

Some of it May Have Started at the River: Thordis Adalsteinsdottir at Nunu Fine Art

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Events Taking Place Outside, 2023. Acrylic and flashe on canvas , 47 1/4 x 47 1/4 in 120 x 120 cm. Images courtesy of Nunu Fine Art

By MICHAEL WOLF February 28, 2024

Why a dog in a suicide vest holding a pitcher of milk? Why a masked man in a brown suit wearing yellow dishwashing gloves near a stained glass window holding a pail of milk? Why so much milk? These are questions you might want to ask artist Thordis Adalsteinsdottir, whose show *Some of it May Have Started at the River*, opened at NuNu Fine Art on January 18th.

If you met Adalsteinsdottir and asked her about the meaning behind her work, she might refer you to Siri Hustvelt's essay about writing fiction. Hustvelt ponders the question: Why one story and not another? Adalsteinsdottir says, referring to Hustvelt's writing, "I found few parallels in our makings, but her writing always inspires me nonetheless, and I connect with it, as in a sentence towards the end of that essay; The great enemy of thought and creativity is the received idea." Robert Rauschenberg once quipped "when an artist explains their artwork, the viewer closes their eyes" meaning - once an artist explains what their intention was the viewer no longer is required to think for themselves? Adalsteinsdottir takes this mandate to heart; she wants us to create our own stories and have our own interpretations of her paintings. Her attitude is refreshing in an art world full of ostentatious artist explanations and statements. Adalsteinsdottir challenges us to dive into her paintings and attempt to decipher them ourselves.

Adalsteinsdottir is an Icelandic native now living in France whose paintings mix surrealism, pop, and naive styles. Alternating between areas that are subtly modeled three-dimensionally and flatly painted patterned areas. The paintings are whimsical, disturbing, and darkly humorous. One of the more accessible paintings is *Thundershark and Paperboat*, which depicts a cat comfortably tucked into a red comforter, resting its head on a red and yellow striped pillow on a bed that is floating on water. The cat is detachedly playing with a small paper boat, the sole passenger being a soldier wearing a camouflage uniform and holding an automatic weapon. The minimalist composition invites several interpretations. The most straightforward interpretation would be the question many cat owners have pondered: if house cats were bigger than us, would they treat us like toys and then devour us? Like cats treat mice? More complex interpretations could involve the cat being a controlling influence over humans, whether it be governments or gods. As in Greek mythology, where humans were created for the amusement and entertainment of the gods. On a more somber level, it may represent soldiers being pawns in geo-political struggles for dominance, with the cat representing politicians or government. This interpretation seems appropriate in the state of the world today.



Some of it May Have Started at the River, 2023, acrylic and flashe on canvas, 35 x 51 1/8 inches 89 x 130 cm.

Milk and cigarettes are recurring motifs in the paintings, along with little men running around in Speedos. A dog holds a picture of milk while wearing a suicide vest near a woman smoking and drinking tea while little men in Speedos run around. A hedgehog lies in bed looking at its phone while two large breasts drip milk outside the bedroom windows. The masked man with dishwashing gloves holds a pail of milk near a stained glass window. Another yellow-gloved man appears next to a giant rabbit with cow utters, while milk drips from the nipples of a bearded figure in another painting. One bit of biographical information I am aware of is that Adalsteinsdottir is a mother. Unlike Renaissance depictions of mother and child, these references to motherhood are not romanticized depictions of mother and child. While milk is often associated with nurturing, the milk depicted in these paintings is frequently placed in proximity to a perceived threat, like the bomb-wearing dog serving milk to a tired-looking woman smoking a cigarette or the bearded figure with milk dripping from its nipples holding a baby hedgehog casting a concerned look at the threatening cat behind it holding a dead mouse in its mouth cigarettes laying on the floor nearby.

One of the more complex and enigmatic paintings in the show, *Some of it May Have Started at the River*, depicts a woman in a river wearing a bike helmet with a built-in GoPro surrounded by two floating bottles. One of the bottles contains a cell phone, like a techy

message in a bottle. The other bottle contains a mushroom. In the water to the woman's left is a large rodent holding a cigarette; in the foreground is a small floating tub with a woman and another rodent-looking creature, possibly a mouse. The river flows through a softly modeled hilly landscape dotted with apple slices and a large cup of tea. The painting is reminiscent of Dali's iconic *The Persistence of Memory*. Both are set in a barren, watery landscape with disconcerting arrangements of objects, animals, and a woman in Adalsteinsdottir's case and insects, a squid-like creature and watches in Dali's case. In Dali's painting, the viewer perceives the objects from a high, detached vantage point. In Adalsteinsdottir's painting, the viewer observes the scene from a low vantage point from the water as if they were in the water with the woman, the rodent, the floating bathtub, and the bottles. While the reaction to Dali's painting is more viscerally disturbing, Adalsteinsdottir is more playful. The viewer is unsure if they have encountered a swim party or if the woman, animals, and objects have been swept away in the tide. The cell phone in the bottle is the most interesting juxtaposition, contrasting our ability to message someone on the other side of the world in a split second with the romantic idea of setting a handwritten message adrift in the sea to find its way to an unspecified receiver the message traveling at its own pace subject to the whims of fate.



Thundershark and Paperboat, 2023. Acrylic and flashe on canvas, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches 100 x 100 cm.

Adalsteinsdottir's work combines surrealism, visual elements of pop art, and cunningly coded social commentary. The meaning behind the paintings may be obscure, but it is a visually delightful, thoughtful, and perplexing exhibition. The bold use of graphic lines and shapes contrasts with the softly modeled forms. The fantastical scenes and use of anthropomorphic animals are a delight to view and contemplate. In the early 2000s, the musician Richard Thompson released an album of what he considered the most essential songs of the last millennium. He chose popular songs dating back as far as the eleventh century. One of the songs he included on the album was Britney Spears's *Oops I Did It Again*. When asked why he included Spears's *Oops I Did It Again*, he explained his thought process; he kept thinking,

" Why?" And then, "Why not?" The "Why not" won. If you ever meet Thordis Adalsteinsdottir and ask her, "Why is the dog in a suicide vest holding a pitcher of milk? She will probably answer, "Why not?" *On view through March 16, 2024. WM*



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