

## IAN PINES

*Ungodly Gross Grafting*, 2015  
Oil on Board, 48 x 48 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## RICHARD M. LANGE

# Of Human Carnage

Death as Experienced by the Living

**O**n March 12, 2012, my girlfriend Elizabeth and I were driving on Costa Rica's Inter-American Highway, the major north-south route through the country. We were on the second-to-last day of a three-week bird-watching trip that had included most of the good birding spots in the northern two-thirds of the country. That morning we had left the cabin we'd rented on Cerro de la Muerte (the Hill of Death) and were headed to our last stop, a small hotel in Alajuela, near the Juan Santamaría International Airport, where we were scheduled to catch our return flight to California the next morning.

As anyone who has done it will tell you, driving in Costa Rica is a challenge. Roads are narrow, most streets are unmarked, and the highways are filled with speeding big rigs. In many places, a lone sign telling you to *ceda el paso* (yield) is your only warning that the highway is about to narrow to a single lane for *both* directions. Throughout our travels, we'd seen pedestrians (including unattended children) walking the narrowest of shoulders. On some stretches there is no shoulder at all—the roadway is bounded by steep drops or weed-choked ditches. In these places, the pedestrians and bicyclists are forced, under threat of instant death, to maintain an extremely disciplined line along the very edge of the asphalt.

Where Elizabeth and I were traveling, about halfway between Cartago and San José, the two northbound lanes are divided from the southbound lanes by a section of neighborhood. I was behind the wheel, my eyes on the road ahead as I listened for any updates from our rented SUV's GPS system, which spoke to us in a kindly female voice we had affectionately dubbed Carmen Sabetodo. The afternoon commute underway, traffic was much heavier than it had been anywhere else on our trip. Cars were travelling at about sixty miles an hour, which is pretty fast for Costa Rica, as most of the roads are too narrow and winding for such a speed. On the left sat a row of small houses, their fenceless yards coming right to the edge of the highway. On the right, a steep-sided ditch lined with concrete—essentially a mammoth rain gutter—ran alongside. Across the ditch, a treeless embankment climbed thirty or so feet.

Well up ahead, on the right-hand edge of the asphalt, I saw a figure. It was a man, dressed in dark pants and a powder-blue shirt. In the first instant that I noticed him,