

Press Release

Oliver Bak

Ghost Driver, or The Crowned Anarchist

September 14–November 2, 2024

Public Reception: September 13, 6–10pm

Sprüth Magers, Berlin

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The mystical scenes of painter Oliver Bak unite the spirits of the past and present. Drawing from fiction and the real, mythology and life, and the tangible and the subconscious, he constructs enigmatic narratives by conflating different fragments of reality. Bak's pictorial worlds are propelled by constant synthesis and anchored in a deep understanding of the medium's history. His mottled brushwork and magnetic use of colour evoke the dreamlike paintings of Symbolist, Surrealist and Nabi painters. Plants seem to sprout from the surface of his canvases and empyrean figures emerge from between leafy areas and flecks of light, breaking down spatial categories. Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers are pleased to present Bak's first exhibition at the Berlin gallery, marking the Danish artist's debut show in Germany.

Bak's new body of work surveys the intersections of beauty and horror, exploring how the inherent duality of Dionysus' nature – the god of vegetation, fertility, and a symbol of death and resurrection – can be captured. Suitably, Bak looks to the myths surrounding the anarchist child emperor Heliogabalus for inspiration. Guided by an 1888 Victorian painting by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema that shows the 'wicked' Roman emperor smothering his guests to death in a shower of rose petals, as well as by the eccentric novelised biography of the third-century ruler written by French poet Antonin Artaud in 1933, Bak revives the romantic theme of beauty versus the inevitability of death and decay embedded in the natural world's cycle of seasons. The tale – filtered through centuries of ideals and morals – of a short scandalous rule between riches, butchery, sexual excess, and decadence is translated into works exuding an equivocal and uncanny atmosphere.

In a lengthy process that takes months to years, he conjures ghostly fauna and figures that seem to haunt his works. The artist evolves his surfaces as highly textured topographies: thick layers of wax and impasto areas are reworked multiple times. Adding and subtracting paint, he sometimes upends his brush, forsaking its bristles for the wooden end. Slowly materialising with each mark and gesture, Bak gives life to characters from his imagination. Occasionally, he erases or destroys his creatures, capturing only their subliminal essence. For his supports, he often utilises vintage fabrics that amplify his moody colour palette. His faint drawings are preparatory sketches for the works in oil or, in some cases, stand-alone works developed independently from his painting practice. He deviates from his familiar process of

subtraction and addition by using his fingers to smudge the graphite, creating depth in apparition-like, even eerie, images.

Bak's paintings hide more than they show, their layers on layers of paint and references combining into deep repositories of emotions. At first glance, Bak's images elicit unqualified pleasure in response to the beauty of the blossoms, delicate flora and foliage of the trees. But just as the pink petals in Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* conceal its violent subject matter, underneath Bak's vegetation loom disturbing shadows full of ambiguity – injecting each work with a foreboding quality.

Resisting the idea of the past, present and future as a linear progression of events, Bak's re-imagining of myths let time collapse. The works' many layers provide a space for contemplation and hint at an undefinable interiority that is absolutely and resolutely human, ultimately enabling the viewer to perceive the invisible.

Born in 1992 in Denmark, Oliver Bak lives and works in Copenhagen. Recent Solo Exhibitions include *Caves in the Sky*, Cassius & Co, London (2023) and *Sick with Bloom*, ADZ, Lisbon (2022).

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For further information and press inquiries, please contact Silvia Baltschun (sb@spruethmagers.com).