



Skunk Hour, 2022. Oil on linen. 188 x 289.6 cm. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

NIKKI MALOOF *SKUNK HOUR*

March 3 - April 15, 2023

Perrotin is pleased to present our first exhibition with artist Nikki Maloof. Opening on March 3, *Skunk Hour*, will present a new series of paintings and drawings where imagined interiors and animals become proxies for the human experience.

For Nikki Maloof, painting is a way to convey the experience of existing in the world—the light, the dark, and all the shadows in between. Her language is figuration: she started out with portraits of individual animals, progressing onto still lifes and, most recently, domestic interiors and landscapes populated with a mix of creatures—human and non-human; alive, dead, and inanimate. These subjects, on one level, have an everyday familiarity. Indeed, they are in many instances collected from Maloof’s immediate environment: for the past few years, her house and studio in rural Massachusetts. But the resulting depictions, however vivid, never feel quite real. The colors are bright, the shapes cartoonish, the compositions often implausible. Everything is emotionally charged. The eyes of dead fish seem to brim with sadness, the oversized blade of a knife glints with menace. A woman who shares Maloof’s physical features stands at a window with a glum expression, her face only just visible behind a tree dense with apples. Looking at these canvases is like looking at a series of dreams, governed by a mysterious logic, their characters and events freighted with ambiguous symbolism.

Of course, unlike in a dream, Maloof chooses what to paint: hers is a conscious artistry. We see evidence of this in her equally accomplished graphite works on paper, in which images are carefully worked out

before she embarks on the larger oils on linen. (It’s fun to play spot the difference between the versions in pencil and paint: notice how a glass of wine materializes on a countertop; how a cat relocates from the landing to the stairs.) Perhaps her work is more akin to confessional poetry, intensely personal yet meticulously crafted. The title of this exhibition, “Skunk Hour,” is borrowed from a well-known poem by Robert Lowell, published in 1959, which begins as a light-hearted description of a seaside town in Maine and culminates in a self-portrait of a mind in turmoil. “I myself am hell,” wrote Lowell, “nobody’s here— / only skunks, that search / in the moonlight for a bite to eat.” Similarly, Maloof describes the scenes she constructs as “vessels,” giving tangible form to psychological states or particular thoughts and feelings.

The idea for this new series of paintings hatched last spring, when one morning the artist stumbled upon the birth of a fawn near her home, and later that day witnessed the body of a recently deceased neighbor being removed from his home. She decided that she wanted to capture the weight of being made simultaneously aware of the beginning and the end of life, as well as the tension between the mundane and extraordinary. There are no laboring deer or body bags here: instead, we get paintings like *Life Cycles* (2022), in which five plates are arranged in a circle, showing the progression of fishes’ lives from small orange roe on crackers to clean-picked bones. Or *Burning Bush* (2022), in which an empty bird’s nest rests inches away from a hawk dismembering its prey on a branch of the same tree. Whether taking the form of conventional still lifes or more expansive house-and-garden scenes, Maloof’s coded



Burning Bush, 2022. Oil on linen. 177.8 x 121.9 cm. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

In the Yellow Room, 2022. Oil on linen. 198.1 x 152.4 cm. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

pictures make clear reference to the conventions of Western religious vanitas painting, with its representations of physical objects—flowers, food, skulls—to symbolize the transience of earthly pleasures.

If this sounds unremittingly heavy, it's not. Maloof's paintings also offer up many of their own pleasures, both intellectual and sensuous. It would be remiss, for instance, to ignore the slapstick wit in the detail of a rolled joint on a kitchen shelf in the work entitled *Skunk Hour* (2022): skunk here signifying not the foul-odored mammal but the just-as-pungent strain of cannabis. Life, as Maloof understands, is nearly always funny, even when things are pretty bad. And if you're not in the mood to laugh, well, just try to resist the delights of the paintings themselves—their profusions of color, pattern, and texture. Extending the culinary theme, we might describe her work as a feast for the eyes. See how the coiling smoke from the lit joint rhymes with the squiggles of steam rising above

a pair of artichokes in a colander; notice the thick scraped impasto of the howling cat's bristling fur. Maloof is unabashedly maximalist in her approach to her canvases, layering both imagery and brushstrokes, at times threatening to overwhelm her subjects through an abundance of painterly gesture. This makes perfect sense. In such moments it becomes clear that, despite the universality of their themes, Maloof's paintings are a vision of the world as seen through the eyes of a singular artist.

— Gabrielle Schwarz

[More information about the artist >>>](#)