

HESSE FLATOW

Clark Filio, *The Art of War at Sea*

April 28 - May 28, 2022

Opening reception: Thursday, April 28, 6-8pm

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HESSE FLATOW is pleased to announce the opening of *The Art of War at Sea*, an exhibition of paintings by the artist Clark Filio, marking his first solo presentation with the gallery.

“What does it mean for a fairy to be white?” Clark Filio asked me this in late December. We sat in his studio, and the outside air seemed as though it were made of Omicron. It was cold; everyone either of us knew was sick. I remember the afternoon as a bright spot during a period of otherwise unrelenting grey, largely because of his question, probably the funniest ever posed to me.



Fate: The Winx Saga, 2021, oil on canvas
98 x 130 in (248.9 x 330.2 cm)

We were staring at “Fate: The Winx Saga,” a large painting Filio had recently completed, whose source imagery was a photo collage of several stills from a recent Italian fantasy series by the same name. Five adolescent girls stand stoically in front of what he explained was the entrance to their boarding school. They are fairies, their wings apparently hidden by clothing and backpacks. The red-headed one in the middle grew up in California; the others come from another world. The figure second from the right has dark skin and cornrows; the one on the far-left black hair and an olive complexion—meaningless irrelevancies in their home dimension, which exists without a history of Christianity or colonization or slavery or continents. Only the central character could possibly be “white” and even then, as Filio put it, “only on a technicality.” None of this is acknowledged by the story’s plot or characters, but Filio said that he was interested in how the series—like so many other works of fantasy—unknowingly posits the thought experiment of a race-free world. He knew that nobody would look at the painting and see these things, but that wasn’t necessarily the point. “I don’t mind if people don’t know the reference,” he said. “I try to make them work as standalone images first.” He compared it to a band covering a song.

It’s not common that an art exhibition lives up to its more colloquial designation—that an art show really does feel like a show. It would be many months before the paintings in Filio’s studio were finished, selected, installed in the gallery, but that rare sense of theatre was already on display. I left his studio excited to see the work hung all together, and laughing to myself about the fairy question.

“Fate: The Winx Saga” is one of nineteen paintings in *The Art of War at Sea* (the show takes its title from a 1555 Portuguese maritime treatise considered to be one of the earliest abolitionist texts ever printed). A few of them depict interiors from Filio’s own home, but even without them there is a pervasive sense of intimacy to the selection—in the brush strokes, each one individuated, but also in the source material, which together functions like something of a CT-scan: a single mind laid bare.

French academic painting makes an appearance, as does, obliquely, the Rodney King riots, and also, not obliquely, a very nice selection of soft cheeses. “Sunset,” based on a piece of Japanese concept art for an anime film whose setting was eventually changed from Manhattan to Sydney, shows a spaceship about to crash into an inaccurate New York City skyline. “Grey Elf” and “Golden Elf,” which both depict almost irritatingly pretty creatures with large breasts and pointy ears, are based on uploads from a website specializing in computer-generated, pornographic-forward art. “Neolithic Scene after Zdeněk,” looking a bit like a deaccessioned Natural History Museum diorama, expands the temporal scale of the show: in a Neolithic era village in Eastern Europe, stone age chores are performed by racially ambiguous people whose descendants would now be considered white.

Every canvas included in *The Art of War at Sea* looks earnestly hand-made, neither obviously ironic nor obviously sincere; all of them are at least a little bit funny. Together, quietly, they seem to wonder aloud if maybe there isn’t anything that doesn’t have within it everything. -- **Alice Gregory**

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Clark Filio (b. 1988) is a New York-based artist and producer. His figurative oil paintings range from the world building of fantasy illustration, to narrative scenes influenced by television, film, and autobiography. Filio has recently exhibited at King's Leap, Kimberly Klark, MX Gallery, Magenta Plains, and Greenpoint Terminal Gallery, amongst others. Filio currently producing the television show *How To With John Wilson* for HBO, which is in its third season.

Alice Gregory is a journalist and critic for publications including *The New York Times*, *Harper's*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Atlantic*, and *n+1*. She is currently at work on a book about the artist Robert Indiana.