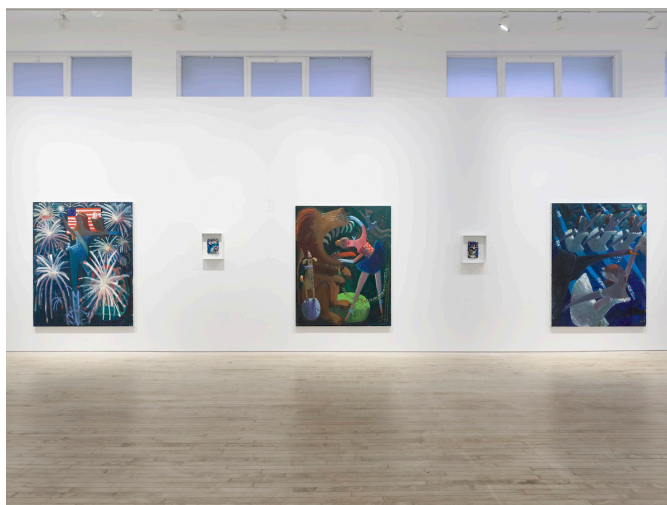




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## Kyle Staver: Radioactive Luminosity

By Raphy Sarkissian



Installation view of Kyle Staver, *The Greatest Show on Earth*. © Kyle Staver. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein. Courtesy the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.

Kyle Staver's circus arrived in Tribeca as a high-wire act of the psyche: all of it—the painted ghosts and the clay bodies alike—conjured within the short and long span of a single year: 2025. At Nino Mier, the walls offered a rhythmic, fifty-fifty split: oil paintings like *Swan Lake* and *Zebra Show* in cheerful counterpoint with boisterous clay reliefs like *Flyers* and *Lion's Mouth*. This arrangement presented a literalized paradox: the body versus the image, running parallel in public, at once a spatial representation and an allegorical proposition. These reliefs embody the grit, the honest and tactile labor of carving a narrative out of the mud. Then come the paintings: those ethereal acrobats and cinematic ghosts that transform Staver's heavy clay bodies into luminous visions. At this point, the gallery recedes—and what remains is purely imagined. A dialectic of perpetual motion unfolds, where the physical sweat of the studio meets the ghostly glow of the screen. Here painted sceneries and their clay fragments become a high-stakes gamble—a balancing act as delicate as that of any circus performer.



Kyle Staver, *Annie Oakley*, 2025. Oil on linen, 54 by 70 inches. © Kyle Staver. Photo: JSP Art Photography. Courtesy the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.

Such shows leave us scrambling for a lineage. We initially frame Staver through the so-called naïve dreamscapes of Henri Rousseau or the luminous theatrical figuration of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. But the more immediate specters are James Ensor's carnivalesque exuberance and Gustave Courbet's physical commitment to paint—artists for whom the human figure and its stories were non-negotiable and for whom storytelling was never subordinate to formal experimentation. *The Greatest Show on Earth*—the early twentieth-century American legacy of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey—serves as a guise for a playfully rigorous formalism. The myth provides the iconological hook, while Staver's iconography provides the weight.



Kyle Staver, *Annie Oakley*, 2025. Air dry clay and acrylic, 12 1/2 by 14 1/2 by 3 1/3 inches, framed. © Kyle Staver. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein. Courtesy the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.

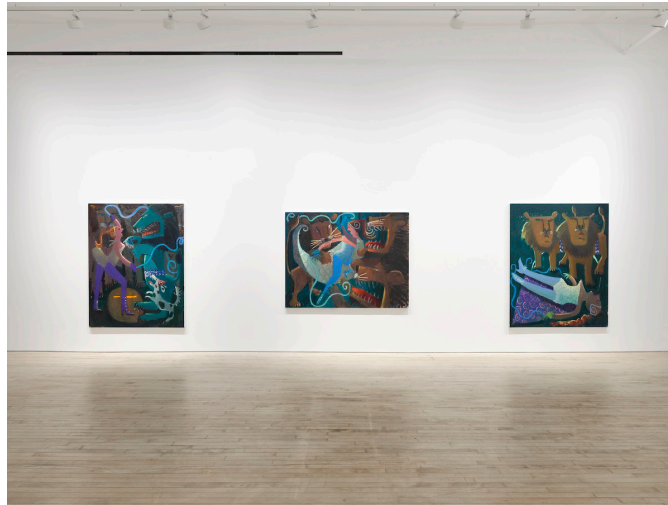
In an era still hungover from minimalist austerity—still reluctant to trust the narrative image—Staver's high-stakes narrativity feels like a provocation. She gives us the Big Top—the lions, the tightropes, the nineteenth-century sharpshooters—but the story eventually dissolves. In works like *Annie Oakley*—which exists in both mediums, as oil on linen and as air dry clay—the painting gives us a chromatic riot: a deep turquoise horse, a bright green ground, a background of dotted white animals with bright orange horns, and Annie herself, arm stretched backward, managing a rope ring in the air—the circus performer as formal device. The clay relief sobers the vision: the horns vanish, the animals reduce to a handful of cows, and Annie emerges in profile as something closer to a witch than a showgirl. Moving between the two, the eye gains an intuitive grasp of the distance between reality and its representation—and recognizes, perhaps, that what appears to be a metaphysical endeavor is finally a materialist one.



Kyle Staver, *Lion Drama 3*, 2025. Oil on linen, 70 by 56 inches. © Kyle Staver. Photo: JSP Art Photography. Courtesy the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.

Each work brings the exhibition to its own psychological apex; *Lion Drama 3*, however, is where the distance between the proscenium and the canvas fully collapses, where action is replaced by the somber reflection of the two lions over the female performer in a state of dream. Here the man-animal-woman typologies are deceptively

orchestrated through kitsch—albeit a term that has lost its currency—into a hallucinatory dedication to the circus itself, draped in a complex, internal luminosity that feels almost radioactive. Staver reconstitutes the picture as much a chromatic theater as a cultural matrix—a bridge to the existential through the exuberant surface of the circus: that slippage between the circus and the painting. Staver views mass culture through a philosophical lens—an amalgamation of Broadway showmanship and the raw, gendered power of a Greek frieze. Her dual lineage is laid bare: she marries the dark, moral weight of European folk-myth to the wide-eyed, cinematic ambition of nineteenth-century Americana. By the time we reach the exit, Staver’s irony has evaporated, replaced by a sincere, almost terrifying fantasy. She proves that the theater of the ring and the theater of the painting are, in fact, the same timeless conduit—a way to stare directly into the sun of the metaphysical and, somehow, not blink. Where Edgar Degas observed his performers through a clinical detachment—articulating their labor through a near-brutal, caricatured shorthand—Staver inhabits hers with total conviction.



*Installation view of Kyle Staver, The Greatest Show on Earth. © Kyle Staver. Photo: Elisabeth Bernstein. Courtesy the artist and Nino Mier Gallery.*

The interchange between the haptic and the optical is where Staver’s subterfuge occurs—a relentless oscillation between heavy materialism and ethereal luminosity. Yet beyond the theatricality of the circus, a singular commonality unites these works: their consistently Caravaggesque ground. These tenebrous depths summon the very conditions of the cognitive process—a journey through the successive phases of visual experience itself: first, transduction, the raw biological conversion of light into signal; second, perception, the neural mapping of color, form, and space; third, apperception, the reflexive integration of image into the self, where memory and identity are drawn into the work; fourth, interiority, the private theater where the self observes its own absorption; and finally, the epistemic abyss—that ontological threshold where the image can no longer be verified against reality and the self is left in the fundamental isolation of pure subjective experience. This negotiation moves beyond mere sensation and the immediate apprehension of the show toward a slower, reflective reckoning with the image itself. Like a trickster, Kyle Staver deploys visual signs that unsettle the safety of episteme—from the outset of the visual process to the depths of cognition within the body. The observer is thus caught between hilarity and the epistemology of vision itself. WM