

Emily Sundblad
The Adolescent Ocean
6 June–8 August 2025
39 Walker

“Flowers, so pathetic in their beauty, frail as the clouds, and in their coloring as gorgeous as the heavens, have, through thousands of years, been the heritage of children.”

—Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*

Emily Sundblad’s pipe dreams throw us onto the coastline of the adolescent sublime – heeding the siren call of seashells, butterflies, and courtesans. Her pretty-in-pink paintings are shrouded by the moody and tenuous dilemma of youth – torn between inward depth and outward demands, recalling the angst of Munch’s *Adolescence*, the introspection of Degas’ *Girl by the Sea*, and the hazy, effeminate dreams of preteen wallpaper.

The Adolescent Ocean, Sundblad’s second show at Bortolami in New York, features a new body of brazenly lush paintings. A *plein air* panorama coated in sand captures a purpling ocean sky. Entangled branches and dripping seashells are set against citrus tones sprinkled with pixie dust. A basketball player dunks into a spiderweb beneath a vibrant Knicks logo. Crocodiles, turtles, and dragons give the sense of a child’s storybook, recalling Sundblad’s accordion edition of *The Jungle Book*.

But hiding in plain sight is a sickly, pasty Olympia wearing only her trademark ribbon and slippers (while holding a squirrel on a leash). As Sundblad says, “We are all Olympia now” – exhibitionists selling our wares to the highest bidder. Perhaps there would be a little more beauty if there were a little more *mistification*. Redon’s butterflies and van Gogh’s undergrowths are recaptured in the twilight presence of an altered New York. We’ve ditched lotus-eating for wellness, but Sundblad revivifies the seduction and scandal of our decadent past lives with a light touch. Sundblad’s work as a painter, performance artist, and gallerist is a continuous provocation of the decadent and carnivalesque. These provocations serve as a ruse to defuse our increasingly sedate, staid, pruned, and prohibitive city – the bedazzling tactics of a Venus fly trap.

Sundblad’s trajectory as an artist is emblematic of the downtown decadence that ran from the ART CLUB2000 to Bernadette Corporation’s runway critiques of the neoliberal art market. She moved to New York from Sweden in 1998 to study at Parsons while forging a theatrical and subversive persona in New York nightlife. She founded Reena Spaulings Fine Art with John Kelsey in 2004, which straddled the lines between parody, post-conceptualism, critical theory, cynicism, gaiety, and queer fashion – an early aughts re-vision of both irony, authorship, and theatrics. Her expressive and romantic vocal performances of *Lieder* and Pop culminated in *Dichterliebe / Divine Bitches* at the Kitchen in 2016.

Sundblad began exhibiting as Reena Spaulings, the artist, in 2005 and collaborating extensively with other artists and collectives, including Loretta Farenholz; the New York City Players; and Grand Openings with Ei Arakawa, Jutta Koether, Jay Sanders, and Stefan Tcherepnin. Her musical collaborators include Ken Okiishi, Juliana Huxtable, and Pete Drungle. On the symbiotic drive of these collaborations, she's noted: "Collaboration involves a tricky politics of togetherness where business loses its distinction from love, and where codependency breeds dreams of betrayal."

Sundblad's first solo show, *If you leave me I will destroy you*, at House of Gaga (Mexico City) in 2010, established her penchant for subtle, ironic, and sweet take on the Sunday painter, but the quality of brisk and leisurely painting was something of a ruse to forge a style with the lightness of touch found in dandy painters from Michael Krebber in Cologne to Nils Dardel in Sweden and Florine Stettheimer in America. Sparse and dense floral and queer figural portraits of effeminate and delicate sweetness recall the aesthetic doctrine of decorum et dulce (the decorous and the sweet; the serious and the light) found in Horace, Boileau, and Matthew Arnold.

Painted couples recur across *The Adolescent Ocean* and can be found in pasty erotic scenes, haunted bordellos, and seedy hotels clouded by bubblegum smoke – echoing and illustrating what John Kelsey calls "Next Level Spleen", the modern incarnation of Baudelaire's exasperated dandyism.

At the heart of the show is a nearly invisible couple found in Sundblad's tribute to van Gogh's *Sous-bois avec Deux Personnages* (June, 1890). One of his last works, *Sous-bois* was painted in Auvers-sur-Oise shortly after his release from the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole asylum in Saint-Rémy. A ghostly couple in a poplar forest with violet trees is overtaken by dense overgrowths. Flowers rendered as dappling dots cover their bodies, and the figures are usurped by the ground. Think of Dorothy in the poppy field. The flowers become a camouflage, leprosy, and funereal shroud, overtaking the lines of flight found in his earlier overgrowths. He culminates an effect sought since the first overgrowth painting in 1887 – "the effect of light and shade," making "an almost abstract pattern, with small arcs of paint covering the entire surface of the canvas."

Sundblad's "Deux Personnages" (titled *A Wedding*) are transposed onto a sparser forest, with cadmium orange grounds and pastel blue trees. Van Gogh's expressionistic strokes give way to transparent layers, redoubling his late search for flattened planes. The couple is reduced to their clothing, which serves as a stilted mask over absent bodies. The clothes hang in space like a deserted "face in the hole" cutout at a carnival. Perhaps the cutout costumes are a metaphor for Sundblad's disappearance into and out of the art world's "roles" in a kind of vanishing masquerade – leaving behind remainders of fleeting vibrancy on the shore for the tides to scatter.

– Felix Bernstein