

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Camila McHugh, "Jill Mulleady," *Artforum*, March 2021

## ARTFORUM

### BRUSSELS

#### Jill Mulleady

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There was something feral about the figures in Jill Mulleady's "Decline & Glory": A woman pawed at her own face; a wolfish canine panted by a river; a ruddy-cheeked Marquis de Sade stared crazedly at the wall of his prison cell. Mulleady builds tension through the contrast between highly controlled composition and hints of disorder and decay; the image seems a thin and fragile surface over life's unruliness. An elusive temporality moved across the works here, as a woman reappeared aged and flowers wilted, breaching painting's attempt to hold a reality in suspension. An allegory for this failed endeavor, *Fighting the Devils Futility* (all works 2020) captured a wave as it swelled to a crest, always just about to crash against a sanguine sky.

The light-washed red of that horizon was a persistent feature of the exhibition, replacing the luminescent green that suffused, for instance, the works Mulleady exhibited at the 58th Venice Biennale in 2019. Recalling the carmine dresses and drapes that accent Rubens's portraits, these newer paintings play with the color's regal role in art history. The deep red of overripe strawberries permeated the exhibition, conjuring the sense of festering glory days. (Decomposing fruit was also a recurrent motif.) Vermilion backgrounds recalled Pompeian frescoes. Preserved under the rubble of Mount Vesuvius, their scenes of cavorting gods or still lifes of baskets of figs set against fields of red stood like

Jill Mulleady, *Sade en Prison*, 2020, oil on linen, 61 x 70 1/4".



icons of a rise and fall.

Mulleady is a painter of atmospheres in which the emotional grain of inherited narratives seeps through to conjure auguries of impending decline. Her figures are subject to strange juxtapositions, with a lobster scuttling under crumpled sheets behind the Marquis de Sade in *Sade en Prison*, for instance, or a plate of strawberries rotting on the floor beside a wrinkled woman in bed in *18 Rue Souveraine*, 1050. These compositional parallels across canvases locate the two bedroom

scenes in a shared world, placing the Bastille in late-eighteenth-century Paris and the rue Souveraine apartment near where the artist spent this past summer in Brussels in the same fantastical painterly register. Soft edges and shifts in palette often delineate the paintings' forms, creating an impression of flatness that undermines the markers of perspective in architecture and landscape that structure the compositions. Mulleady hones this uncanny effect in *Gardens of the Blind*, in which an angular androgynous figure in the foreground appears pale against a verdant landscape, their dark coat contoured by a riverbank and plumes of smoke. In the distance upriver, tones of bruised ocher and purple imbue an embracing couple at the water's edge.

The atmosphere in "Decline & Glory" extended beyond the canvases as Mulleady turned her attention to the gallery's nineteenth-century Neoclassical architecture as well. She painted bunches of decaying fruit on the ceiling of the grand ground floor as emblems of dying bourgeois aspiration. Having previously made paintings on found car windows and the doors of a house that was slated for demolition, Mulleady painted *Shadowplay* on a mirror from a gutted house, the one on rue Souveraine, setting a Pierre Klossowski-esque tangle of lanky figures on its corroding surface. The mirror put the room itself on display, tempting you to take a look at yourself in the midst of all this. With gallery-going still precarious, the decline of some kind of pompous glory just seemed to fill the air.

—Camila McHugh