

ENG

# Ruby Swinney

## *Amid The Alien Corn*

1 November - 21 December, 2024



Ruby Swinney, *Soft Water*, 2023, oil on silk, 80 x 145 x 5 cm

AKINCI is proud to present a solo exhibition by Ruby Swinney (b. 1992), a South African painter who works primarily in oil on silk and oil on tracing paper. Using vibrant monochrome colours, her work ascends into a parallel world where strangely dark and mysterious figures inhabit timeless landscapes. Swinney's paintings echo our present uncertainties and our longing for a vanishing natural world that is growing darker and more unfamiliar.

The idea for this exhibition began with a sense of displacement. Earlier this year, Ruby Swinney moved to London. The relocation caused a profound rupture in the artist's life. The paintings in this show were painted, prior to the move, in the bright, natural light of the artist's Cape Town studio. The landscapes they represent are specific to this world, which now exists only in her memory.

The title, *Amid The Alien Corn*, is taken from John Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale'. In the poem, the nightingale is a strange contradictory presence, both innocent and associated with death. Keats in a flight of fancy, imagines the bird's other-worldly song heard by the Biblical character of Ruth, the lonely Moabite woman displaced from home in a foreign land. It is from this sympathetic depiction of Ruth that Swinney derives the title of this show.

As with the nightingale's 'plaintive anthem', so one is led through Swinney's paintings by an uncanny music: each picture is a pastoral, affective melodic painting. But like Keats' poem, this always relapses on reality. Swinney holds the tension between pastoral idyllic and social realism by placing, for example, the rise of a brutalist structure on the horizon, which reduces a tranquil landscape to something both familiar and strange, beautiful and ominous. *Knee-Deep Palmiet* (2023), named after a river in the Western Cape, depicts the indigenous and familiar, as something so alien overburdened by their own fields of colour.

In *Untitled (Proteas)* (2023) a solitary figure is rendered a silhouette by a sunrise or sunset. He is alone, walking a path surrounded by a field of fynbos (vegetation indigenous to the Western Cape of South Africa) towards a bank of shadow: a forest or a hill where a cataract of light hangs suspended. The figure, too, has about his head a white spirit-like flame. There is something ineffectual, even frustrating about the ghostly characters who so passively inhabit these eyeless landscapes. They are like the characters in a Kazuo Ishiguro novel, who seem to have lost their agency to greater, irresistible forces: of history, of economics, of power. And it is in this frustration one feels – in this tension – that one finds not only oneself, but finds all of humanity, finds the imprint of the soul, finds that 'selfsame song that found a path / Through the sad heart of Ruth'; It is here that we find ourselves amid the alien corn.

Exhibition text by Noah Lee Swann

### **Biography**

*Since graduating from the Michaelis School of Fine Arts in Cape Town in 2015, Ruby Swinney has had multiple solo exhibitions; two at WHATIFTHEWORLD Gallery in Cape Town – 'Hold Still' (2019) and 'Ignis Fatuus' (2017) - and two in Amsterdam with AKINCI – 'Floating World' (2022) and 'The Distance Between Us' in 2021. In 2018 Swinney presented her first museum solo exhibition 'Human Nature' at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Arts Africa (MOCAA) in Cape Town. She has had group exhibitions at Colección SOLO, ES (2024), Tang Contemporary Art, CN (2022) and New Normal Projects, UK (2021), as well as many presentations at international art fairs. Ruby Swinney's work forms part of various private and public collections, including the Zeitz MOCAA collection, Cape Town (ZA) and the Colección SOLO Museum, Madrid (ES). She currently lives and works in London, United Kingdom.*