

## Zeinab Saleh *The space {between}*

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24 Grafton Street, London



Zeinab Saleh, *Three oceans away*, 2024

© Zeinab Saleh

Courtesy the artist, Château Shatto and David Zwirner

David Zwirner is pleased to present *The space {between}*, an exhibition of new paintings and works on paper by British artist Zeinab Saleh, on view in The Upper Room at David Zwirner London. Earlier in 2024, a solo exhibition of Saleh's work was on view at Tate Britain, London, as part of the museum's Art Now series. Her first solo show, *Softest place (on earth)*, was presented at Camden Art Centre, London, in 2021.

In her serene depictions of scenes from the domestic world, Saleh refigures objects and places from her personal life – such as embroidered linens, sleeping pets, and richly patterned prayer mats – into evocative and enigmatic compositions. These works are suffused with nostalgic stillness yet infinitely open ended in their emotive potential. Saleh's subject matter is drawn from the things that exist close to her body and mind. Instead of depicting objects or locations from a documentary distance, she prefers to conjure the minute sensory details that make personal experiences linger so vividly in one's memory: the elegant stitching on a lace handkerchief, or the luxuriant softness, rendered in charcoal, of a lounging cat's fur. As critic Ellen Mara De Wachter describes of the artist's work, 'Presence is subtle and ambiguous in these spaces: Saleh herself is not visible, yet from the richness with which she renders haptic effects of texture, light and scale, we surmise that these are rooms she knows very well.... Such deft handling of materials produces a rich perceptual world, the kind best enjoyed from a place of stillness, where the body feels safe and calm, the senses open to nuance and subtlety.'<sup>1</sup>

Rendered in a distinctive palette of misty, ghostlike whites and pastel blue-green tones, Saleh's paintings arise through an organic and experimental approach. She begins by covering her canvas in watery washes of hazy acrylic paint, atop which she presses crumpled fabric and plant cuttings onto the surface

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Mara De Wachter, 'The Quiet Sovereignty of Zeinab Saleh', *Frieze*, 11 March 2024, accessed online.

to create various semi-abstract forms. Working in direct response to these initial shapes and textures, the artist then introduces her characteristic delicate brushwork, allowing recognizable contours of objects, animals, and occasionally figures to coalesce through a process that embraces intuition and chance. Mysterious hands emerge from clouds of scumbled paint, and peaceful interior scenes seem to be simultaneously veiled in shadow and filled with sun. With their muted, dreamlike hues, Saleh's works appear harmonious in their visuality while also possessing an element of improvisation, alive with unexpected glimpses of figure and form.

Saleh's works toe the line between intimacy and distance, positioning the passage of daily life as a key to unlocking moments of both individual and universal revelation. The installation of her exhibitions reflects this concept – *The space {between}* accordingly intersperses larger paintings with small-scale works on paper and other canvases of unorthodox dimensions, encouraging the viewer to encounter images and visual rhythms with an active and engaged eye.

While Saleh's subject matter is derived directly from her observed surroundings, she obfuscates these familiar views with abstracted interventions and motifs from her personal lexicon of cultural and cosmic symbols – thereby instilling her works with a subtle sense of mystique and subversion. In *Waiting* (2024), Saleh depicts a crocodile surfacing from a bubbling sea of aqueous blue paint. The tableau is suspended between tension and tranquillity; it is unclear whether the menacing creature, whose dark gaze is levelled at the viewer, is about to strike out or slip back beneath the waters. Other works such as *Three oceans away* (2024) achieve a similar sense of fantastical surprise through juxtapositions of technique and form. In this painting, overlapping textiles adorned with floral motifs swim around the edges of the composition, forming a kind of window that opens out into what could either be a solid wall, an expanse of bedsheets, or a strange and swirling void. The artist created this abstract central passage from imprints of actual fabric, resulting in a playfully metareferential and illusionistic arrangement that offers a close look at reality through an unexpected lens.

Saleh is fascinated by the accoutrements of mundane life, yet her compositions are never cluttered or overfilled; they always leave space for the viewer to breathe and become fully immersed in the scene at hand. Her fragmented narratives of domestic existence reveal themselves only gradually, unfolding and floating up to the brink of perception in a process that mirrors the fluidity of human memory.

On the occasion of this exhibition, Saleh will present a new multicolour lithograph by Utopia Editions based on a detail from her 2024 painting *The sovereignty of quiet*. The print will be available during the run of the show.

Zeinab Saleh (b. 1996) was born in Nairobi and moved to London with her family at a young age. Saleh received her BFA from the Slade School of Fine Art, University College London, in 2019. In 2018, she was awarded the Slade's Prankerd-Jones Memorial Prize. In 2017, she cofounded the collective and creative agency Muslim Sisterhood. Saleh lives and works in Dubai.

Recent solo exhibitions of Saleh's work include *Art Now: Zeinab Saleh*, Tate Britain, London (2024); *j~o~y r~i~d~e*, Champe Lacombe, Biarritz, France (2023); *Softest place (on earth) [extended mix]*, Château Shatto, Los Angeles (2022); and *Softest place (on earth)*, Camden Art Centre, London (2021).

Saleh's work has been featured in group exhibitions at museums and institutions such as *A Lover's Discourse*, Aspen Art Museum, Colorado (2023); *Redress*, University College London Art Museum (2018); and *Widening the Gaze: Curated by Zeinab Saleh*, Slade Research Centre, London (2018).

Her work is held in permanent collections worldwide, including Frac Nouvelle-Aquitaine MÉCA, Bordeaux; Pitzer College Art Galleries, Claremont, California; Start Museum, Shanghai; The Perimeter, London; and University Galleries, University of San Diego.

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