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CONVERSATIONS Mousse 66

Painting Tempi. Everyone Else Is a Troll: Sophie von Hellermann

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Sophie von Hellermann and Tenzing Barshee in conversation

Go ahead, try to picture artist Sophie von Hellermann at the studio: moving in with speed, loosely, quickly, meeting the canvas, brushes swirling, thoughts soaring, zapping, painting with tempo. Since her earliest work, she has incessantly built a catalogue of paintings, watercolors and murals, committed to the liquefaction of the very medium that is painting. Back in 2001, her career first took off, over the moon, and she had already marked a position: her focus—as a painter—was set on the workings of the mind and "how dream images come together from things you've seen, read, and experienced." The understanding of how a picture manifests in the mind and how that manifestation can be continued onto the canvas, realized as a material image, is a working process to which the artist is still committed today. Her technique is intimately prompt, almost abrupt—like the forming of thoughts into words, except she forms thoughts into painted imagery—and so she uses the act of painting as a form of communication like writing or speech. Although more

calmative at times, many of her paintings are wild like a blabbering or ranting mouth—remember the velocity with which the medium is applied. Countering the momentum that is as much part of the making of painting as it is of its experience, considering how certain painted images decelerate the process of seeing, von Hellermann insists on immediacy and connects the moment that holds a thought to the one that reveals her idea on canvas. She weaves the threads between mental and physical images. Hers isn't really an automated but rather an eloquent procedure of applied thinking. Twofold, through their speediness and also their fragmentary nature, her paintings manage to inhabit the gap between what is present and what lies in the past. This is precisely how they tap into Marcel Duchamp's famed "instantaneous state of the Rest" and the "extra rapid exposure" that is the "allegorical appearance": in essence, this outlines von Hellermann's practice. The instance that is perhaps photographic, which activates and salvages the thing, which has already happened. Circumventing bitter nostalgia, von Hellermann serves fragments, time and time again, grasping the past, injecting it into the present—and, perhaps, vice versa. This allows us to recognize the past as something of our own. Generally, images and ideas that have been already formed, however much they lie behind, describe a temporal distance, and at times, this distance may be painfully long. Memory behaves trickily like that. But the allegorical instance, as found in von Hellermann's paintings, allows her to keep track of things that would otherwise disappear. Every new painting is started in the hope of recovering the loss of the old. In the end, von Hellermann's paintings

simultaneously proffer and defer a promise of meaning; they both tease and frustrate our desire that any image be directly transparent to its signification. As a result, they appear strangely incomplete—fragments or ruins that must be deciphered.

TENZING BARSHEE: You are about to open an exhibition at Greene Naftali in New York. You mentioned that it all started with a joke.

SOPHIE VON HELLERMANN: I was thinking of jokes that are on us and that oppress us or that jump in our faces with an uncomfortable truth. This was inspired by reading the novel *Tyll* (2017), by Daniel Kehlmann, and by the observation that however much people try and laugh and laugh, in the end, the subject of their joke gets to laugh the hardest. I personified the jokes by painting clowns jumping around or sitting on people. There is always a shift of imagery and a sudden clarity and stillness when a punch line is told, and this is what I find interesting to paint.

TB: Can you give an example of a joke that is on us and an uncomfortable truth that is being revealed?

SVH: I think of how we laughed at stupidity but now it's laughing at us. Like the Trump administration. There's also the joke we sadly live in Britain: she wanted sovereignty with Brexit and has now become so divided that she is ungovernable.

TB: Can you say more about the subject matter in these paintings and where you wanted to take them?

SVH**:** Talking of the Trump administration, the painting *In Their Face* (2018), with the mother and child walking and migratory birds flying in the sky, was a reaction to the news of children being separated from their parents at the U.S. border. The jester jumps at them. Then I was thinking of other wanderers: pilgrims being led by a clown in the sky, in *Ironic Pilgrimage* (2018), or in *With Pierrot* (2018), the joke turned on the restrained lady. In *Punch and Judy* (2018), I wanted the painting itself to laugh and sneer at the viewer, mocking their gaze.

TB: Please talk about the painting *Viking Sword*, from 2018.

SVH: There was a news story: a girl had found a 1,500-year-old sword sword in a lake in Scandinavia. I painted her in the moment of surprised discovery, the Viking spirit figure drawn out by her action, and in that instant, the past is present. I liked the idea of her finding something in the water—because that is, I suppose, what I do when I paint. I am surrounded by mysterious buckets of water, little luminous nuggets of pigments lurking inside of them, which may lead the way to a new painting.

TB: Kehlmann's novel is situated during the Thirty Years' War. Previously you've painted portraits of women who were killed in the witch trials that took place almost in the same period— the English Civil War. Do these interests tie together?

SVH: I am very interested in how our age of information is becoming more and more like a dark age similar in its tribalism to the period of the Thirty Years' War.

TB: How so?

SVH: The online world is in many ways akin to a medieval village, where shopkeepers run after you remembering every item you ever took an interest in, where everyone can see you all the time, and where truth tellers pass by and their stories are told and retold for ages therewith losing original content and gaining other meaning with speed. And you're stuck in the village of what you like and share, in your own tribe, it's closed off. Everyone else is a troll.

TB: You also painted *Jerusalem* (2018).

SVH: Because of where my studio is located on the North Downs, I thought a lot about pilgrims and their journeys. Canterbury's city center is full of pubs because of the pilgrims. Jerusalem is the ultimate Romantic image. I suddenly realized I had to paint a huge landscape, but I also painted a very small one, hinting at a nude in the clouds who is rubbing herself against the Golden Skyline in a defiant gesture.

TB: Were you also thinking of the contemporary meaning of a witch hunt?

SVH: Really, with the witch hunts my main concern was the hatred of knowledge and wisdom and the fear of goodness and the ready belief in the least possible scenario. The term "witch hunt" is a perfect example of how strong but hugely unlikely or false statements are believed over obvious, if sometimes complicated, truths.

TB: You've said before that you can relate to women being punished for their expertise or intelligence.

SVH: I probably don't need to say this, but it is harder for women to claim ownership of ideas, and what is seen as intelligence and talent in men is often seen as madness in women. So men can denounce women as weak but help themselves to their ideas freely without being held accountable.

TB: You also talked about the *After a Fashion* (2015) piece, the portraits that were arranged in a kind of pyre, as representations of the "Young Hot Things"—burned out. Do you relate to that from personal experience?

SVH: I did experience the "being put through the machine" as a very young artist and maybe didn't handle the attention very well, and then also almost all of the paintings I had sold to Charles Saatchi burnt in the Momart fire, which was unbelievably sad for me.

TB: I'm very sorry to hear that. Have you ever considered remaking some of the lost work? Or translating this experience of loss into a work?

SVH: No, I never thought of recreating any of the lost paintings. Each painting is unique, it's impossible. Then again my painterly practice is not so different from what was Einstein's definition of madness: to attempt the same thing over and over again with no hope of success (accompanying this thought, I imagine him playing the violin). Every new painting is started in the hope to recover the loss of the old.

TB: Your painting is a mixture of what you think and what you see: you react to language, and, on the other hand, painting is a way of communicating, almost easier than talking, for you. Can you please say more about how the way you paint functions as a language or communicative tool for you?

SVH: I was always drawn to literature and, possibly, I would have become a writer. But I sit too much between two languages. Of course, nowadays in Berlin a lot of people would not even notice if a novel was written in English and German. I started painting instead. I create scenes and characters that act in them. And it is theater: the canvas is a stage. And it's a movie: the pigments are the pixels or the tiny plastic particles that make the color film. When I wanted Britain to remain in the EU, I painted Britannia—*So glad you stayed Britannia!* (2016)—surrounded by her European friends at a party, bathing herself in the attention. In this happy painting, I painted the terror in the background because I couldn't paint what was on people's minds.

TB: Do you have an audience, recipient, or addressee in mind while you paint?

SVH: Yes, now I think of you when I paint.

TB: Can you talk more about the process of synthesizing ideas onto the canvas?

SVH: I like it when an idea is formulated on the canvas, but what is on the canvas must not become more solid or more massive than what I hold in my mind. It is a projection, yes, but only in the sense that it mirrors what is in my head. Pigments scattered in water and acrylic binder mix; they carry all the information I need to convey an idea. The colors are the actors of my play.

TB: I think it's pretty difficult to pull off a good one-liner in a painting, yet you manage to do so, by connecting language (usually through the title) to imagery, such as your paintings that are based on idioms like *Jumping through the Hoops* (2013), *Elephant in the Room* (2013), or *Afraid of Her Shadow* (2013). Can you talk about that relationship between the two, language and images? Do you feel that the combinations narrow down or expand the tension between the two?

SVH: Painting those idioms was a game. I'm entertained by these images that are thrown around in conversation all day long. It started with a painting I made thinking of a photograph by Andreas Gursky of the Rhine, which, in turn, was referring to a painting. I titled it *The grass is greener on the other side* (2013) and then I just carried on and painted the crow that flies, the top of the slippery slope, and yes, even the bigger picture. I guess what I am saying is, titling paintings is idiotic but fun! You can massively reduce the poetry of a painting with a few words, you can make people laugh, and sometimes you can even make them look at the painting.

TB: Looking at some of your work, again—the relationship between what's seen and what kind of language is provided—it looks like you're sacrificing a certain painterly complexity (by painting fast and with thin liquids) but only to achieve a more tense complication of whatever you're saying or addressing. Does that make sense? And if so, can you talk about this?

SVH: Yes, a lot of complexity is lost because I paint with a lot of water and it literally evaporates. But I still combine a lot of different things. For example,*Ilieden* (2018), a painting I am showing in New York, started with an event I heard about: a plane

crashed during the war in the woods near the Kent coast, and the pilot survived and spent the rest of his life in a cottage next to the woods, leased to him by the landowner. So I imagined the moment of the crash, but I also imagine what it means now—with Brexit looming—that locals had helped a stranger who had literally crashed into their lives. So I painted that, and I think that can be read, even though it's just a swirl of colors—the colors convey meaning. So back to your question: the plane or the tree or the person maybe doesn't look like a plane or a tree or a person, but that is because it isn't just a plane or a tree or a person.

TB: When you say that a figure you paint isn't merely the figure it seemingly represents—something that looks like a tree isn't only a tree—I wonder about how you fluidly move between what is, on one hand, representational and, on the other hand, supposedly abstract. Looking at *Illeden*, the more discernible figures, so it seems, are more to the left of the picture, and on its right side, things tend to collapse into lines and colors that seem to exist in their own right, without having to act as clearly identifiable signifiers. Can you please talk more about the idea of multiple layers of meaning, and perhaps how you see meaning attached to something that is apparently abstract?

SVH: Paint is a tool to suggest space in every sense. So, swirling fluorescent orange could be a fading memory of an explosion, automatic leaves flying, a transport to another plane, an opening, a nothingness, a sunset.

TB: I'm interested in what you say, that colors convey meaning. What do you mean by that?

SVH: Colors by themselves don't mean much and are just screens for projection. But set against and mixed with other colors, they start acting out their abilities in relation to the space they make: blues recede but expand, reds come forward but contract, and yellows hold the middle.

TB: You don't make preparatory drawings or sketches, but you make watercolors that exist on their own, right?

SVH: I do make watercolors, yes, on paper, a lot, and I also paint on walls. Last year, I created an enormous three-story mural depicting the history of Hannover at the local Kunstverein. As I read the history, I painted it on the wall, thinking about the space and overall composition, which equates to a truth I was revealing. As if the images had been on the wall all along, and I was merely uncovering them as I was covering the white walls with acrylic paints. I feel the same with painting on canvas. The images do always exist before, somewhere floating in the air, and I just catch them.

TB: I found this quote of yours: "I have an idea that we are merely a projection of the past, that we don't really exist and that we are an imaginary future scenario played out, and so my paintings need to be dry and thin to work as representations of this idea. It means I can never really plan a painting, I just start with the simple wish to create a clear image of something that strikes me." How are we only a projection of the past?

SVH: I think a lot about time and how it is possibly not linear at all and that everything actually happens at once, all the time, forever. I see ghosts everywhere, and I very often see buildings that have been destroyed or become ruins. But when I

was talking about not really existing, I think I was talking about how, from the perspective of people who lived through the trauma of the first half of the twentieth century, we are really an improbability and should have been wiped out in our preexistence along with the millions who were. Maybe the world did end, and this is just an afterthought or a funny dream right before the end.

TB: What kinds of ghosts are you seeing?

SVH: When I visited Georgia in 1998 with my friend Thea Djordjadze, I saw an outdoor theater performance by the promenade in Batumi that I walked past. Later, the stage I had seen and the seats weren't there anymore, not to mention the actors. The theater hadn't been there for years, but I had "seen" it. The building I live in in Margate was a huge convalescent home for children with tuberculosis, run by Catholic nuns since the late nineteenth century. What was left of the building, after it was bombed in the Second World War, became a social club and rehearsal studios until we moved in. A lot of ghosts!

TB: What does the concept of "past" trigger for you?

SVH: Trying to remember! Anything past can be reimagined as much as the future can be reimagined, if not more. The future is rolling in on us with such a particular force that mocks the uncertainty we feel about it. The past, though full of darkness and horror, can no longer throw things at us except the odd terrible memory and pain from old wounds and increasingly appears to be cloaked in sweet-scented layers of time.

[1] "Artist Sophie von Hellermann on how she paints," (Guide to Painting), *The Guardian*, September 20, 2009 https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/sep/20/guide-painting-sophie-von-hellermann.

Sophie von Hellermann (1975) is a painter living and working in London and Kent, United Kingdom. Recent solo and group exhibitions include *Stufen zur Kunst*, Kunstverein Hannover; *New Waves*, Pilar Corrias Gallery, London; *Salon*, Wentrup Gallery, Berlin; *Moderne Frauen*, Kunsthalle Bielefeld; *Petri Dishes*, Parrasch Heijnen Gallery, Los Angeles; and (as a member of hobbypopMUSEUM) *Digitalia*, Dortmunder Kunstverein. *Ileden*, her fifth solo show, is currently on view at Greene Naftali, New York.

Tenzing Barshee (1983) is an independent writer and a curator at Sundogs in Paris. Recently he curated *Verlörung* at art berlin Salon, an epilogue to a sequence of exhibitions, which were realized in different frames and contexts, including *Here Here—The I and everything else* (2018) at Braunsfelder, a private collection in Cologne; *Der Verdienst. 2014-2017* (2017) and *Le Mérite. 2014-2016* (2016) at Oracle and Treize, project spaces in Berlin and Paris, respectively; *Who Are Who*, at Studio for Propositional Cinema, a former artist's space in Düsseldorf; and *Revelry* (2014) at Kunsthalle Bern, among others.

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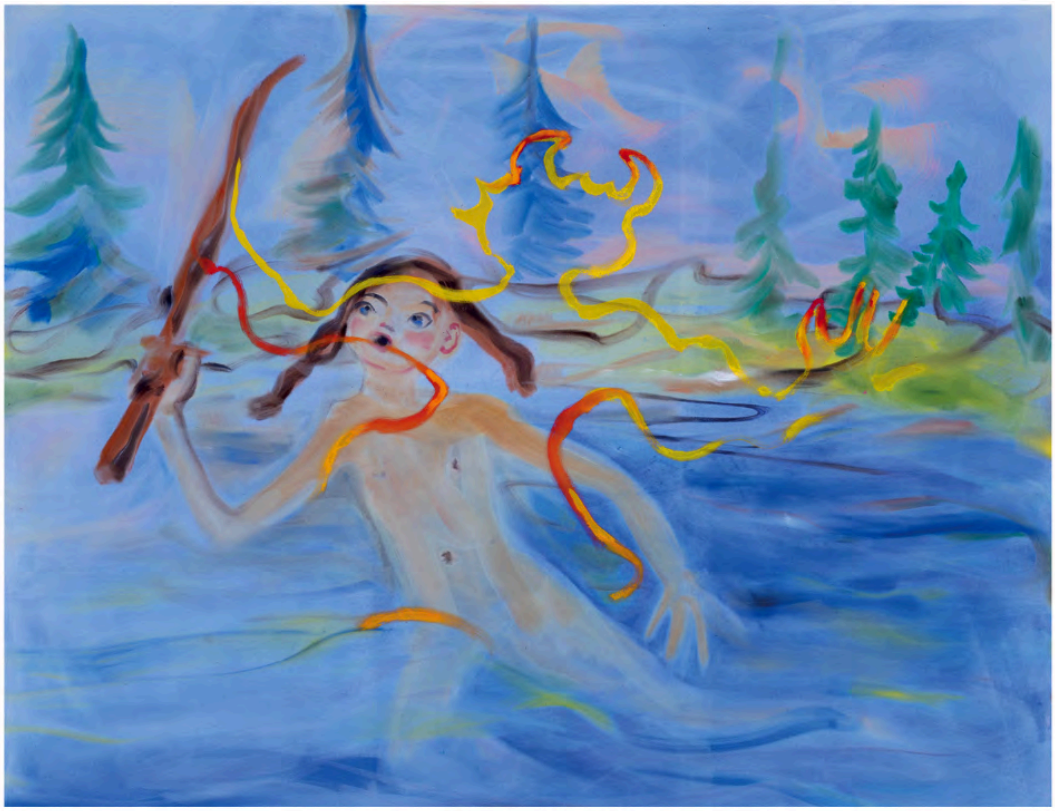
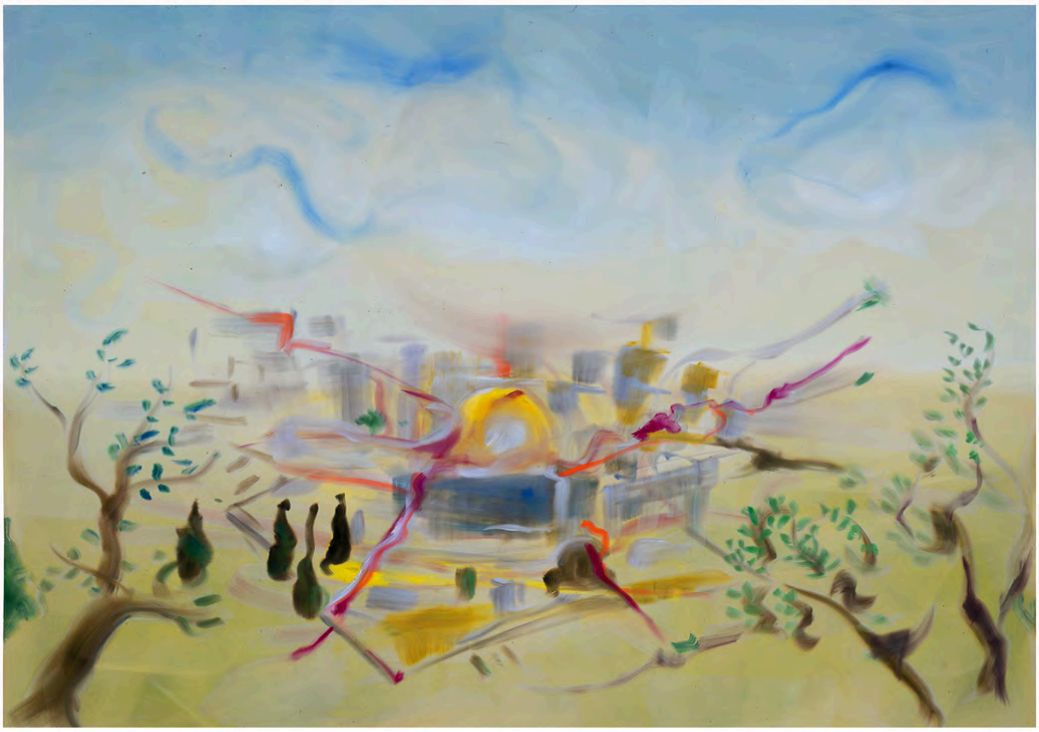


Sophie von Hellermann, *Viking Sword* , 2018
Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

Sophie von Hellermann, *Owl*, 2018
Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York



Jerusalem, 2018
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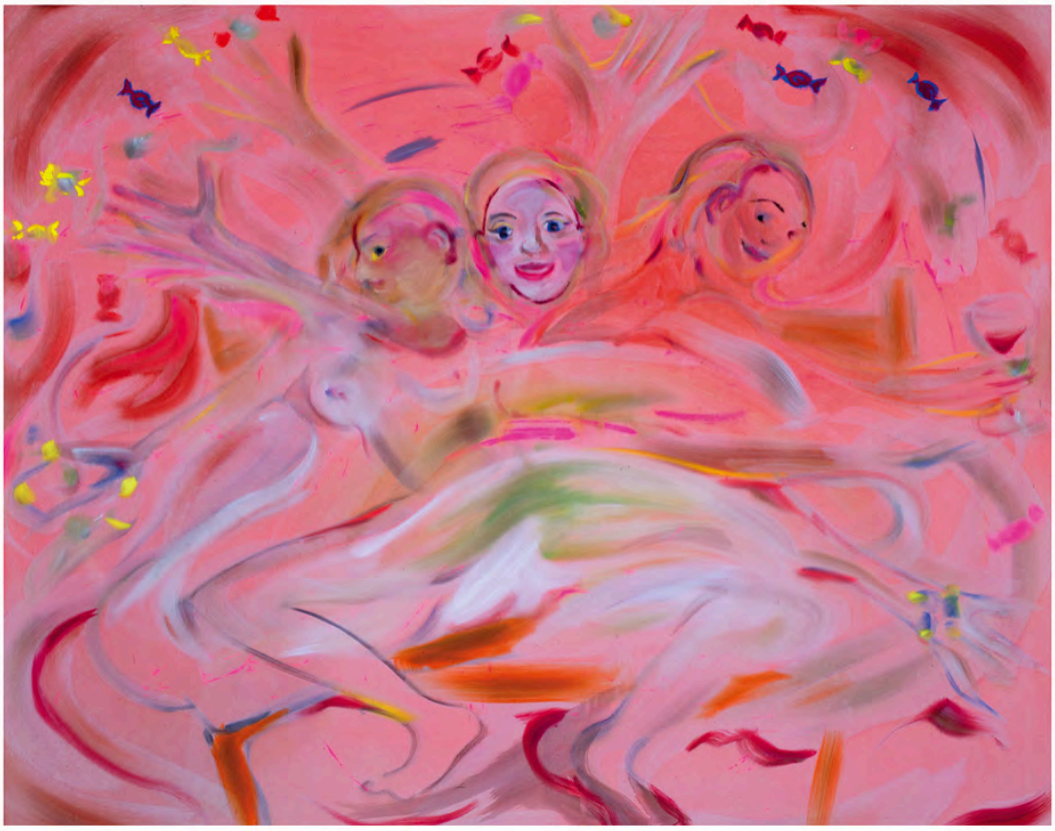

Candies From The Studio, 2018
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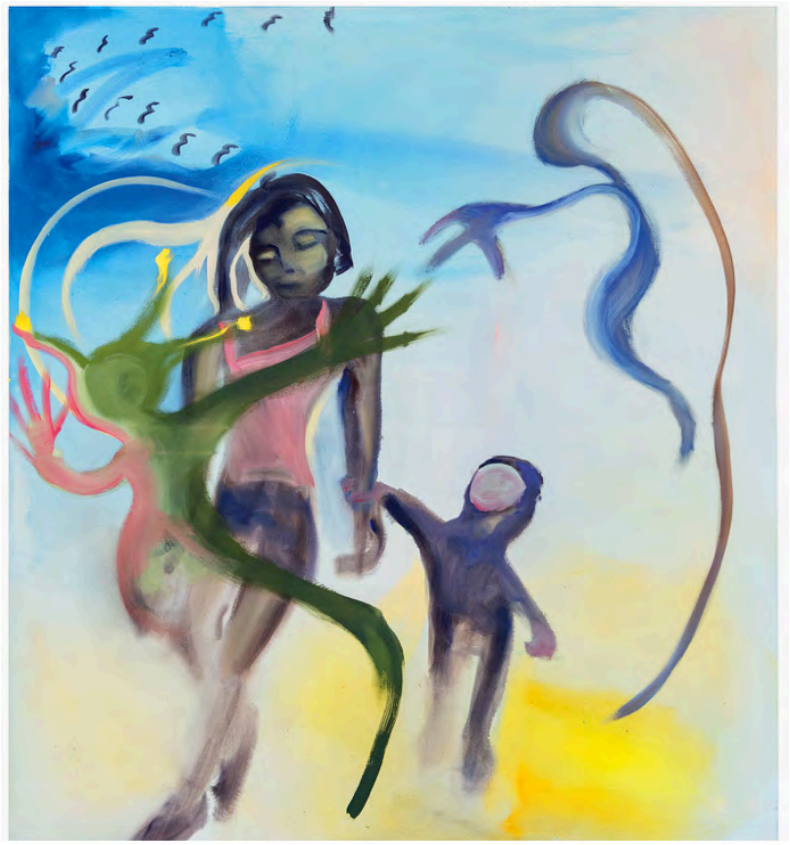

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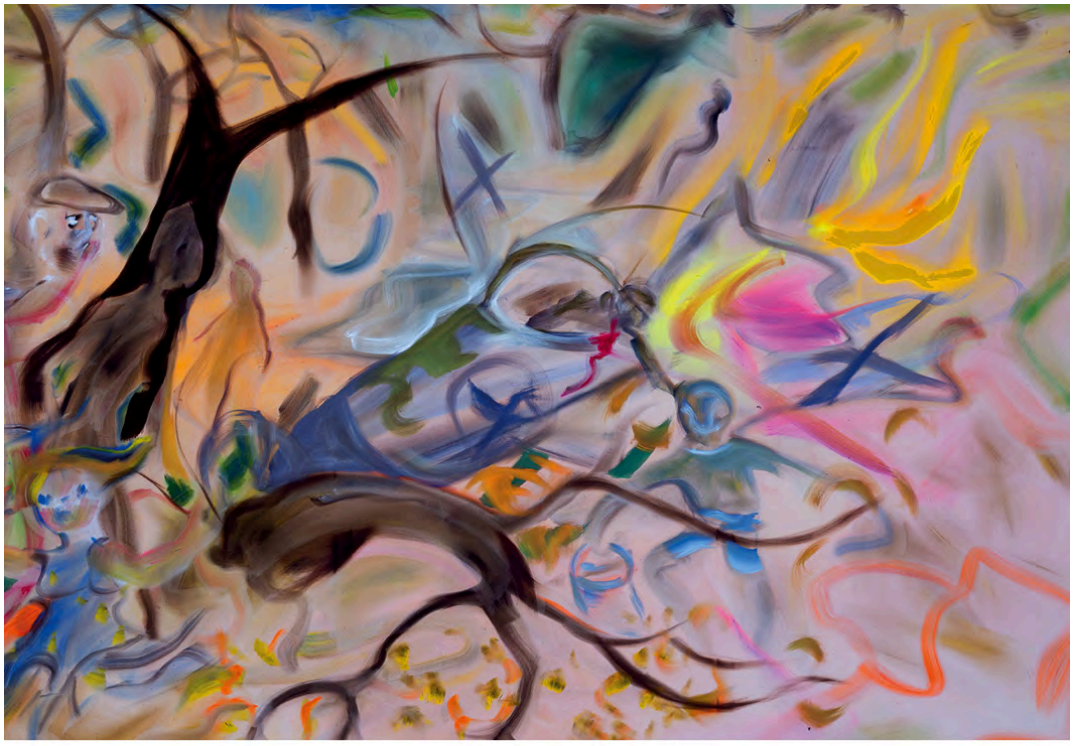
In Their Face, 2018
Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York



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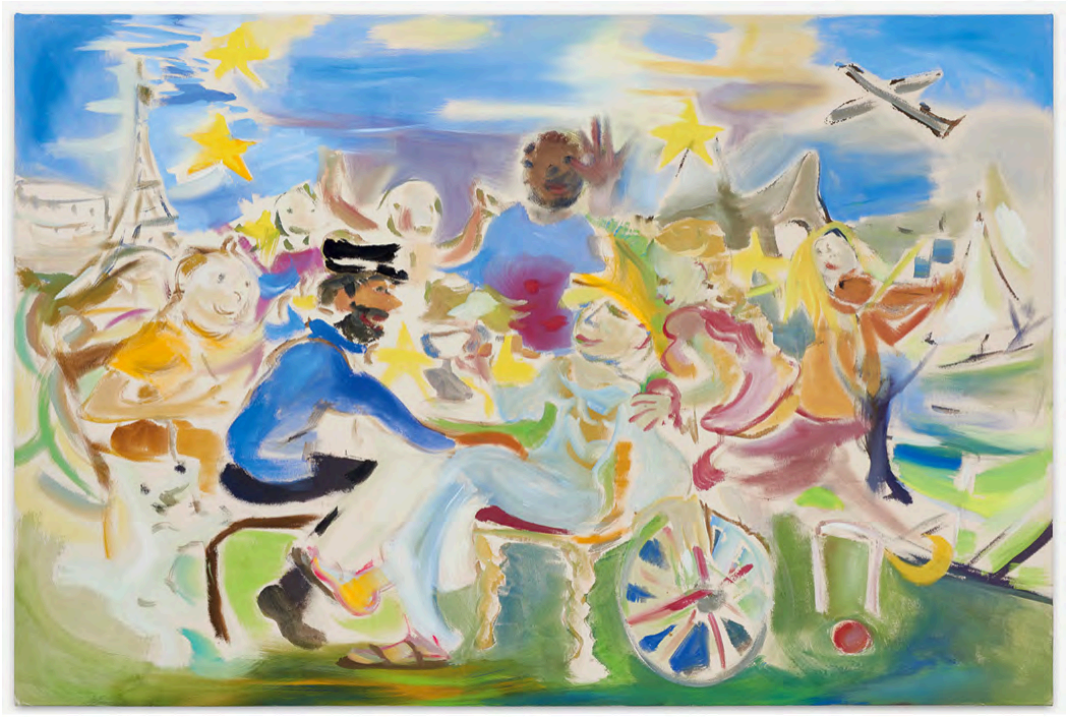
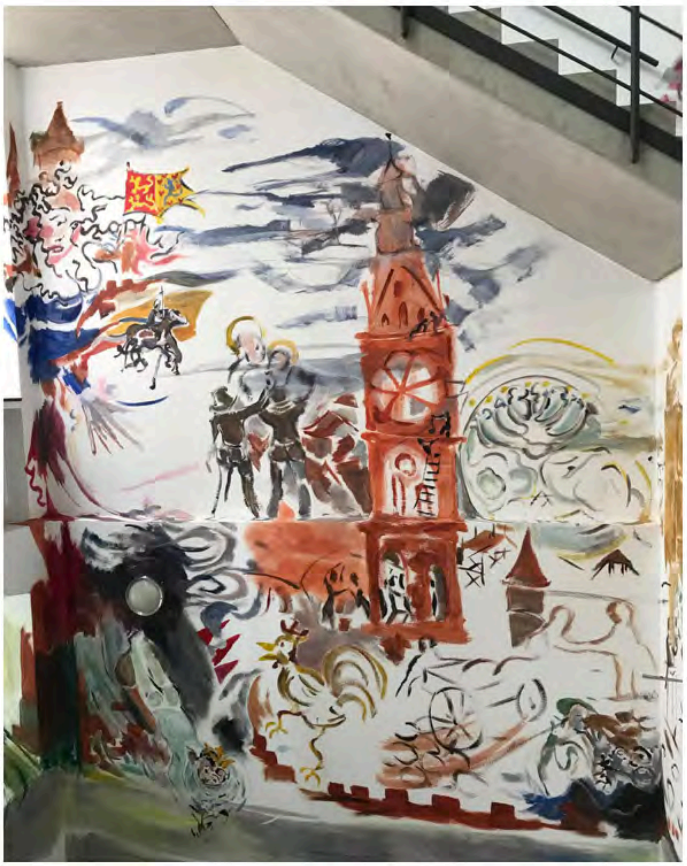
Sophie von Hellermann, *Ileden Woods*, 2018
Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York



So glad you stayed Britannia!, 2016
Courtesy: Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn. Photo: Mareike Tocha



Stufen zur Kunst installation view at Kunstverein Hannover, 2017-2018
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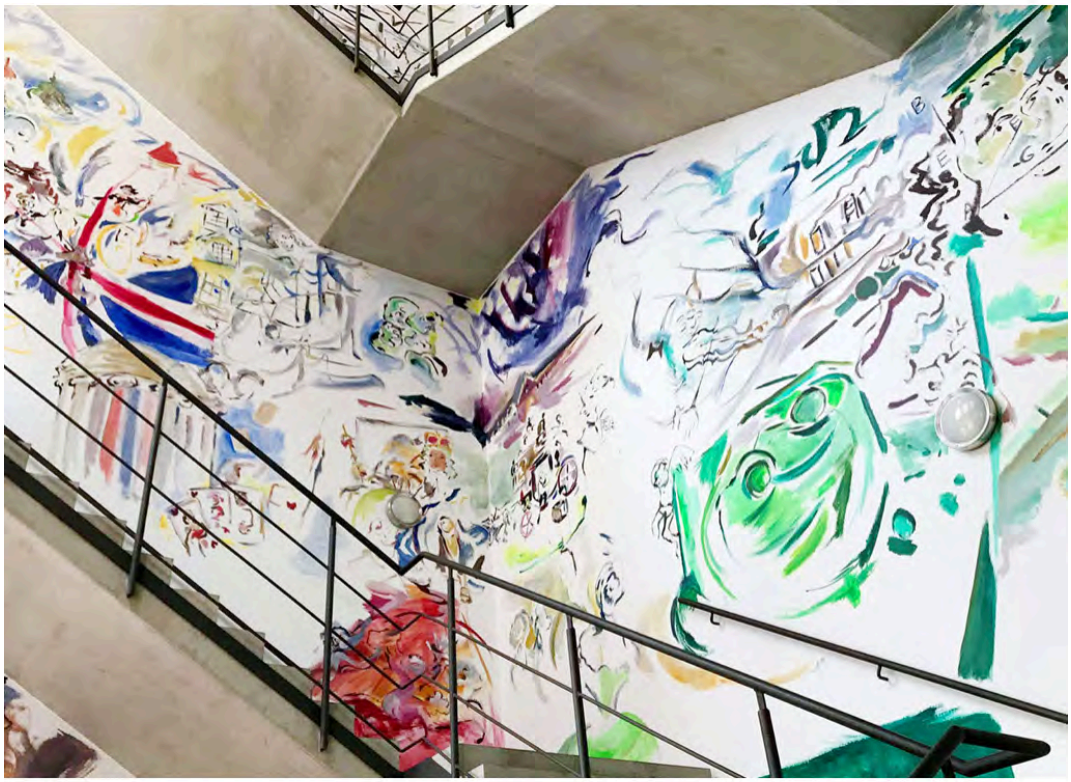

Stufen zur Kunst installation view at Kunstverein Hannover, 2017-2018
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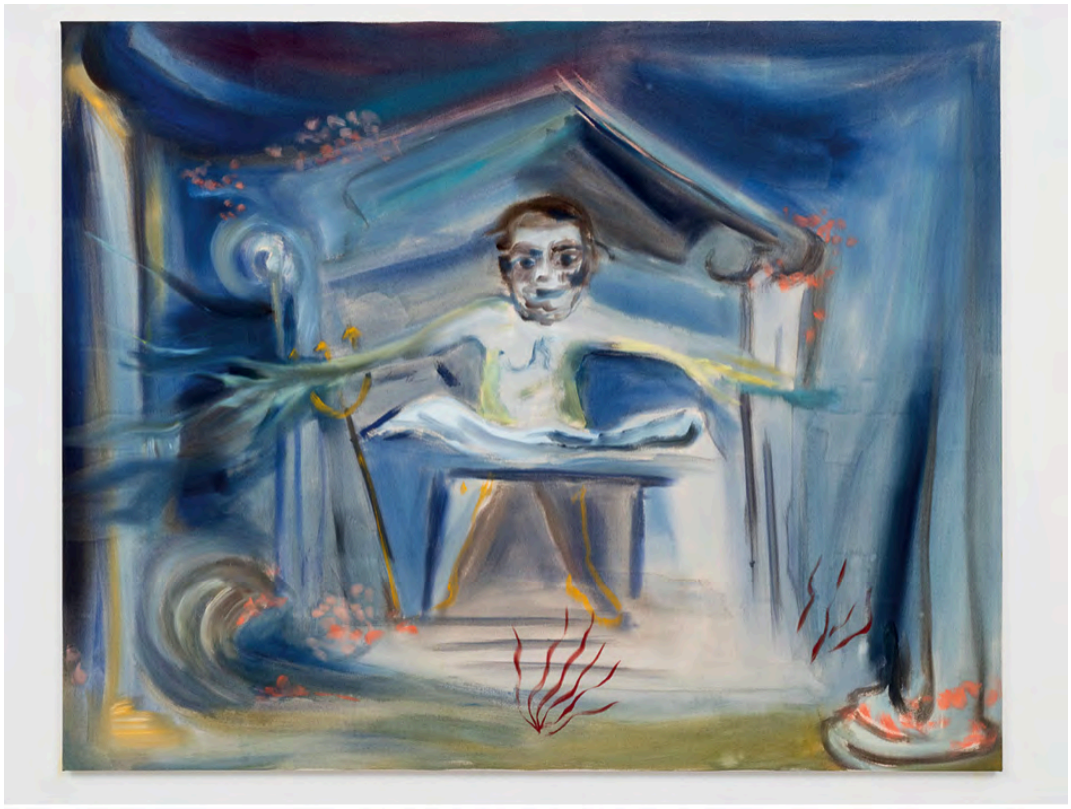
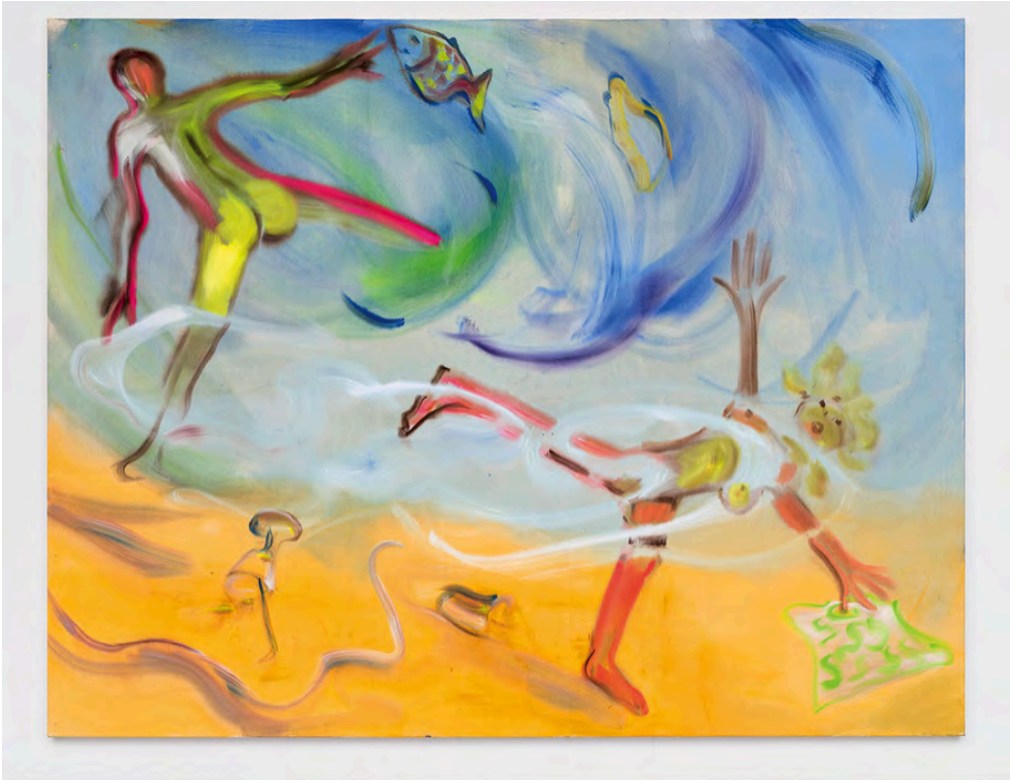
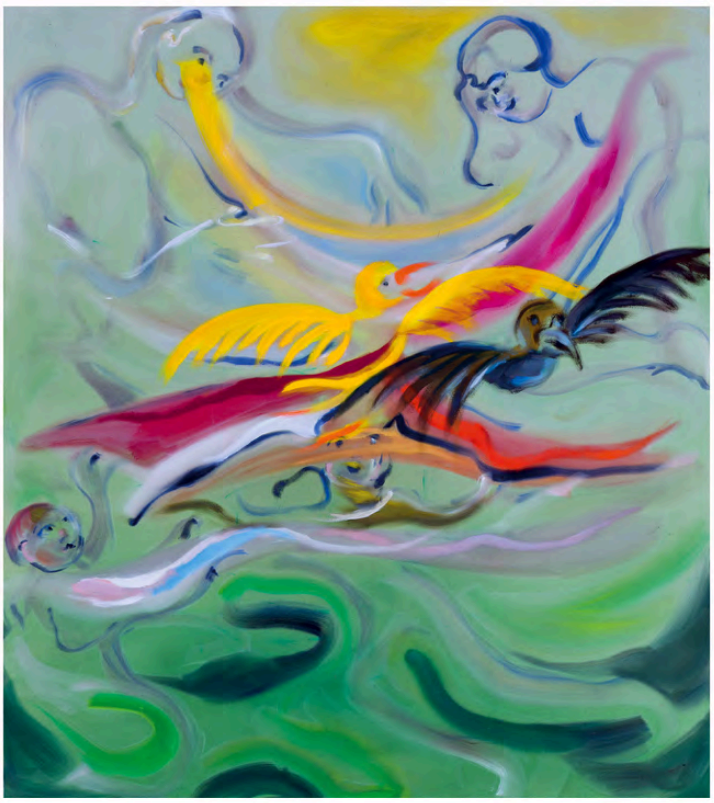


Poseidon, 2018
Courtesy: the artist and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: Damian Griffiths



Plastic People, 2017

Courtesy: the artist and Pilar Corrias, London. Photo: Damian Griffiths



Set Free, 2018

Courtesy: the artist and Greene Naftali, New York