

MARTYN CROSS

GODS SHAPED OF MUD

On View: October 30 – December 20, 2025

Opening Reception: October 30, 6–8 PM

509 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011

"I am a bundle of hydrogen and oxygen and carbon and nitrogen and calcium and phosphorus atoms that differs from the surrounding sea of those same primary elements only by dint of organization and complexity, not substance; and, in fact, over the course of my life I will swap out every atom of my original molecular makeup for atoms pulled in from outside myself, building myself from scratch like Theseus's ship. A living organism is not so much a substance as a concentration gradient; not so much a thing as a proportional relationship maintained through the doggedness of habit."

– Ellen Wayland-Smith, *The Science of Last Things*

New York, NY – Marianne Boesky Gallery is pleased to present *Gods Shaped of Mud*, an exhibition of new work by Martyn Cross (b. 1975; Yate, United Kingdom). For his third solo exhibition with the gallery, Cross evokes the power of myth to examine the enduring kinship of the Earth and its inhabitants.

Informed by literature, medieval wall painting, and a deep connection to printed books, Cross imagines vast, otherworldly landscapes populated by strange creatures captured amidst vast, fantastical transformations. Throughout *Gods Shaped of Mud*, winged storm clouds cast bolts of lightning into the ground while spectral, mushroom-nosed felines root into the earth and colossal, anthropomorphized bud vases—as if from a reanimated Morandi still life—stand tall along the banks of a snaking river. Traces of an ambiguous archaeology appear throughout the work: ghostly silhouettes of walking sticks, hammers, putty knives, screw drivers, wooden spoons, and pliers drifting throughout the landscapes, offering evidence of humanity-defining material culture.

Cross is an avid draftsman; his paintings frequently begin as spontaneous drawings jotted in sketchbooks outdoors or on the artist's periodic pilgrimages to medieval churches throughout the United Kingdom. Diaristic in nature, these drawings seem to bubble up from some deep inner worlds and spill out onto paper. In *Gods Shaped of Mud*, Cross presents, for the first time, a series of pocket drawings: ten two-by-three-inch colored pencil works made throughout the course of Cross's daily life—on park benches, at the kitchen table, on the bus. Cross carries these drawings—with their colorful flowers and steaming volcanoes and anthropomorphized stone crosses—in his pocket for several months, the paper absorbing the oils from his hands, stains from his pocket snacks, and scratches from his house keys. Over time, the oils and stains and scratches become part of the material composition of the drawings, transforming them into relics.

Cross's paintings, too, offer a record of time, revealing the process of their own making. He builds the works in layers, softly applying color before scrubbing, scraping, and sanding the surfaces to

reveal what's beneath, repeating the process as he goes, allowing paint to accumulate onto canvas according to the laws of geology. With their worn, weathered edges and surfaces textured with sand and iron filings, the paintings suggest recently unearthed artifacts or enigmatic records of elusive, long-lost cultures.

In any number of mythic traditions, gods created life from the earth, fashioning humans out of mud or clay or dust or soil. In Greek mythology, Prometheus shaped man from mud and Athena breathed life into him. In the Book of Genesis, God formed Adam from the dust. In Ancient Egypt, Khnum made babies out of clay before placing them in their mothers' wombs. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Aruru pinched off a piece of clay and threw it into the woods to create Enkidu. In Mayan mythology, the gods created man from mud, only to find them wanting and trying again with new materials. In all these—and many more like them—humans are formed of the very fabric of the Earth.

Throughout these works, Cross reflects on this collective mythic tradition, offering a reminder that we are made of precisely the same stuff as our surroundings, achieving human form only by grace of the organization of our primary elemental components. "Every atom of our being," Ellen Wayland-Smith writes, "is on loan from the universe, at every instant, from time immemorial. That is a fact of which very few of us are ever cognizant in any consistent way. Humans don't much like to acknowledge this loan, most likely because our brains work at time scales supremely unsuited to appreciate the nearly four-billion-year-long game of biological life on earth. We are a prideful species, hesitant to claim kinship with the primeval bubbling ooze that started the whole ball rolling."

With *Gods Shaped of Mud*, Cross conjures a portal to this primeval ooze—to this notion of life's origin. In the largest painting in the exhibition, *Broken and Chewed* (2025), a curious altar—adorned with colored stones, a stout cross, and grim-faced vases—drifts on an uncertain body of water underneath a brilliant sun, two small moons, and a puffy white cloud. Walking sticks and wooden spoons float at the edges of the scene, suggesting that this is a place of some unknowable pilgrimage, where perhaps the land is as conscious as its people. Falling through Cross's portal into this sacred place, the sustaining power of myth comes alive—and we find our way back to the Earth.

ABOUT MARTYN CROSS

Cross has exhibited at galleries and institutions across the United Kingdom and internationally. His work has also been the subject of solo exhibitions at Flatland Projects in Bexhill-on-Sea, England; Hales London; and Ratio 3, San Francisco. His work has been included in group exhibitions at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; OSHSH Projects, London; Oceans Apart, Manchester; Bath Spa University, Bath; Spike Island, Bristol; LIMBO, Margate; Stroud Museum; and Kettles Yard, Cambridge, among others. Cross recently completed the Roberts Institute of Art Residency at Cortachy Castle in Angus, Scotland. In 2023, Cross was longlisted for the John Moores Painting Prize. Cross holds a BA in Fine Art from Bath Spa University; he lives and works in Bristol.

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