

You Can't Wake up if You Don't Fall Asleep: Thordis Adalsteinsdottir's "Some of It May Have Started at the River" at Nunu Fine Art

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Emily Colucci

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Thordis Adalsteinsdottir, *Hedgehog*, 2023, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 in
(Courtesy of the artist and Nunu Fine Art, New York)

Did you know that you have to massage baby hedgehogs' tiny genitals in order to get them to shit? Me neither, until attending a walkthrough with artist Thordis Adalsteinsdottir of her current exhibition *Some of It May Have Started at the River* at Nunu Fine Art. I don't bring up

this hedgehog-rearing tip just to be shocking. Or because several of Adalsteinsdottir's paintings on view feature grown versions of the cute prickly critters—one laying in the gloved hand of an ambiguously gendered figure whose nipples spurt drops of breastmilk and another cuddling up under the covers of a human foot-posted bed, gripping a cellphone, below more paintings of singular dangling breasts dripping milk. I repeat the Icelandic artist's story of palpating the private bits of writhing teeny creatures found at her current residence in France because it inherently reflects a disarming dichotomy—the adorable and the grotesque—which is one of many clashes pervading her exhibition.

Adalsteinsdottir is an artist of collisions—formal, aesthetic, and thematic collisions. Beyond the adorable and the grotesque like a grumpy polar bear pissing a strong yellow stream in the warming ocean while flicking off the viewer like an environmentalist peeing Calvin bumper sticker, *Some of It May Have Started at the River* combines and confuses the natural and technological, cartoonish and realistic, people and (often anthropomorphic) animals, recognizably domestic and thoroughly bizarre, and whimsical and threatening. While I could spend an inordinate amount of words listing examples for each of these, all are embodied in the figure of a fluffy grey dog posed with a pitcher of milk while strapped with an explosive belt as seen in the first painting that viewers encounter in the exhibition, *Events Taking Place Outside*. Is this pup ready to commit an act of terrorism, blowing up the onesie-wearing female figure and her woodpecker friend perched on her cigarette and sending bits of flesh flying into the blue skies with hardwood floor clouds? Or is the dog simply displaying a proud collection of suicide bomber vests like the obsessive and suicidal León from Dennis Cooper and Zac Farley's film *Permanent Green Light*? The three running male figures, sporting wee Speedos and clutching iPhones, aren't taking any chances.



Installation view of Thordis Adalsteinsdottir's *Some of It May Have Started at the River* at Nunu Fine Art (Photo Martin Seck; Courtesy of the artist and Nunu Fine Art, New York)

These running figures, almost always rendered in profile and on a significantly smaller scale than other humans, jog through many of the artworks in the exhibition. In *Athena and the river*, one solo runner surfs a bathtub while taking a selfie, joining a tub parade of a bikini-wearing cat and a man in a top hat heading off a steep waterfall where, at the bottom, a rabbit in an apron and rubber gloves does the dishes. Another runner is trapped in a clear bottle, seemingly unfazed by his predicament, next to a dog playing solitaire in *Solitaire*, a socially isolated take on the tacky classic dogs playing poker painting. Two more race past a growth of mushrooms, including the deadly red-and-white-spotted fly agaric, in *Owl, Mushrooms and Sexy Guys Running*, one of the few works on paper in the show. Adalsteinsdottir leaves the trajectory and meaning of these running men deliberately vague: Are they jogging for health? Or are they running to something? Or *from* something? Certainly, some nasty encounter had to happen to explain the men's chapped knees and asses.

The running men are not the only images that span the exhibition—mushrooms, gloves, cigarettes and cigarette butts, blue and white china cups filled with coffee, and lots and lots of milk. These repeated motifs help forge some sort of hazy linkage between what is essentially a beguilingly surreal combination of imagery. How else to describe a painting like *Landscape with many things*? A brown and white cat in a flowered bikini top sits on a patterned shore, emitting puffs of jet-black smoke with white cursors from its cigarette. Behind the kitty, a suit-wearing man with a bad combover and melting hands bends over a

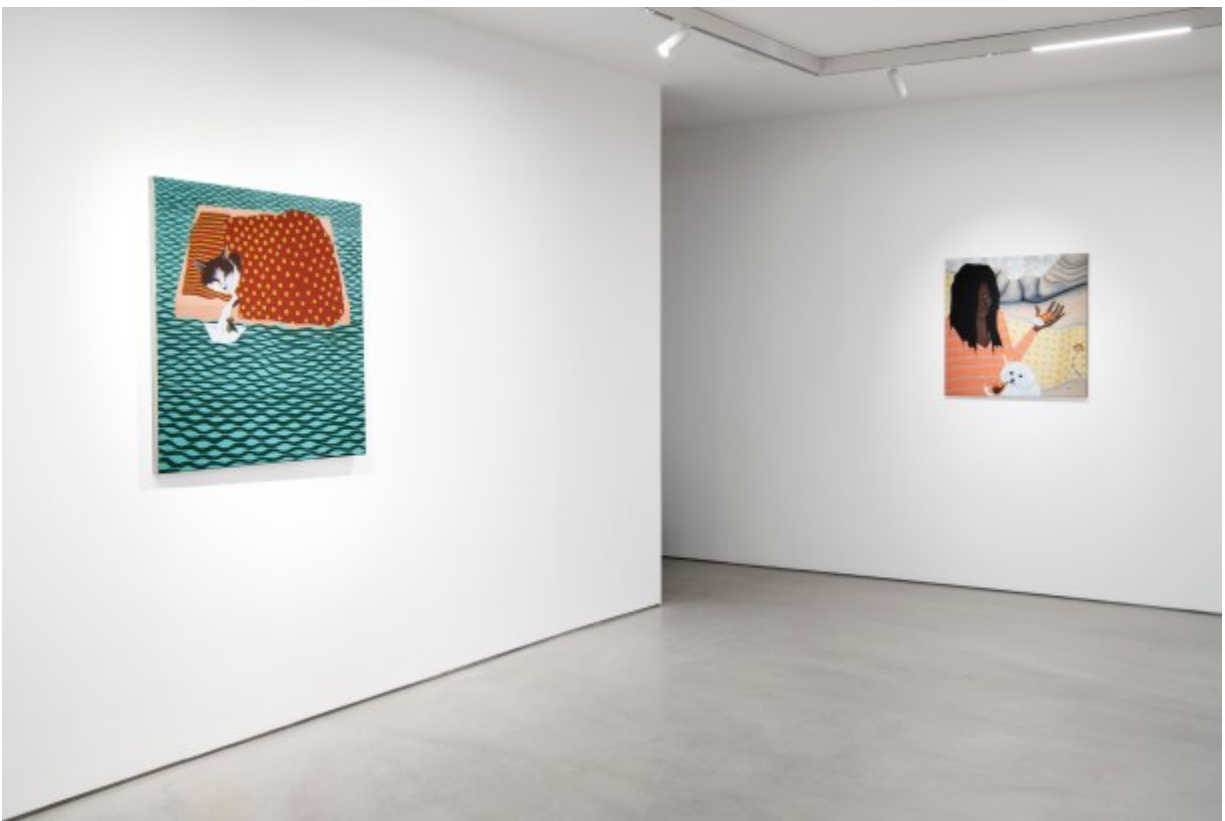
bucket. That's not all—scattered around this mountainous environment, portrayed so rounded and curvy that it feels fleshy, are more coffee cups, lit and snuffed cigarettes, a Eurasian blue tit, a mushroom, a water bottle, and a CCTV surveillance camera. It's not just Adalsteinsdottir's crowded canvases that are baffling, though. One of the simplest is also one of the most bizarre; *Familiar consequences* presents a tiny man with a milk-filled bucket standing in front of a gigantic rabbit with elongated teats. Mama!



Thordis Adalsteinsdottir, *Familiar consequences*, 2023, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 35 x 51 1/8 inches (Courtesy of the artist and Nunu Fine Art, New York)

There is more than a dash of *Alice in Wonderland* to *Some of It May Have Started at the River* and it's not just the frequent presence of toadstools. The most cartoonish of the figures like in *Familiar consequences* look like they've just devoured an "Eat Me" cake and promptly shrunk. This isn't to say the more suitably sized figures are photorealist. Less simplistically painted as the bite-sized people, these larger, often central, figures, as seen in *Teacher* or *Events Taking Place Outside*, are depicted with more care toward their flat angular facial structure with a focus on the juts and folds of cheekbones and occasional wrinkles. Some remind me of the faces in Jessie Makinson's paintings from her 2023 exhibition *Bad sleeper* at Lyles & King. However, Adalsteinsdottir's figures have a greyish corpse-like pallor that differs from the still unnatural but less sickly green, orange, and purple tones in Makinson's works. Even more than the faces, one of the most enigmatic parts of Adalsteinsdottir's portrayal of humans is their hair, which, as in *Leah with Matches*, *Mia Smokes Bird*, drips down their sternums like wet paint.

Adalsteinsdottir pays as much attention to the environments these figures inhabit as the figures themselves. While some of the backgrounds are bare neutral expanses, most showcase an artistic fixation with patterns—yet another collision that works hand in hand with the paradoxical imagery. 1970s-style floral wallpaper meets stones in *Teacher* while a plaid tablecloth bumps up against two-toned green teardrop swirls on a reddish-brown background in *Still life with smoke detectors*. This clear fascination with patterns is reminiscent of Anne Buckwalter's yet Adalsteinsdottir's lacks any consistent grounding in tradition like Buckwalter's Pennsylvania Dutch references. While the prior two examples are domestic interiors, Adalsteinsdottir's landscapes are just as busy. In the show's eponymous painting, the rippling water, in which a capybara and a black-haired woman commune while another tinier woman and black cat sail by in a bathtub, is such a strong and repetitive pattern that it resembles a floating scarf. That same water also fills the pictorial space of *Thundershark and paperboat* on which a cat drifts in a bed with a striped red, yellow, and green pillow and matching polka-dotted blanket. All of these patterns work to place the paintings in an otherworldly environment—one that is close to our world but not entirely of it, a dreamworld begging to be disturbed.



Installation view of Thordis Adalsteinsdottir's *Some of It May Have Started at the River* at Nunu Fine Art New York (Photo Martin Seck; Courtesy of the artist and Nunu Fine Art, New York)

And disturb she does. Clutched by the paw of *Thundershark and paperboat's* sleepy cat is a mini-military man gripping an automatic rifle in a childlike folded paper boat. Is he patrolling and protecting the cat? Or storming the bed? Either way, yikes. Though the whimsy floats close to the surface in *Some of It May Have Started at the River* (Kitties! Dogs! Bunnies!

Hedgehogs!), so does the foreboding, anxiety, or outright sense of danger. All those fire alarms in *Still Life with smoke detectors* have to be there to warn about something. At times, the menace requires a second glance like spotting the doomed bird stuffed in the fluffy white dog's pipe in *Leah with Matches, Mia Smokes Bird*. Holding an alarming lit match, the dog makes eye contact with the viewer, daring us to say something before setting the bird alight.

In some ways, Adalsteinsdottir's filtering of contemporary existential dread through the fantastical reminds me of the best of Wes Anderson's films. In *Asteroid City*, Anderson uses an elaborate framing device—a teleplay within a film within a film—to, well, essentially cop to using his sometimes-oppressive level of aesthetic tweeness to process a depth of emotion and loss like grief. “You can't wake up if you don't fall asleep” is the pervasive motto of that movie—opaque, yes, but I take it to mean that dreaming, or imaginative movie-making, can be a way to wake up and confront real horrors. So too with art-making. Whether the surveillance state, war, addiction to technology, or just the struggle to quit—and miss—smoking, real-life concerns leak through Adalsteinsdottir's irreverent worlds, almost like contemporary fables. Which, to Anderson's point, I find much more palatable. I'd much rather consider the effects of climate change while looking at a series of drawings of a furious and depressed binge-drinking polar bear stuck on an ever-shrinking ice floe than more dry statistics about sea levels, wouldn't you?