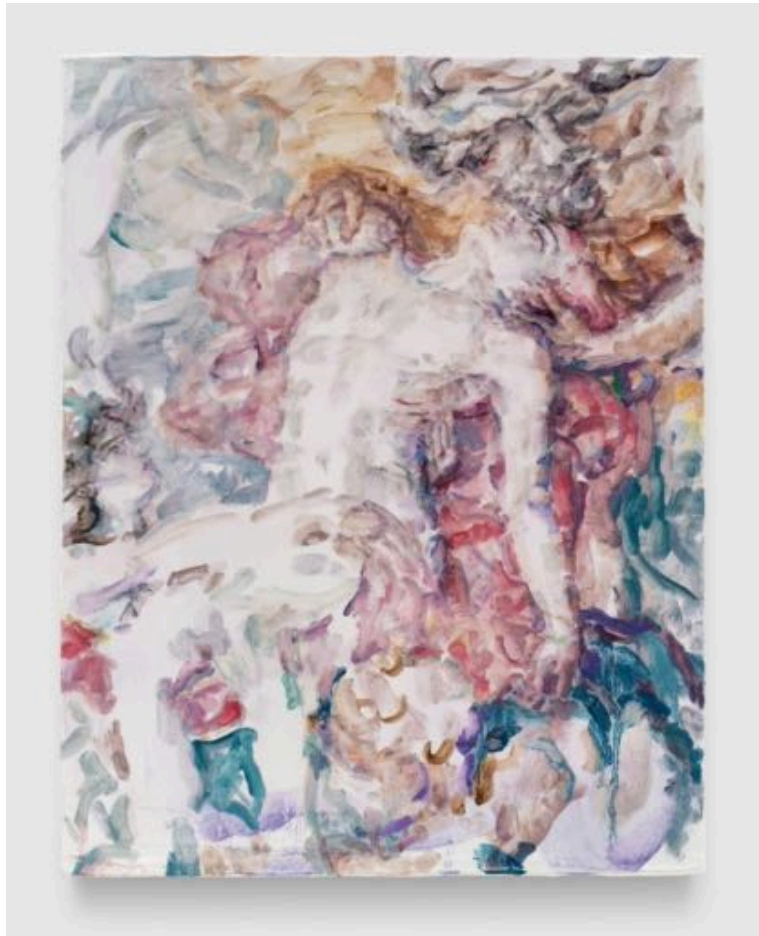


Elizabeth Peyton
mountains in my heart (the death of Sarpedon)

March 19–May 2, 2026
533 West 19th Street, New York



Elizabeth Peyton, *the death of Sarpedon, ή θάνατος του Σαρπηδόνοϋ (after Henri-Léopold Lévy, 1874), 2026*

David Zwirner is pleased to present *mountains in my heart (the death of Sarpedon)*, on view at the gallery's 533 West 19th Street location in New York. The presentation brings together new and recent paintings and works on paper by American artist Elizabeth Peyton. The works on view depict individuals spanning across three millennia—including cultural and artistic figures from ancient Greek mythology to the present day. On the occasion of the exhibition, Peyton was joined in conversation by Paul Olivennes. The following is an edited excerpt from that conversation:

Paul Olivennes : This is your first exhibition in New York in nearly a decade. Your life and work have long been shaped by movement—Berlin, Copenhagen, Paris, Rome—a form of displacement that is never merely geographical. And yet, this is the first time you invoke a place in the title: *mountains in my heart*. But this “place” seems less geographical than metaphysical—an inner landscape, a form of interior geography. Could you speak about this?

Elizabeth Peyton : When you mention the cities I’ve lived in, what comes to mind is not so much place as the feeling of being at home—nowhere, and yet everywhere. The mountains, for me, carry a particular sense of that at-homeness. In thinking about the title, I kept returning to their physical reality—to the way they are formed, to their relation to gravity, to this movement of ascending and descending that defines them. They can appear inhospitable, almost as if we were not meant to be there, and yet they are deeply familiar. In a way, we are made to be in these parts of nature. There is something in their presence—both difficult and welcoming at once—that resonates with how I experience being in the world.

Paul Olivennes : The title seems to articulate two movements: an ascending—*mountains in my heart*—and then a descending, with *The Death of Sarpedon*, which also opens the exhibition. How did this figure (Sarpedon), and this moment from the *Iliad*, enter into the exhibition?

Elizabeth Peyton : There was really a slow ignition towards that. I first saw the painting at the Musée d’Orsay. It’s one of those unfashionable nineteenth-century paintings, and it immediately caught my eye. At the time, I didn’t know the story of the *Iliad*—I even thought the bearded figure might be a god. Then I began reading Simone Weil. She writes about the *Iliad* as her favorite poem, and about force—about the way those in power always believe that force is permanent, that it can be exercised without limit, without ever being reversed, without realizing that the very next day they may find themselves under someone else’s power. Then someone very close to me passed away, and I kept returning to that painting. Suddenly it opened up in a completely different way—as a very natural, inward sense of what it means to respond to death, of how one might honor it. So I read the *Iliad*, and that was that. Zeus looks at Sarpedon and says that he loves him more than any other mortal man. He wants to save him. But Hera tells him that he cannot interfere with his fate. There are many sons of gods on the battlefield, and if he rescues his own, the others will want to do the same. He has to let him go. So instead of resisting, he lets it happen. He rains down tears of blood. And then he asks Apollo to lift Sarpedon from the battlefield, to wash the blood from his body in the river, to anoint him with ambrosia, to clothe him, and to entrust him to the twins, Hypnos and Thanatos, so that they may carry him back to Lycia, his homeland, where he can be properly honored. There is something in that gesture that I find both heartbreaking and, at the same time, deeply consoling. Because everything is acting on everything in the same way—the curves, the ascending and descending. I’ve been thinking a lot about this movement, not only in relation to Sarpedon being carried back to his homeland, but also in the mountains, and more generally in everything, and in painting itself. It’s a constant movement of rising and falling, and in a way that is simply the nature of everything that is nature.

Paul Olivennes : You were speaking earlier about movement and about how these forces run through everything, from mountains to painting itself. And I wonder if this might also be a way of approaching your work through another lineage—perhaps a specifically American one, closer to a literary and philosophical tradition: Emerson, Whitman, even Emily Dickinson. Not so much as references, but as a way of being in relation to the world. The exhibition you did in Japan, *daystar hakuro*, two years ago, was partly influenced by your reading of Emerson. I’m thinking in particular of something you said

yesterday, when we were looking at a painting—you were describing the curve of an eye, the movement of an eyebrow, and you said: there is a lot of mountain in that movement. That idea—that a landscape might be contained within the smallest inflection of a face—feels very central. Could you speak about this?

Elizabeth Peyton : I think about that a lot. The way our faces are formed is the same way everything is formed. Everything is acted upon in the same way—the way mountains rise and fall, the way a curl of hair turns. When I'm drawing people, I see these curves everywhere: in the ocean, in mountains, in the veins of leaves. It's not that they resemble one another. They are not metaphors. They are the same, in that they are shaped by the same forces. And I think that's also why Emerson has been so important to me. There's this passage in *Nature* that I keep coming back to—"Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?" That idea feels very close to what I'm trying to do. Each body of work has to begin there. I have to find my way back to a kind of belief in what I'm doing. It usually starts with something very small, very particular—something that catches my eye. And I follow it, without really knowing where it leads. But trusting that what holds my attention matters is essential. Even when I'm alone, when no one is there to see it, there is something that insists—something that feels like it has to happen. There's a kind of love in that attention, in the act of looking. And I think that also determines the way a painting comes into being. It has to be made in the same way that everything else comes into being: through reacting, without expectation, without imposing my will on it, but by seeing what is happening and following it. There is one thing in looking at a face and sensing the movement within it. But when it comes to actually making a painting, it cannot remain at that literal level. It has to become its own pattern of movement—its own way of watching, of attending to what is happening, of not getting in the way of it, of letting it come, and of seeing what becomes possible within it. So in a way, the painting doesn't begin when I start painting. It's like the narrow end of a funnel, shaped by everything that has already taken place. It may be something someone has written, something we've done, a walk I took that morning, the light I was looking at. There are so many things I don't know. I can't really say that I understand what happens when a painting comes into being. But it feels like an accumulation of different experiences, filtered somehow—through me, through something I can't quite name—and then into the painting.

Paul Olivennes : You spoke about a form of love in attention—in the act of looking. It made me think of Simone Weil, to whom you dedicated your exhibition *La pesanteur et la grâce* in Paris. What is striking in her writing is that spirituality is never separate from the world—it is inseparable from attention. And I wonder if this might also be where something like spirituality enters your work. She writes that attention is "the purest form of generosity." Do you feel that painting, in that sense, is a form of attention—and perhaps even a form of love?

Elizabeth Peyton : I think my understanding of what that love is, in painting, has changed—or perhaps it hasn't changed so much as it has slowly revealed itself over time. It may be something quite simple, even quite universal. But for me, it has to do with being entirely present within what is happening—within the painting, or the drawing—and allowing it to unfold. I have to remain with it, to abide in it, without trying to impose too much of my will. There is a particular kind of attention involved—an attention to what arrives, often by accident. I might not even know what colors are on my brush, and suddenly they are there, on the surface. And then I react to them as they come—sometimes working into them, taking part away or adding, letting it all keep coming. So it becomes a way of attending, moment by moment, to what is coming into being—without getting in the way of it. And perhaps that is where something like love enters. Not as something separate, but as a way of remaining

with what appears, of trusting it, of letting it be. There's also a passage by Simone Weil that has been very present for me while making this exhibition. It's something that keeps unfolding, depending on what is happening—whether in the world, or in more ordinary, everyday moments.

"The beauty of the world gives us an intimation of its claim to a place in our heart. In the beauty of the world brute necessity becomes an object of love. What is more beautiful than the action of gravity on the fugitive folds of the sea waves, or on the almost eternal folds of the mountains? The sea is not less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships are wrecked by it. On the contrary, this adds to its beauty. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a boat, it would be a creature gifted with discernment and choice and not this fluid, perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that constitutes the sea's beauty."^[1]

Paul Olivennes : Thank you. I feel that your exhibition does something very similar. And perhaps this is why your painting feels so important today. Because it refuses indifference. Because it continues to affirm that the other still has a claim on us. That beauty is not lost. That tenderness is not weakness. That to look closely at a face, at a being, is still a way of resisting disappearance. As if, precisely there—"despite all the folds imposed upon the waves by gravity"—something still insists. Something in us remains capable of love. Was this already there at the beginning of your work?

Elizabeth Peyton : Yes, I think it was already there. I don't know exactly in what form, but I had a very strong feeling that I didn't want to give up on beauty— that beauty was a very powerful thing in my life. At art school, not in the world but in that particular environment, beauty was often dismissed, almost as something stupid. You could sense that in art, and in music as well. But for me, it was the opposite. I felt very strongly that beauty was essential—that it had a kind of power. I knew that for me, it was a very transcendent quality. It could make me want to be better, live better, be a better human. Just seeing somebody on the street or hearing a Madonna song would expand me. So making work that aspired to beauty, that trusted in its force and power, felt natural. And over time, I think I have come to feel this even more strongly. Beauty has become, for me, a kind of equilibrium—a way of holding something steady, and adding something positive in a world where so much is difficult or violent. There is love, there is beauty, there is the act of looking at people, of truly seeing them. And nothing feels more important than that—than our relation to one another. In that sense, beauty becomes almost like a ladder, or a door to the greatest things in the universe. So I believe in it now more than ever. But at the same time, the question remains: what does beauty look like today? And in a way, that is the work.

^[1] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1973), 128

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