

Bad Girls Club

Catherine Mulligan

September 8/October 14, 2023

“All phenomena of symptom-formation can be fairly described as ‘the return of the repressed.’ The distinctive character of them, however, lies in the extensive distortion the returning elements have undergone, compared with their original form.” – Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 201

As the hot weather season, proclaimed in this year’s parlance as “Rat Girl Summer” by a cadre of content creators on TikTok, draws to its natural conclusion, as another tide of IP-driven blockbusters (come on, *Barbie*, let’s go party) slowly recedes from America’s dwindling multiplexes, as yet another reboot of the culture wars, inevitably staged on the battlefield of electoral politics, resumes its sordid formation, it makes some sense that a new body of Catherine Mulligan’s patently grotesque paintings would manifest, capstone-like, in downtown New York, where such recurrent indicators of the everchanging national mood reliably generate new dispositions, novel ways of posing and positioning oneself within the disorienting smog of contemporaneity.

With *Bad Girls Club*, the artist’s first solo exhibition at Tara Downs, Mulligan retrieves us from the current malaise, the implacable mundanity of the Biden era, and returns us to the tomorrow once promised to us, the future that never quite arrived. Framing this regressive moment through the lens of young adulthood, Mulligan populates her works with latter-day demimondes, figures whom almost always arrive equipped with suburban signifiers or bridge-and-tunnel accoutrements, regardless of whether they organically inhabit their roles or merely play at them. In one of the works on view, *Blondes*, 2023, two bobbling figures of Bratz-doll proportions, dressed in Hooters shorts and distressed graphic tees, pose in front of a kind of Futurist rendition of an American football stadium. Together, the twins announce the violent ebullience of the exhibition, and not only because one of them is stashing a handgun. As the exhibition’s eponymous bad girls, they in turn allude to the ones we once saw on TV, living and partying with one another, but mostly fighting. If this particular mid-2000’s reference appears somewhat foggy, therein lies the point. Lamenting the demise of monoculture, the sort of consensus required to render the artist’s pop references immediately legible, Mulligan’s strange paintings propose a return to the precise moment of mass media’s disintegration, as a form of hauntological survey, or, more directly, as a homecoming.

For a certain set of Millennial viewers, such works perfectly recall the staid, anemic visual culture of the second Bush years, the fratty films and television shows and fashion editorials that cluttered and stalked our adolescence and arrested us there. They begin to resemble the sort of images gleaned from the activities that marked the short durée of our collective aesthetic awakening: the hours spent perusing periodicals at Borders, the unhurried days spent in front of television sets and laptops at our parents’ hastily constructed McMansions.

They exhume the corpse of Marissa Cooper (1988-2006), the teen-soap heroine of *The OC*, who inexplicably seemed to sulk into every frame from beyond the veil, even before she fatally careened off-screen. They remind us of the nepo-babies Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie, clad in bedazzled Juicy tracksuits and bug-eyed sunglasses, tormenting certain desolate corners of the American landscape. Or, instead, they recapitulate the unheimlich quality of that perennially viral image of Chloë Sevigny and Maggie Gyllenhaal, two prominent actresses and It girls of the early aughts, mugging languorously in sporty Chanel and Lacoste ensembles at the 2004 opening of – yes, that’s correct – the Atlantic-Barclays Target. Comparable step-and-repeat photos, alongside vintage Steve Madden ads, Dipset-era mixtape covers, and botched before-and-after cosmetic surgery pics, constitute the foundation of the artist’s endlessly recursive, high-low regime. It is as if Mulligan stumbled upon a sizable cache of such half-remembered evocations – vestiges of a bygone cultural moment – sequestered in Dorian Gray’s attic for the past twenty years, and gleefully set about transcribing the results.

Hers are paintings that reanimate the undead and deploy them in service of a singularly lugubrious vision, a transgressive fairytale reimagining of the recent past, or, perhaps, a comically literal take on the often pejorative term “zombie figuration.” While Mulligan’s past paintings in oil depicted similar stock characters – models who bore some semblance to the second-rate stars of tabloid and reality TV – the disjunctive backdrops of her recent works have become more intrinsic to their meaning, more pointedly tethered to current events and their consequential debasements. In *Hitchhiker*, 2023, the living-dead subject of the painting bends and snaps against a grisaille landscape, an autumnal scene punctured by a yard sign advertising the anti-abortion services of ProLife Across America, legible between the crook of the main character’s posed body and bent arm. Elsewhere, Mulligan abandons her signature figures entirely, preferring instead to present vacant architectural scenes redolent of the establishing shots of long-running reality TV shows like *Big Brother* and, indeed, *Bad Girls Club*, where the improvised, real-time construction of the program’s narrative is mirrored by the ad-hoc staginess of the set.

A small wonder resides in Mulligan’s confluence of these low genre tropes and the highly amalgamated artistic lineage she has constructed for herself, which a propensity for bawdy figuration quite distinct from the minor genre’s leading proponents, a group that would invariably include major contemporary artists like John Currin and Lisa Yuskavage. Like those two, Mulligan is ultimately a painter’s painter, pressing firmly at the medium’s pictorial boundaries, even as she rests well within its established parameters. Unlike them, however, Mulligan’s seems to locate her *raison d’être* in the allegorical possibilities of cultural types rather than the pleasures and repulsions of the body itself. And what better form for stripping away the pink, plastic veneer of American life than that of the *jeune fille*, who is always centrally involved in cultural signification anyway, even if, and especially when, we wish it weren’t so. Channeling the return of the repressed? Bad girls do it well.

Catherine Mulligan (b. 1987 in Nutley, NJ) lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. She gained her BFA from University of Pennsylvania in 2010 and her MFA from Indiana University Bloomington in 2019. Her work has been exhibited at Tara Downs, New York, US (2023); Queer Thoughts, New York, US (2022); Downs & Ross, New York, US (2022); M+B Gallery, Los Angeles, US (2021); Bonner Kunstverein, Bonn, DE (2021); Envy6011, Wellington, NZ (2021);

A.D. Gallery, New York, US (2020); Vox Populi, Philadelphia, US (2016); and Woodmere Art Museum, Philadelphia, US (2015), among other venues. Mulligan has been the recipient of two Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grants. Her work is included in the permanent collections of the Woodmere Art Museum and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

– Jeremy Gloster

Moth Paths

Julia Selin

September 8/October 14, 2023

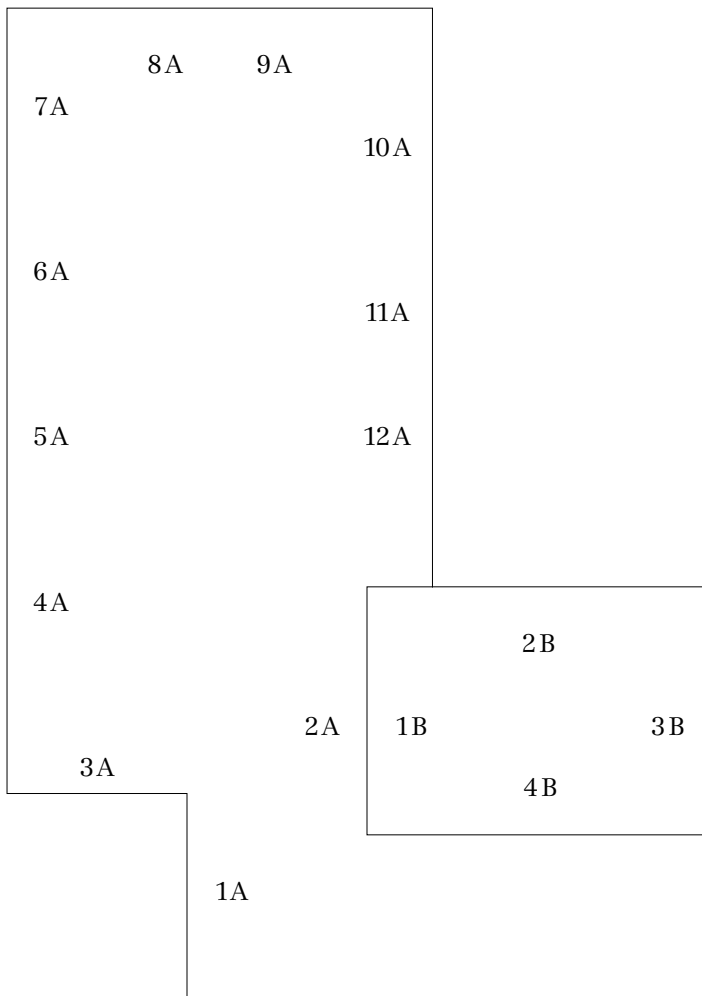
The pitch dark of the painting's surface, the isolation of the Greek isle upon which the scene is staged, the cluster of elongated trees at the work's center that, darker still, seem to draw us further into the abyss: taken together these elements form the gestalt of a late nineteenth century painting by the Symbolist artist Arnold Böcklin, *Isle of Death*, 1880. Occupied by this memorializing commission, the Swiss artist assured his widowed patron that the finished work would be sufficiently transporting. "You will be able to dream yourself into the world of dark shadows," he promised her. Julia Selin's first solo exhibition at Tara Downs proffers a similar sensation. The exhibition comprises a suite of four monumental paintings, each much larger than the average human body, and constructs a sort of installation-in-the-round, an encompassing space for contemplation. Drawing on correspondences between the landscape genre and abstraction, paintings such as *Sprung out of this world*, 2023, tower over us, seemingly ushering us into their depths.

Our relationship to such works as viewers, to their totalizing force, reflects the process by which they were made, the originating haptic encounter between the canvas and the artist herself. Selin covers the canvas in a single layer of dark, nearly black oil paint, a monochromatic coat that slowly reveals modulations in pigment as she works the wet surface with brushes, rubber scrapers, her own hands and fingers. Paint and resin accumulate, ensconcing the artist's actions as if in amber, and draw attention to the work as a sculptural object in itself. From these simple indexical gestures, Selin conjures both tactile, palpable quality of painting's earliest origins and the Romantic vestiges of Symbolist painting, evoking a sense of sublimity through the most economical of means.

Selin's preoccupations descend primarily from the Scandinavian tradition, from the thematic concerns of artists like Edvard Munch, Peder Balke, and Akseli Gallen-Kallela, all of whom located contemporary mores and anxieties almost counterintuitively in nature. As demonstrated by works such as *Am I mistaking the fluttering moths for a ticking clock*, 2022, the artist's investment is in replicating the more extreme sensory experiences of being in nature – its disorienting effects and awe-inspiring capabilities, while maintaining, like the fin-de-siècle artists who inspire her, a correspondence between landscape painting and deeper existential questions. Her navigation of this

correspondence is redolent of the framework first constructed by Wilhelm Worringer's foundational text *Abstraction and Empathy*, originally published in 1907. "The need for empathy and the need for abstraction to be the two poles of human artistic experience," Worringer wrote. "They are antitheses which, in principle, are mutually exclusive. In actual fact, however, the history of art represents an unceasing disputation between the two tendencies." What's remarkable about Selin's paintings is her ability to oscillate between both concepts within the same work, between suggestions of organic identification and self-alienation, or the inner turmoil of the artist, and between the objecthood of the canvas and the picture-window of the works' surface. Landscape painting is never neutral, and neither is nature, its source material— both are human constructs, culturally determined. Seen from this perspective, Selin's undulating paintings reflect an ultimately successful struggle to represent both a retreat into the natural world and a fearless confrontation with the contemporary moment.

Julia Selin (b. 1986 in Trollhättan, SE) lives and works in Malmö, SE. She received her MFA in 2013 from Umeå Art Academy, SE. Solo exhibitions include Tara Downs, New York, US (2023); "Present Nature," Alma Löv Museum of Unexpected Art, Smedsby, SE (2023); "Follow a bug to the end of the World," Trollhättans Konsthall, Copenhagen, DE (2022); "Consequences," Galleri Thomas Wallner, Simris SE (2022); "Scandinavian rot," Galleri Cora Hillebrand, Gothenburg, SE (2020). Selected group exhibitions include "Sunless Press," Galleri Cora Hillebrand, Göteborg, SE (2023); "Vår vår," Molekyl Gallery, Malmö, SE (2023); "I staden växer ett fält," Malmö Konsthall, Malmö, SE (2022); "Malmö so there," Galleri Thomas Wallner, Simrishamn, SE (2021).



- 1A Catherine Mulligan, Las Vegas Mansion, 2023
- 2A Catherine Mulligan, Sisters, 2023
- 3A Catherine Mulligan, Ass, 2023
- 4A Catherine Mulligan, Interior, 2023
- 5A Catherine Mulligan, Hitchhiker 2023
- 6A Catherine Mulligan, Blondes, 2023
- 7A Catherine Mulligan, Nouveau Riche, 2023
- 8A Catherine Mulligan, Nocturne 2, 2023
- 9A Catherine Mulligan, Ass 2, 2023
- 10A Catherine Mulligan, Clubbers 2, 2023
- 11A Catherine Mulligan, Bridge and Tunnel, 2023
- 12A Catherine Mulligan, Big Brother House (Pool), 2023

- 1B Julia Selin, Worm Path, 2022
- 2B Julia Selin, 41 billion years, 2023
- 3B Julia Selin, Am I mistaking the fluttering moths for a ticking clock, 2022
- 4B Julia Selin, Sprung out of this world, 2023