

For the title of her first solo show at Praz-Delavallade, Maude Maris has chosen *Hieromancy*, a reference to the ancient practice of divination using offerings to the gods, in particular studying the entrails of sacrificed animals. The exhibition that bears this rare, contextualised term is comprised of around one dozen paintings of figures suffering from rosacea, their abnormally flushed complexions shot through with pink, red and burgundy. Each blends, more often than not, into a cool, blurry blue background. Right from the start of her career some fifteen years ago, Maris implemented a precise ritual involving painted objects – one to which she has always remained true – and yet this series marks a departure. It is as if the images have established a mysteriously connection to the occult world, one which unsettles notions of scale, disturbs perception and disrupts dominion.

As far as dimensions are concerned, Maris usually sees things on a very big or a very small scale and only rarely in the intermediate formats on show here. Each size offers a different chromatic experience, from the fluid palette of the largest paintings in which the colours are so diluted that the canvas seems like a fine, quivering skin, to the smallest formats that concentrate the subject in an intense palette of colours that forges a captivating relationship with the viewer.

It's a fact that we can only see what we have learned to see, a fact that highlights the role of pareidolia as we try to decode the painting, imagining the slightest detail we perceive to be something familiar. A soothsayer wouldn't do it any differently. The titles also have a part to play and contribute to this feeling of familiarity by adding the notion of families – Ursidae, Caprinae and Leporidae, etc. – making the viewer guess at their prototypical forms. As Maris makes no secret of the question, let's lift the veil on their origins: they are figurines, small toys, or decorative objects just several centimetres high, either stylised animals or human representations. As a result, we should probably be looking at a much earlier stage to find the original model for these paintings, the actual living creatures on which these objects were based. But let's pass over these beginnings and how industry idealises the animal form, because it is the operations carried out further down the line by the artist in her studio that are of interest.

The original object undergoes a series of transformations – 3, 4 or 5 – that challenge its very essence. It is cast in plaster and painted, reflected in mirrors and photographed, before finally making its way onto the artist's canvas. Each successive manipulation is like a ricochet that modifies the model, changing its material, surface, or quantity using tried and tested special effects. Horizontal and vertical mirrors show the object from every angle, whilst simultaneously trapping it within an eternal loop; photography captures the object in an indexical relationship and any resemblance is deliberately distorted.

Finally, the painter enters the fray. Oh, the sweet sensations to which these illusory appearances give rise, as they put our senses in a swirl! Oh, how heady the sensation of being confronted with this machine that deforms reality! Shapes multiple, planes give in to anarchy and perception falters as we are carried away to some funfair hall of mirrors

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or strapped into the centrifuge like apprentice astronauts. Losing any point of reference, the gaze looks this way and that, searching for balance and leaning with the weight of paint on the vertical edges, the reverse of what we are used to. The tight framing impedes our understanding of the image, in particular in the large formats that seem to have been painted with a dolly zoom. As we get closer, a disturbing effect of perspective makes the image seem to recede, like sand slipping through our fingers. The truncated composition shows an object that is always incomplete, its extremities amputated the time it takes for our eye and mind to reconstitute phantom limbs.

What happens to this projection once painted? Compared to its reference, is it enhanced or corrupted? Is it that little bit more than the original, or on the contrary that much less? Considering the process by which the image is manufactured from start to finish, it could have become a perfectly synthetic rendering controlled by the artist down to the very last whisker and yet, we feel that portrayal does indeed rhyme with betrayal. The successive interpretations engender a loss of fidelity, desynchronising and incorporating impurities and random occurrences. Each mould, reflection, photo and copy has left its mark in the form of chimera, memories and mirages. And yet, as one deformation follows another and the subject is seen through yet another filter, a miracle occurs! The image of the object resists, here a muzzle, there an eye, and its manifest qualities subsist.

Embedding these successive transformations provides Maris with endless opportunities to experiment with perception. Although based on reality, the image is separated from the original model and takes on an almost fantastical air. The fixity of a very small number of original elements – no more than ten or so – which the artist has been tirelessly dissecting for several years, is confounding. Constantly returning to the same forms, Maris always manages to create something new. When, in the past, her subjects stood aloof in the centre of the image, their outline sharp and distinct with space all around, the titles referenced the idols of Antiquity (Bastet, Io, Tethys, etc.). In this recent series, the same subjects lie prostrate, knocked over, brought down, their bellies offered in sacrifice. When once before they were venerated as gods, today they are excoriated; yesterday they were admired for their form and today for their material.

In conclusion, and returning to the title of the exhibition, we have to ask: Have the gods given us a sign? In fact, they always do, if that is we know how to interpret their message. The entrails of these paintings have certainly delivered theirs: continue painting and never stop for it is a token of humanity.

– Laetitia Chauvin

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*Maude Maris (b. 1980), lives and works in Paris. Graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure d'Art et Médias of Caen and the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, her work has since been exhibited in France and abroad: Les Ateliers Vortex, Dijon, FR (2020); CAPA, Aubervilliers, FR (2020); Maison des arts, Malakoff, FR (2020); Memento, Auch, FR (2020); Greylight Projects, Brussels, BE (2018), bringing her several nominations and awards. Maude Maris' work is included in numerous collections including: Bel Fund, Colas Fund, Emerige Fund, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rennes, FRAC Auvergne, FRAC Basse-Normandie, FRAC Haute-Normandie, Artothèque de Caen.*