

CHAPTER NY



For immediate release

Mary Stephenson

Big Dance

April 24 – May 30, 2026

Chapter NY is thrilled to present Mary Stephenson's second exhibition with the gallery.

The centerpiece of Mary Stephenson's exhibition *Big Dance* is a painting of the same name: commanding in scale, yet more enveloping than confrontational. Characterized by diffuse, glowing fields in washy, sage-green paint, the image depicts a vacant labyrinthine corridor. Here, doorways open to nowhere and a choreography of rectangles that tilt and hover at unstable angles, like floorboards of thought in formation. As such, the painting is both a structural and pictorial passageway into the exhibition, where Stephenson builds images from an understanding of perception as inherently cerebral and somatic. For the artist, what is seen and what is unseen—but materially felt—forms the scaffolding for memory and meaning. What emerges is less a depiction than a condition of an image, and a sense of "being" in the world, recalling filmic projection as much as painterly surface.

Though no human figure is present, Stephenson's canvases are decidedly bodily, operating as a skin or membrane. This entry point is less abstract than it first appears. Treated with a rabbit-skin glaze, her surfaces are designed to allow oil paint to seep and pool. Paint stains the ground rather than resting on it; color and light absorb at different paces; edges soften or harden; forms advance and recede. The result is an uneven monochrome where the image appears to be submerged or rising from within. While her paintings might initially read as photographic, the process is distinctly filmic. As she paints, Stephenson imagines a large film light positioned just over her shoulder, directing the painting's flow of luminescence to produce not the optical illusion of movement, but its sensation: images pausing, replaying, zooming, and moving in rhythm with the passage of time.

In turn, quasi-still lifes of objects like Peter Pan shirt collars, books, and vessels arrive *in medias res*, their forms smeared or partially disintegrating. If still life is *nature morte*, these smaller works capture the futility of trying to control feeling, or time, in half-articulated memories. In this way, Stephenson's work contests nostalgia as a singular register, embracing instead more conflicted emotions: desire for something new, and a kind of mourning for the failed satisfaction of something that was never fully delivered.

The soft blush-pink *New House* holds these tensions in a bare-bones-drawn home protruding from a tent-like structure. Caught between emergence and dissolution, its "rose-colored lens" is present but lifted, the image shrouded in a forlorn effect. Chalk underdrawings remain visible—ghosted lines mapping earlier iterations, lingering as failed "graveyard marking" but also tentatively hoping for a better form to arise.

These aren't dreamscapes or depictions of the unconscious. In their ties to historical surrealism, Stephenson's renderings might recall the stage-like architectures of Giorgio de Chirico or Kay Sage's austere cityscapes. But where the former was theatrical, and the latter nightmarish, Stephenson's moments of stillness and animation register as intimately human: points of pressure or intimacy. If painting carries a thought from one side to another, from sensation to memory and from self to world, it does so not by constructing a bridge, but by entering the water and finding a way through. Not a performance, but a dance.

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Mary Stephenson (b. 1989, London, UK) lives and works in London. She graduated from the Royal Academy Schools, London in 2023 and the Glasgow School of Art in 2011. Stephenson has had solo exhibitions at White Cube, Paris; Maureen Paley, London; Chapter NY, New York; MASSIMODECARLO, Paris; LINSEED Projects, Shanghai; and Incubator, London. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at White Columns, New York; Jeremy Scholar, London; Rose Easton, London; Michael Werner Gallery, London; and Ginny on Frederick, London, among others. Her work has been acquired by the Loewe Art Collection, Madrid, H+ Museum, Suzhou, and the Government Art Collection, London.