

Conversation on the Canal Volume III: Hannah Bays

Artist Hannah Bays shares her thoughts about the subconscious, the body, desire and more with Lyra on the occasion of the exhibition "I'm Not Afraid of Ghosts."



Hannah Bays portrait courtesy Hannah Bays

Artist Hannah Bays knows what you're thinking. Long interested in psychology, the artist's paintings press upon our collective desire for meaning, with surreal scenes that invite visual (and psychological) analysis. Bays has had solo exhibitions at Asylum Gallery and Jack's House in London, and was selected for participation in the Malevich Residency on Lake Como, Italy. For Volume III of Lyra interview series, "Conversations on the Canal," we caught up with Bays to discuss visual metaphor, Jungian psychology, and our collective move towards virtual reality. Read on for our interview with the artist whose work is currently on view as part of Lyra exhibition "I'm Not Afraid of Ghosts."

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Love 2, 2023, Hannah Bays

Lyra: *We've read that your work is about human drives and the construction of meaning—a fascinating premise that conjures up questions about the subconscious. Tell me more about how you use your art to explore the construction of meaning in our lives.*

Hannah Bays: I think that quote came from about ten years ago, so I probably wouldn't use the same words now, but I interpret those terms as a kind of catch-all for human experience to encompass the body, consciousness, and the subconscious.

Human beings are noted for our ability and need to construct meaning in our lives, in our desire to search for patterns. For us to acknowledge these mechanisms of construction is to also acknowledge the chaos. For me, meaning-production is in the creative act because art offers a way to make sense of our experience. Art is a means for reflection and contemplation, an empathetic awakening.

I've long been interested in psychology — the subconscious; in particular the unconscious id as the site from which image materialises. When we produce images in dreams, it is the psyche speaking to itself in its own language. Painting is an attempt to preserve or re-create this 'authentic' image by transmitting psychic energy.



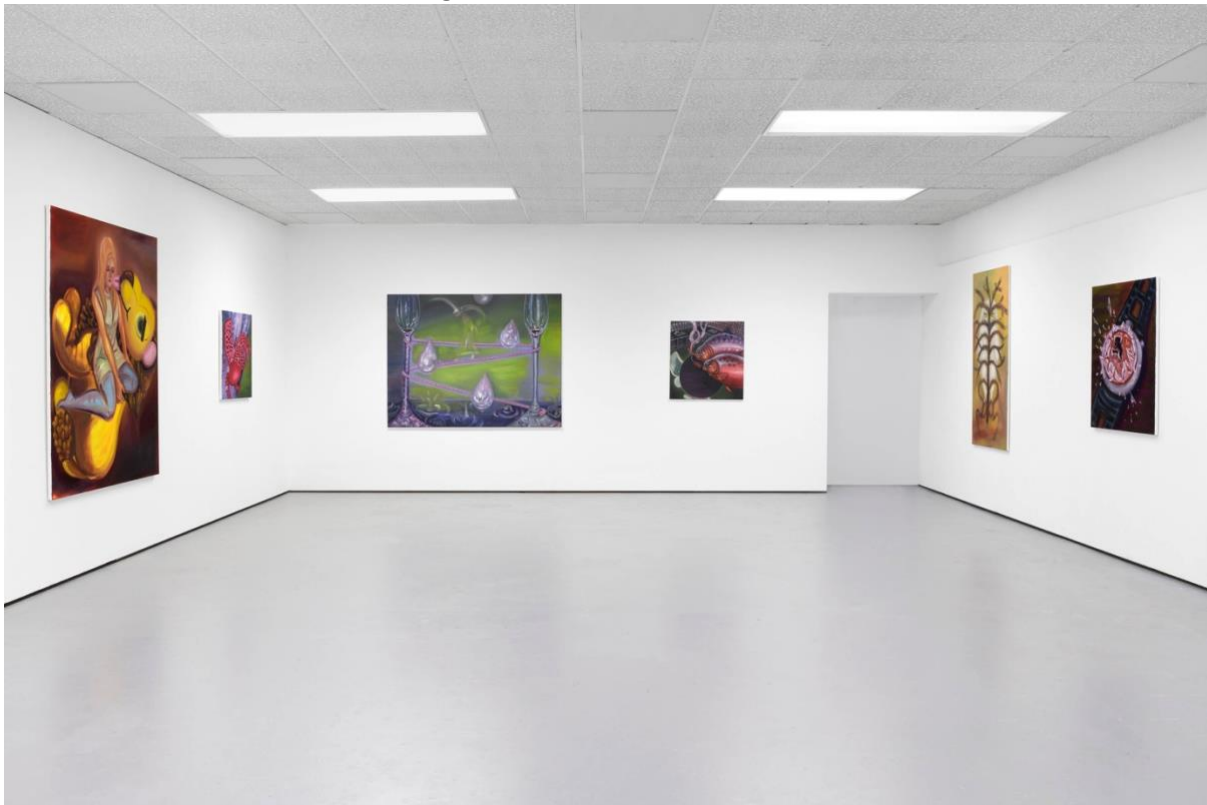
A Single Drop, 2023, Hannah Bays

Lyra: *We read your work as profoundly emotive—from your color pallet to your use of organic forms. We understand that your recent work focuses on the question of desire, does that question of desire have emotional underpinnings?*

Hannah Bays: I've often thought of my line and form-making as suggestive of a bold sensuality, the use of curves typically associated with the female form, of female desire.

Art is related to empathy, and enables us to come up close to another consciousness. As different as that may be to ours, it invites us, lovingly, to share the experience of being

human. In Jungian psychology, images *are* libido, and in its fullest sense, desire is not just sexual, but relates to all motivating forces.



Installation view of Hannah Bays "Night Walk" at Asylum Studios

Lyra: *You have a unique talent for imbuing inanimate objects with human qualities, whether vases, watches, or flowers—how would you characterize the relationship between living and non-living forms in your work?*

Hannah Bays: The use of anthropomorphic objects allows me to talk about elements of human experience more universally, without becoming weighted in particular identities. Even my human forms are never 'real people,' but symbols and ciphers in service to ideas.

The use of objects allows me extra layers of communication, as does the use of literary metaphor, or 'figures of speech.' A flower, say, with its head bowed between railings, speaks of the fragility of love. A burning, melting candle in the form of a female body speaks of passing time and the inevitable decline of our bodies; the gothic monstrousness of this knowledge is embedded in the choice of imagery.

I've always had a kind of surrealist approach to objects, where a symbolic, secret life is unlocked – a kind of double vision that pertains to human interiority. I collect weird little trinkets that seem to possess great character, and they sometimes find their way into my work.

I'm interested in the panpsychism idea that all things are made from the same building blocks of consciousness, just to a greater or lesser degree (hence animate, or not). I love how this ancient idea has circled around again and is being once more considered scientifically. I've

been thinking recently that as we move towards an increasingly virtual reality, perhaps *all* material things have a richer, more empathic quality — a material essence associated with the human. Maybe the virtual world has created a new level of artifice that is further from us than the distance between us and our objects.



Host, 2020, Hannah Bays

Installation view: *I'm Not Afraid Of Ghosts* (17 April – 22 September 2024), Lyra debut exhibition at Palazzo Tiepolo Passi. Image courtesy of Lyra. Photography by Marcin Gierat
Lyra: *What are you currently exploring in your studio?*

Hannah Bays: I've been researching the history of the grotesque, from Nero's pleasure palace in ancient Rome onwards. Be it comic, tragic, or monstrous – the desire to create an awakening 'jolt' within an artwork through the grotesque (in either form or content) is often my intention. It reminds us that we are alive for a fleeting time and that we don't know what's around the corner. I also like to allude to different levels of reality within the work, like the ghost of 'Host,' or currently, the disruptive Imp of European folklore.

I make a lot of paintings concurrently, and they attend to a spectrum of ideas or themes at any one time. The rebirth of Spring, failed idealism, and the human appetite for destruction encircle me right now. Naturally, I digest world events, and these inform my work too.

Interviewer: Maddie Phinney

"I'm Not Afraid of Ghosts" at Palazzo Tiepolo Passi, 2024 The Grand Canal, San Polo, 2773 30125 Venezia

