

NINO MIER GALLERY

A surreal painting by Kyle Staver. The central figure is a woman with long, flowing red hair, depicted in a nude, elongated form. She is surrounded by other figures: a winged cherub-like figure to her left, a large green creature with a white vertical structure on its back to her right, and a smaller winged figure below her. The background is a dark, starry night sky with a blue and purple color palette. The overall style is expressive and dreamlike.

LOS ANGELES | BRUSSELS | NEW YORK

KYLE STAVER

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BIOGRAPHY

Kyle Staver

b. Virginia, MN, US

Lives and works in New York, NY, US

Kyle Staver is an American painter who also works in relief sculpture, drawing, and etching. Engaging with canonical Western mythological and folkloric traditions, Staver finds her inspiration in sources ranging from the Bible to ancient Greek oral-poetic traditions. Staver captures critical moments within these narratives in her fastidiously refined color palettes, identifiable for their stark highlights and rich use of darker tones which blanket figures and their environments in shadow. Despite working with stories that have been re-told throughout centuries, Staver cultivates an enigmatic atmosphere within her paintings—both formally and narratively. As Dan Nadel put it in Artforum: “Her sources are the urtexts of patriarchy, but Staver often flips the script” to offer intelligent re-workings of gender dynamics enshrined in ancient archetypes. Her paintings traffic in a kind of narrative uncanny, as the stories to which they refer are simultaneously familiar and new or unsettling.



Kyle Staver (b. Virginia, MN, US; lives and works in New York, NY, US) earned her BFA from Minneapolis College of Art and Design and her MFA from Yale University. In 2015, she was awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and the American Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase Prize. She has had solo exhibitions at Half Gallery, New York; Zürcher Gallery, New York; Galerie RX, Paris; Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, New York; among many others. Her work is in the collections of the National Academy of Design (New York), The American Academy of Arts and Letters (New York), The National Arts Club (New York), The McEvoy Foundation (San Francisco), and Portland Community College (Portland, Oregon). Staver is also recognized as a distinguished member of the National Academy of New York.



SAMPLE WORKS

**sample selection does not reflect current availability*

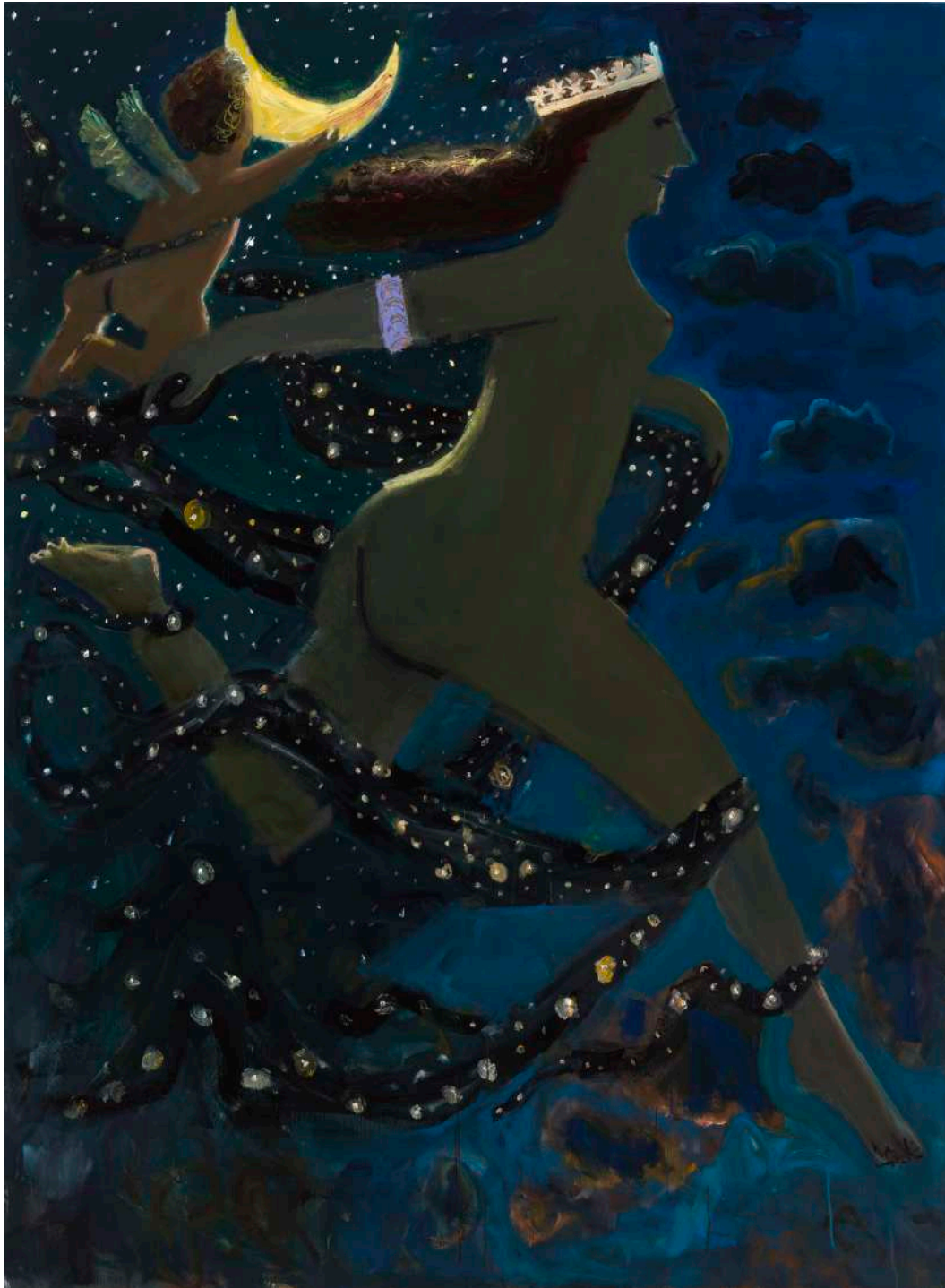


Tiger Hunt, 2022
Oil on linen
68 x 59 in
172.7 x 149.9 cm
(KST22.042)

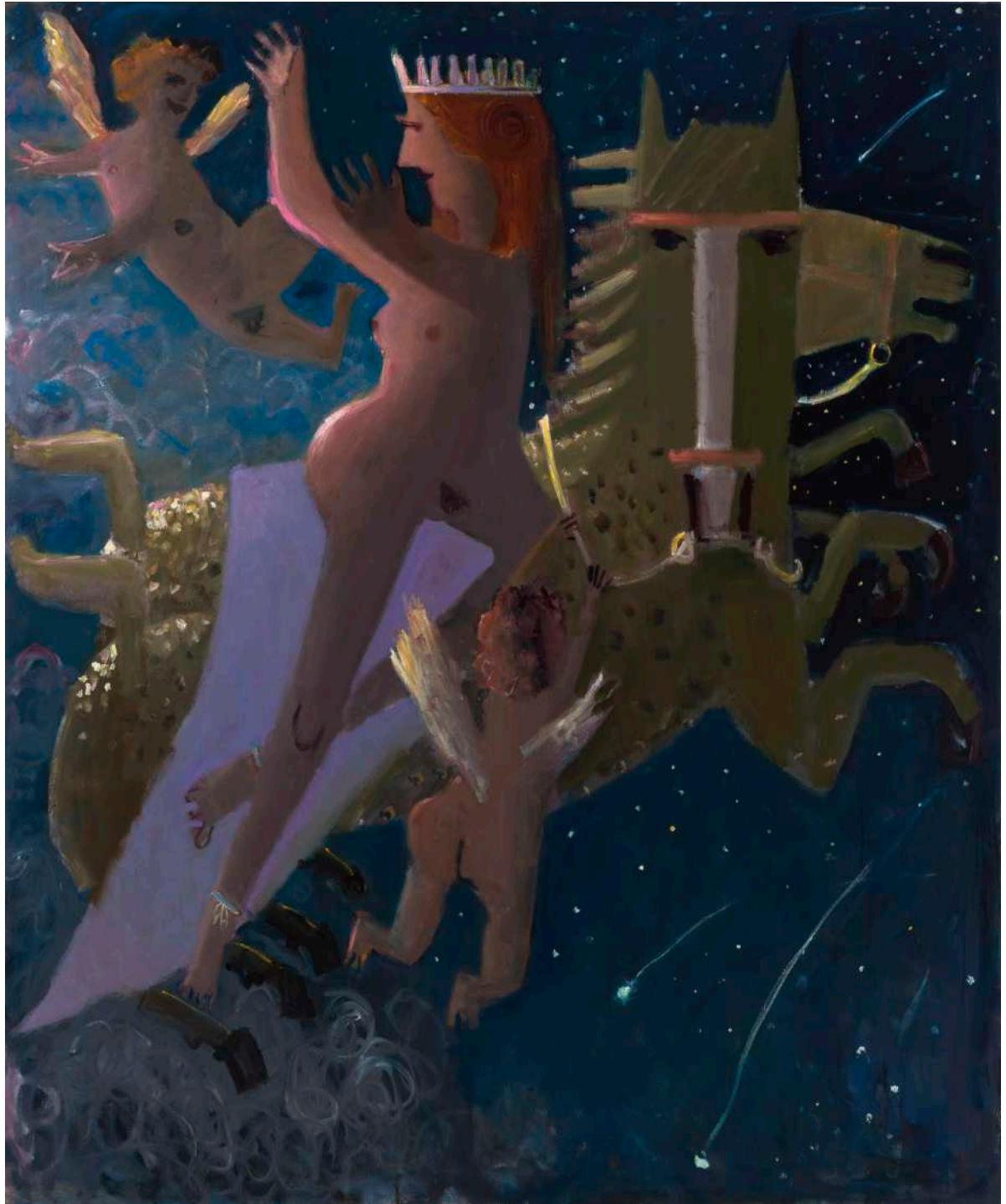


Justice, 2022
Oil on paper
30 3/4 x 24 3/4 x 1 1/8 in (framed)
78 x 63 x 3 cm (framed)
(KST22.029)





Dusk, 2022
Oil on linen
68 x 50 in
172.7 x 127 cm
(KST22.036)



Dawn, 2022
Oil on linen
68 x 58 in
172.7 x 147.3 cm
(KST22.037)





Calypso and Odysseus, 2022
Oil on panel
33 x 27 in (framed)
83.8 x 68.6 cm (framed)
(KST22.022)



Europa and the Flying Fish, 2011
Oil on canvas
68 x 54 in
172.7 x 137.2 cm
(KST22.004)

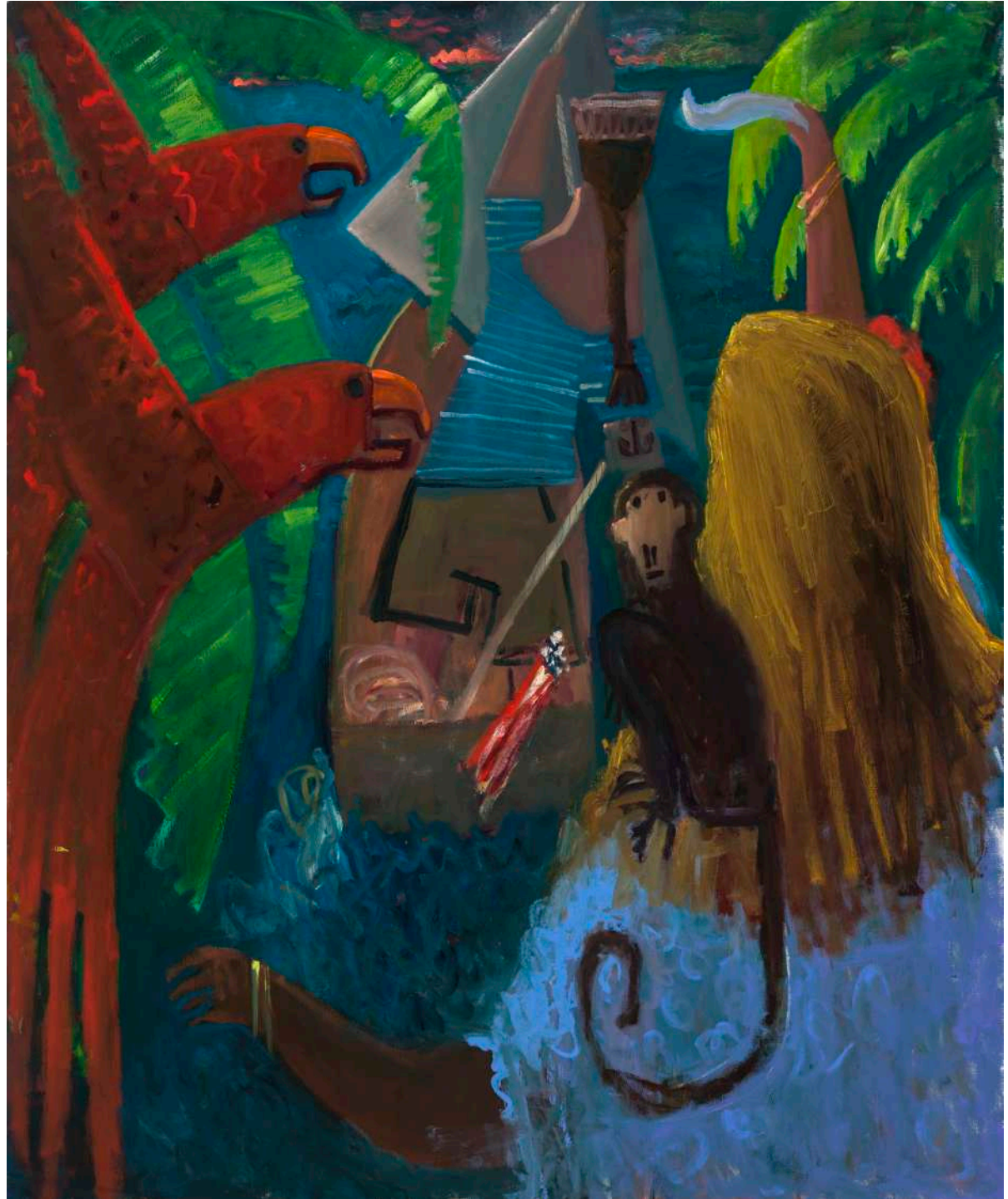


Europa's Fall, 2022
Clay
14 3/4 x 13 1/2 x 4 1/2 in
37.5 x 34.3 x 11.4 cm
(KST22.049)





Charity, 2022
Oil on paper
30 3/4 x 24 3/4 x 1 1/8 in (framed)
78 x 63 x 3 cm (framed)
(KST22.026)



Calypso and Odysseus III, 2022
Oil on linen
70 x 58 in
177.8 x 147.3 cm
(KST22.041)



An abstract painting featuring a central, large, greenish-yellow face with a dark eye and a dark, triangular mouth. The face is surrounded by various colors and textures, including dark green, black, red, orange, and blue. The background is dark and textured, with some lighter areas. The overall style is expressive and somewhat somber.

**SELECTED EXHIBITONS
AND PROJECTS**

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS

Truth Be Told

2024

HALF GALLERY
NEW YORK, NY

Light Catcher

2023

NINO MIER GALLERY
BRUSSELS, BE

Show of Strength

2022

MOSKOWITZ BAYZE
LOS ANGELES, CA

Tout Court

2022

HALF GALLERY
NEW YORK, NY



Truth Be Told

2024
HALF GALLERY
NEW YORK, NY

In the 1960s, while attending an all-girl's boarding school called Ferry Hall - this was just outside Chicago - Kyle Staver had a transformative encounter with a teacher named Mrs. Moses. One day the woman said to her pupil, "I know what's wrong with you. You're an artist." And young Kyle responded, "Who me?!" The teacher could tell that her assertion warranted additional context. "It's okay," said Mrs. Moses. "Art is a whole world."

Before Kyle went to boarding school, she was making little bedroom doodles all the time from the safety of her small town in Northern Minnesota, but she had never conceived that a life, let alone a livelihood, could be forged from this pastime. The only art book she'd encountered to date was a big gold Dali monograph which her parents had stationed in their living room.

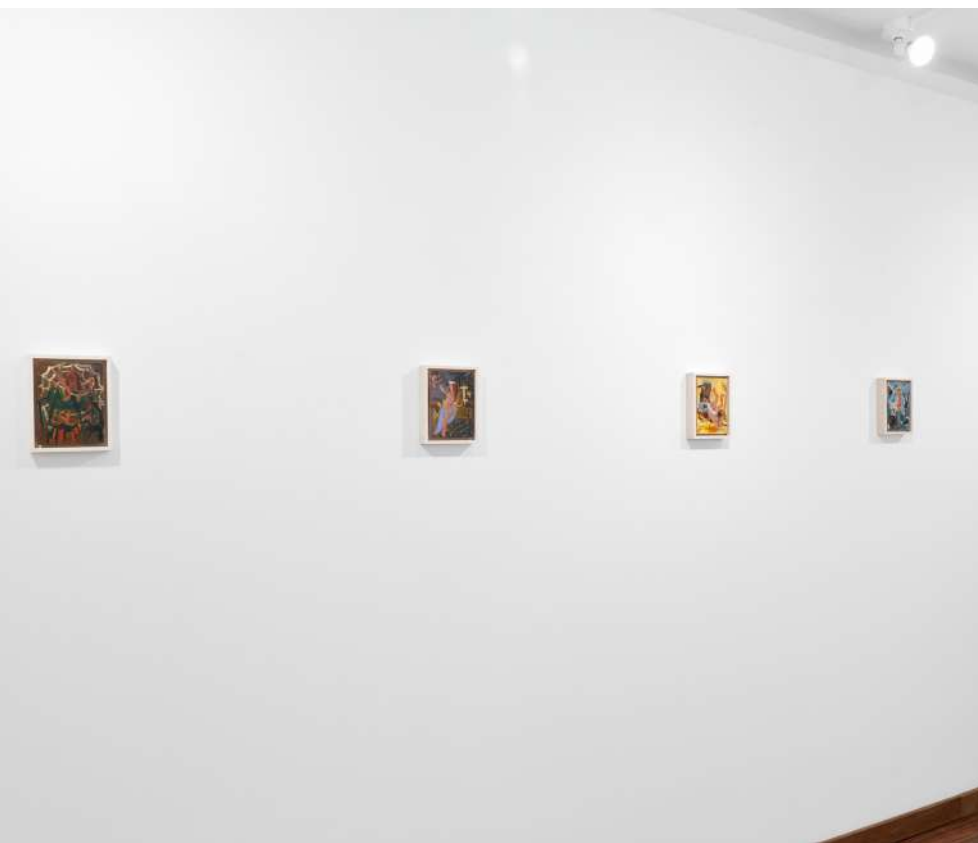
In her formative days, Edith Hamilton was Kyle's main reading source. She authored the classic 1942 book "Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes." It was more drama than a Real Housewives episode could shake a stick at and served as Kyle's primer to Greek and Roman parables. The stories transported Kyle to another universe of palace intrigue and tragic romance.

There's that old joke about finding your way to Carnegie Hall and by the time Kyle got to Yale graduate school in the 1980s she was ready to lean into her practice. She started off as a sculptor, studying with Siah Armajani. Kyle fancied herself a Jackie Ferrar or a Mary Miss, well, those were the artists she sought to emulate. She was making sited work with small teams of people helping her put them together. At the time artists John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage were also attending the MFA program at the Yale School of Art.

Her path beyond graduate school was a slower burn. Back then, Peter Halley was the cat's pajamas. Cool was hot. And it was all male. Kyle returned to her love of fables and began painting again, always with a flat brush. A flat brush kept her honest. She tapped into the absurdity and humor of classic tropes: the damsel in distress, the futility of Prometheus's plight, how repetition of imagery could serve as a force multiplier.

Thirty five years later, Kyle Stave remains active in her Brooklyn studio. Writing for The New York Times in 2018, Roberta Smith commented, "In this century's resurgence of figurative painting, Ms. Staver is a significant precedent." Kyle was a 2016 Guggenheim fellow and counts the likes of Carroll Dunham and Trey Abdella amongst her many collectors.

Kyle Staver's signature if you believe artists can traffic in such things is her ability to capture backlight and raking light or, dare we say, divine light. The glow emanating from Goldilocks as she finds herself surrounded by a sleuth of bears, clutching her Klimt-like quilt up to her chest for protection. Or that hollow of sunshine between the skeleton and his beloved in "Death and the Maiden" as if affection could be manifest as a beam of light.













Light Catcher

2023
NINO MIER GALLERY
Brussels, BE

Nino Mier Gallery is thrilled to present *Light Catcher*, an exhibition by Brooklyn-based artist Kyle Staver on view in Brussels from February 24 – March 25, 2023. Our first solo exhibition with the artist, a suite of new paintings, drawings, and clay reliefs will span both galleries, located at Rue Ernest Allard 25 and Rue Ernest Allard 41.

Engaging with the beautiful and the grisly of canonical Western narratives in equal measure, Staver finds her inspiration in sources ranging from the Bible to ancient Greek mythopoetic traditions. Across her works, we find recognizable figures gripped in the throes of their trials and passions. Odysseus finds—then leaves—Calypso’s sandy shores, Ganymede plummets through a stormy night sky, and Europa falls off the back of her captor, the minacious, lascivious bull. In other works, the artist personifies a series of virtues including Charity, Justice, and Fortitude, among others, developing a tradition of iconography stemming from early Christian manuscript illumination.

Despite working with stories that have been re-told throughout centuries, Staver cultivates an enigmatic atmosphere within her paintings—both formally and narratively. As Dan Nadel put it in Artforum: “Her sources are the urtexts of patriarchy, but Staver often flips the script” to offer intelligent re-imaginings of stories enshrined in ancient archetypes. The paintings therefore traffic in a kind of narrative uncanny, as the stories to which they refer are simultaneously familiar and new or unsettling. “There is so much expressive opportunity in the space between what is expected and what is actually there,” Staver explains. “Allowing the painting to slip its moorings, without completely losing sight of the mothership, is when painting is the most thrilling for me.”

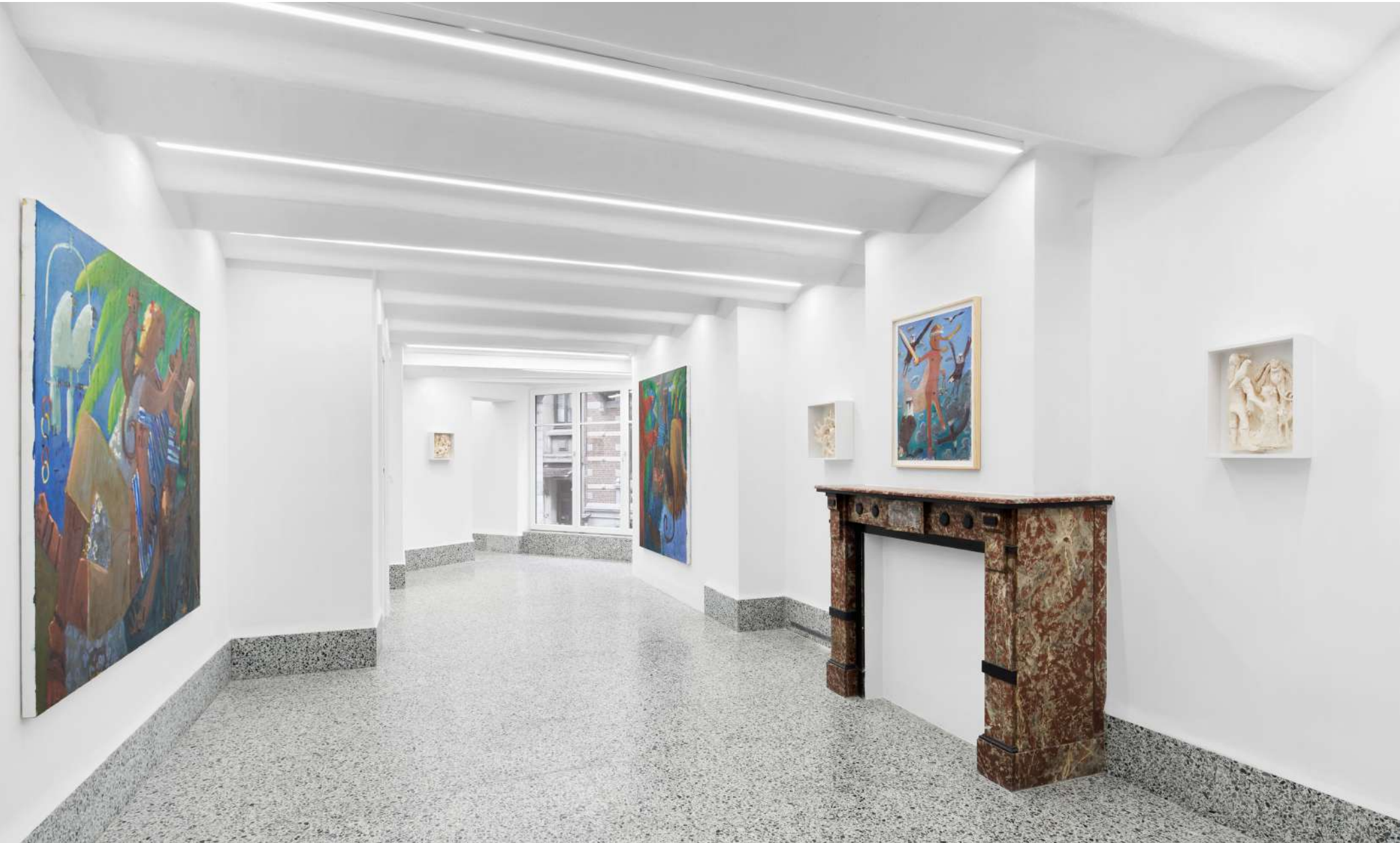
Before starting a painting, Staver contemplates which moments in a given story are most captivating, and works on preparatory drawings and reliefs. Beginning with ink, watercolor, and pencil drawings, Staver finds the ideal tonal scale and composition suited to her interpretation of the original text. Her three-dimensional reliefs, in turn, offer a physicality that further immerses the artist in the world of her paintings. Staver’s focus on repetition and cross-mediality reflects the discursive nature of her source narratives, as stories that have been re-told throughout centuries.

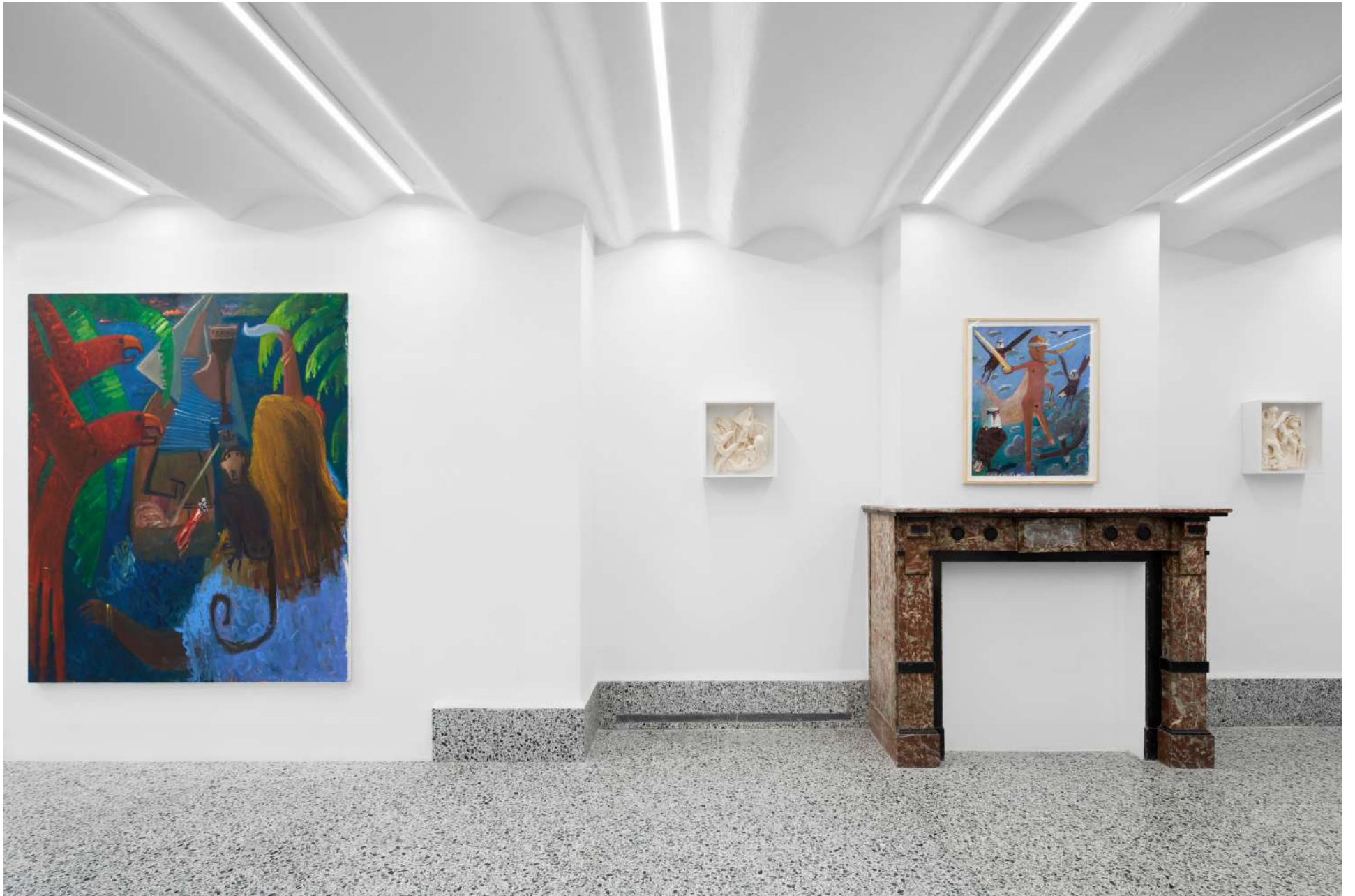
Shadow and light are opposing properties that comprise both content and form within Staver’s work. Nightfall and daybreak become personified in *Dusk* (2022) and *Dawn* (2022), wherein crowned goddesses shepherd in nighttime and morning amid angels in the sky. Further, Staver captures critical moments within these narratives in her tenebrous yet vibrant color palettes. Luminosity is frequently relegated to the margins of Staver’s shadowy forms. In *Calypso and Odysseus* (2022), for instance, both figures



are rendered in muted color palettes, with stark, salmon-colored highlights flecking the curve of his arm, bent to shield an invisible sun, and the curve of her breast as she sits plaintively next to him.

Staver's shadows decenter her figures as the key features of her paintings, instead representing them as one of many components within larger narrative climates. In *Calypso and Odysseus III* (2022), both figures are depicted from behind as they pass through a palm-lined strait. However, a monkey on Calypso's shoulder stares nakedly at the viewer. To its left, an American flag hangs from Odysseus' boat, recalling the American Eagle gripping Ganymede in Staver's distillation of the story. Such focal shifts and anachronisms register an important feature of folklore, one Staver runs with freely: it is protean rather than fixed, changing throughout time to reflect shifting cultural conditions.

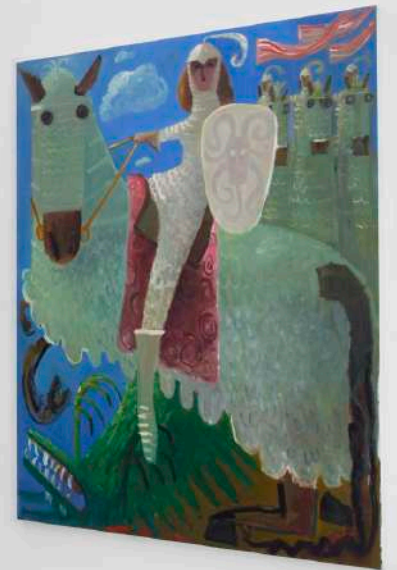
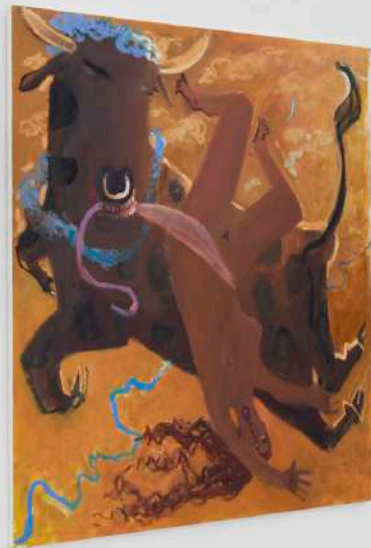
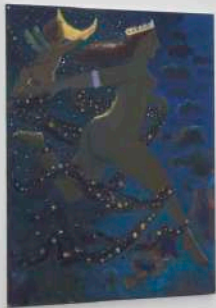






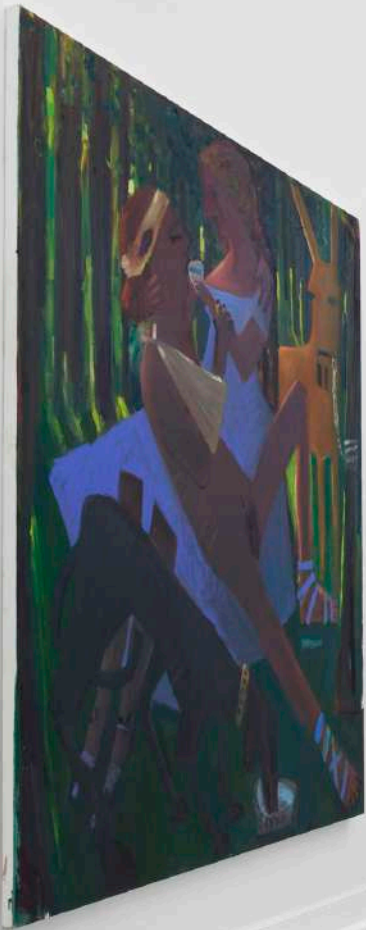


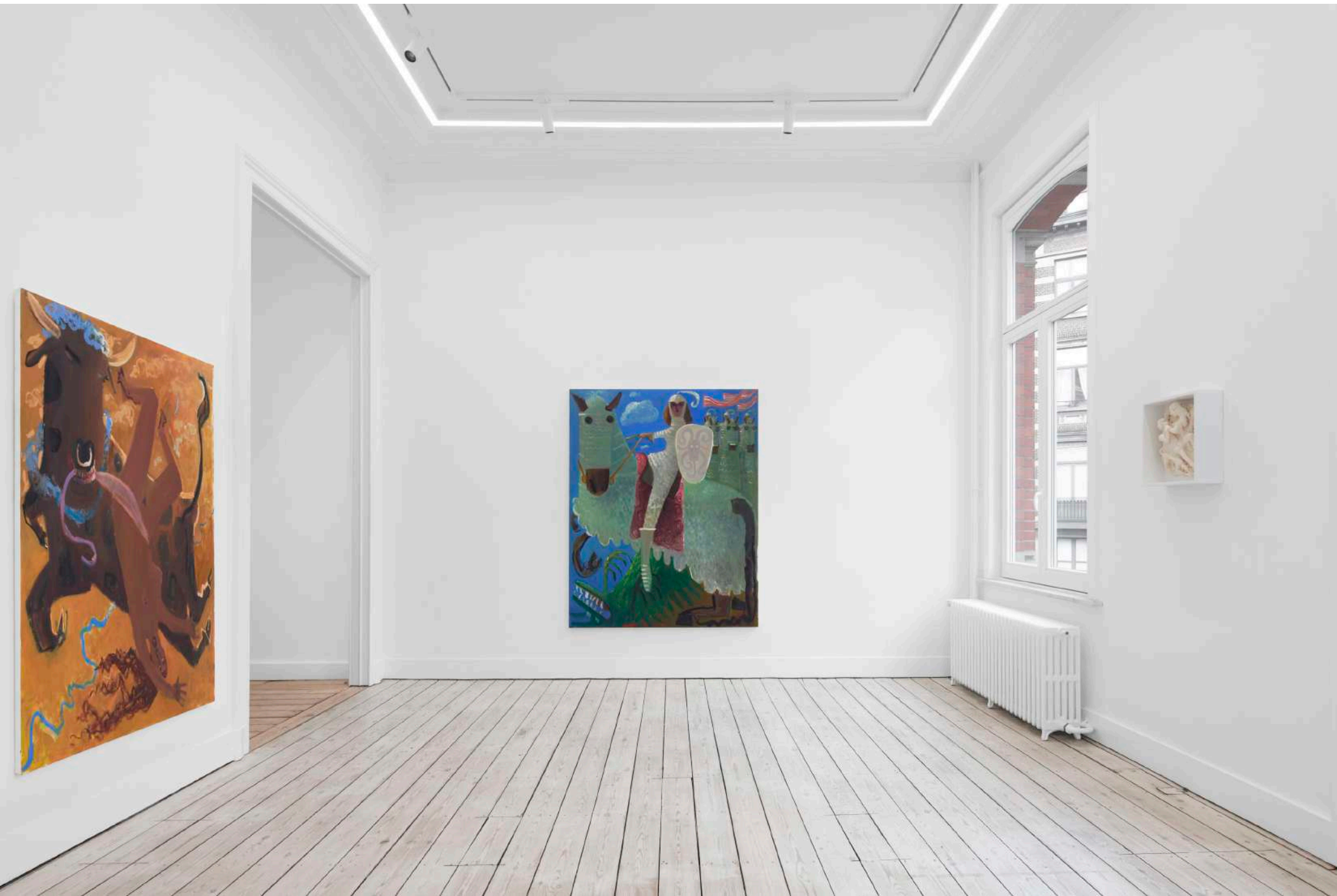


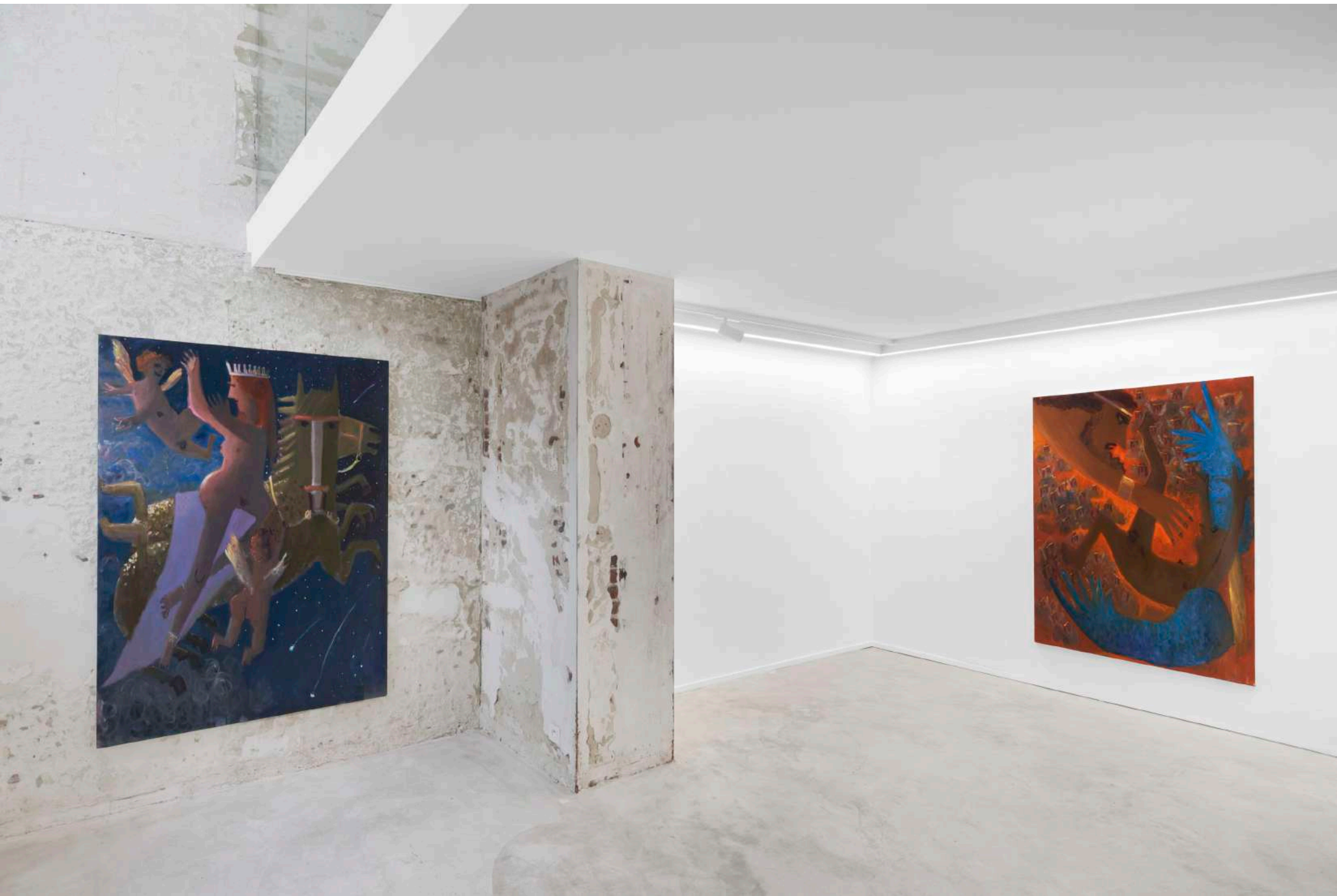












SHOW OF STRENGTH

2022

MOSKOWITZ BAYSE
LOS ANGELES, CA, US

Moskowitz Bayse is pleased to present *Show of Strength*, an exhibition of new paintings, clay reliefs, and etchings by Brooklyn-based artist Kyle Staver. This exhibition is the artist's first solo presentation with the gallery and will be on view from May 14 - June 18, 2022. We will host an opening reception on Saturday, May 14 from 6-9pm.

Deepening and darkening an extended engagement with the miasma of myths, tales, archetypes, and doomed heroes that make up the Western canon, Kyle Staver's *Show of Strength* lurches through salvation and moral ambiguity on its way toward retooled painterly sublimes. Comprising seven of Hercules's twelve labors, the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, and Daniel's salvation in the lion's den, Staver's subjects are the flawed, embattled, and beset heroes of a painterly practice long wary of narrative absolutism; while her Hercules traipses around Lake Lerna, Hades, and Nemea, conquering varyingly formidable enemies, Daniel looks dolefully toward the heavens for an eleventh-hour commutation, and St. Sebastian slumps into pyrrhic deliverance. Unlike Staver's female heroines, who often float to decisive victories after centuries of narrative helplessness, her men struggle and plod: the revisionist impulses of the artist's brush bend toward an elusively egalitarian center.

Staver considers the myth of the myth, gravitating to her subjects for their universality and ubiquity as the bases of countless retellings in film, painting, sculpture, and song. St. Sebastian is a historic favorite, with painters using the degree of his suffering to project some combination of restraint, realism, piety, and mastery of perspectival subtleties. The Hercules saga, too, has often provided opportunities for artist and viewer alike to bask in shades of human divinity, and vaunt the necessity of some well-timed carnage. Conversing with her fellow storytellers without ever submitting to them, Staver exchanges stoic, calcified certainties for shimmering moments of searching.

That searching seems to take place before the viewer in puckish visual echoes connecting, for example, the common shock on the faces of Hercules, his Harpy assailants, and the slain lion atop his head; Cerberus's perky tail balances the languid menace of his glowing tongues; the wristwatch-clad hand in the yellow teeth of a feline captor lead the eye toward Daniel's own limply shackled arm. Likewise, Staver's surfaces slither and dance, with piercing highlights flashing through fogs of muted paint that coax the eye from the glint of a tooth to a flaring, cocked blade. Staver constantly finds moments of compositional harmony suggestive of chance but owing little to it.

Indeed, much of the artist's searching takes place in the reliefs, drawings, studies,

Images courtesy of Moskowitz Bayse.



and etchings, which serve as standalone works, and stations on the way to a completed canvas. Her white clay reliefs disclose light sources and bodily weight, while the etchings provide value, tone, and two-dimensional compositional cues. The resulting compositions transcend a single medium, becoming fully fledged constellations of story and form; Staver's unmissable hand moves fluidly between media, as her decisions develop and build on one another, complicating the seemingly instant intuition of each finished work.

Delighting in moral and tonal murkiness and the formal opportunities those qualities provide, Staver's *Show of Strength* finds a painter comfortable wading through masculinity's bloated mire toward artworks brimming with empathy, generosity, carnage, and redemption. Narrative, perhaps the dominant mode of figurative painting today, is complicated by the dual attack of universal familiarity and departure therefrom. For an artist whose influence on many of today's leading painters is becoming more understood, the envelope continues to be pushed, with cultural memory and painterly tradition called into question once again.







Tout Court

2022
HALF GALLERY
NEW YORK, NY, US

Kyle Staver builds worlds. Inside, we are close to nature. The light feels familiar but just out of reach. Scenes unfold inside darkening forests and drooping wisteria. I look up to see the skies of Northern Minnesota. I look down and notice Artemis and Mr. Moose participating in their own stories. I look around and am surrounded by fireflies and moths. A chorus of animals bear witness.

These paintings are made from scratch. Brush strokes gather, stretch out, zigzag, and crisscross giving shape to clouds, waves, feathers and fishnet stockings. Oil sticks jab onto stretched canvas making dots that turn into eyes. An elk, a horse, or an archer, make eye contact. Who am I in this world of dancing satyrs and barking dogs?

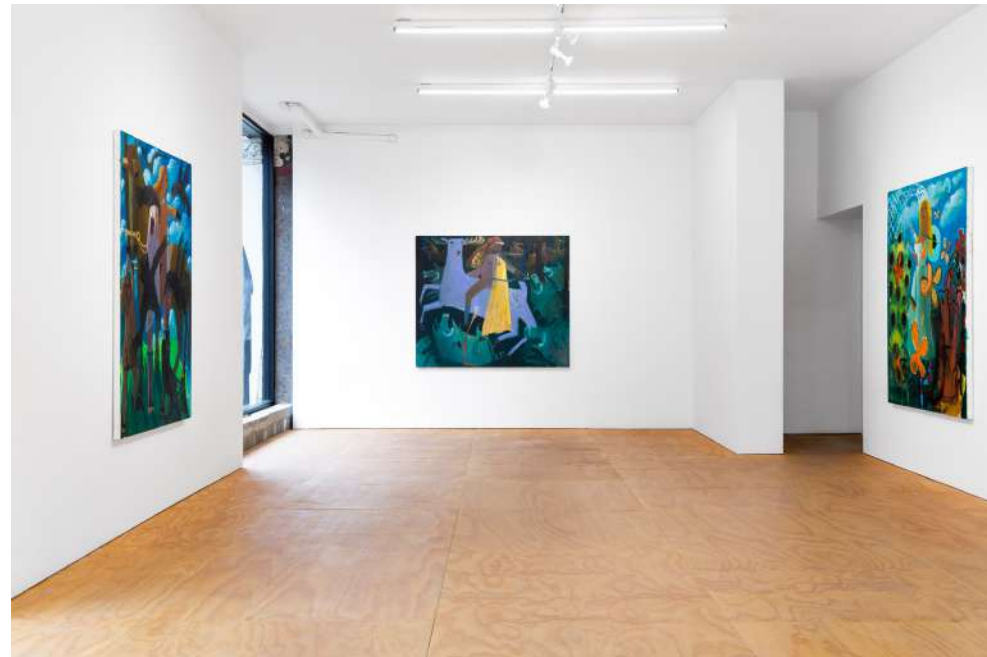
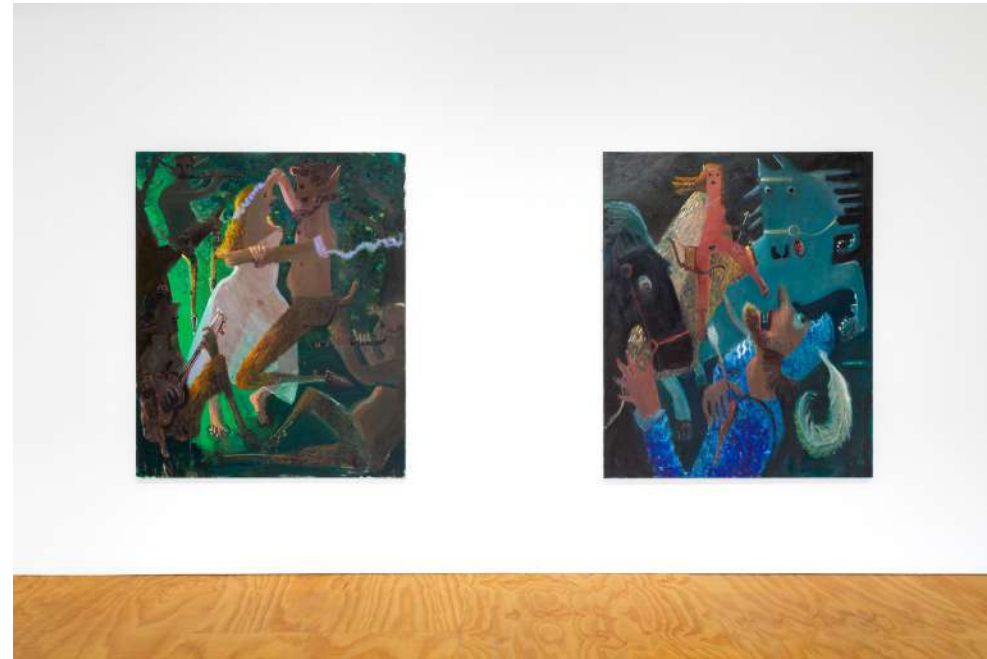
Touch is something that is felt, suggested, inferred in Kyle's paintings. Objects and voids play with nearness, always dancing and reshaping the space around each other. Two lovers' faces almost meet. Between kisses, their lips pause. In a darkened field, leering eyes and smoking cigars come within a hair's breadth tracing the contours of a dancer in the dark. Somewhere else a bird lands on a hand.

And then there's the visual rhyming. Once you see it, you can't unsee it. A glowing bulb pushes back an arcing net. Crows circle against circling clouds. Seven dolphins dive synchronously against an outstretched orange line of last light, high on the horizon.

And to see all of this, to feel all of this, requires time.

Kyle takes us into the time of myths and memories to show us what still matters. And by asking us to trace her painted marks she holds our hand as we witness a world come into being.

March 28, 2022
Sangram Majumdar



Images courtesy of Half Gallery.













PRESS

PRESS

WHITEHOT MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY 2024
BY DAVID JAGER

THE ART NEWSPAPER

APRIL 2022
BY GABRIELLA ANGELETI AND
BENJAMIN SUTTON

THE NEW CRITERION

JULY 2020
BY ANDREW L. SHEA

ART SPIEL

JULY 2020
BY ETTY YANIV

NAD NOW

APRIL 2020
BY KATHLEEN HEFTY

ART IN AMERICA

DECEMBER 2018
BY ERIC SUTPHIN

NEW YORK TIMES

OCTOBER 2018
BY ROBERTA SMITH

HARPER'S BAZAAR

SEPTEMBER 2018
BY STAFF

ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 2018
BY DAN NADEL

HYPERALLERGIC

SEPTEMBER 2018
BY JOHN YAU

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

OCTOBER 2016
BY KATE LIEBMAN



FEBRUARY 2024

Kyle Staver: Truth Be Told at Half Gallery

By David Jager

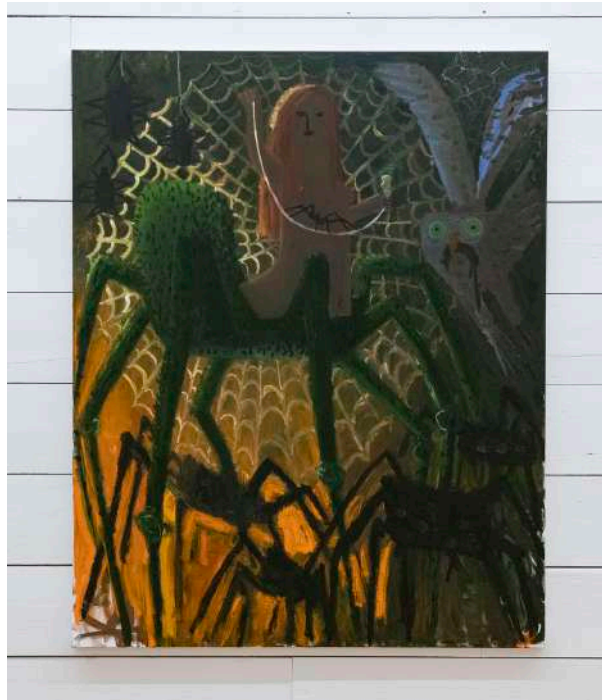


Kyle Staver, Amazon Archers, 2023. Monoprint, 20 x 24 in. Courtesy of Half Gallery.

To look at a Kyle Staver painting is to step into a visual space that is serenely otherworldly. Through her years of painterly practice, Staver has established her own peaceable domain, an aesthetic realm inimitable as it is ineffable. A narrative and figurative painter, she is also an accomplished stylist, bringing a modernist and witty, if not downright funny, sensibility to her canvases that makes her work squarely contemporary. There isn't really anyone who paints like her, and she has been doing so, steadily, for decades.

Myth and fairy tale is the domain of Staver's current show at Half Gallery, eleven paintings of Amazon women archers, mermaids; Goldilocks and the three bears; Mary Howitt's 'Spider'; death and the maiden and two paintings devoted to sleeping beauty and prince charming. Taken altogether we have the sense of a separate cosmology built out of her whimsical and stylistic imagination, which nonetheless prove to have deeper aesthetic, if not metaphysical resonance. You can also read into each work aesthetically, allegorically or psychologically, and the effort is always rewarding.

Staver's fairy tale figures live in a world sweetly naive as it is liminal - they are most certainly in the dream time. Yet they also have a chunky weightiness, an echo of School of Paris modernism that she manages to make her own. Her sensuous palette of bold and pastel colors, also unique, almost recall Max Beckmann's love of contrastive color and outline. A common tension in Stavers' painting is the way in which her formal and compositional styling almost threatens to overwhelm the narrative and figurative elements. Even so, she manages this balancing act in a way that makes it seem effortless.

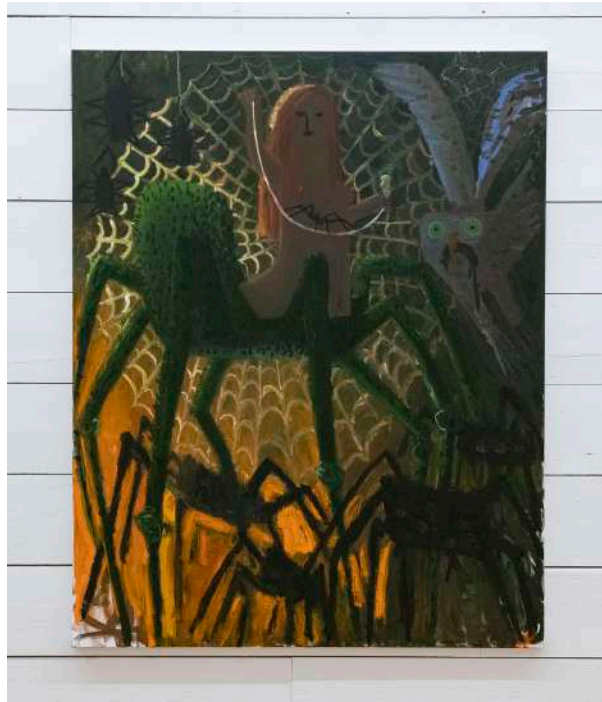


Kyle Staver, Spider, 2023. Oil on Linen, 70 x 58 in.

Nevertheless, a subtle tug of war continuously takes place between each painting's stylistic, symbolic and narrative elements, which gives each one a subtle drama. "Sleeping Beauty", which catches the princess at the moment of her awakening, is also a complex formal arrangement of geometric shape and texture. The rosy triangle of her princess gown, oddly stiff and flat, is punctuated by a burst of blue birds flying upwards, who in their geometric simplicity are strongly reminiscent of late Braque. In the meantime, the princess' dress is draped over an almost abstract field of scrawled flowers in dark reds and browns- she appears to be lying on a bed of them- while the prince, resplendent in mint green, offsets the primary colors of rose and cerulean. The motifs of reawakening and joyous rebirth are so overdone in the composition as to be almost silly, but Staver is in on the joke. She gives the jaunty prince a ridiculously long green feather in his hat. A blob of white cloud and comically solemn horse look on from the background.

Humor is a potent weapon in the Staver's painterly arsenal. Her portrayal of Goldilocks awakening amongst the three bears verges on the cartoonishly funny. Her look of consternation amid the three glowering bears almost brings a Far Side panel to mind. But the composition is also anxiety-provoking, as Staver manages to rekindle our childlike curiosity in that moment of the fairytale. I remember being a deeply curious about this story as a kid. To further underscore the drama of the moment, Staver paints the baby bear looking directly at us with its claw bared, as if to warningly say "Look away!" Staver helps us relive the instant when the comforts of home are suddenly upended by the terrors of the natural and outside world. Perhaps her paintings aren't as naïve as they appear.

Staver's similar flirtation with depth and terror are echoed in her painting "Death and The Maid", which appears to be a cryptic mirror of her Sleeping Beauty painting. A skeletal death cradles a maid in a field of oranges and autumnal browns, one bony hand cups her breast while another smooths her hair. Death looks as if he is lulling the maid, tenderly if not erotically, to sleep. Oddly the face of the maid in profile is almost identical to the profile of sleeping beauty being awakened. Being kissed back to life or cradled into sleep by death: in Staver's world both events are bookends of the same mythical cycle. Maybe one is not so different than the other.



Kyle Staver, Death and the Maiden, 2023. Oil on Linen, 52 x 68 in.

Femininity and feminine identity do seem to emerge as a theme this show, viewed as they are through the lens of fairy tale and myth. Her Amazons, atop their horses with bows drawn and riding into battle, are studies in feminine resilience and strength. Her *Goldilocks*, on the other hand addresses girlhood fears of welcome and safety in the home. Her *Sleeping Beauty* paintings allegorize girlhood fantasies of ideal love. *Death and the Maiden* speaks to fears surrounding budding womanhood, sexuality and death.

There are also moments of feminine ambiguity. Her female spider, who she has gifted with a female torso and face, is serene while her victim, a mustachioed fly, seems deeply perturbed. He appears to be asking "Why must it be this way?". Painted by Staver it's a parable of the mating dance. The same ambiguity appears in 'Mermaid', where a mermaid embraces a drowning woman. Mythically beautiful but sexually unavailable, the mermaid has always been a symbol of feminine beauty, seductiveness, and danger. Her pairing with the woman- an allegory of narcissism or self-idealization perhaps- is painted by Staver as a dangerous folie a deux, as the rather horrible face of her drowning woman attests.

Staver's preferred figuration, it seems, are couples that bring to life mythical situations that nonetheless have deep human import. They are beautifully modulated tableaux, replete with whimsy, paradox and irony, that speak to difficult and ambiguous areas of human experience. As much as they hail from the serene world of dream and myth, they have quite a lot to say about the truth of our souls.

Kyle Staver: Truth Be Told is on view at Half Gallery through February 7, 2024. **WM**



THE ART NEWSPAPER

APRIL 2022

Exhibitions to See in New York this Weekend

By Gabriella Angeleti and Benjamin Sutton



KYLE STAVER: TOUT COURT

Kyle Staver's new paintings depict the adventures of goddesses, mythic heroines and nymphs in compositions that are disarmingly comical and quietly masterful. Her take on the Greek goddess of the hunt, Artemis I (all works 2022) shows the titular figure not brandishing a bow and arrow (though there is plenty of that in adjacent works) but sitting by a campfire and enjoying an amiable conversation with a large bear while a sage moose looks on and glowing moths flutter about. The sweet scene, rendered in thick brushstrokes of mostly-dark blues, browns and greens, has the warmth of an endearing fairy tale. But it is also ingeniously composed, with the bright, sloping line of a tree trunk matching the bear's curving silhouette perfectly to guide our eyes toward the electric gaze being exchanged between Artemis and her ursine interlocutor. This pattern of casting mythic and allegorical figures in inventively re-imagined and expertly choreographed scenes plays out across the exhibition. Unexpected and borderline supernatural bursts of colour add to the dazzling effect, from the mauve glow shading the entire scene in Artemis I to the pulsing turquoise tusks of the titular prey in Boar Hunt or the practically radioactive grass that provides the ground in Crows. Staver conjures myths and landscapes that are not only lovingly recast but dramatically augmented.

The New Criterion

JULY 2020

A Moment for Myth

By Andrew L. Shea



What can old and ancient tales of mythology teach us today? It's a question raised by the art of Kyle Staver, whose recent work is currently on view (through July 24) at Zürcher Gallery in downtown Manhattan. Using a variety of media, Staver riffs on thoroughly trod narratives from Greek and Roman mythology, the Bible, and canonical literature to create witty and visually arresting pictures. In doing so, the artist aims to revitalize these chaotic and fantastical stories, reminding us of their enduring relevance in an age of often suffocating rationality.

This spirit of rejuvenation felt apt as I walked into the Zürcher space on Bleecker Street last week. Though we're already well into July, a certain vernal feeling is in the air of the New York gallery scene, which is just beginning to break through the frost of coronavirus lockdown. Zürcher Gallery was one of the very first to re-open its doors to the public, and its current exhibition, which originally opened for a brief moment back in early March, hits the right note for the return of in-person viewing.

That's to say, seeing Staver's work "in the flesh" is a powerful reminder of just what we've been missing these last few months. Her pictures of Medusa and Perseus, Lady Godiva, St. Sebastian's martyrdom, Shakespeare's Ophelia, and other mythological characters reproduce well on the screen or printed page, but much of their full power comes from the physical experience. Staver seems to delight in paint qua paint, and her work plays up the magical, luminous potential of her chosen media. "Magical"? Ye of little faith, Staver is a believer. Her work reminds us why the Ovidian, metamorphic impulse has stimulated the imagination of some of our best painters for centuries.

A case in point is *Medusa* (2019), one of the six or seven large oil paintings in the exhibition. In it, Perseus holds aloft the titular Gorgon's decapitated head in his left hand and grips the reins to his horse in his right.

Like many of the mythological moments represented in this show, it has been attempted numerous times throughout history, perhaps most notably by the sculptor Benvenuto Cellini in his bronze Perseus with the Head of Medusa (ca. 1545–54). But whereas interpretations such as Cellini's emphasize a victorious Perseus clutching the snaky locks of his vanquished foe, Staver's hero is pushed to the extreme left edge of the canvas, and seen only from behind; we are instead drawn immediately to the blood-red discs of Medusa's accusing eyes. From this focal point our attention disperses along the various radii of Medusa's snakehead tresses and we begin to realize just how unnatural and disorienting the entire moonlit presentation is. Perseus's horse, sky-blue, spotted, and blindfolded, takes up nearly the entire right half of the painting—by its sheer size defying rational perspective and natural scale. Posed in direct profile, the horse comes off initially as a totally abstract plane, included out of formal necessity.

The idiosyncratic modernism of Staver's figuration—mask-like faces, boneless and elastic limbs, glowing and often radiant colors, etc.—lends all her work a certain stylized, illustrative effect. One could imagine a successful book on classical mythology decorated with Staver's drawing. Illustration, or illustrative quality in painting, often gets a bum rap, as it implies a lack of depth or serious content. But the muscular quality of her plastic and engaging forms pull deeper meaning out of the surface image. It's also worth considering that a number of modern masters made forays into illustration with great success, blurring and transcending the line between decoration and fine art. Picasso, for instance, illustrated editions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*; Matisse illustrated an edition of Joyce's *Ulysses* with scenes from Homer's *Odyssey*. Both artists clearly exert a strong influence on Staver's figurative language.

Surrounding most of the large narrative paintings are smaller works in different media—watercolor, pencil sketching, aquatint etching, even a series of sculptural reliefs in fired ceramic—on the same subject. It's instructive to compare these efforts and note their differences. One senses that Staver uses the different media to isolate certain formal aspects of the picture (composition and line in the pencil drawings, say; tonal drama in the aquatints; local color in the watercolors; spatial plasticity in the reliefs) that are then picked up or tossed out in the "final" large paintings. And yet, despite this apparently laborious preparatory work, the paintings rarely feel "planned" in any traditional sense. Evidence of spontaneous improvisation is ubiquitous in the works' facture, and one sometimes feels that "pure-painting" discovery plays as important a role in determining the final result as the mythological sources themselves.

Perhaps the strongest work in the exhibition is *Ophelia* (2020). The large painting shows us Shakespeare's drowned heroine floating down a dark blue stream, her lifeless wrists grabbed at and picked up by black swans with radiant orange beaks. The entire picture is seen in near-silhouette, illuminated from behind by an incandescent Kelly Green that peaks through low-hanging willow branches in the background. Again, the subject evokes an art-historical predecessor. This time it's John Everett Millais' *Ophelia*, from 1851–52, a classic example from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. But despite working in a fanciful, modernistic idiom, Staver bests the uber-naturalistic Millais in capturing both the tragedy of *Ophelia*'s death and the watery weight of her half-submerged body as "her garments, heavy with their drink,/ Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay/ To muddy death."

Interesting formal relationships between figure and environment, and figure and beast, proliferate: see those between the swans' arcing necks and similar contours in the wrists and elbows of *Ophelia*, and those between the feathers of the swans' tails and the fingers of *Ophelia*'s hands. It's engrossing to search for these rhymes and resonances in each work. This imaginative intermingling between humans and nature recalls Nietzsche's vivid description of the mythological mind of ancient Greece, from his essay "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense":

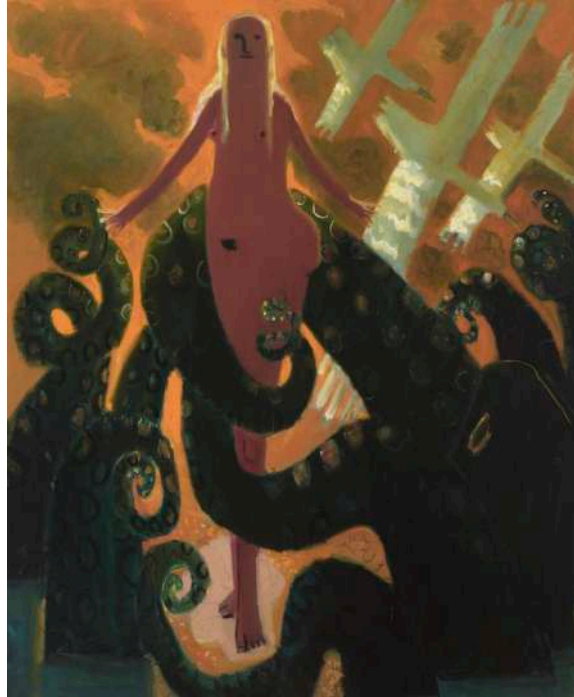
When every tree can suddenly speak as a nymph, when a god in the shape of a bull can drag away maidens, when even the goddess Athena herself is suddenly seen in the company of Peisistratus driving through the marketplace of Athens with a beautiful team of horses—and this is what the honest Athenian believed—then, as in a dream, anything is possible at each moment, and all of nature swarms around man as if it were nothing but a masquerade of the gods, who were merely amusing themselves by deceiving men in all these shapes. Through exceedingly individual recreations of a dream-like world where "anything is possible at each moment," Staver reminds us of the very human, universal, and thus contemporary power of myth. It's all fine painting, too, so don't miss this exhibition if you find yourself in Manhattan during these last few days before it closes.

ART SPIEL

JULY 2020

Kyle Staver – New work at Zürcher

By Etty Yaniv



Kyle Staver's second solo show at Zürcher Gallery in New York features new paintings, relief sculptures, drawings, and aquatint etchings through July 24th. In this interview Kyle Staver shares some ideas on her work process, touches upon the narrative and mythological elements in her work, and gives us an insight on her notion of art history.

AS: Our interview is being conducted during a tumultuous period of pandemic and social upheaval. Life has changed since your exhibition at Zürcher Gallery opened March 12th. What are your thoughts about the road ahead?

Kyle Staver: March 11th my show at Zürcher Gallery opened. Three days later the world shut down and closed. My work hung silent in the empty gallery. Going to the studio everyday is the only thing that has remained unchanged in this time of sad and confusing chaos. The Brooklyn soundtrack of non-stop sirens and hovering helicopters operate as a constant reminder that I'm not making this stuff up. The world was/is on fire. I'm not sure how this will change the work I do, but it will. Trying to look forward, I don't have a clue where we will land. I do know that artists will soldier on trying to make sense and hope out of all this.

AS: Please tell me a bit about your background and what is the premise behind this body of work?

Kyle Staver: I grew up in Northern Minnesota in a small mining town. When I was 16, I went to an all girls boarding school outside of Chicago. Mrs. Moses, my history teacher, told me she knew what was wrong with me, I was an artist. She said it was a wonderful thing to be and that there were many others like me. It was a miracle. She opened a secret door and I slipped through it like a baby duck slides into water.

The work I make always begins with the narrative/story. I start making pencil drawings, loose and tentative. Hunting bits of images that spark and move me. From there I start to make ink wash drawings. Working the tonal scales to press the light to deliver/support the expressive needs of the narrative. With the watercolors I try to get the composition, values and color to agree to work together. The reliefs allow me to see the work as actually existing in the world. This helps me “believe” my paintings are real. All of my work on paper and clay is made to support and push the painting along.

AS: In a 2019 essay on your work by painter Marc Desgrandchamps he sees your imagery as “a world of ‘paradise lost’, overwhelmed by today’s fears, but fears held at bay by a staging that provokes joy rather than fear, a joy also caused by an attention to form that does not reduce this painting to a simple narrative.” What is your take on that description and can you elaborate on your approach to narrative and mythology in the process of making your imagery?

Kyle Staver: I am first and foremost a storyteller. Making paintings has always been my means of connecting to the world. If I begin my painting with a story or a myth that the viewer is familiar with, we are connected and invested from the first moment. When I change or tweak a story it is hard to miss and the viewer is put on alert. There is so much expressive opportunity in the space between what is expected and what is actually there. The paintings seem to present as a “certain kind of painting” in a “certain kind of western art history lineage” with a “certain time honored story”, except when they don’t. Allowing the painting to slip its moorings, without completely losing sight of the mother ship, is when painting is its most thrilling for me.

AS: Let’s focus on Miss America. What would you like to share about this painting, the idea behind it, its genesis and process?

Kyle Staver: Miss America was a painted Ambassador of good will and greeting from the USA to France. She is a Rodeo Queen and as American they come. The companion painting, Joan of Arc and the Poodles, is as French as I could imagine. Both paintings accompanied me on my trip to Paris last summer for an exhibition curated by Gwenolee Zürcher.

AS: It seems that art history is central in your work. Where do you see this body of work in that context?

Kyle Staver: I see the history of art as a Big River with every thing that has ever been made bumping and knocking against every thing that will be made. The unstoppable need to make stuff is shared by all human beings. It transcends time, gender, race, and sexual orientation. Being a part of this River makes the source material for my work endless and rich. I can’t imagine a period of art that is no longer important or germane to what is happening today. Nothing is used up or outdated. The pleasure and challenge for me is to continue the conversation by personalizing and contemporizing it.

NAD NOW

APRIL 2020

KYLE STAVER AT ZÜRCHER GALLERY

By Kathleen Hefty



Last month, before cities and states around the country issued stay-at-home orders, Zürcher Gallery in New York City presented an exhibition of new and recent paintings, aquatint etchings, drawings, and relief sculptures by Kyle Staver (NA 2015). I was fortunate to view the eponymous exhibition immediately after it opened and before the gallery moved the exhibition online. The day I visited, I noted the transition from an unusually quiet street outside Zürcher Gallery into a world of similar dreamlike eeriness. Within this uncanny and theatrical space, Staver's work greeted visitors with a beguiling mix of tension and familiarity.

Throughout her practice, Staver, who is based in Brooklyn, has been examining human nature through tableaux, scenes from life, and narratives by means of painting, drawing, printmaking, and sculpture to peculiar effect. Staver's practice is traditional on the one hand—she incorporates Renaissance motifs, meticulous etching methods, and relief techniques that date back to ancient times—and, on the other hand, avant-garde for that very reason. In the case of this exhibition, her choice of subject matter—a range of biblical, mythical, folkloric, and literary sources—and traditional materials feels historical but still of-the-moment. The exhibition brings the artist's studio into the gallery space and revolves around her process creating the show's centerpieces: large oil paintings. Interspersed throughout are studies by way of sculptural relief scenes, drawings, watercolors, and aquatint prints. Her clever use of space within each medium connects the techniques. Showing the smaller preliminary explorations of each theme alongside the final paintings is powerful.

The drawings and etchings exemplify the urgency and fullness of the stories at hand. In *Study for Medusa 1, 2020*, for example, Staver presents a childlike ink and pencil drawing, full of squiggly lines and shapeless snakes squirming like sun rays around Medusa's decapitated head. The aquatint etching print of the same

subject, *Study for Medusa*, 2020, is almost identical in layout but the complex technique is less a sketch than a methodical creation. In their expressive and hasty qualities, both works provide a window into the artist's modes of communication.

Alongside these studies are unpainted fired clay panels reminiscent of Renaissance church doors or classical temples, which replace sculptural precision with crude incisions and lumpy shapes. In *Study for Death and the Maiden*, 2020, a skeleton's bony hands claw into a maiden's flesh; their coarse faces and sunken eyes contribute a sense of immediacy, as though the artist was compelled to create the scene wholly without losing the story in the details. "The undulation of the relief can unite form and background," sculptor Etienne Hajdu stated about the medium in 1953, "It also gives a spatial sensation without perspective; light makes its way across the surface little by little." Staver's reliefs have formidable depth and Hajdu's sentiment resonates here. Staver layers the figures on top of each other; they are crowded, jumbled forms that meld together. Therefore, shadows play an essential role in establishing physical depth and definition.

The large oil paintings are theatrical, vibrant, and primitive. They showcase the ease with which Staver plays with space. "When I make paintings," the artist said in a 2016 interview, "I make them like a sculptor. I feel like I build them."¹ In *Ophelia*, 2020, for example, the familiar protagonist lies lifeless, her limp hand mirroring the elegant curves of the necks of three black swans swimming around her body. Ophelia's blonde curls, the green glow of the canopy, and the birds' bright orange beaks pop out of a dark palette, and in doing so contribute a subtle sense of three-dimensionality to the painting. The swans' elongated forms and perky tails contradict Ophelia's lifeless body in the center and frame her shape. A glowing soft backlight illuminates the shapes of the figures, while Ophelia's head remains in the shadows before a background of cascading leaves that act as a green curtain behind the unfolding scene at center stage.

Similarly dramatic, a sense of upward momentum in paintings like *Miss America*, 2019, and *Death and the Maiden*, 2019, have an exuberant dimensionality that echoes the dynamism of the reliefs. In the past, Staver has explained her choice of size of canvas as a one-to-one ratio, and in that sense she composes the scenes as though we could enter the story ourselves. Legends and myths take on their own lives in her work, but they often share themes that work together to make sense of complex human behavior—love, despair, jealousy. They do this through entertainment and humor as well as revulsion and horror. Staver synthesizes various modes to investigate the possibilities of shape, line, shadow, and color to bring these stories into a contemporary and fresh perspective. Like *Miss America*, wearing a sparkly Americana costume as she triumphantly rides a bucking bull, the exhibition is enticing and alluring.

Art in America

DECEMBER 2018

Kyle Staver

By Eric Sutphin

Whether the theme is love, war, or death, myths have provided artists a rich source of visual and conceptual material for millennia. The beauty lies in part in their malleability. Generation after generation, such stories prove to be fitting vehicles for exploring current political issues and events. About a decade ago, New York-based painter Kyle Staver (b. 1953) shifted from portraying domestic tableaux drawn from her own life to employing myths and legends, often foregrounding the role of female protagonists. In such works, she has maintained her distinctive style, in which chunky, monumental figures (the artist began her career, in Minnesota in the 1970s, as a sculptor) inhabit compositions that have some relation to the rigorous, atmospheric work of the late figurative painter Lennart Anderson (a mentor of hers) and often convey a subtle humor.

Her recent show at Zürcher comprised twelve large oil paintings, a selection of related works on paper, and six small clay reliefs. The reliefs were titled as studies for Staver's paintings, even if in some instances—according to the dates, as John Yau pointed out on *Hyperallergic*—she made them afterward. In the painting *Swan Flight* (2017), a coral-colored woman rides a swan through a misty sky dense with pink clouds. She, the swan, and the swans behind them are seen head-on and meet the viewer's gaze. They appear strong and determined yet peaceful, the image providing a counterpoint to the celebrations of heroism and violence often found in mythical depictions. Staver's portrayal of light enhances the otherworldliness of her scenes; *Swan Flight* seems to display a kind of shimmer, with bright pink streaks and white touches defining various contours in the composition.

Exaggerated poses, inventive color combinations, and stylized features give Staver's figures a cartoonlike quality that at once underscores the fictive aspect of the material and provides a kind of tension with the seriousness of some of the scenes. In *Lobster* (2017), a merman forcefully grabs the arm of a mermaid, who appears to gasp as she looks up at a screaming gull swooping down on the scene. A number of works depict such grabbing and groping, and seem particularly charged at this moment in which waves of individuals are rising up to expose sexual abuse and misconduct. *Venus and Adonis* (2017) features Venus grasping the chest of her unrequited love, while a clay study for a painting that wasn't included in the exhibition, *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, depicts two naked women fondling St. Anthony.

One difficulty with narrative painting is that the story at hand can subsume the work's formal properties. Indeed, to get the balance right is one of the artist's main challenges. Too much bravura will obscure the story, while too great an emphasis on narrative details can turn the image into an illustration. After decades in the studio, Staver has achieved this elusive but intensely rewarding equilibrium. She is able to make even the most familiar tale seem fresh, instilling her work with a genuine sense of joy and discovery.

Harper's BAZAAR

SEPTEMBER 2018

Best Female Art Exhibitions of 2018

By Staff



This fall, female figurative painters are out in full force. The change of season signals the awakening of summer slumber as New York's art scene comes roaring back to life. This September it's arguably female painters who are creating work that continues to push figurative art forward. From art veterans Katherine Bradford, Julie Heffernan and Kyle Staver to young feminist painters Natasha Wright and Nancy Elsamanoudi, this is our list of shows not to be missed.

KYLE STAVER AT ZURCHER

In Kyle Staver's large-scale paintings and small sculptural reliefs, majestic radiant light falls on elastic, almost cartoonish figures set in mythological scenes. The sensuality of Staver's figures, the lightness of touch, her superb handling of the paint, and ability to deftly infuse each scene with radiant light draw us into her newly imagined world of old gods and heroes. Staver's potent and heroic retelling of pagan myths infuses the paintings with renewed relevance, opening up the viewer's imaginative possibilities.

ARTFORUM

SEPTEMBER 2018

Human Nature

By Dan Nadel



ATTEMPTING TO RENDER what it is to be human is an absurd task, which makes it all the more urgent. We are long past the postwar afterglow of the “Family of Man” and other ultimately exclusionary attempts at unity. To know that and yet to pursue unironic ideas about our collective condition—despite all current political, social, and theoretical factors—is a profound act of faith in art. The artists Ellen Berkenblit, Carroll Dunham, Sarah Peters, and Kyle Staver are creating internally consistent speculative spaces in which to explore and, possibly, recuperate the idea that art is capable of representing what it’s like to be human. These “worlds” are empyrean, prelapsarian, suspended in an archaic “time” that exists outside of time. Shaped and inflected by ancient myths, Biblical stories, and other deep strata of human culture, but also by twentieth-century popular illustration, these artists’ work suggests a simultaneous longing to return to Eden and an awareness that we cannot do so—and that even if we could, Eden itself likely wasn’t so Edenic.

These artists investigate and foreground eros in the broadest sense—as life force, joy, and polymorphous perversity. Animals are the emissaries of this sensibility, and they act as magnets for empathy in the work, eliciting feelings of identification in the viewer. They may also represent those parts of humanity that aren’t merely human—those aspects of our universal selves that we share with animals, that aren’t determined by language or other strictly human structures. While the four artists’ work is figurative, and narrative in a fragmented way, their projects are also grounded in the physical. They are invested in the objecthood of their art, and the things they depict within their fictional spaces tend to intersect or open into real space, as though lifting out of picture planes or off of pedestals to further propagate their makers’ worlds. Both at the level of representation and in their exploration of the vitality and sensuality of making, Berkenblit, Dunham, Peters, and Staver investigate and foreground eros in the broadest sense—as life force, joy, and polymorphous perversity.

FOR THE PAST FIVE OR SIX YEARS, Staver has been making paintings that use mythological and Biblical stories as an armature for images of all-too-human emotions and foibles. Her sources are the urtexts of patriarchy, but Staver often flips the script both narratively and materially. Adam and Eve and the Goats, 2016, is not about the particulars of the Genesis story—there are no goats in any version of Eden, and Staver's Eve seems empowered as she reaches decisively for one of the glowing red orbs, while Adam stands nearby, looking irresolute. A luminous lime-green glow emanates from the background, as if through a backlit scrim. Staver's spirited and precise paint application, especially her almost flashy use of highlights and color flourishes to keep the viewer's eye moving, has an exuberance and finesse reminiscent of the Bay Area painter David Park. The light that shines on Adam and Eve produces deliberate outlines on Adam's cheek, Eve's calf, and a goat's ass. The goats stare out at us intelligently, beckoning us toward the incandescent hue, while their matter-of-factness invites us to look past ancient tropes and imagine the first humans leading their daily lives.

In his 1975 study *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition*, art historian Robert Rosenblum, rehabilitating Romanticism, describes Franz Marc's mythological paintings in terms that seem applicable to Staver's work:

That Romantic empathy into the lives of dumb animals, which increasingly humanized them . . . found its most remarkable extreme in Marc's ambitions, which he clearly articulated: "Is there a more mysterious idea for an artist than the conception of how nature is mirrored in the eyes of an animal? How does a horse see the world, or an eagle or a doe, or a dog? How wretched and soulless is our convention of placing animals in a landscape which belongs to our eyes, instead of submerging ourselves in the soul of the animal in order to imagine how it sees.

That submergence happens again and again in Staver's paintings (as well as those of Berkenblit and Dunham). *Psyche's Watch*, 2018, a decidedly revisionist take on the story, prompts us to identify with the only creature in the picture who meets our gaze: a dog peering out from underneath a bed on which a nude Cupid slumbers. The god is attended by putti bearing candles, gently illuminating a composition that is a play of triangles, from pubis to wings to nose. A hovering Psyche bemusedly looks down on the sleeper, who appears limp, flaccid—not just his penis but his whole being. There is no strong man inside this form. One reading of the painting is that it's all in the pup's imagination, a thought experiment that asks us to look at the positions of these bodies, allow ourselves into the space, and wonder at humanity and the roles that have been doled out to, enacted by, or forced on unwitting characters everywhere.

DUNHAM'S RECENT PAINTINGS, like Staver's, make central the theatrics of gender. Dunham's pictures of ageless and age-old wrestlers, begun in 2015 and recently on view at Gladstone Gallery in New York, are among the artist's most searingly emotive works. They explore and enact a mode of masculinity that is familiar to contemporary politics and everyday life, and seemingly an eternal driving force in history—although for Dunham, prehistory itself was the beginning of these paintings, if not their final subject. As a boy, he was obsessed with a 1961 picture book about the origins and development of civilizations, *The Epic of Man*, which contained pulpy illustrations of cavemen and dinosaurs. These would be at home (though they're not included) in a 2017 volume by Zoë Lescaze called *Paleoart*, a deep dive into depictions of prehistoric life. *Paleoart* does reproduce Rudolph Zallinger's *The Age of Reptiles*, 1947, a 110-foot-wide fresco, still on view at Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History, that enraptured Dunham as a boy and chronicles more than three hundred million years of dinosaur life: brontosaurus, Tyrannosaurus rex, Edaphosaurus, and innumerable others line up in a grand procession across eons. In Dunham's paintings, there are no reptilian megafauna, but you can feel them lurking just out of sight. And then there is the modern antiquity, as it were, of postwar, predigital childhoods—the aftereffects of which have permeated popular cultural forms for decades. We seem to be in the Jurassic period, the Bronze Age, the 1960s, and an extradimensional future all at once.

The men who inhabit this layered painting space are bumbling, ill-assembled creatures, good for fighting, fucking, camaraderie, and little else. They are the antithesis of the "sensitive" man as embodied by the "enlightened" generation of the 1970s or by the proudly (if not necessarily consistently) feminist progressive men of today. Precisely because the wrestlers are so ludicrous in their monolithic and uniform hyper-machismo, the paintings suggest that there's no single answer to what masculinity consists of, while not ruling out the possibility that the tendency toward violence might be hardwired. Yet Dunham's figuration is somehow tender, accepting of confusion, touchingly nonjudgmental.

The paintings *Green Hills of Earth* (1), (2), and (3), 2017, depict two men in combat, each with a club, against a curved horizon dotted with several trees, in a green color space with birds (each a precise M)

and a perfectly circular yellow sun. The bodies are in dynamic action—horizontals, diagonals, and spirals of limbs—but the space is utterly still, and the light is even. In Dunham's world, all things are equal; everything is rendered with the same carefully considered attention. Dunham uses a counting system to determine how many of each pictorial element to use in each group of works (in the case of Green Hills, three trees, four birds, eight limbs), which ensures that there is an ordered framework for the artist's experiments in paint handling and a range of emotional entry points for the viewer. The mournful, meditative *Left for Dead* (1), (2), (3), and (4), 2017–18, offer dramatically foreshortened views of a fallen male, two from the head down, two from the feet up. In each, a bird with folded origami wings hovers above, looking curious, as if less interested in carrion than in asking a question. One tree, one body, one bird. In *Dusk (A Wrestling Place 6)*, 2017, an oval-eyed gray dog observes the foolish men in a wet, muddy brown landscape against a starry purple sky. And in *Any Day*, 2017, Dunham offers his most expansive version of this ordered universe. The painting brings together a bather, a dog, four birds, the wrestlers, and Dunham's uniform mounds, stumps, flowers, and trees, arrayed on a swooping French curve of a cliff. Here, as in all of the artist's figurative paintings, only the animals have visible eyes. Oval and out of scale, perhaps occupying different dimensional and/or planar spaces than the wrestlers, these eyes are alternately quizzical, emboldened, and innocent. It's as if they're channeling the unknowable inner lives of Dunham's humanoids, bearing witness to his creation.

These are paintings as windows, not only as objects, and they are not a story, though they do open onto a series of events in and out of order. Seen together, the colors rhyme and the tubular bodies cartwheel across the gallery spaces. That is, the ideas embodied in these concoctions of ivory, brown, pink, green, yellow, blue, and black spill out into the physical space between the canvases and make us reckon with them in a nonnarrative fashion. Altogether, they capture the arc of a worldview—from despair to indecisiveness to hope. This arc is encapsulated by *Mud Men*, 2017, which depicts the two men facing away from the viewer in murky water, one with his hand on the other's shoulder—a moment that is especially poignant in its emotional ambiguity. The gesture is conciliatory, but the water could have been clear and blue, and so Dunham signals that hope is never unalloyed by doubt. Rosenblum, again:

The mood of intense communion with the most impalpable of nature's phenomena—light, color, atmosphere—is made even more explicit in some of [Caspar David] Friedrich's early paintings where figures . . . contemplate in quasi-religious stillness the mysteries of nature's most commonplace daily drama. [In] these works, the presence of static figures, seen from behind and frozen into place by the starkly simple symmetries of the compositions, permits the spectator a maximum of empathy, for he can easily take his place beside or within these faceless beings.

Opening into the gallery, the paintings ultimately invite us back into their space via this classic trope of Romantic painting, suggesting we can take our place beside the wrestlers. The empathy engendered is with their struggle to simply be in the world—and that, surely, is universal. More specifically, Dunham has subverted the gendered expectations of hulking men and given us figures that, like Cupid and Psyche, seem embroiled in social and physical forces beyond their control.

If Dunham engages heteronormativity with his vulnerable macho men, Peters seems to show us the idols of a nonbinary world

"WHEN I WAS A KID," Dunham recently told me, "I wanted to live either thirty-five thousand years ago or in the future." Such a paradoxical temporality also suffused Peters's recent exhibition, "Figureheads," at Van Doren Waxter in New York. For the past few years, Peters has been distilling human experience into bronze busts that radiate mysterious presence and that exist on an art-historical continuum stretching from Assyrian objects to modernist futurism. These bronzes have weight and lightness at once. They are highly ordered things, each plane flowing to the next in keeping with classical norms of proportion and scale. Their facial features are just specific enough to read as individualized, and just general enough to invite projection. If Dunham engages heteronormativity with his vulnerable macho men, Peters seems to show us the idols of a nonbinary world—her figures read as female or as indeterminately gendered, but almost never as male. For instance, there is *Charioteer*, 2018, whose hair grows in spinning psychedelic wheels that allude to trance states and enlightenment and terminate in a vaginal form on the back of her head. Her absence of a body serves only to emphasize that her control and her power do not emanate from her sexualized form.

Peters's *Untitled (Herma 2)*, 2018, literally inverts the power of the Greco-Roman effigies known as herms—plinths or pillars surmounted by gods' heads, often with penises carved at the anatomically "correct" height. In her take on the genre, an anonymous, blank-looking head emerges from a skyscraper beard. Where a

penis would typically protrude, an upside-down Tshape is slotted in. The phallus, and all the masculine power it once entailed, has disappeared. Perhaps the most imposing of all of these icons is *Figurehead*, 2018. It is derived from a ship's figurehead: She is leading us, fiercely. The mouth is sensually open, the eyes wide, and the eyebrows raised, the seemingly endless hair revealing an inverted obelisk of a torso terminating in the pubis. Dramatically, the head is flat in the back.

As suggested by *Figurehead*'s morphology, Peters is not an illusionist. She telegraphs her awareness of the work as an object that the viewer needs to approach from one direction and experience frontally before moving around it. There's no need for an entrance point, or an animal guide, since these objects exist with you in real space. Peters subtly reminds the viewer that this space is political. *Figurehead* is a loaded object, and although it doesn't tell you what to think, it does remind you who, historically, has gotten to paint and sculpt what and what the implications of those restrictions have been. At the same time, Peters proposes a female-centric, sex-positive vision of power. *Figurehead* and *Charioteer* could be in the grip of orgasmic ecstasy, but their abandon is not in tension with their self-possession—quite the contrary, their uninhibited sexuality is inextricable from their strength. The artist's uncompromising treatment of hair, which functions as both character trait and support, amplifies this sense of empowered sexuality; the hair becomes the site of a kind of controlled chaos, and is the only element of the work where the artist's hand makes itself apparent. The wavy lines, which are created by drawing in clay and refined further in the mold and casting process, could be brain waves, thought itself captured as restless movement.

All four artists pursue humanist projects even as they problematize humanism and carefully navigate its original sins.

BERKENBLIT, whose film *Lines Roar*, 2018, was on view this past spring and summer at the Drawing Center in New York, is a master of swooping tresses and dramatic manes; her figures exude the same elegance and regal humor as Peters's while also recalling Staver's playful sensuality. She has been painting strong, willful women and animals since the '80s. Berkenblit's pictures were once populated mainly by misbegotten maidens who seemed to have wandered out of a fairy tale; now they are visions of witches and demigoddesses interlocking within a painterly space articulated by sudden flashes of color-drenched light, graphic symbols, and unashamed handwork. Berkenblit's bodies in motion dominate a tightly controlled pictorial world. Uniformly costumed, her protagonists are visual and spiritual counterparts of Dunham's wrestlers, performing the "feminine" with a verve more than equal to his theatrics of masculinity, albeit to different ends.

In paintings like *Mrs. R.*, 2018, and *Earth Flowers*, 2018, her women, witches, and animals (and trucks) move across the picture plane—and through time—with the relentless audacity of Peters's *Figurehead*. "The female form feels inevitable for me to make my work though," Berkenblit recently wrote. "I don't think of it as a power symbol. I'm not sure I think of it as a symbol at all—but, if I do, I think of it as 'my symbol.'" Her pictures' ordered space is open and permissive, replete with other—happy or anxiety-producing—symbols: flowers, clocks, machines. If Dunham's wrestlers are exteriorized aggression, a meditation on manhood writ large in a primal land, Berkenblit's women display their brio by navigating, and surviving within, a contemporary space of pleasures and hazards. Her tigers and cats, meanwhile, seem at once totems and companions. *Lines Roar* demonstrates how these pictures are built. It is a meditative collage of footage of Berkenblit painting and drawing—sometimes on Plexiglas, so that the image appears as though brought to life by invisible hands. As we watch each stroke, as forms and textures emerge, what comes through—as in the carving of hair in Peters's sculptures, Dunham's knotted, matted manes, and Staver's highlights on flesh—is a sense of minutely concentrated focus on small motions to create maximum impact. With Berkenblit, we are never far from a gestural, almost balletic approach to mark-making. It's this close to expressionism. It doesn't quite get there, but Berkenblit's paintings are still as much a record of their own physical creation as they are representations of an alternative reality.

The works of Berkenblit—and Peters, Dunham, and Staver—seem, ultimately, to emerge from an unabashed effort to convey something nonverbal, an impulse to activate feelings that must be shouted, wrestled, danced, and levitated. They urge us to locate our own generosity of spirit and to share intense emotions not usually sanctioned in daily life. Which is to say, these artists offer a way to expand our affective worlds. They pursue humanist projects even as they problematize humanism and carefully navigate its original sins. The patriarch is made a figure of fun or banished entirely, and his structure of unjust, violently enforced binaries and hierarchies goes with him. The subjectivity of nonhuman beings is brought into the fold of the human. With formal generosity and figural drama, these artists offer us sublime visions in which the proposition that we can reimagine and rehabilitate this tormented tradition is the most transgressive idea of all.

HYPERALLERGIC

SEPTEMBER 2018

Kyle Staver' Historical Revisions

By John Yau

One of the consequences of declaring that painting died in the 1960s is that it helped define and preserve a canon largely made up of white men. Depending on your aesthetic disposition, the narrative of modernism's progress culminated either with Jackson Pollock or Andy Warhol, both of whom were said to have destroyed painting.

I see the desire to write the excluded self into this history as representing a direct and, one hopes, fatal challenge to the hierarchical thinking that has prevailed for centuries — so much so that there are many individuals who would have you believe that the silencing of others is an inalienable right.

What is perhaps less emphasized and less discussed — particularly in the art world — are the institutional agendas regarding race and gender that are advanced by hierarchical thinking, from the various declarations of the triumph of America painting to painting's inevitable death. Despite all the changes that have taken place in the art world since I began writing about art in 1977, I, for one, do not think the shadows cast by these formulations have dissipated. They might have changed their names, but that does not mean they are gone.

Seeing the work of an artist who is writing herself into an exclusionary history is not why you should go to the exhibition Kyle Staver at Zürcher. You should go for the many pleasures that you can find in her work, which includes paintings, fired clay bas-reliefs mounted in white shadowbox frames, and works on paper.

Around 10 years ago Staver began painting mythological subjects, moving away from biographical subject matter. That shift in focus enabled her to enlarge the imaginative scope of her work — to paint mermaids, centaurs and all manner of beasts. By the time she turned her attention to myths, she had developed an idiosyncratic way of depicting the figure, inspired by Henri Matisse, American folk art and David Park. One of the things she absorbed from Park was his creation of light within a scene, something she does in her own recognizable way.

Whereas Park was good at articulating the nuanced particulars of Northern California light, Staver — who grew up in Minnesota — achieves a very different kind of light in her elemental scenes, many of which take place at night in the woods, in the sky, or on or beneath the sea. The core of her current exhibition consists of a dozen paintings, all measuring around five and half by four and half feet, complemented by six bas-reliefs, measuring a little more than twelve inches by around ten inches by five inches and seemingly done as a study for a painting.

Which comes first: the painting or the bas-relief? I wonder if Staver — who initially studied sculpture as an undergrad in art school — makes more than one relief in relationship to a particular painting. This questions pops up because it is easy to see a direct correlation between certain bas-reliefs and their painted counterpart. This is true of the fired clay relief "Study for Swan Flight" (2018) and the painting "Swan Flight" (2017), but the dates indicate that the painting came first. The bas-relief "Psyche's Watch" (2018) seems to be seen from other side of the view depicted in the painting,

Making a work in another medium, based on something that you have done, is not a new idea. Making a small bas-relief based on a larger painting is hardly common, however. And, while fired clay bas-reliefs of mythical figures can be traced back to the Italian Renaissance and venerated artists such as Donatello and Ghiberti, the medium is not widespread among contemporary artists. If anything, Staver's practice is an interesting combination of quirky, conservative, and radical.

Her palette can be divided into warm and cool colors, dark and light hues, which she deploys to strong dramatic effect. She is a latter-day luminist, interested in scenarios of extreme contrast in light, for instance, nighttime, beneath a dappled sea, or sunrise. No matter the perspective, the figures are painted in flat, clunky shapes and visible brushstrokes, where eyes, nose, and mouth are rendered from lines, dots, and circles. She often uses a hot red or soft pink to outline one part of a figure, indicating the presence of an unseen light source as well as underscoring weight and air. She has a masterful control over the dramatically lit space she evokes. She transforms what is essentially the compressed space of stage and backdrop into a vast domain.

Staver's paintings are theatrical retellings of myth, an imaginative intervention. In this, she shares something with the writers Angela Carter and Octavia Butler. In "Swan Flight" (2017), a woman rides a swan, surrounded by other swans through a blue-gray sky with muted pinkish-gray clouds. The painting is frontal and the flock of greenish-gray swans is headed directly towards the viewer. White along the edge of the feathers and in the dusty gray-pink clouds further accentuates the presence of an unseen light in this backlit view. As in the show's other paintings, there is something tender, sweet, and elusive about the work. At the same time, there is something oddball and comical about them, which challenges commonplace views of the heroic. Without resorting to parody or cynicism, Staver undoes the tropes we associate with depictions of heroic and mythical. First, she often makes the female both the center of attention and not a victim. Second, by developing her own lexicon in both painting and sculpture — one that merges deliberate awkwardness and understated sophistication — she inscribes her presence in a history that many consider closed.

Sitting astride the swan, we cannot tell from the young woman's expression — a lozenge for a mouth and two small, impenetrable circles for eyes — what she is thinking. In the bas-relief, the holes for the eyes and the slit for a mouth shift the emotional tenor in a different direction, hinting at a purposeful anger. Staver never attempts to disguise the malleable materiality of the clay: instead of trying to perfect the feathers, they remain flattened stubs of clay. While I have seen bas-reliefs in her earlier exhibitions, they were usually sequestered from the paintings. By placing related works in close proximity, we are given the opportunity to examine the similarities as well as discern the differences.

In the reliefs, Staver is focused on how to have forms come forward from the background. This is particularly evident in "Swan Flight." The internal shifts in scale place some swans closer and others further away in our mind's eye. The rectangle of clay from which the figures protrude is necessary, but not subject to the attention the rest of the piece receives. The space is compressed.

Distance, in the paintings, is indicated by rudimentary scale shifts, with larger forms in front and smaller ones in back. She can combine multiple perspectives in a single work, as in the painting "Sailors and Sirens" (2017). The warm orange glow of the sirens suggests that they present no danger to the sailors peering at them from over the side of the ship. The painting's compressed space and multiple perspectives (we see a full-length sailor in profile, standing bare-chested on the crow's nest, along with the two sailors seen from behind) reveal a highly complicated artist.

In this exhibition, the difference in palette from painting to painting, as well as the different kinds of figural configurations she establishes, are good indications that Staver — for all the recognizable trademarks of her style — has not settled into groove, and that she is still finding ways to paint herself into a hierarchical history.

OCTOBER 2016

KYLE STAVER

By Kate Liebman



Installation view: *Kyle Staver*, Kent Fine Art, September 9 – October 22, 2016. Courtesy Kent Fine Art and Kyle Staver.

In her most recent show, the Brooklyn-based artist Kyle Staver presents paintings that provide the viewer with an escape—to a world that is familiar enough to be recognizable, but more magical than our own. It's a world filled with mythology and religious narratives, but emptied of malice and the threat of real violence. Figures in sword fights seem to perform a choreographed dance, ogling men pose no real danger to the naked women they observe, and monsters are entertaining, not scary. They are images of fairy tales without the darkness of the Brothers Grimm.

Staver achieves this fairytale effect in part through her settings, but also through the light that permeates them. Four of her imagined scenes occur in well-lit clearings of thick, leafy forests: *Adam and Eve and the Goats*, *Bathers*, *Cardinal*, and *Annunciation 2* (all 2016). Reminiscent of Staver's northern Minnesota upbringing, these forests locate her pictures in a specific place that might still be inhabited by the figures that populate our imaginations and our myths—where the crowding of trees and the damp ground provide heat, where light flickers, and where the sameness of the landscape allows for secret meetings.

To form these settings full of detail, Staver uses many shades and hues of green and varied brushwork to depict diverse foliage. In *Adam and Eve and the Goats*, the earth green of the Tree of Knowledge contrasts the deep, mossy green on the ground, giving way to the chartreuse mark in the composition's center that lights the entire canvas. On Staver's canvases, the material is light and color, imbuing her pictures with a mood of enchantment. The action occurs in the picture's foreground, with woolly goats looking on. Adam and Eve are not ashamed of their nakedness (see how Adam, standing contrapposto, holds a goat in his arms and reveals his penis), and their imminent expulsion from Eden is not foreshadowed. There is no Satanic snake on the ground, no prophetic angel Gabriel in the sky; there is no guilt, no remorse. Staver reimagines

these stories, especially the role of women, without altering the plot: how could Eve not have reached for that glowing red apple?

Creating light from matter is a kind of alchemy, one that has fascinated Staver throughout her career. In the paintings from 2016, we don't see the true light source (the moon, the sun, a lamp); instead, we get its reflection or we see its direction coming from offstage illuminating bodies in high contrast. Blonde hair turns white, limbs come into high relief, and patterns turn iridescent in patches, as in *Cardinal*. A naked woman, a blue sarong falling off her behind, turns to look at the viewer with a slight, satisfied smile. One hand is on the shoulder of the man leading her, on horseback, into the forest. On the other hand rests a red cardinal who also gazes at the viewer. Something about how Staver puts her figures together, how she attaches the limbs to the torso, and the hands and feet to the limbs, is reminiscent of Florine Stettheimer. From her facial features—painted with a thick, Picasso-like line—we understand that this is not a woman taken against her will.

Bathers, one of the standout pictures in this show, demonstrates that Staver is knowingly participating in a conversation with, and commenting on, the paintings made by her (often white, often male) predecessors. With its subject matter, *Bathers* refers to the popular trope of men painting, or men painting semi-clothed men watching women bathe (see: Titian, Rembrandt, Renoir, Cézanne, Gauguin, Degas, Bonnard, Thompson, etc.). But those who watch Staver's women are not men; they are fauns: mythological horned half-human, half-goat, creatures. Arranged almost in a circle around the edges of the canvas, they watch without leering, as three women enjoy themselves in brightly illuminated water in the distance. Like Renoir's, Staver's figures are not ethereal, but adamantly corporeal, in both paint application and body structure. The image is a window; it seems like a world coming up from behind to meet the surface, pressing up against it.



Kyle Staver, *Adam and Eve and the Goats*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 54 x 64 inches. Courtesy Kent Fine Art and Kyle Staver.

The gallery's first room showcases a group of terracotta studies that precede the paintings. In these studies, Staver pinches and attaches, smooths and rubs her material to form Ghiberti-like reliefs, planning out her compositions and discovering how the figures interweave in space. It's remarkable how few changes Staver makes in transitioning from the *Study for Bathers* (2016) to the final painting—the composition is set before Staver takes to the canvas. The same can be said of Staver's transition from terracotta to canvas for *David and Goliath* and *Cardinal*, making clear how these shallow sculptures enable Staver to paint complex arrangements of figures—replete with their expressive bodies and faces—on a flat picture plane. The same can be said of Staver's transition from terracotta to canvas for *David and Goliath* and *Cardinal*, making clear how these shallow sculptures enable Staver to paint complex arrangements of figures—replete with their expressive bodies and faces—on a flat picture plane.

With both her studies and her paintings, Staver materializes images of a world that exists off in the distance, or in the imagination. In reinterpreting the mythic and biblical narratives that have influenced her predecessors,

she is able to rise to her own challenge: “to keep myself excited, to keep myself alert and interested.”¹

Endnotes

1. Interview with Kyle Staver, 2012. <http://bit.ly/2d0y7Fx>



CURRICULUM VITAE

KYLE STAVER

Born in Virginia, Minnesota, US
Lives and works in New York, New York, US

EDUCATION

1987 Yale University, College of Art, MFA in Painting, New Haven, CT, US
1976 Minneapolis College of Art and Design, BFA, Minneapolis, MN, US

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2024 Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US (*forthcoming*)
Truth Be Told, Half Gallery, New York, NY, US
- 2023 *Kyle Staver and June Leaf Drawings*, Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, New York, NY, US
Light Catcher, Nino Mier Gallery, Brussels, BE
Light Catcher: Works on Paper, Nino Mier Gallery, Brussels, BE
- 2022 *Show of Strength*, Moskowitz Bayse, Los Angeles, CA, US
Tout Court, Half Gallery, New York, NY, US
- 2021 *The Four Seasons*, Zürcher Gallery, New York, NY, US
Paper Trails, Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, New York, NY, US
- 2020 *Kyle Staver*, Zürcher Gallery, New York, NY, US
- 2019 *Kyle Staver*, curated by Gwenolee Zürcher, RX Gallery, Paris, FR
Kyle Staver, Printed Matters 2001-2018, National Arts Club, New York, NY, US
- 2018 *Kyle Staver*, Zürcher Gallery, New York, NY, US
- 2017 *Kyle Staver*, Ohio State University at Lima, OH, US
- 2016 *Kyle Staver*, Kent Fine Art, New York, NY, US
- 2015 *Tall Tales*, Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects, New York, NY, US
- 2014 *Recent Work*, John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY, US
- 2013 *Recent Paintings*, Tibor de Nagy, New York, NY, US
Paintings, Prints, Reliefs, John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY, US
- 2011 *Kyle Staver: A Survey of Paintings and Prints*, Pennsylvania College of Art & Design, Lancaster, PA, US
- 2010 *Kyle Staver: Recent Works*, Lohin-Geduld Gallery, New York, NY, US
- 2007 *Kyle Staver: Recent Works*, Lohin-Geduld Gallery, New York, NY, US

- 2006 *Kyle Staver: Recent Works, Lohin-Geduld Gallery, New York, NY, US*
- 2003 *Kyle Staver: Recent Works, Denise Bibro Gallery, New York, NY, US*
- 2002 Maurice Arlos Fine Arts, New York, NY, US
- 2001 Hackett-Freedman Gallery, San Francisco, CA, US

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2023 *Solid Gold*, curated by Asif Hoque, Half Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
Beach, curated by Danny Moynihan, New York, NY, US
Animal People, Tappeto Volante Projects, Brooklyn, NY, US
- 2022 *Figuration Through Abstraction*, ABR Contemporary, Miami, FL, US
NEW VISIONS, The Love You Gallery, Miami, FL, US
Between States, M. David & Co., Brooklyn, NY, US
Life in an Ivory Tower, curated by Jack Siebert, 75 Kenmare Street, New York, NY, US
Painters Guild, 11 Newel Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US
- 2021 *The Talking Stone*, Moskowitz Bayse, Los Angeles, CA, US
Potent, curated by Nicasio Fernandez, Harper's Books, East Hampton, NY, US
Painting the Narrative, National Arts Club, New York, NY, US
Kyle Staver and Janice Nowinski (Online Exhibition), Wagner College, New York, NY, US
- 2020 *All Figured Out: The Presence of the Figure*, Zürcher Gallery, New York, NY, US
Animal Crossing, Inman Gallery, Houston, TX, US
- 2019 *Women Out of Doors*, curated by Robert Yahner, National Arts Club, New York, NY, US
At the Core: New Members of the National Academy, National Academy of Design, New York, NY, US
Summer, Zürcher Gallery, New York, NY, US
Dance with Me, curated by Kyle Staver, Zürcher Gallery, New York, NY, US
Afflatus, curated by Suzanne Unrein and Amy Hill; 5-50 Gallery, New York, NY, US
Court of the Dryads, curated by Kari Adelaide and Max Razdow, Spring/Break Art Show, New York, NY, US
Samaritans, curated by Dan Nadel, Galerie Eva Presenhuber, New York, NY, US
- 2018 *10 Years in New York*, Anniversary Group Exhibition, Zürcher Gallery, New York, NY, US
Mythologies, Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects, New York, NY, US
- 2017 *Celebrating the Legacy of David Park*, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA, US
- 2016 *Human Mysteries*, BFP Creative, Brooklyn, NY, US
Painting Forward, Thomas Erben Gallery, New York, NY, US
On Painting, Kent Fine Art, New York, NY, US
- 2015 *Worlds Without End*, Brian Morris Gallery and Buddy Warren Inc., New York,

- NY, US
B Side, No. 4 Studio, Brooklyn, NY, US
Invitational Exhibition of Visual Arts, American Academy of Arts and Letters,
 New York, NY, US
- 2014 *Soul*, Novella Gallery, New York, NY, US
Mixtape, No. 4 Studio, New York, NY, US
- 2013 John Davis Gallery, Hudson, NY, US
Silence & Noise, Whispers, Hints, Narrative and Declarations, Metropolitan
 College of NY, New York, NY, US
- 2012 *The Jam*, Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects, New York, NY, US
Red Herring, FJORD Gallery, Philadelphia, PA, US
Juried Exhibition, National Academy Museum, New York, NY, US
- 2009 *Artists' Choice*, Lohin Geduld Gallery, New York, NY, US
- 2008 *Drawing Atlas*, Lohin Geduld Gallery, New York, NY, US
- 2007 *Culture in Context: Self-taught Artists in the Twenty-First Century*,
 American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY, US
- 2004 *Women Subjects by Women Artists: Rosemarie Beck, Isabel Bishop, Barbara
 Grossman, Alice Neel, Kyle Staver*, Fordham University, New York,
 NY, US
- 2000 *Two Generations of Women Artists from New York*, Haverford College,
 Haverford, PA, US
Juried Exhibition, National Academy Museum, New York, NY, US
- 1998 *Juried Exhibition*, National Academy Museum, New York, NY, US

AWARDS & RESIDENCIES

- 2019 College Art Association Artist Award for a Distinguished Body of Work, New York, NY, US
 Honorary Membership at the National Arts Club, New York, NY, US
- 2015 John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, New York, NY, US
 American Academy of Arts and Letters Purchase Prize, New York, NY, US
 Elected Member of the National Academy of Design, New York, NY, US
- 2013 ArtPrize, Painting, Grand Rapids, MI, US
- 2003 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award, New York, NY, US
- 1998 Benjamin Altman Figure Prize, National Academy Museum, New York, NY, US
- 1996 Benjamin Altman Figure Prize, National Academy Museum, New York, NY, US

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

National Academy of Design, New York, US

American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, US

National Arts Club, New York, US

Portland Community College, Oregon, US



NINO MIER GALLERY

LOS ANGELES

info@miergallery.com
+1 323 498 5957

BRUSSELS

brussels@miergallery.com
+32 2 414 86 00

NEW YORK

newyork@miergallery.com
SoHo | +1 212 343 4317
TriBeCA | +1 212 268 9055

MARFA

marfa@miergallery.com