

Steve Negrón

Where the Deer Dreams

Curated by Alex Urso

Every painting, in some way, represents a theater set: a smaller stage where imaginary narratives come to life. This comparison seems all the more fitting in Steve Negrón's paintings. As we explore the creations of the American artist, there is the sensation of observing (if not actually taking part in) a series of events that have a strong symbolist spirit.

His compositions are populated with women boasting thick, red manes, along with androgynous-looking men and anthropomorphic creatures dressed in evening wear. They are Pirandello-esque, seemingly close yet still quite distant. Lost in their own inner turmoil, posed in a manner that evokes Greek tragedy, these figures appear to be caught up in private matters to which we are not privy. We pick up on their sense of unease, the anguish that afflicts them, but we don't understand the reasons behind their torment – which is so excessive as to border on farcical. What we see is the suspended moment before the fall: the moment that precedes the drama; the greatest point of emotional intensity before the curtain closes.

STEVE NEGRÓN'S FAIRY-TALE PAINTINGS

Created on cardboard or wooden panels, Steve Negrón's works highlight the artist's distinctive narrative nature. It's as if the painter has been lent to the world of illustration (or perhaps it is the other way around). Frequent references to mythology, Biblical iconography, and Greek epic tradition make these pieces "literary" compositions even before visual works, as evidenced by *Adam Raised a Cain* and *Neptune's Wedding*.

The first piece depicts a family murder: Abel's body lies on a sofa. He has been killed by his brother, and the rest of the family is nearby, despairing over what has happened. The setting is sparse, but the clothing and the few details in the home give the appearance of a wealthy family-residence. In the distance, a Greek temple rises atop a mountain, making for a disorienting narrative mash-up. Is it a Biblical scene, a heroic tale, or the televised image of a family murder served up for entertainment purposes?

The second painting depicts the marriage between Salacia and the god of the sea. The slender silhouette of a woman is seen navigating the waves toward her destiny. On shore, people raise a toast to fate having brought the two lovers back together. Architecture also plays an essential role, and this is often a trademark element of Negrón's work. The delicate structure that serves as a shelter for some of the figures evokes the Renaissance portico of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*, once again blurring the layers of meaning. References to pictorial tradition and soap-opera clichés merge in a bold and cheeky way.

NATURE AS A FORM OF REDEMPTION

And then there's nature, truly the main character – however silent and often in the background – in the artist's works. While a majority of the scenes feature references to man-made architectural elements (from metaphysical squares to fountains to the drawing rooms of aristocratic homes), there is quite a bit of flora and fauna that command attention. Long climbing plants spill from vases far too small to contain them; weeping willows stand atop mountain peaks; peacocks and deer take on human form, in a metamorphosis where the loss of one's innocence is the price to pay. The juxtaposition of roles that emerges is ruthlessly clear-cut. On one hand, there's the purity, instinct, and wild wisdom of animals and all of their symbolism; on the other hand, there are "dandy" men and women wandering through their upper-class interiors, despairing as they face the void of existence and the consequences of their vices. This duality could perhaps be the key to interpreting the entire Steve Negrón oeuvre, which focuses on the theme of adults searching for innocence lost. But before we have time to wonder how it all came to be, the curtain falls.