

Olivia Sterling

Yowl

Jan 20 — Feb 27, 2022

Press Release

“The societal default is white superiority and we are fed a steady diet of it 24/7” (1)

To yowl is to utter a loud long cry of grief, pain, or distress. For Olivia Sterling it is the sound of the white person that openly laments the loss of its privileges in the face of societal progression in diversity and inclusion. In her new body of work the British artist not only wants us to see how *whiteness* looks like, a recurring *topos* in her work, but also metaphorically present us with how it sounds like. Inspired by a specific experience of one of these casual, yet chilling, remarks (namely the recount of privileged parents scoffing at how it is getting harder for their non-marginalised children to get into prestigious universities in the United Kingdom), in *Yowl*, Sterling depicts these utterances in all their crudeness while, with her signature slapstick style, she exposes them as what they are, yowling cries for attention, so eye roll-inducing to become bitterly laughable.

Sterling’s works draw the viewer in with the catchy visual language of cartoons, with their humorous soft features and flashy colours, but at a second glance the

paintings begin to reveal a violence that seeps and creeps in the colourful images. Bouncy slaps, soft-flesh grabs, knife strikes might at first appear innocuous in this versicoloured fantasy, but once in the seen, the cel animated viciousness starts to feel very real. In *Yowl*, Sterling chooses to continue placing her characters into familiar settings and surround them with everyday objects. If in previous series the set up was shared tables and meals, vignettes of joyful togetherness where hidden micro and macro-aggressions, unwanted touching and grabbing, and othering dynamics were served along with white glazed pastry and chocolate smudged hands. Here, however, the artist chooses to zoom further in, focusing her attention only on the hands of the characters interacting with one another, while depicting in full colour the whiny sound of white fragility. In these paintings, white hands, often tagged by Sterling with playful looking letters corresponding to their colour (as *W* for white, *P* for pink), are not only surrounded by hands marked as *Bs* or *Ys*, but even more they appear to be wounded: bitten by a snake, stabbed by a knife or pierced with an arrow. These works want to be literal visual representations of what the artist herself describes as the “illogical arguments used to gaslight marginalised people using certain stock sentences repeated in order to lessen the blow of discrimination.”

If it is the gift of few painters to be able to have such a personal and powerfully attracting painterly language as Olivia Sterling does, it is an ability of even fewer to be able to draw the public closer in such a compelling way when dealing with identity politics. With an artistic discourse captivately intersecting with the most

contemporary manifestations of figurative painting, she manages to entice and not deter, to excite and attract, and by doing so she pushes the viewers to ask themselves questions that would have not aroused such an interest otherwise. Her work captures, intrigues, and then surprises the still very white and middle/upper-class public of art galleries and institutions confronting them with an uncomfortable reality which is not very often debated, even by the *woke* Europeans. In *Yowl*, with her secure brush strokes and witty compositions, Sterling presents us with a newly produced series of works that are both painterly and politically relevant at the same time. As she momentarily blurs, but only in order to highlight, the borders between violence and play, her magnetic canvases assure that we are watching, while the veil of innocence under which everyday racism hides drops in front of our eyes.

Alina Vergnano & Mattia Lullini

(1) Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement*, p. 1.

—

Olivia Sterling's (b. 1996, Peterborough) paintings critique racialised discourses in our contemporary through the depiction of everyday objects and settings. On her zoomed-in canvases, limbs of different skin tones are often placed in ordinary scenes, and colour blocks

are *tagged* with letters and numbers referencing to racial compartmentalisation. While Sterling's slapstick style, vibrant colours, bold brushstrokes and cartoon-styled outlines seem to be cheerful at first glance, they serve the artist's aim to unveil the underlying systemic racism, prejudice and everydayness of othering that pervade our society even in the most mundane activities. Graduating with an MA in painting from the Royal College of Art, Sterling was exhibited at CCA Goldsmiths (London, 2021), Cob Gallery (London, 2021), Galerie Droste (Paris, 2021), Guts Gallery (London, 2020), Blank Projects (Cape Town, 2020), White Cube (Online, 2020), UCA Farnham (Surrey, 2019), and RCA Battersea (London, 2018). Sterling lives and works in London, United Kingdom.

NEVVEN
Molinsgatan 11
411 33 Göteborg
+ 46 760 86 73 05
nevvengallery.com