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Sydney Cain

The Forest is the Water

September 4 – October 25, 2025

Casey Kaplan is pleased to present Sydney Cain's (b. 1991, San Francisco, CA) inaugural exhibition, *The Forest is the Water*, featuring eight scenes uncovered from worn histories, illuminated by the natural cycles that shape them. Cain positions their subjects (human, animal, and floral) in a ruptured space steeped in myth and the history of the African Diaspora, impermeable to the linear constructs that aim to define them. Time is simultaneously continuous and still, ushering cross-generational groups through a metaphysical landscape that rests in power and veneration for what was, is, and will be.

The search for connection and renewal informs and permeates Cain's landscapes. Figures gather intuitively in sacred, intimate spaces, trusting of their circumstance. They are individual, but also representatives of a long lineage, dwelling in the ecosystems they are born into and recede from. Amid environments of mostly forest and water, these entities traverse unseen thresholds seeking transformation, radiating like intergenerational messengers and energy conduits, both within their panel's borders and across the exhibition as a whole. Through a process of gradual unveiling (sculpting, rubbing, and erasing), Cain's predominantly black-pigmented compositions reveal Blackness as both subject and state of being. Here, Cain recasts personal and collective stories that trace joy, celebration, loss, and grief, rebuilding narratives that honor the life cycles rooted before them and those that follow.

As anchors within this new body of work, Cain presents *Forever Green* (2025) and *They Were Here Before... (III & IV)* (2025), in which (respectively) a sole, acutely-rendered child sits cross-legged on a checkered foreground and an ornate, front-facing leopard king similarly stare out at the viewer with unmasked wisdom. Set beneath and between a shrouded chorus of figures, each wields a collective power, embodying a reverence for renewal. As the anthropomorphic leopard appears conjured or reborn from a dream state, the child stores and expunges the bloodlines within them. They are simultaneously the keepers of histories and channels for future generations, dwelling in the perpetual present. Over and over, with new, wiser versions of the self, they emerge from darkness, glowing with the power of the evergreen.

The rhythms of the natural world—washing, growing, dying—are mirrored in *The Forest is the Water*. For the first time, evergreen plants like rhododendron and magnolia spread and wholly take over the pictorial plane, acting as connective tissue between generations, regions, and stories. In *Rhododendron (The Seven Days)* (2025), a dense terrain of flora blankets the composition, parting only to unveil dreamlike figures moving amongst the foliage. As non-human figures function as guides, the greenery is a safe haven or resting place for communal memory, nurturing and expanding like the evergreen. *The Forest is the Water* (2025) combines a double panel to detail a natural setting. As plants scale the edges, an owl pops its head into the center to challenge the daylight. The forest veils the figures fashioned in head dresses and thickets, as a fish hovers in view, alluding to the water pooling at the bottom of the composition (a recurring motif in Cain's practice). As the water feeds the leaves that provide the oxygen for the community, Cain traces the reciprocal systems of nourishment that sustain our environments and heal our communities.

Figuration yields to abstraction as optics yield to remembrance in Cain's exhibition, where living forms interlock and overlap in collective movement. Single entities are coated under swathes of loose brushstrokes of acrylic, powdered metal, soft pastel, and graphite, interchangeable as they travel through thick arenas of uneasy golden light. In *The Watchers* (2025), a profile of an adorned person in a cowry shell cape and headdress meets the stare of a mighty horse, while a ghost-like face peers from the center, blending species and natural objects into a convergence of metaphysical and real. The "watchers" are both everywhere and nowhere—their name precedes their image, intimating their relationship to a greater community and a history of looking, forward and back. Blurred images appear like flashes of memory within the works at large, only to dissolve into their compositions upon further reflection. Where color escapes and scrapes across the surface, the cycle is breached—memory develops and reality materializes in these moments of colorful clarity.