

ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

Stephen Polatch

MARGOT SAMEL

295 Church St

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Stephen Polatch, RIP DoE, 2022
egg tempera on gesso board
16 1/8 x 11 3/4"

Glasgow-based painter Stephen Polatch creates idylls populated by a cast of elvish figures, swans, cats, and foxes in narratives that unfold in hallucinatory suburban spaces. Throughout this show one can find references to video games, Symbolist art, and religious icons—though one also suspects that an autobiographical thread is running through the works' allegorical superstructure. These modestly scaled, egg-tempera panels are animated by the friction between the familiar and the strange. Take RIP DoE (all works 2022), in which two revelers, irradiated by golden light, stare blankly beyond the picture plane from a composition with wildflowers, drink, a curious feline, and even a party hat. A set of pulled-back, chrome-yellow curtains frame the scene, suggesting theater, as if Edvard Munch were the set designer for an atomic-age vaudeville act.

Polatch's figures frequently wear bewildered expressions, seemingly awestruck by the power lines, railways, and dirty canals that trace the cramped streets of their mysterious realm. Take the nude, vacant-eyed damsel in Milngavie: She floats in front of a man as her long, whiplike braids unfurl beside her. A tendril of red ribbon is tied around the man's neck—part adornment, part instrument of bondage. The stylized composition, full of saturated golds, reds, blues, and pinks, recalls Pamela Colman Smith's iconic 1909 tarot illustrations. Indeed, Polatch's taxonomy of forms and symbols is charged with supernatural energy, peppered with references to the occult.

At times the artist's subjects appear to have leaped from one painting into another. A doll-like figure in a blousy smock emerges from a forest in Figures with Owl and is also present in Milngavie, though only as a blip in the distance. In Poppy Field, two large heads in the sky—one in the shape of a moon—look down on a pale-skinned girl gathering the titular flowers as she is stalked by a cobra and a cat. While the narratives are elusive, each work here seems to fit within a much greater and deeply absurdist plotline.

— Eric Sutphin