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Angela Maasalu
Taking Courage
20 February – 20 March 2025

Text by Orlando Reade

The Wizard of Oz premiered in 1939, three weeks before the beginning of the Second World War. Propelled by a tornado out of Kansas and into Munchkinland, an American girl goes on a quest to find the Wizard of Oz. On her way, Dorothy encounters a tinman without a heart, a scarecrow without a brain, and a cowardly lion, and they accompany her. By the end, the four friends have learned how to find what they are lacking inside of themselves.

Courage – from the Latin noun *cor*, meaning heart – is generally understood to be something found inside. This exhibition's title comes from a phrase that Angela Maasalu noticed soon after she migrated to London from Estonia: *Take Courage*. What might it mean? 'Take Courage,' as the artist discovered some time later, is an advertising slogan for a bitter British ale. The phrase stuck. Perhaps because it reminds us that there are external objects from which we draw courage, an idea that might help illuminate this new body of work.

In Angela Maasalu's paintings, we encounter a strange series of figures. A woman bites a lion's paw; the horses on the merry-go-round are bleeding on their poles; in a keyhole, an infant is smoking. The harlequin is crying. They are surrounded by a swirling miasma that is shining, delirious, and beautiful. There is tenderness here, and a sense of humour, partly submerged. Like Dorothy, we might want to work out what to take from this world.

Maasalu's work seems to belong to a Surrealist tradition. They recall the mystical paintings of Paul Chagall, the red curtained spaces of David Lynch's films, and the apocalyptic altarpieces of fifteenth-century painter Matthias Grünewald. The Surrealist

movement was born in a world recovering from one war and sleepwalking towards another. Their spokesmen proposed, through a synthesis of Freud and Marx, a solution to the imperial war machine. By presenting images of a deregulated unconscious, Surrealism would help modern society to purge its aggressive wishes.

Today, after Surrealism's appropriation by the advertising industry, we might feel sceptical about that claim. But some of its initial spirit is alive in Maasalu's work. These paintings contain a kind of disturbing content, but they don't seem designed to inspire shock or fear. Images that might elsewhere disturb are presented in a form that makes them available for enjoyment and analysis. Like the dreamer, we know that what we see is us too. By showing how the strange is familiar, and the threatening cowardly, these paintings might give courage.

Angela Maasalu (b. 1990, Estonia) lives and works in London. Maasalu studied painting and art history at University of Tartu (BA 2012), and painting at Estonian Academy of Arts (MA 2015), as well as at Central Saint Martins in UK (2013–2014).

Solo exhibitions include: *The sound of music*, Tütar Gallery, Tallinn, Estonia (2024); *Sleepwalkers* Gene Gallery, Shanghai, China (2024); *Happy house*, Rüki Gallery, Viljandi, Estonia (2024); *A Fool with a Heart of Glass*, Tartu Art House, Tartu, Estonia (2023); *Cave for forgotten dreams* Hobusepea gallery, Tallinn, Estonia (2019); *Home II*, Vaal Gallery, Tallinn, Estonia (2017); *Clytemnestra never loved you*, DA Gallery, Heraklion, Greece (2016); *Home*, The Back Room Gallery, Peckham, London, United Kingdom (2016); *Confessions of Mikk Madisson*, Draakoni Gallery, Tallinn, Estonia (2013). Group exhibitions include: *Shifting sand* curated by Lilian Hiob, along with Ingmar Järve, Mariann Metsis, Kati Saarits, Riga, Latvia (2024); *I would not think to touch the sky with two arms*, curated with Andrew Dubow at Paulina Caspari Gallery, Munich, Germany (2024); *In rapture*, The Bomb Factory Art Foundation curated by Marcus Nelson and Pallas Citroen, London, United Kingdom (2024); *On the other side of the great oblivion*, Narva Artist Residency, curator Maria Helen Känd, Narva, Estonia (2022); *Tiger in the house*, Maxted Road, Peckham; curated by Kola Aleksandra Sliwinska and Ania Batko, London, United Kingdom (2021); *Spiral Trap*, Lewisham Arthouse, Kate Lyddon, Paula Turmina, Adam Leach; London, United Kingdom (2021).

Orlando Reade is an academic and writer. His art criticism has been published in *The Guardian*, *CNN Style*, *Apollo*, and *Effects*. His first book, *What in Me is Dark: The Revolutionary Life of Paradise Lost*, was published in 2024.

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