

The approach

Tom Allen *The Hour*

2 June – 1 July 2023

There is a long tradition in landscape painting of depicting views at different times of the day, to explore how atmospheric changes alter what we see. In *The Hour*, an exhibition of six new flower paintings (all 2023), Tom Allen focuses on a single sixty-minute stretch: the period of transition when the sun gradually begins to fall, day edging into night. When I spoke to Allen, he referred to it as the most “chromatically dramatic” of hours. As the light shifts, new subtleties of tone are continuously revealed, as if by sorcery – no wonder it’s sometimes called the “magic hour”. This is ideal territory for an artist obsessed with colour: Allen’s canvases always teem with countless pigments, from historical specimens like vermilion and lead-tin yellow to ultra-contemporary fluorescent and iridescent shades.

The compositions are based on Allen’s photographs of flowering plants, encountered on travels abroad or in his neighbourhood in Los Angeles. They are accurately rendered, so that an amateur horticulturalist would have little trouble identifying them: here, we have a yellow-and-pink orchid, a white-ish gardenia, a green-and-speckled-red nepenthe, a pearly magnolia, a pink-tinged water lily, and a red-and-green heliconia (also known as a “lobster-claw”). But Allen’s goal is not photographic realism. Rather, he sees his paintings as forms of portraiture, representing both the external and internal qualities of his subjects.

Each flower, then, gets its own canvas, with a backdrop designed to channel the character of the blossom itself. In *Red and Green*, *Red and Green*, the distinctive structure of the heliconia, its twisted vine and two columns of hanging bracts, is reflected in a “split” environment with contrasting multi-hued bands on each side of the vine. The dark speckles on the tubular pitcher in *Nepenthe* reappear behind it as hazy, cloud-like blobs in various shades. Tiny purple dots on the petals of the magnolia in *The Hour* (the canvas from which the show borrows its title) become twinkly stars and a crescent moon shining down from a mauve-ish sky. The overall effect of the works is distinctly psychedelic – but there is also a clear debt to the late 19th-century group of French painters known as Les Nabis, who made liberal use of pattern and ornamentation to construct psychologically charged domestic scenes that fused people and their surroundings. Sometimes fantasy contains more truth than reality.

The paintings that Allen produces are so spectacularly vivid and embellished that they could be accused of verging on gaudy – just like a flower, of course, which makes the style of these pictures a perfect match for their subjects. The flamboyance of flowers is intended to attract pollinators: it’s a strategy of seduction, necessary for their survival. But could the same not be said of art? In a world saturated with images, Allen’s modestly sized easel paintings nonetheless seize your attention, not through scale or quantity but through a virtuosic display of colour, form, and texture. In painting, he finds a medium to express the essence of flowers – and in flowers, a medium to express the many possibilities of painting.

Gabrielle Schwarz

Tom Allen (b. 1975, Springfield, Massachusetts) lives and works in Los Angeles, USA. Recent exhibitions include: *The Song*, Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; *The Promise*, The Annexe, London, UK (both 2021); *Praeternatura*, Air de Paris, Paris, France (2020); *Là-bas*, Lulu, Mexico City, Mexico; *Blue Flowers*, Le Maximum, Venice, CA; *Dreamhouse vs. Punkhouse*, Serious Topics, Inglewood, CA (all 2019); *The Lovers*, Bel Ami, Los Angeles, CA; *Symbolisms*, Cooper Cole, Toronto; *Witch-Ikon*, Mortlake & Company, Seattle, OR; *Therianthropy*, Laura Bartlett Gallery, London, UK; *Ruins In the Snow*, High Art, Paris (all 2017); *A Change of Heart*, Hannah Hoffman Gallery, Los Angeles; *Outside*, MiM Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (2016). His work can be found in the permanent collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Sweeney Gallery at the University of California, Riverside, and in numerous private collections.

Coinciding with Tom Allen *The Hour*, The Approach will also be presenting
Peter Davies *From the land of...* in The Annexe

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