

Angst Revisited: Cathleen Clarke at Margot Samel



Cathleen Clarke, Valentine's Day, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 101.6 x 101.6 cm. Courtesy of Margot Samel.

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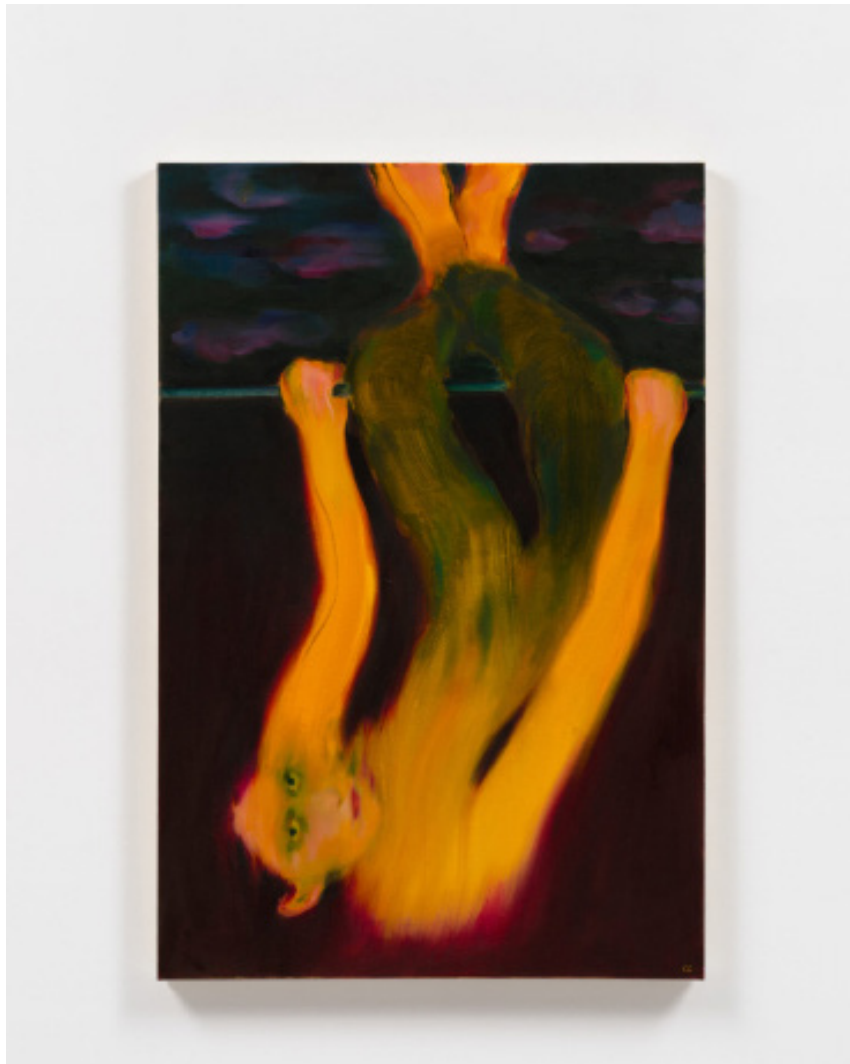
We live in the age of nihilism, pre-apocalypses, dissolution. In her current solo show at Margot Samel in Tribeca Cathleen Clarke's self-restraint builds up a momentum of angst in a viewer to a new extent. What is on view is a selection of eight paintings, all of them oil and acrylic on canvas. Presented here are scenes from a dream of a person coming of age or a person who is stuck in that age (of those there are many among us). But they do run a gamut of emotional experiences, especially within the intellectual continuum of western thought starting with old Greek prophecies and ending with updates to Freudian ideas. But before going there quite yet, consider the color.

It is always instructive how a misuse of a more or less codified coloristic association by an artist produces a heightened emotional reaction. Once you enter the gallery space you feel caught somewhat off-guard by Clarke's pink which is not at all dreamy or benign. It is not a color of California dreaming or sunset but of anxiety or traumatized memory. Pink is often used here as a sign of a sleeping trance, in a dressed figure, and human flash. But in denying this hue it's

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traditional, lyrical, meaning Clarke preps us to reconsider what we see here as we mostly do see nightmares. They are gentle and intricate, yet, lasting and difficult to process. The spooky figure of an elongated sandman haunts one dream, but the figure is luminous and magnetic.

No one wants to wake up from seeing such a mystifying presence. Two boys are losing their childish trust in the safety of their home, for the first time aware of the darkness surrounding them. A young girl is being shaken into wakefulness by a green-handed monster. Two carnivalesque processions also enter the gallery, a mismatch of various eerie figures from the lore of the XX century and beyond. All we see are the snapshots of our own experiences and internalized emotional memories of our naïve self-centeredness. This intensely personal rendering of color for storytelling is what Clarke has been building up in the last years. The artist's works some five years ago were more monochromatic and linear. The introduction of color just added to the emotional tone.



Now to go back to the thematic cohesiveness of vision outside of obvious storylines and mise-en-scènes. René Girard – a lesser known, yet not less of a thinker and representative of the French theory insisted that a sacrifice becomes sacred only after it is decided who is a person marked for killing. At least that's how it went for Girard within the tradition of myths and biblical stories. What Clarke is sacrificing here is innocence and wonder. We see the moment of final wakefulness when a child realizes the terror and is never again to be enveloped by protective adults. A poignant moment for a child and their parent is explored with insight, mastery, and sensitivity. A point of no return is captured by Clarke with great precision. And what makes these works prescient is our point of no return, our society is at that point.

Hibernating within us is a dream of a future of harmony and beauty, yet, it is buried deep down under the layers of strife, conflict, and unease. Crises of meaning and reality affect our thinking and visual culture. Clarke as Edward Munch or Marlene Dumas expresses these crises, adding a new note of panic to their plasticity. Her paintings are more than images - they work as a temporal excursion into the state of our existential dread. What Clarke's works also bring to question is the role of the artist in our current conflicting state of being. When every word, gesture, post, or IG story is tried by public opinion for consistency, purity, and originality.

Does an artist have a real freedom to create stemming from their inner need? Or do they have to find a correctly labeled box for themselves to be checked into and delivered to their sourced collectors through a fitting gallery? This question is not new and has always existed for any artist. And we, the audience, are the reason why this mechanism of highly specified supply and demand has been so seamlessly calibrated. Through our information or visual diets, we look only at what we like, our social media algorithms making deadly-sure we hardly even encounter what's intrinsically alien to us. What is alien could produce anxiety and angst, and angst is not something we are ever comfortable with.



Cathleen Clarke, *It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To*, 2023. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 101.6 x 76.2 cm.

As a notion, angst references an isolation and an anxiety of the emotional experience of the unknown. Amongst others, it is tied to the dreary ghosts of Edgar Allan Poe; the strangers of Rainer Werner Fassbinder; the rolling stones of Sisyphus recontextualized by Albert Camus, and the endless tuberculosis of Hans Castorp's at his Alpine sanatorium. Angst is a potent human experience that could produce a stupor, but is useful to analyze. Frustration and rage turn into despair; despair turns into angst or dread. What makes this despair even more anxiety-inducing today is the unprecedented rate of isolation, feelings of loneliness, and depressive reliance on digital 'friends' to keep us mentally fit. According to a recent study in Arizona, a significant amount of younger people turn to generative AI for psychological healing and conversations, because the machine is always there for them. This is the angst-producing sunrise of the new era: half-viral, post-human, and postapocalyptic that Cathleen Clarke is showing us.

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