



Universe 25

30th March - 29th April 2023

Phoebe Evans, Bethany Hadfield, Yaya Yajie Liang, Serpil Mavi
Üstün, Bi Rongrong, Joanna van Son, Caroline Zurmely

B. R. R.
2023

Animal in Two Dimensions—Landscape VIII (2023), by Bi Rongrong

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In 1968, American ethologist John Calhoun began an experiment into the effects of overcrowding; Universe 25. He introduced four rodent couples into a specially designed and enclosed shelter. In only 600 days, despite never reaching the hypothetical maximum capacity of the shelter, the explosive population growth turned into the total collapse of the mice colony. In fact, regardless of the rigorous maintenance of utopian living conditions such as abundant water, food, and perfect climate conditions, the mice became increasingly violent, developed cannibalism and were eventually unable to reproduce or rear their young.

As urbanisation and drastic socio-economic reforms swept across Post-War Europe and America in the 1960s and '70s, Calhoun contemplated the fate of modern human societies through his findings derived from Universe 25. He wrote to National Institute of Mental Health: "I shall largely speak of mice, but my thoughts are on man, on healing, on life and its evolution. Threatening life and evolution are the two deaths, death of the spirit and death of the body."

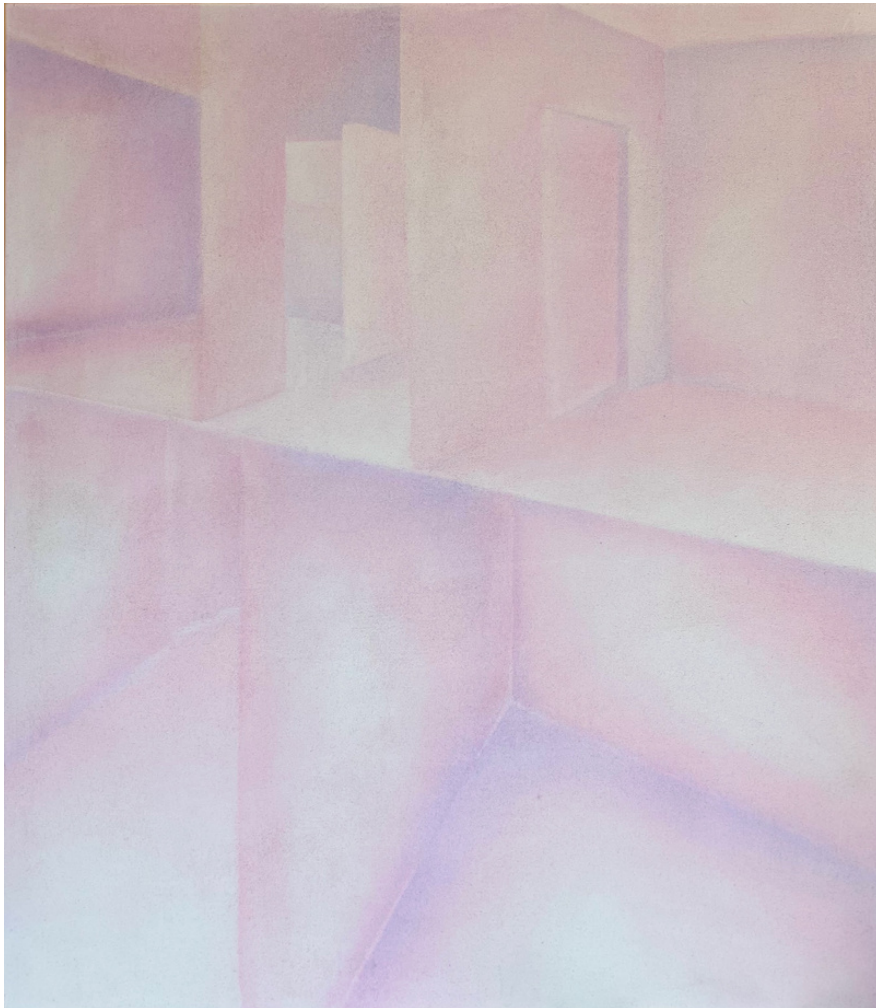
It is worth noting that Calhoun's direct anthropomorphic application of Universe 25 is a flawed one. It is frequently reductive, it does not take into account the effects of law enforcement in human societies, and it heavily relies on pre-disposed personal and political views rather than objective inquiry. However, by looking at Calhoun as part of a Post-WW2 generation gripped by disillusionment and uncertainty, his 1960s dystopian outlook sheds light onto the sense of urban pessimism and emotional alienation that arises in the face of drastic social change.

Crisis and social decay are recurrent impetuses to self-reflection and artistic creation. Lately, collective angst about issues such as the cost of living crisis, misinformation in the media, artificial intelligence and parallel digital realities, has forced us to re-evaluate our relationship with nature and the broader implications of being 'human'. Contemporary artistic endeavour cannot help but be influenced by such precarious living conditions. With over half of the world's population living in urban areas, material abundance and overpopulation are looming concerns, often distorting our individual instinctual identities and our collective ability to form functional bonds.

Employing Calhoun's experiment as a point of departure, albeit through a contemporary critical lens, this group show brings together seven female artists whose practices are critically engaged with the conditions of today's urban society. By responding to the environment we live in, the desires that drive us, and the social identities we inhabit, each artist calls into question the fragility of social fabric and what it means to be human. With practice that ranges from painterly to deeply psychological expression, the show explores the theme in two main ways: negation of the physical body and the inward examination of mind and space.

Traces of Home, 2023
oil and sand on canvas
80 x 70 cm

£ 1,900.00



Phoebe Evans

Phoebe Evans introduces the viewer to a sublime and liminal space, depicting architectural dreamscapes carefully delineated by infinite shades of a monochrome. Ranging from pastel pinks and yellows, to dark blues and bright oranges, Evans draws on magic realism to explore perspective through harmonising colours. The domestic environments portrayed in her canvases become an aesthetic ideal.

Through her practice, Evans merges the past, present and a future that never arrives. Her canvases become timeless representations of an urbanistic ideal, which blend together personal experience and collective memory.

Fragments, 2023
oil on canvas
80 x 70 cm (left)
80 x 40 cm (right)

£ 2,500.00

Phoebe Evans



The artist grants us access to a private space that we somehow recognise, and now observe through a tinted lens. These fragments of long corridors, dark staircases and carefully constructed windows, trigger a sense of nostalgia, reminding us of times gone by and lost memories; eery scenes of domesticity create a feeling of longing and a surreal sensation of odd familiarity. Homes we have never entered become portals to the fading facade of both the artist's and audience's memory, captured in a static moment that stills the flux of change.

Lindsay, 2023
oil on canvas
155 x 170 cm

£ 4,250.00



Bethany Hadfield

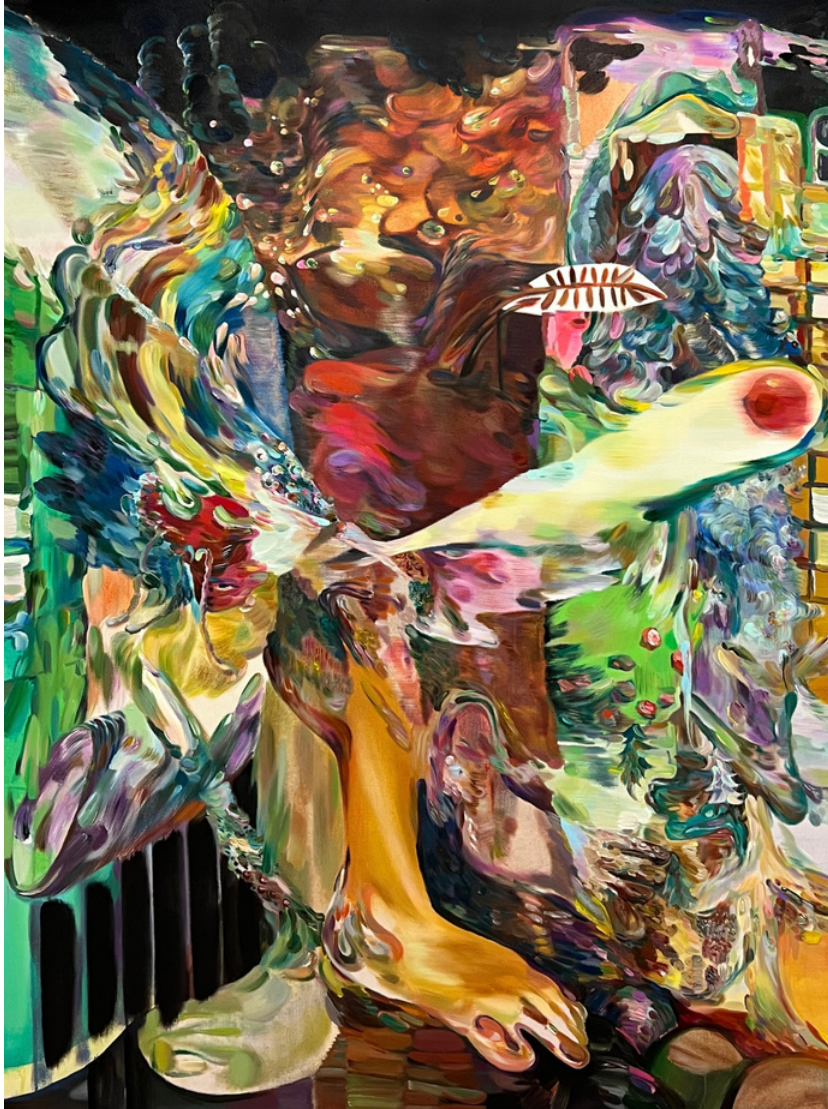
Bethany Hadfield's practice exists between different dimensions: one confined to the screen, focusing on rendered animations and digital images, and the other inherently physical, consisting of large-scale acrylic paintings. The artist's process starts with the generation of digital improvisations using an open-source 3D software. The resulting image is then projected and traced onto the canvas. Hadfield employs acrylic paint on primed canvas to eliminate gestural notions, achieving a smooth, artificial finish. Despite the long and laborious methodology, Hadfield's canvases appear almost fully void of human touch. Usually paint smudges and drips to display the manifestation of the brushstroke, invoking vitality. In Hadfield's case, this vitality is inherently semi-artificial: digital images are literally translated on canvas with little or no room for gesture.

Serving as physical records of the image economy, the works are formed from networked labour and collaboration with the artificial machine. Indirectly, the artist's work operates a commentary on the blurring of the natural human process and the digital one, thereby prompting us to reflect on our own relationship with technology and its effect on human social interaction.

Hadfield's paintings express a sense of nostalgia. With seamless gradients and slick pastels, they evoke 1960s sci-fi imagery like that of Frank Frazetta and Roger Dean and, summoning an era of utopian imaginings. Hadfield's canvases induce a sense of unease and a lack of clarity, leaving the audience unsure as to what they are looking at and how the works were created. The dystopian dimension of Hadfield's art stimulates viewers to question their own fundamental understanding of the world we inhabit.

The Shadow Play, 2023
acrylic on canvas
177 x 135 cm

£ 11,250.00



Yaya Yajie Liang

Yaya Yajie Liang's work explores metamorphosis of the body. Liang looks at the potential of 'becoming animal'; from the legendary banished beast to the interpenetration of biological space. Liang interrogates how analogic mapping to and from animals within imagined, lived, or taxonomic intimacies helps us to reconsider the prescribed definition of 'humanity'. Liang views painting as movement that is constantly repeating the 'becoming'. Shifting restlessly between abstract and figurative modes, she uses an intuitive approach to kick-start new paintings, allowing unplanned initial strokes to help dictate the works' subsequent direction.

Reflecting on the limitations that the contemporary urban society imposes on our very nature, through 'The Shadow Play', Liang explores the effects of spatial confinement on the human body, our behaviour and our relationship with each other. The boundaries between the setting and the subject are blurred and entangled. The anthropomorphic creature inhabits the canvas, occupying the majority of the pictorial surface. It is restrained, held captive in what looks like a domestic space; its body is fractured and recomposed, with human feet that are rooted to the spot and a set of wings that signify the desire to fly and break free. Liang prompts us to empathise with such a creature, reconsidering our own role and state as human beings in an urban and ever-evolving society.

Celebration, 2022
oil on linen
75 x 63 cm

£ 5,500.00



Serpil Mavi Üstün

Serpil Mavi Üstün's work investigates the loneliness of the individual in contemporary urban society. Her canvases depict figures carrying out mundane activities in picturesque scenarios: walking through the city, sipping coffee, buying flowers etc. Mavi Üstün presents us with the personal stories of fragile, perturbed, melancholic heroes, and hints towards the concept of solitude. The artist is particularly interested in exploring the personal conflict we deal with in everyday life, showcasing how easy it is to sabotage our own happiness in situations that seem idyllic to the external eye. For Mavi Üstün, it is in these contrasting feelings that resides the agony of the individual who feels trapped and oppressed by the social system. The protagonists of Mavi Üstün's work also symbolise those who strive to fight back and react to the difficult circumstances that surround us.

'Celebration' depicts a maternal figure, with shiny hair and a bright dress serving cake to her guests, inviting the viewer to become part of the assembled party. At first glance, the dessert seems to be covered with traditional culinary sprinkles, but looking more closely we realise that they are common anxiety medications. Mavi Üstün speaks about the dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and potential depression that we try to suppress with consumption, artificial social relationships, activities, and celebrations. "Things that are supposed to be fun actually aren't fun for most of us, are they? Do we appear happy just because we are expected to, even though we don't feel that way?" (Serpil Mavi Üstün)

Dialogue, 2022
oil on canvas
60 x 60 cm

£ 5,000.00

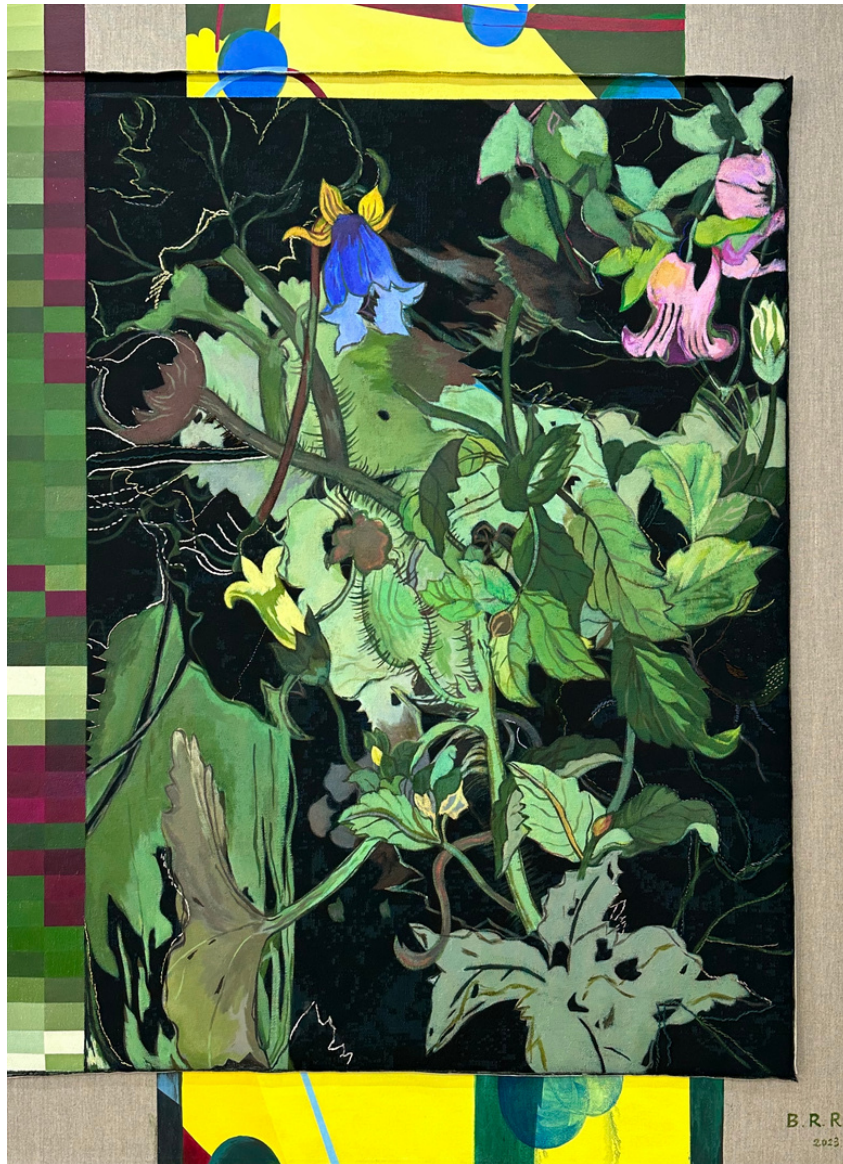


Serpil Mavi Üstün

'Dialogue' portrays a beautiful woman leaning over a table to closely observe a black crab. The two subjects face each other, appearing to be in 'dialogue.' The placement of the crab, on a dining table between oranges and lemons, categorises it as food. Yet, what the artist wants to emphasise with this reciprocal gaze between human and animal, is the feeling of empathy and respect that the young girl projects onto the crustacean. The use of different animals, including fish, snails, and cats, is common in Mavi Üstün's practice and is aimed at prompting the audience to reflect on our relationship with nature.

Animal in Two Dimensions—Landscape VIII, 2023
acrylic and oil on canvas, embroidery, textile
190 x 140 cm

£ 23,500.00



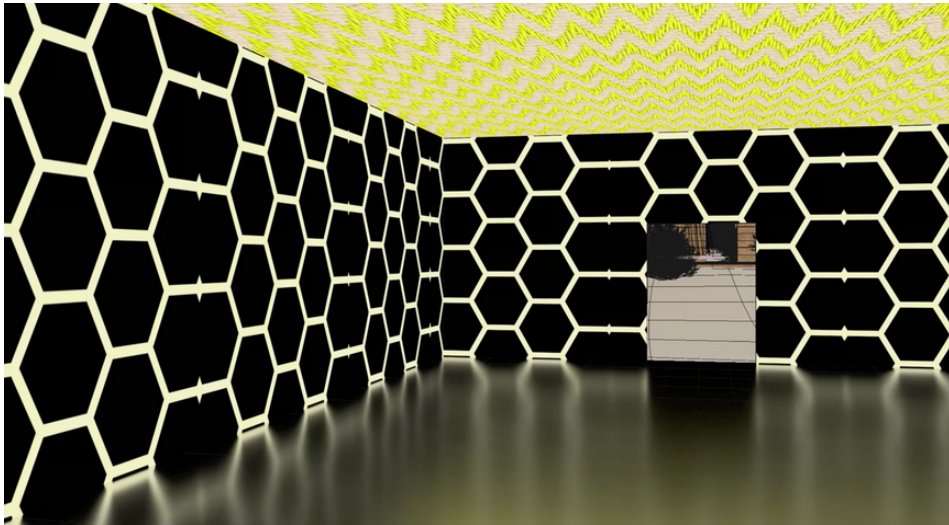
Bi Rongrong

For Bi Rongrong, urban architecture is a source of creative direction, experiment, and self-discovery. Bi investigates cityscapes; observing ornamental structures, billboards, patches of greenery and any other fragment of urbanisation that can inform her practice. Each one of these elements is translated onto canvas and reimagined in the form of pattern, design and texture. The research into cities and the differing cultural dynamics within them results in a new and original form of urban mindscape. Here the margins dividing human, urban and the natural world are distorted and re-purposed according to an undefinable set of Bi's internal rhythms and aesthetic rules. 'Urban' and 'city' are no longer a contained structure or space, but rather an ever-expanding fabric of imagination.

Bi Rongrong employs manual and digital manipulation, and rendering to produce mixed-media works including painting, textiles, thread-work, collage, video animation, and installation. As part of her continuous engagement with contemporary urbanity, she often makes use of mass industrial products like dyes, yarns, and fabrics. Bi mostly avoids a strict planning technique of composition of the canvas, preferring to let experimentation lead her. Yet, the artist tends to initiate the creative process with line drawing, a habit derived from her training in traditional Chinese 'gongbi' painting – a style that focuses on a meticulous and highly detailed brush technique.

Coiling out of a Single Plane II, 2023
single channel digital video
4 minutes and 14 seconds

£ 5,950.00



Bi Rongrong

The video work ‘Coiling out of a Single Plane II’ is a journey through the artist’s memory, a mental archive of all the cityscapes, urban and natural details, and textural environments that inform her painting and textile work. The digital work has its own artistic independence. Yet, it can also be thought of as a supportive tool that explains and expands upon Bi’s canvases by shedding light onto the artist’s semi-subconscious process and her approach to patterns and materials.

In ‘Coiling Out of a Single Plane II’, we first encounter a weaving scene suspended in darkness. A number of animated silk threads are constantly weaving an image under a mysterious force, and it appears that the entire world is part of this complex process. In their movements, the silk threads integrate the urban world with the natural world. At the same time, a moving line of sight begins to appear, leading the viewer to walk in the universe Bi constructed and enter a cultural space composed of various patterns.

This video work suggests that the world is composed of intertwined relationships, visible and tangible, but also the complex, diverse and elusive, and we should endeavour to find our place within them.

Futile Sacrifice(d): The Donkey Wonders in Gray, 2023
acrylic on canvas
200 x 170 cm

£ 5,500.00



Joanna van Son

Joanna van Son has developed a vital appreciation for process in her practice. The artist paints over preliminary drawings on an unstretched, unprimed canvas nailed to a wall. She stands close to the pictorial surface, so as to be unable to see the image in its entirety until after completion of the work. The paint is never layered, so every brushstroke is final; throughout the creative process she departs significantly from the initial sketch. The unprimed canvas allows the paint to seep through and attach to the wall. When detached, the remains of previous works and parts of the wall itself stick to the back of the canvas. Every work becomes a palimpsest of the stages of its own creation and of her production overall.

Joanna investigates themes of doom, decay, urbanism and human nature. In 'Futile Sacrifice(d): The Donkey Wonders in Gray' a body on a cross is consumed by a woman and a donkey - for van Son the donkey is a symbol of uncredited labour, the sacrificed and silent facilitator for the growth of society. This feral, cannibalistic behaviour, evokes the breakdown of social order, acting as a critique of the degeneration of contemporary society.

Throughout the artistic process, the initial figures and spaces are abstracted and consumed by thick paint until they are no longer recognisable. The degeneration of drawn structure to thick visceral paint, becomes a mirror image of society's decay. 'Futile Sacrifice(d)' embodies fear and anguish towards the future in a time of crisis. Yet, degeneration can lead to regeneration through the incorporation of old artworks into new creations. Van Son's art constantly recreates itself and so breathes new life into deteriorated relics.

Blue III, 2022
oil on canvas
88 x 88 cm

£ 2,750.00



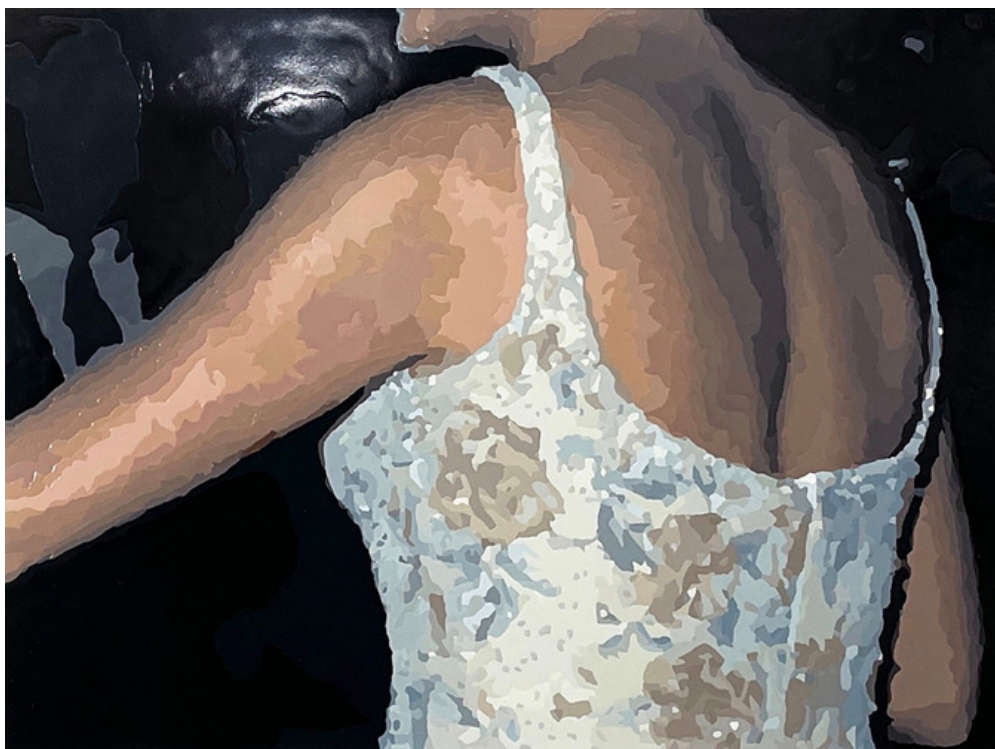
Joanna van Son

Blue III is the third instalment of the Blue series, which all present human figures at the centre of the composition. Blue III depicts two women, their naked bodies twisting and bending against a bright blue background. Again van Son's fascination with materiality is apparent, attested by the continuous alternation of different textures throughout the surface of the canvas: thick tridimensional impasto yields to large fields of thinly applied oil, while circular brushstrokes interrupt the composition. As in Untitled, thickly applied oil paint is superimposed on the figurative scene, effacing some sections and abstracting the figures. Rather than the subject matter, van Son is interested in analysing how bodies behave within space, particularly that of the composition: her contorted figures fill up the canvas, almost wanting to burst out of the surface. The artist renders the figures entangled, abstract, incorrect and faceless; through this change and dynamism the bodies become the space.

Caroline Zurmely

Rose I, 2023
nail varnish on board
30 x 40 cm

£ 2,500.00



The protagonists of Zurmely's works are easily recognisable as they are often sourced from mediatic material already impressed on our memory. Yet, the artist is not interested in explicitly revealing the name of her subjects, leaving it to the viewer to identify them. Through such an investigation of the aesthetic of mass media, Zurmely's production seems to evoke 'The Society of Spectacle', a concept that is arguably still relevant today.

Guy Debord's seminal text 'The Society of Spectacle' (1967) is a critique on consumer culture and commodity fetishism, commenting on urbanisation and class alienation: "All that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (Guy Debord). Today we tend to consume images more than the experiences themselves. To reinforce this parallel, Zurmely employs the use of vintage imagery from the Golden Age of Hollywood to the British Royal family, playing on the concept of nostalgia.

Rose II, 2023
nail varnish on board
27 x 35 cm

£ 2,250.00



Caroline Zurmely

'The use of nail polish as a medium also draws upon the idea of mass-production in the beauty industry. This in turn is read as a sign of female empowerment; a symbol of the agency women have achieved in the presentation of self.

Caroline Zurmely's art is driven by her interest in alternative media, texture, relief and process. Her work explores scenes of tabloid photography, depicting tight close-ups and altering the focal point of the image. Restricting the frame of her works and using unconventional materials, Zurmely aims at altering the viewer's experience of the world both inside and outside of the picture simultaneously crafting opposing senses of intimacy and remoteness between the viewer and subject.

GILLIAN JASON GALLERY

MODERN & CONTEMPORARY ART BY WOMEN

art@gillianjason.com

www.gillianjason.com

19 Great Titchfield St London W1W 8AZ