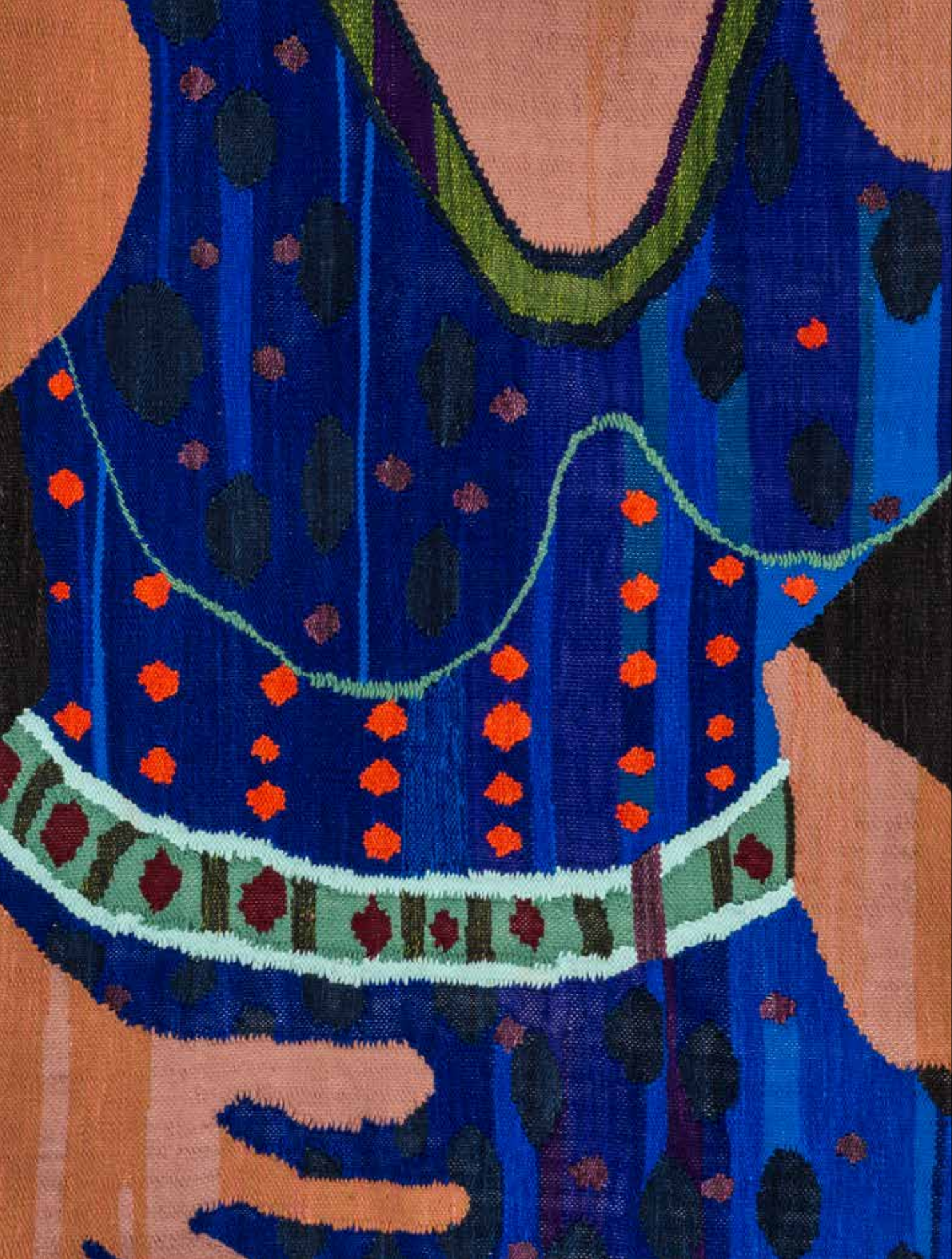


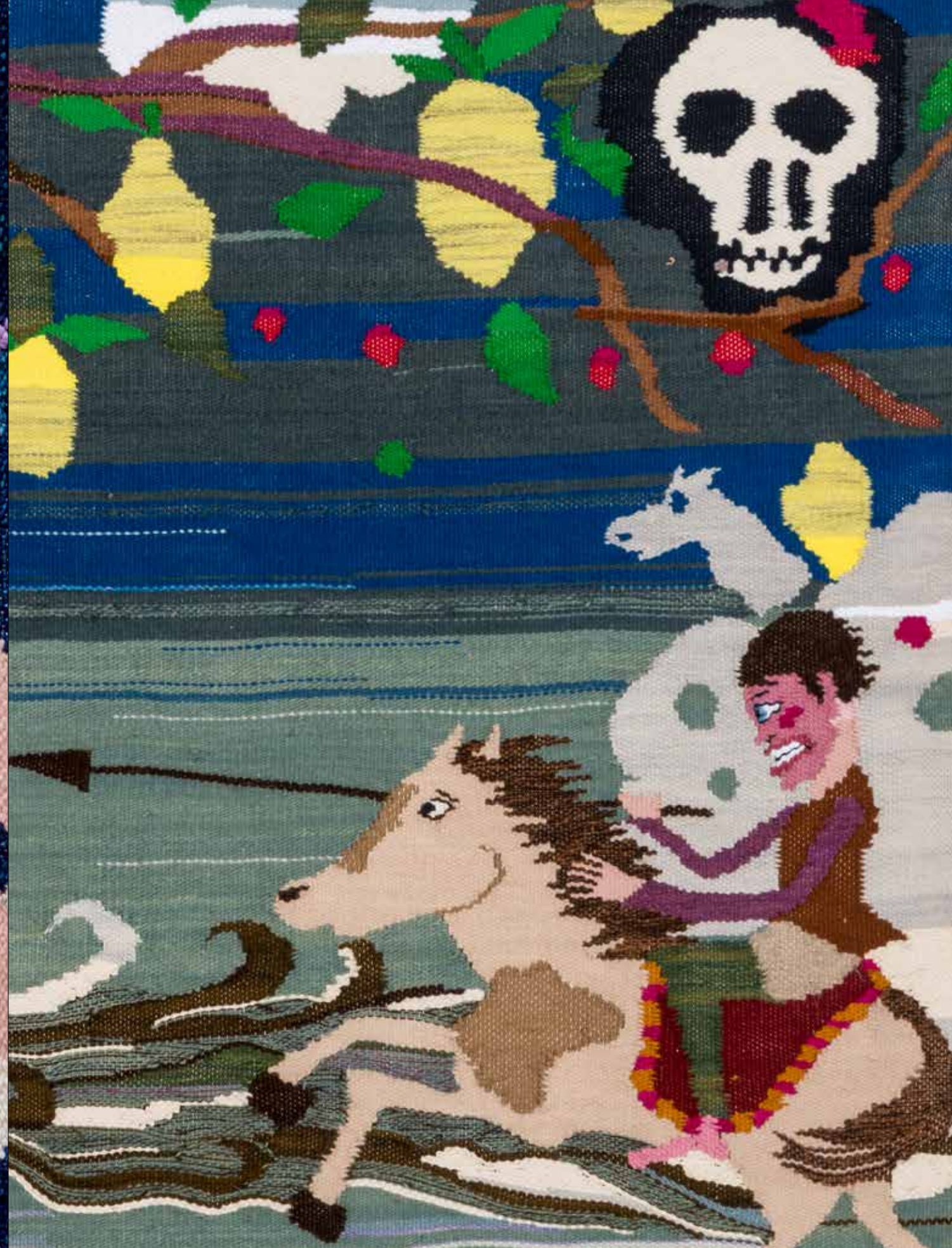
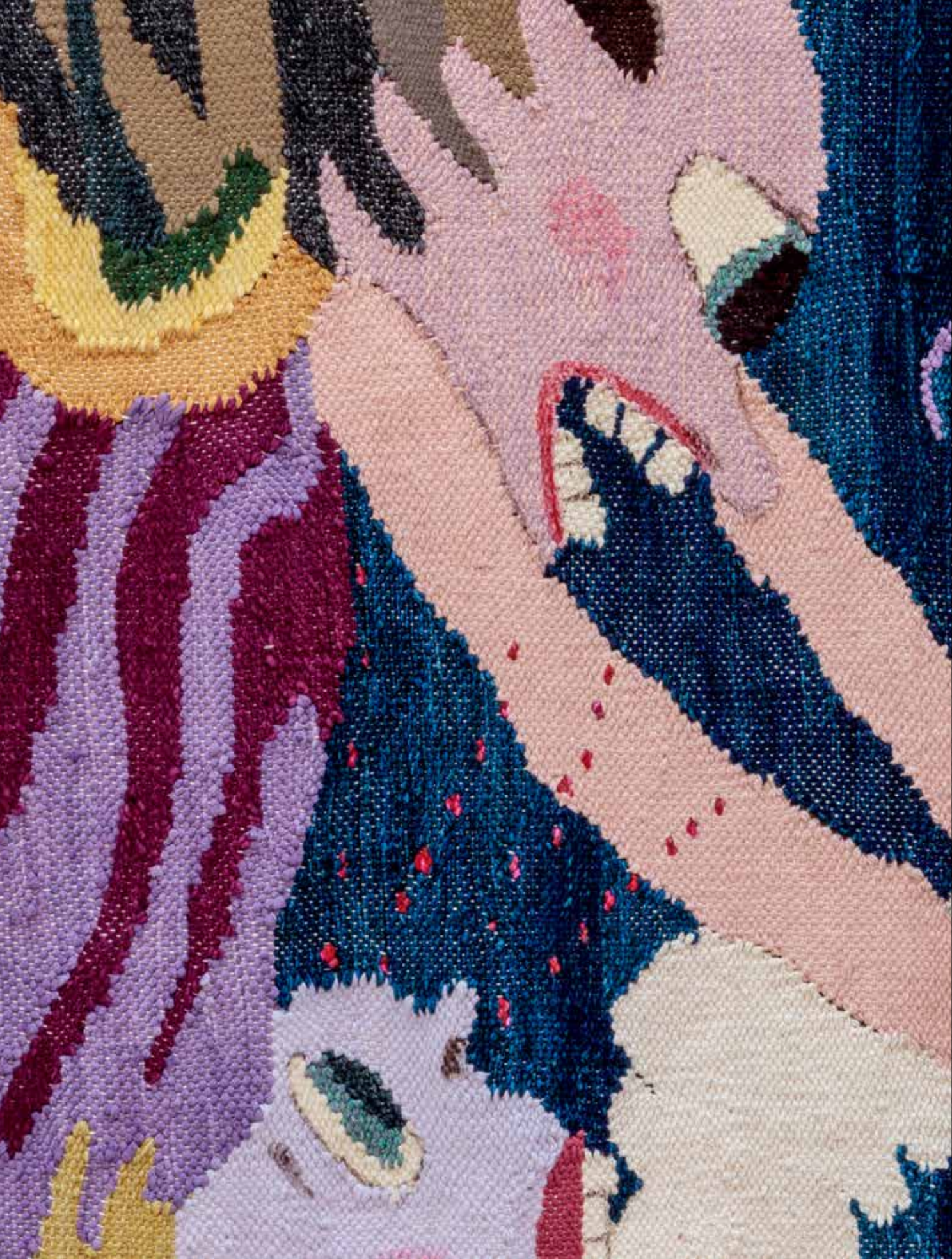








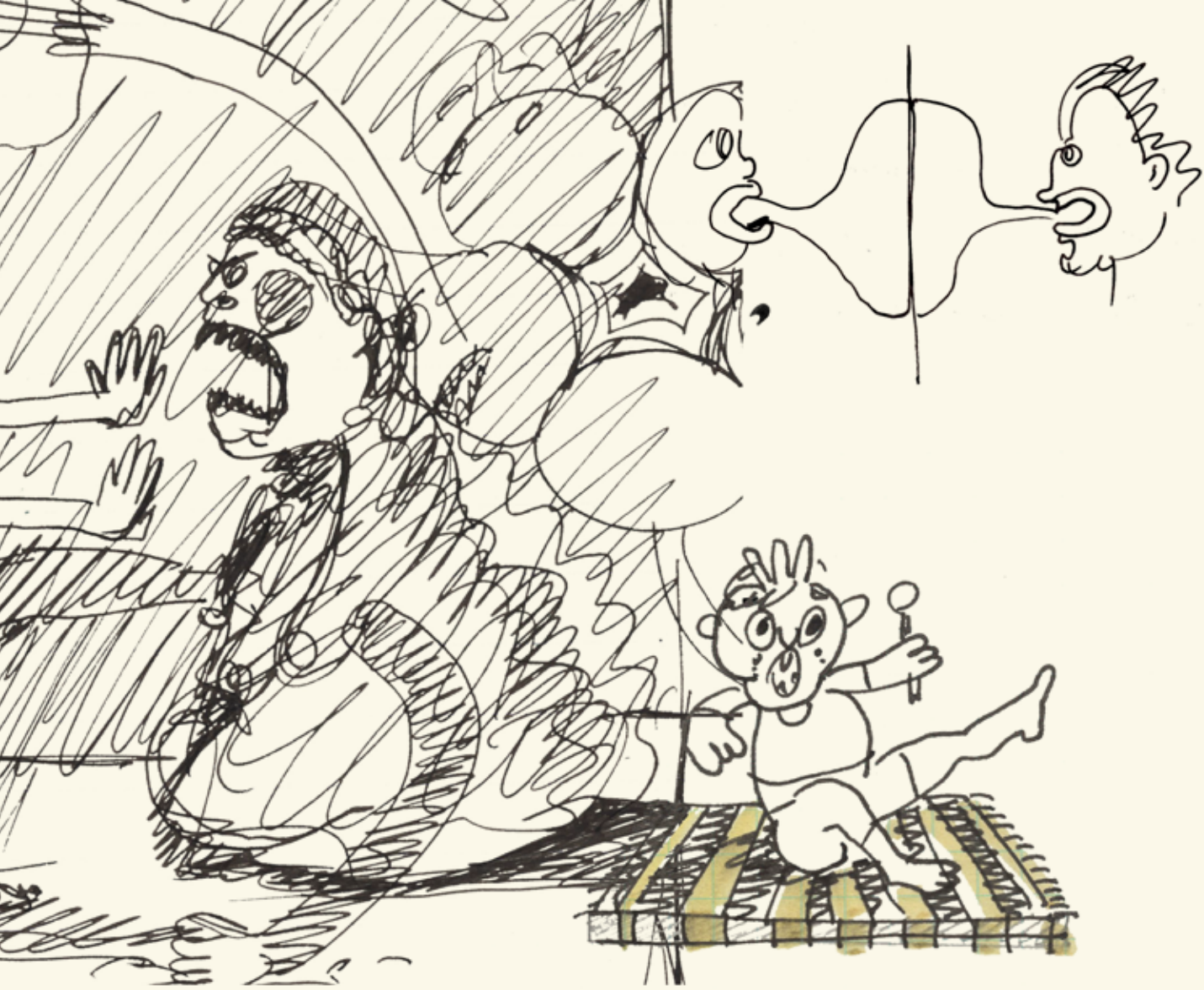


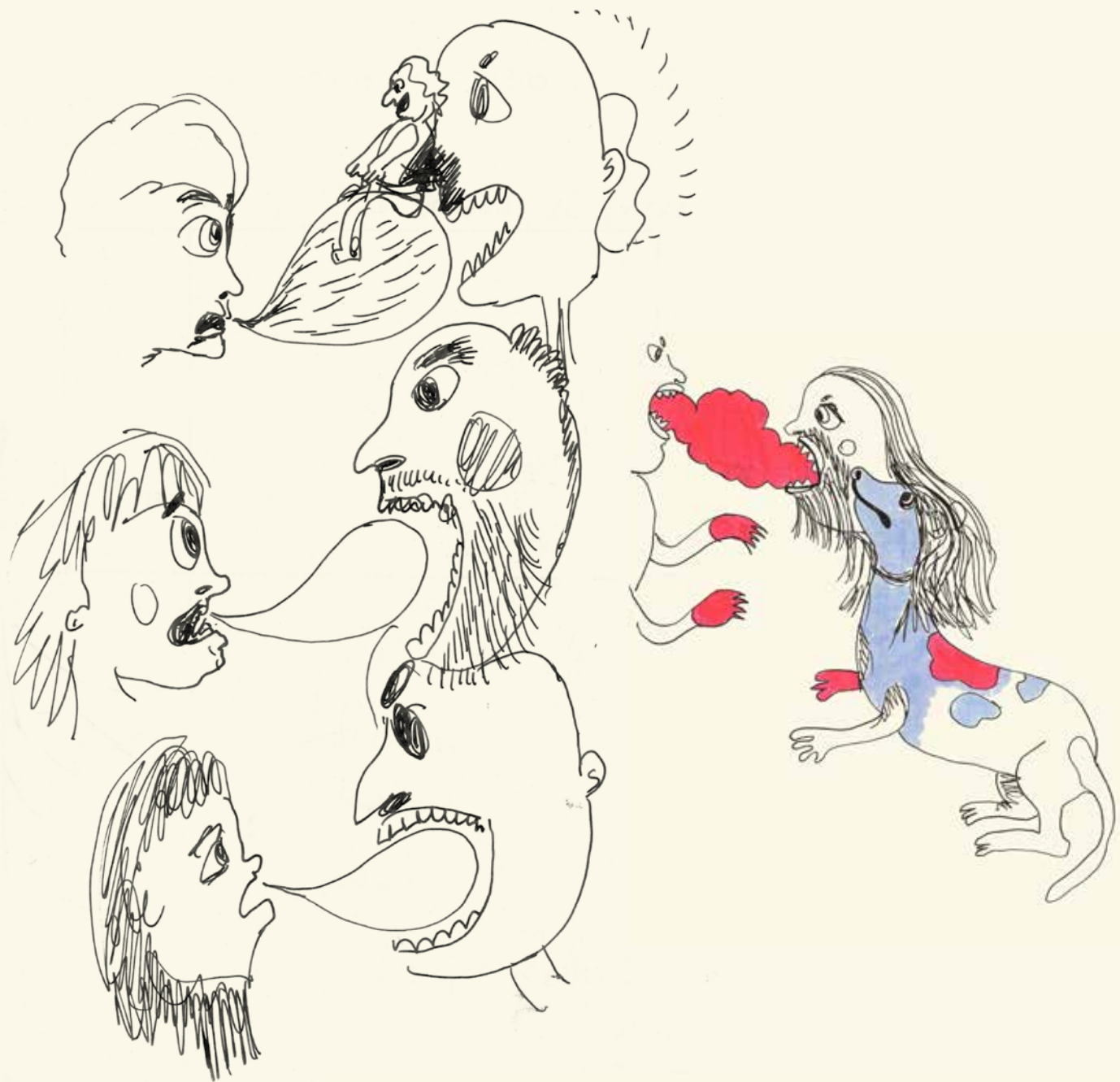












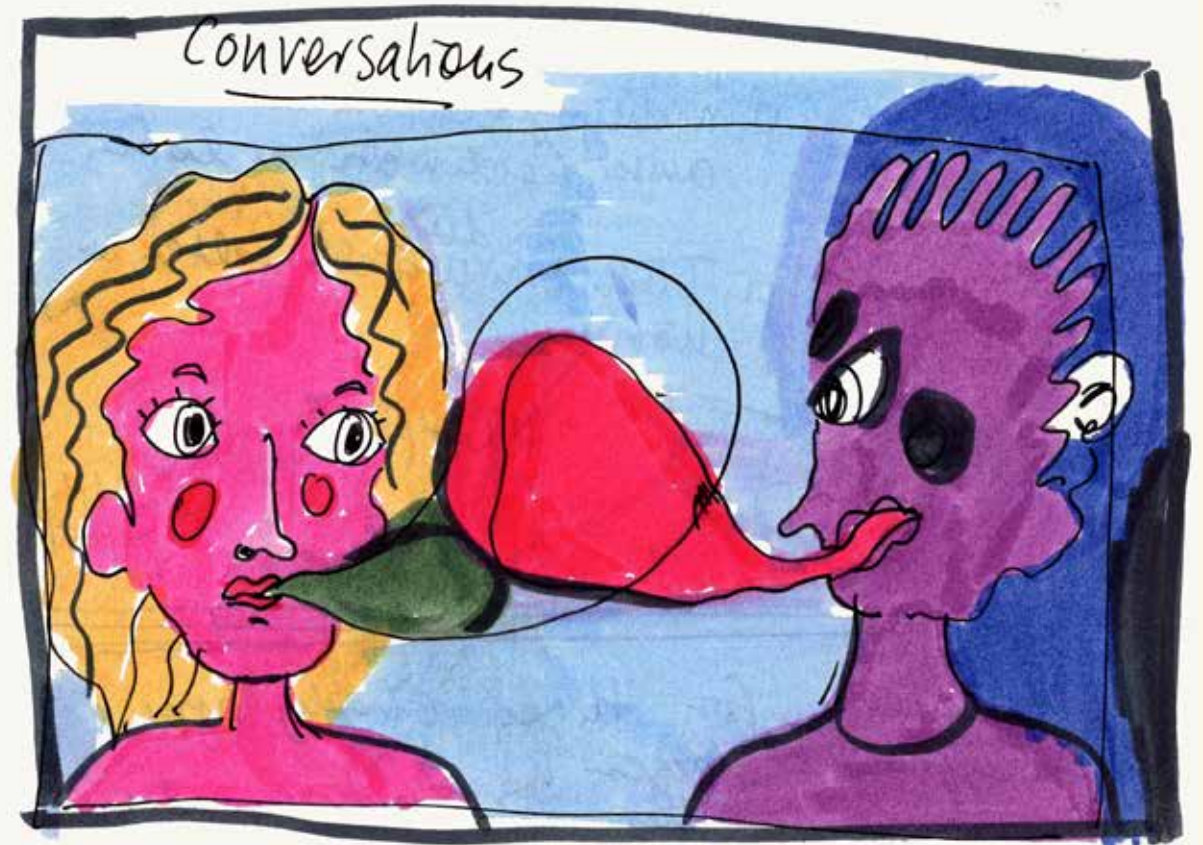
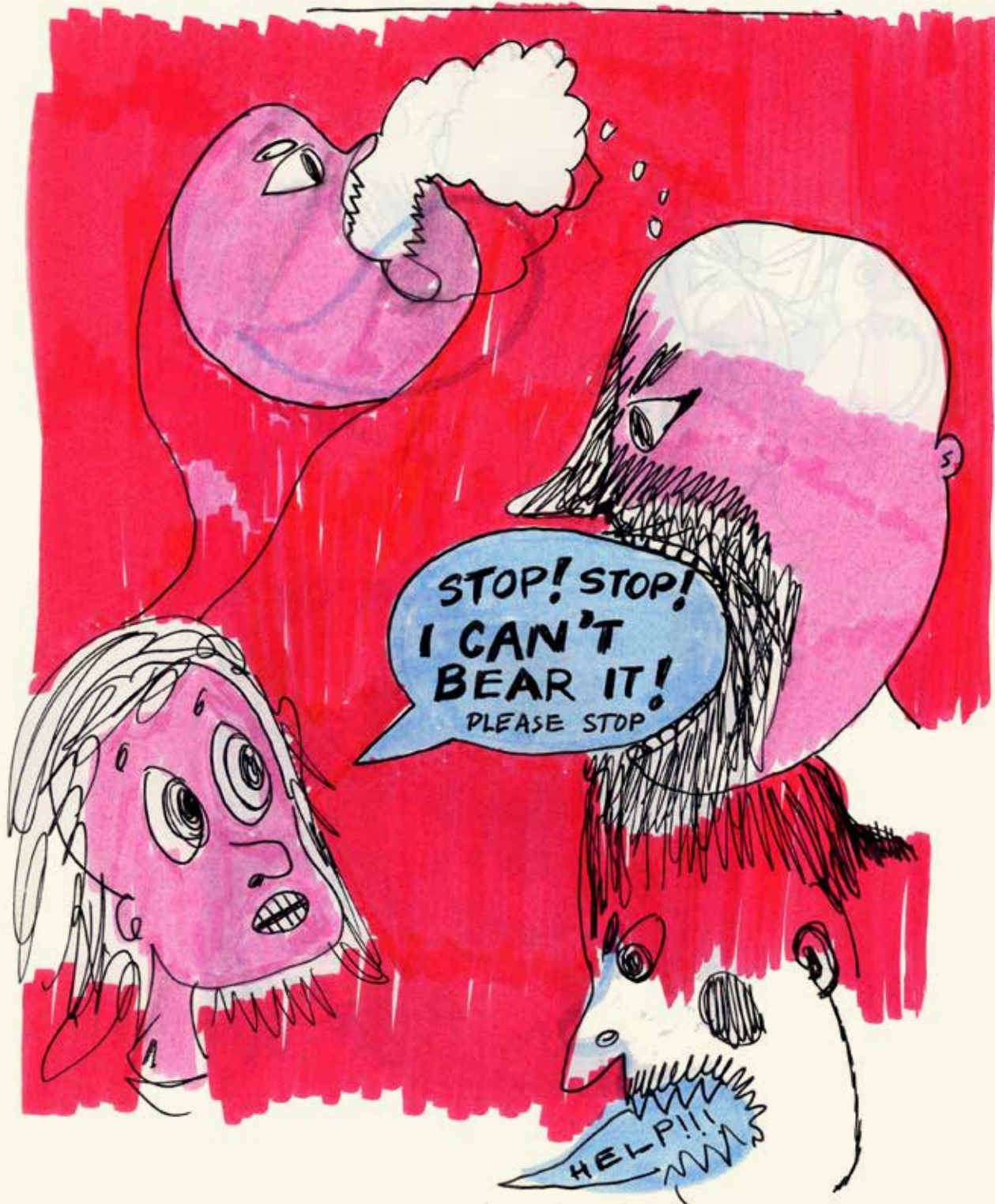
No, please listen, I really don't like it!

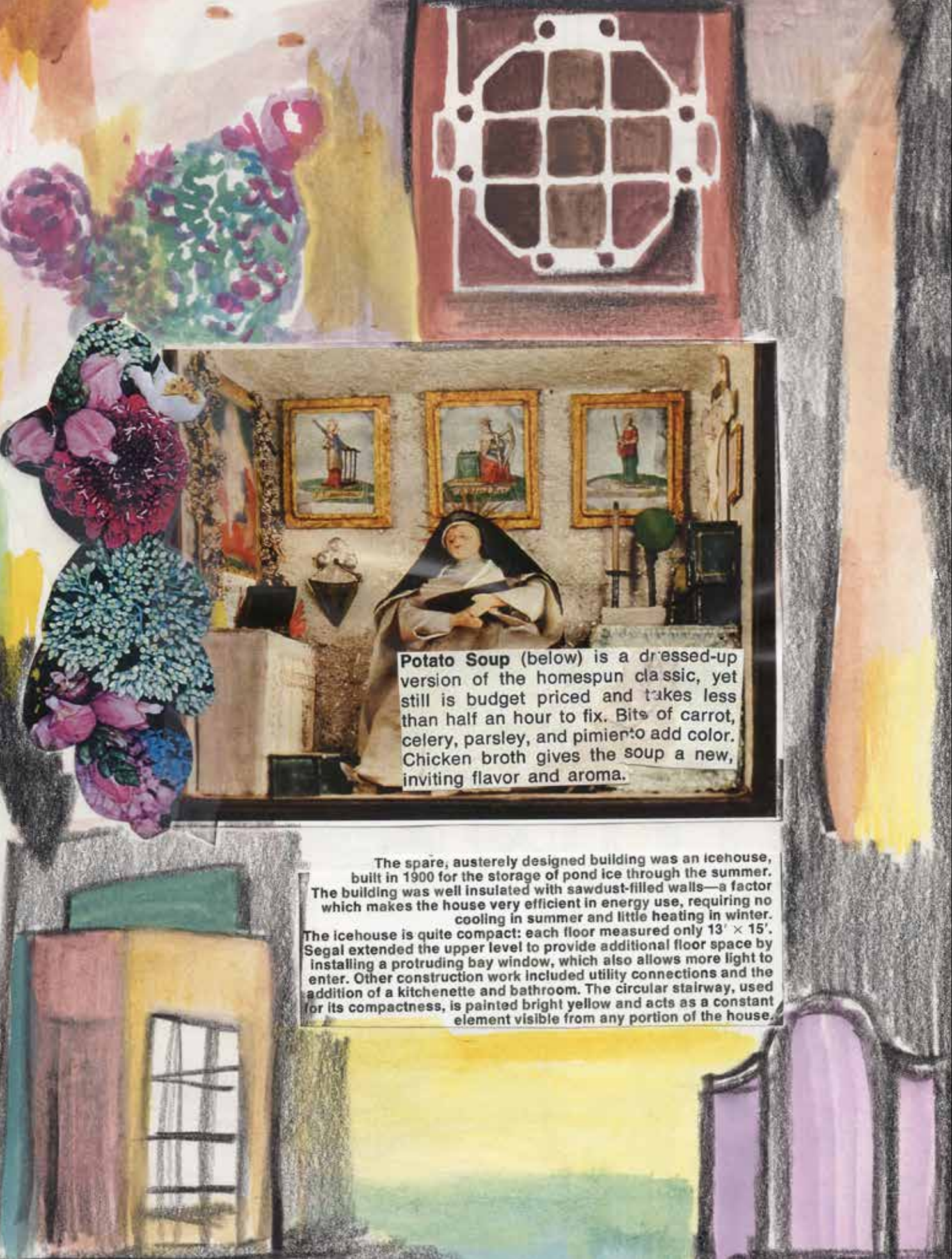


I just wanted to say...

Don't think twice







Potato Soup (below) is a dressed-up version of the homespun classic, yet still is budget priced and takes less than half an hour to fix. Bits of carrot, celery, parsley, and pimiento add color. Chicken broth gives the soup a new, inviting flavor and aroma.

The spare, austere designed building was an icehouse, built in 1900 for the storage of pond ice through the summer. The building was well insulated with sawdust-filled walls—a factor which makes the house very efficient in energy use, requiring no cooling in summer and little heating in winter. The icehouse is quite compact: each floor measured only 13' x 15'. Segal extended the upper level to provide additional floor space by installing a protruding bay window, which also allows more light to enter. Other construction work included utility connections and the addition of a kitchenette and bathroom. The circular stairway, used for its compactness, is painted bright yellow and acts as a constant element visible from any portion of the house.



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LUHRING
AUGUSTINE

