

Thordis Adalsteinsdottir: Some of It May Have Started at the River

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Thordis Adalsteinsdottir, *Events Taking Place Outside*, 2023. Acrylic and flashe on canvas, 47 1/4 x 47 1/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nunu Fine Art.

On View

Nunu Fine Art

Some of It May Have Started at the River

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New York

The realm of fantasy has lately transcended its traditional boundaries, ceasing to be exclusively reserved for happily-ever-after endings, a transformation that finds resonance in the work of Icelandic painter Thordis Adalsteinsdottir. Her latest exhibition *Some of It May*

Have Started at the River, showcased at Nunu Fine Art, delves into the darker facets of nostalgic fantasies. Disrupting her childhood memories with modern elements like discarded plastic water bottles, cell phones, suicide bombs, and surveillance cameras, Adalsteinsdottir invites viewers to confront the intricate layers of society through her anthropomorphic animal characters.

Influenced by surrealist painters like Remedios Varo, William Kentridge, and Kiki Smith, Adalsteinsdottir's paintings seamlessly blend post-Pop art, minimalism, and expressionism, resulting in a dreamlike sense of alienation. Further motivation stems from literature. She has cited contemporary authors such as Siri Hustvedt, Valeria Luiselli, Barbara Kingsolver, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Isabel Allende as having an effect on her work. These novelists frequently examine the intricate interplay between personal identity and the pervasive influences of society and the environment. One might also imagine that fairy tales and folktales play an unconscious role, especially those like “Bluebeard” or “The Little Mermaid,” which culminate in distressing endings.

Adalsteinsdottir has described her ritual of tuning into the news on the radio while sketching with a pencil on her canvas before commencing the painting process, providing a captivating link between her work and the tumultuous news cycle, as well. As unsettling information infiltrates her daily routine, she surrenders control over her paintings, embracing uncertainty and navigating the evolving narrative until a mutual understanding is reached between the characters she paints and herself.



Installation view: *Thordis Adalsteinsdottir: Some of It May Have Started at the River*, Nunu Fine Art, New York, 2024. Courtesy Nunu Fine Art. Photo: Martin Seck.

At the gallery's entrance, an unsettling scene unfolds in the painting *Events Taking Place Outside* (2023). Standing beside a coffee table with palpable impatience, a Weimaraner, assuming the role of a waiter, wears a suicide bomb while serving a lady in a patterned jumpsuit a jar of milk. The woman holds a cigarette with a bird perched atop. Below, a grassy field becomes the stage for a peculiar spectacle—naked male joggers, each tightly clutching a cell phone, engrossed in selfie-taking. Amidst this surreal landscape, clouds with patterns resembling woodgrain adorn the blue sky, pressing down on the ethereal expanse as though descending upon the frenetic world we currently inhabit. This offers a poignant satire that beckons viewers to reflect on the heavy reality of our present world.

Many of Adalsteinsdottir's works delve into contemporary issues like climate crisis and endless warfare. In the "Second Polar Bear Series" (2022), a mournful story unfolds in two separate paintings as a polar bear stands and sits on the sole square of ice in a vast ocean, despairingly drinking a beer—a stark commentary on the urgency of global climate warming. In *Thundershark and Paperboat* (2023), a cat reclines on a floating pink mattress on a river, releasing a small paper boat bearing a soldier with a sniper rifle. The act mirrors sacred spiritual traditions in certain Asian and Greek cultures, sending off paper boats with blessings and prayers. The interplay between the serene animal and the inherent violence suggested by the armed soldier prompts reflection on the juxtaposition of peace and warfare. Adalsteinsdottir's articulation of this ritualistic act becomes particularly poignant as it invites viewers to meditate upon the ongoing conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine.



Thordis Adalsteinsdottir, *Landscape with many things*, 2023. Acrylic and flashe on canvas, 39 3/8 x 39 3/8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Nunu Fine Art.

In contrast to her show *Living in the End Times* at Shoshana Wayne Gallery in Los Angeles in 2022, which predominantly portrayed interiors, this body of work challenges the boundaries between public and private spheres. In *Landscape with Many Things* (2023), a turquoise-patterned screen separates inner space from the external world. However, the seemingly private area, featuring a cat in a bikini, a man in a suit, on his knees with a cleaning bucket, scattered cigarettes and other odd detritus, is surveilled by a security camera. The recurring theme of voyeurism throughout these paintings prompts contemplation on the dynamics of observation and attachment, engaging both viewers and subjects in a cyclic relationship.

Adalsteinsdottir also urges self-awareness and reflection on societal roles, challenging viewers to question established structures and schemes. Breast milk, with its associations of maternity and sexuality, takes centerstage in several paintings. Characters interact with milk in various ways but never consume it. This deliberate avoidance introduces a nuanced societal critique, commenting on motherhood within a politically tumultuous environment. Adalsteinsdottir's brushstrokes hold up a mirror to the complexities of our existence. This exhibition, a love letter to adults who cherish fairy tales, also serves as a warning to those who have played a part in tearing up the fantasy we were supposed to live in.