

Eleanor Swordy *Say Less*

14 November 2025 – 17 January 2026
Bleibtreustraße 45, 10623 Berlin

Opening: Friday, 14 November, 6 – 8pm



Eleanor Swordy, *Set Apart*, 2025, photo: Laumont Photographics

Galerie Max Hetzler is pleased to announce *Say Less*, a solo exhibition of new works by **Eleanor Swordy**, her first in Berlin, and second with the gallery.

'In two pictures in Eleanor Swordy's new show, at Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin, a figure stares from the center of the canvas towards the viewer. The eyes of these figures appear glazed, since each is looking at (or perhaps more accurately, through) a task – basket weaving and trimming paper flowers – that her hands are plying with somnambulistic attention. Although outward-facing, there is nothing confrontational about either figure, each being wholly absorbed in her respective activity, if not nonplussed. Both share Swordy's long blond hair, which is a clue that they are stand-ins for the painter herself. Swordy's paintings often feature devices which allegorize their own artifice. In *For You*, the picture's lower edge becomes a surface, gathering stray fragments of colored paper dropped by the flower-trimmer. In this typically playful way, Swordy hints at the painting's objecthood, self-reflexivity being an important aspect of her work. Here, as more explicitly in *Set Apart*, depicted action and technical application together encourage a sense that the painting's surface embodies (or stands parallel to) a kind of invisible interface or force field. On either side of this plane, foreground and background can be read as distinct planes of reality; these could in turn be defined as the actual and the virtual, or, perhaps, the real and the imagined or remembered. Narratives are therefore suggested as much by formal properties as by pictorial description; the self takes a back seat to the world of activity, or stares dreamily through glass into a dreamlike world outside.

In her recent work, Swordy has begun to build up her backgrounds out of many layers of scumbled color, a development that lends her pictures a new kind of spatial tension. Against these impressionistic areas, foreground objects are painted with smooth sweeps of graded color. The results, blown up to large scale, reproduce the experience of losing oneself in a humble activity, while the surrounding world goes out of focus – an experience at once visual and affective, and one surely shared by the painter herself as she works on her canvases. The flower-trimmer comes into focus only where her fingertips poke through the handles of her scissors (unless her fingers only seem to be in focus, while remaining merely negative space – a visual paradox). It is as if, by interacting with an object, the flower trimmer can touch, and enter into, a greater reality. Painting itself is one such object, as well as the means for reflecting upon "object relations", while dwelling on what D. W. Winnicott

named 'transitional space', the space of creativity (and of paradox, since Winnicott defines transitional space as – impossibly – both subjective and objective). While we are painting, we are “dead to the world”, and at the same time more alive, more in touch with some vital process.

The process in question is one which these figures appear to have access to; weaving, in particular, brings to mind the way birds build their nests by instinct. The writer and field-researcher Eugène Marais thought that humans, or their ape ancestors, had long ago possessed such instinctual knowhow, a faculty they had now forgotten without losing it completely. In his classic *The Soul of the Ape*, Marais describes certain experiments, which he believed demonstrated that a blindfolded and hypnotized person might be dropped off in a remote place and find his way home, guided only by an innate homing instinct, much like a bird. If only the conscious mind, with its concern for utility, could be put to sleep, the body might repossess its ancestral knowledge. Swordy's basket weaver looks to be dreaming her work as much as she is doing it.

There have been painters who worked at speed so as to elude the censorship of the conscious mind; Van Gogh, for example, sometimes could not recall having painted his pictures. Swordy's work reminds us that, on the contrary, a slow, diligent approach can open up a space of reverie, where concentrated focus coexists with a dreamlike state.

Looking at these pictures, I am reminded of comments by Paul Valéry on the art of the weaver and illustrator Marie Monnier. Valéry praised her work for combining what he called “the insect's stubbornness and the mystic's fixed devotion”. Consequently, her pictures reminded him of “fine pearls”, “complex and mature wines” and “highly accomplished people”, things brought to perfection by, as he put it, “the unhurried accretion of successive and similar causes”. Swordy's progress towards greater finesse and control has been a steady one. Using chiaroscuro, she creates armatures of dark and light, upon which she spreads her jewel- or rainbow-like colors.'

Patrick Price, 2025

Eleanor Swordy (b. 1987, Paris) lives and works in New York. The artist's work has been presented in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including her debut solo exhibition with Galerie Max Hetzler, London, in 2023. Swordy held the position of Visiting Artist Lecture, BFA, at the School of Visual Arts, New York, in 2023; and was awarded the Rothenberg Travel Fellowship in Berlin, in 2008. Her work is in the collection of Pérez Art Museum, Miami.

Further Exhibitions and Events

BERLIN

Janaina Tschäpe
A gush of wind (Atemraum)
7 November 2025 – 31 January 2026
Potsdamer Straße 77–87
10785 Berlin

Grace Weaver
Mothers
11 September – 29 November 2025
Goethestraße 2/3
10623 Berlin

LONDON

Jeremy Demester
Nile
5 November – 20 December 2025
41 Dover Street
London W1S 4NS

PARIS

Albert Oehlen
Endless Summer
20 October – 20 December 2025
46 & 57, rue du Temple
75004 Paris

MARFA

Richard Prince
Posters
17 May – 7 December 2025
1976 Antelope Hills Road
Marfa, Texas

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