

Justin de Verteuil

Magpie on a Morning Gallows

Opening Nov 22nd, 6 – 9 pm
Nov 22nd – Jan 4th, 2025
Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

Justin De Verteuil's intuitive process of picture-making might better be described as "picture-finding." He seldom starts out with a preconceived final image, but gathers elements, textures, colours and tones as he paints his way towards meaning – or, more accurately, towards the tantalizing intimation of multiple possible meanings. His poignant paintings are meaning generators, rather than meaning transmitters.

For de Verteuil, composing a painting is as much a process of undoing as it is doing. He has revealed that, under the layers of paint, there are usually buried several prior compositions that were subsequently altered or abandoned. These paintings are constructions that, eventually, almost make themselves, coalescing, as if inevitable, from a hazy half-conscious, hypersensitized receptive state that the artist assumes while searching for the right direction. "The images that interest me are never simply arrived at, but more stumbled upon, like slowly turning the dial on a radio back and forth until you finally settle on the right frequency," he says. Each one of his paintings is the product of the slow passage of time, during which the artist and the artwork get to know each other, de Verteuil trying to ascertain what the nascent painting wants or needs from him.

The title of this exhibition, *Magpie on a Morning Gallows*, was inspired by a 1568 painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, now in the collection of the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt. Bruegel's extraordinary painting – conjectured to be his final work, made a year before he died – is actually called *The Magpie on the Gallows*, but as with de Verteuil's paintings, the show title went through various deliberate modifications, becoming less descriptive, more suggestive, evolving into an over-arching image to haunt this exhibition.

Befitting this motif of a bird momentarily at rest, the paintings in de Verteuil's exhibition evince a sense of becoming: of recent arrival, and imminent departure. It is not quite right to say that they seem unfinished, since every part of the canvas is carefully worked, but they feel as if they hold in them the promise of further pictures, further narrative progression. *Torero (Wings with me)* is a study in stillness contrasted against motion, in which areas of stability abut areas of golden-hour evanescence. Swooping, insubstantial birds and a distant figure, who is walking or maybe even running away from us, swirl around the poised bullfighter, who pins the centre of the composition.

In the large painting *Minnesang*, parts of faces are left blank, and a figure's patterned sweater melds, chameleon-like, with the sheet against which he stands. The entire scene seems arranged around a focus invisible to us, the real-world viewers, available only to the protagonists in the picture. As with all of de Verteuil's work, what is visible is at the service of the invisible.

Spatially, these paintings harbour many irresolvable mysteries, mysteries often to do with ambiguities over what is real, and what is imagined. (Answer: everything, and nothing.) The spaces in de Verteuil's pictures are reassuringly familiar and also disorientingly illogical. The two figures in *Good Morning Mr Magpie* appear to link arms through an impossible, sloped aperture – or perhaps it's a mirror? – while *Projector* skews space, confusing what is two- and three-dimensional in each section of the picture. (Again, both and neither.) Shadows and silhouettes often feature in de Verteuil's works, further muddying the assignation of solidity and ephemerality, of presence and memory, of figuration and abstraction.

So what is really going on in de Verteuil's paintings? Reverie is the word that I return to, when considering these works, even if reverie here is tinged with unease, regret, unfulfilled desire, sadness. Places, as well

as people, are integral to this condition. There is a sense of longing for an undefined elsewhere, locations fondly remembered or half-imagined, familiar in mood although not in specifics – maybe from the sun-warmed landscapes of trecento Italian masters such as Giotto or Simone Martini, or maybe from contemporary tourism (note the title of de Verteuil’s painting *Bergamo* or the *toreros* and clocktowers that feature elsewhere).

Other paintings seem more prosaic, closer to home (de Verteuil, who grew up in Trinidad and Tobago, has lived in Düsseldorf the past several years) – as with *In der lotte*, which derives from a bar near his studio, or that bathroom in *Good Morning Mr Magpie*. His work is not autobiographical, however, at least not in its final form. It manifests a range of alternative realities, situations in which people (and sometimes animals) interact but never share with us what they know.

In *A Ladybird, a Lion and a Leg*, a magpie and a lion cohabit the rectangle of the picture plane, without revealing whether they are cognizant of each other. (People in his paintings often do the same.) Magpies are not only famous for their species’ intelligence and their supposed propensity for stealing eye-catching or shiny objects (an analogy for de Verteuil’s own scopophilia harvesting of images from his daily experience), but are also the subject of many other folkloric superstitions. One of the more outlandish ancient beliefs was that magpies carried the Devil’s blood in their tongues, and if their tongues could be cut, and the blood released, they would speak with human voices. What would his paintings say, de Verteuil mused, if they were given voices? Very little about themselves, he guessed, but much about what they had witnessed, what they had overheard, and what they thought about the life going on around them.

Besides a magpie perched on a gallows, Bruegel’s painting includes many peripheral narrative elements, including an idyllic watermill, an animal’s skull, musicians, dancers, and a man shitting in the bushes. Any of these may be marshalled into allegorical readings of the picture. But *The Magpie on the Gallows* appealed to de Verteuil because of its perplexing central motif: a gallows which is painted as an illusionistic “impossible object,” the bases of its posts not corresponding with its upper horizontal bar. The bird in Bruegel’s painting represents a pictorial device recognizable throughout de Verteuil’s work: meaning perching lightly – fleetingly – upon a constructed illusion.

Text
Jonathan Griffin