

The Day Begins at Night

November 18–December 22, 2023

As It Stands is pleased to present “The Day Begins at Night,” an exhibition of new paintings by Jessica Williams.

Williams’s paintings inhabit a fantastical Los Angeles where dusk never ends and youth expands forever. Her female figures emerge from this atmosphere, embedding themselves in its firmament and taking on its otherworldly hues. Rather than act on the landscape, they ardently inhabit it—they smoke cigarettes, read books, and lounge by the shore of the Pacific. In communion and alone, they bear the psychic weight of living on the far edge of America, their narrowed eyes and implacable expressions suggestive of the self-protectiveness born from the imminent threat of tectonic shift.

Only a real Angeleno could see straight through to the heart of the city, could capture in paint the emotions aroused by its potentialities, its eeriness, its volatile mixture of reality and fantasy. Raised in the suburbs in the San Fernando Valley, her interest in what she has called “the psychic space within strip malls and pre-planned housing tracks” reveals itself as heavy brushstrokes and palette-knife slashes. Her ultraviolet color palettes, “at once ecstatic and toxic,” lend realist scenes the mystical quality of aura photography. Working on recycled canvasses, Williams builds on the sediment of past compositions, polluting her paintings with reverberating images.

Williams filters her interest in early twentieth century European figurative painters—Marie Laurencin, Edvard Munch, Paula Modersohn-Becker, and Léon Spilliaert are only a few of the artists she communes with in her studio—through the lens of a girl from the Valley who has always hewn close to home. To avoid traffic on the Pacific Coast highway during her commute from her home in Pasadena to Malibu to teach painting, Williams began to arrive an hour early and depart an hour late, spending this interstitial time sketching on the beach. The drawings and memories she made on the shore while bathed in the chromatic effects of Los Angeles’s polluted sky became the underpinnings of these works, whose subjects evoke Impressionist leisure paintings.

Recurring, revisiting, driving out to the water and back inland again, Williams enters into nostalgia’s logic. The figure in *Wild Heaven* leans back introspectively, hands behind her head, into a swirling field of blue and purple. The sky behind her, as Joan Didion wrote of Los Angeles during the Santa Ana winds, has “a yellow cast, the kind of light sometimes called ‘earthquake weather.’” Two swans from Echo Park lake float near the bottom; the white stallion of a horse girl’s dreams prances in the distance. The *Violet Dusk Girls* sit on the bluffs of the Pacific Palisades with the Santa Monica Pier Ferris wheel behind them, the sky a bloody, surreal red. Are they sisters, friends, shadow selves? If you find them while walking along the shoreline at night and are brave enough to approach, you can ask them yourself.

—Canada Choate