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Casey Kaplan is pleased to present Ella Walker's first solo exhibition at the gallery, *Theatre of Virtues and Vices*. Eight large, unstretched canvases hang loose from wooden armatures, like backdrops on an imagined stage, anchored by Giotto's 1305 allegorical fresco sequence at the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy. As each painting describes Giotto's personified scenes of virtue and vice, Walker positions herself at the fulcrum, refitting old narratives into contemporary plots of unfolding tragedy, comedy, and love.

Within the intersection of medieval and contemporary spaces, Walker moves freely, interchanging histories with invented scenes that are both referential and dream-like. By creating imagery that merges art historical iconography from the Trecento period, theatrical sets and stock characters from Commedia dell'Arte, contemporary ballet, and costume design inspired by Federico Fellini's 1963 surrealist comedy-drama *8 1/2*, Walker translates ritual into innovation. The resulting meeting challenges viewers' understanding of the sacred and profane, while simultaneously encourages the rethinking of binaries of old and new, high and low culture.

Walker's latest body of work materializes within the framework of Giotto's allegorical fresco mural at the Scrovegni Chapel. This historic setting serves as the starting point for centuries of mural painting, and specifically for fresco painting, at large — its walls and ceilings are coated in scenes related to the Life of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Panels in grisaille (shades of grey mimicking the contours of stone) act as a border to the vividly rendered narratives above and are dedicated to the subjects Walker focuses on: Hope/Despair, Charity/Envy, Faith/Idolatry, Temperance/Anger, and Prudence/Folly are individually represented as rival characters in elaborate dress and unsettling poses. Walker imitates the effects of fresco in process and medium, rendering underpaintings in delicate washes of azurite, the most common blue pigment of the Renaissance, typically used to depict the sky. Areas are tempered by thinly applied layers of malachite, a natural pigment present in Egyptian tomb painting as well as 15th and 16th century European paintings. Marble dust or a flexible acrylic paste further enhance the texture of Walker's compositions. The combination of natural pigments with the acrylic medium, tempera, pastel, and ink create a coarseness that convey the effect of fresco throughout.

Shallow depths of fields serve as impossible backdrops to Walker's lively figures, who pose with deliberation and resolve within recreated storylines in both her hanging paintings and a pair of smaller stretched canvas works. As if emerging from a fantasy, they establish their presence with confidence and fury, inviting the viewer into an unexpected scenario that repositions women as heroines. *Theatre of Desire* serves as the central axis for the exhibition, depicting a troupe of three figures in a triangular grouping, based on the composition of Piero della Francesca's *Virgin of Mercy and her supporters* (Polyptych of the Madonna of Misericordia, 1445-1462). Within it, an apprehensive Madonna in a collared Renaissance blouse emerges from a brushed, black background with outstretched arms in a protective gesture of the two figures who kneel below in a traditional display of adoration. Overhead, theatrical floating hands hang menacingly and hold rocks like props. Walker's inclusion of a starkly nude woman against Madonna's Harlequin-inspired dress further subverts decorum, and instead personifies the mercurial vice of inconstancy. This convergence of virtue and sin establishes the tone for the paintings that follow: *Idolatry, Faith, Queen of the Night, Mother,*

*Folly*, and *Troupe* generate revisionist translations of principles of morality, belief, and discipline, while simultaneously locating women as the central subjects of her paintings.

With an unorthodox lens, Walker sets the scene of worship through a woman's perspective in *Faith*. The standing character is armored with a dark green chest plate that serves as both an accessory for fashion and battle. She appears aloof, even as an incision under her right breast (akin to Jesus Christ's crucifixion wound) draws blood in an iron-oxide red paint as bright as stage make-up. While a bending figure in diluted layers of red and turquoise in the foreground seems to proclaim their unwavering devotion, she remains unfazed — falling dead leaves from a bouquet of gathered roses cascade loosely in a sign of wilting loyalty.

In a clandestine and self-referential action, Walker inscribes her unstretched canvases with a literary or visual reference on the verso. This source material both informs and inspires the character plots on the surface and include references that span *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography* from Angela Carter's 1978 novel, *The Wife of Bath's Tale* by Geoffrey Chaucer, to John Donne's "The Triple Fool." Equally represented on the reverse are renderings of Giotto's individual fresco panels, serving as a reminder of the genesis of each allegory and a balance of the past and Walker's invented dreamscape. On the back of *Idolatry*, Walker inscribes a title from Carter's essay, "The Desecration of The Temple: The Life of Justine." In an ode to Justine, Marquis de Sade's symbol of virtue, Carter examines the relationship between sexuality and power, asserting that desire is derived not from gender, but from power and politics. Walker engages a similar feminist approach within her work, reinventing each narrative with women (in vogue) at the forefront.

Ella Walker (b. 1993, Manchester, UK) trained in painting and printmaking at Glasgow School of Art (Glasgow, UK) and drawing at the Royal Drawing School (London). Her work has been exhibited throughout the United Kingdom, as well as in Casey Kaplan's group exhibition, *Where the threads are worn* (2021). Her work is housed in several European permanent collections, including the Royal Collection (London, UK). This is Walker's first solo exhibition at Casey Kaplan, New York. She currently lives and works in London.