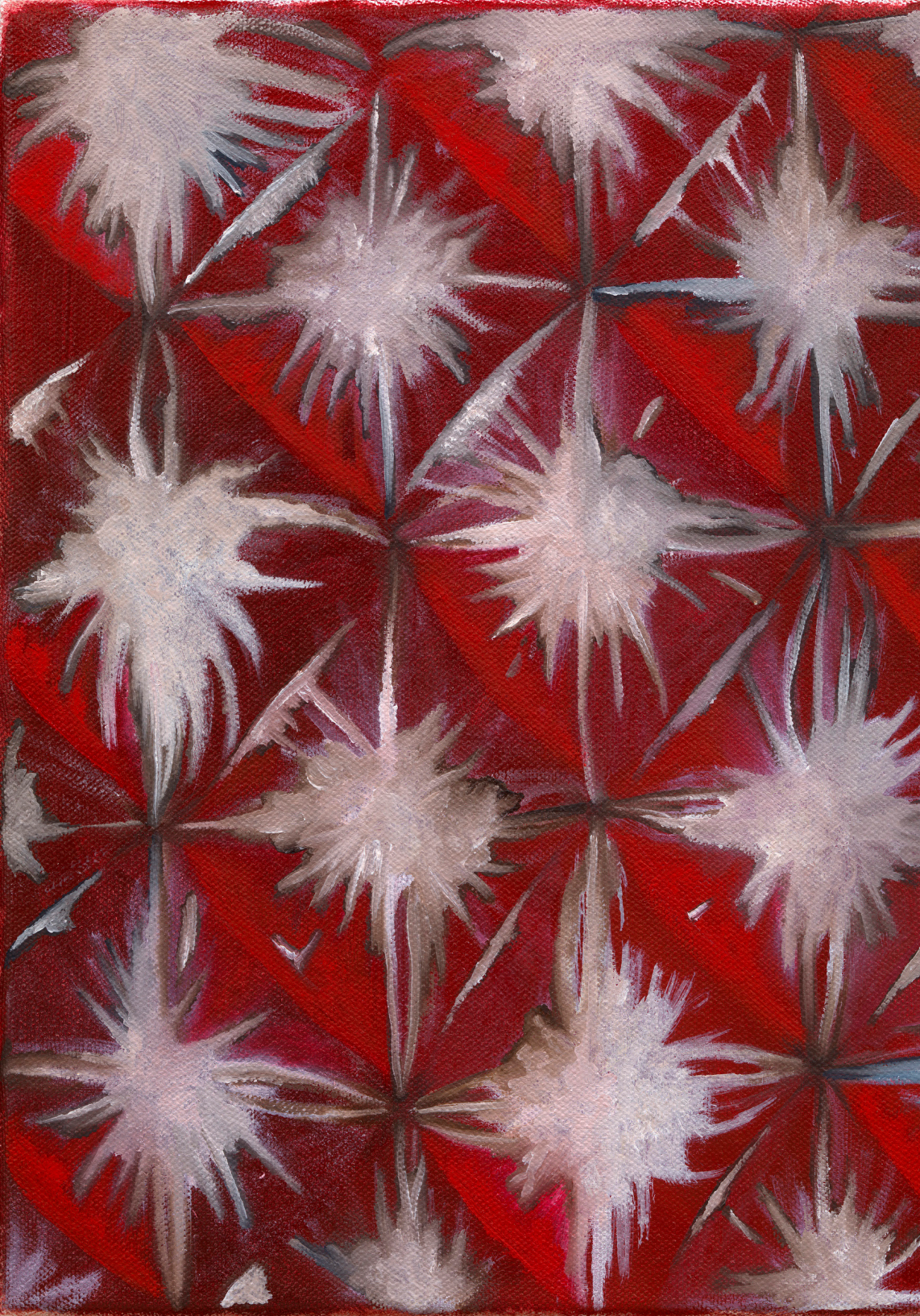


Estelle Simpson's

RÉVÉRENCE



Estelle Simpson's

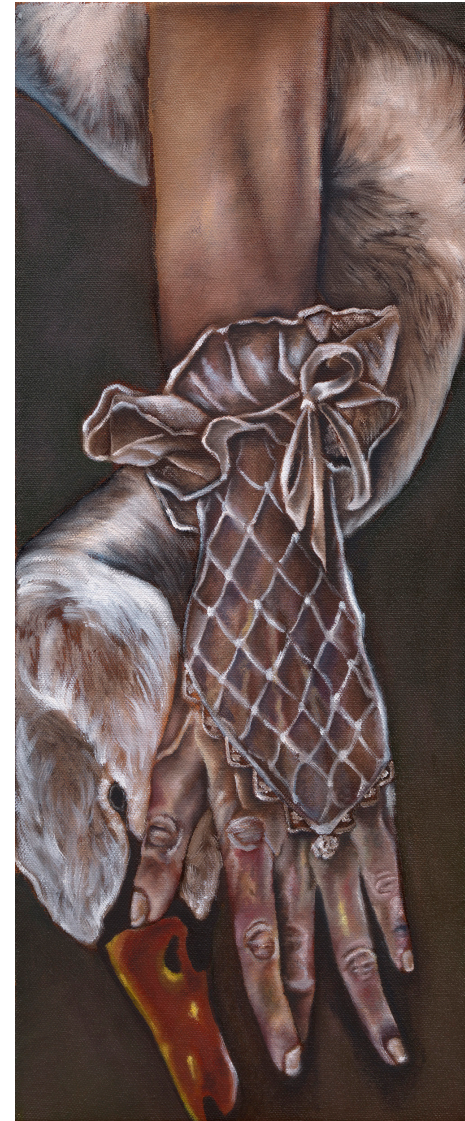
25 April–29 May 2025
Tache

Révérence

Curated by Catherine Li

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The Proximity of Feeling (2025), oil on canvas, 49 x 15 cm

The Beauty of Strangeness

Catherine Li

Introduction

My first visit to Estelle Simpson's new studio in Elephant and Castle took place in the months ahead of her first solo exhibition. Our conversation that afternoon was extensive, given this significant step in her painted practice since her graduation from Camberwell two years earlier.

The building, a long-vacated office block, has been repurposed to house artists' studios. To help me get a better view of the pieces as a body of work, Simpson had moved them to a deserted canteen area adjacent to her studio unit, on the tower's top floor. The room was carpeted in a deep, old-fashioned red, and dominated by an industrial stainless steel kitchen. We joked about the oddity of this setting before we looked into her paintings together. Estelle commented that she "never wanted to work in an office," though I couldn't help but feel that the 1980s corporate interior only heightened the Lynchian atmosphere of our viewing experience.

That visit and conversation made it clear that a wide range of references inform Simpson's practice - references from literature, stage design and her background in ballet, as well as the legacies of surrealist and symbolist artists. These influences surfaced not only in her words but in the textures and gestures of

the paintings themselves, unravelling a world of sources present everywhere I looked. For this essay, mapping each fragmented thread felt less urgent than pursuing a more instinctive investigation. I will move through the beauty and strangeness of Simpson's pictorial language and magical performances, engaging with the complexity of forms, tensions and emotions.

Embellishments

Simpson exclusively paints interior scenes that, initially, appear ordinary; classical spaces that feel close to domestic life. We are invited, welcomed, into these rooms by familiar embellishments: armchairs, curtains, tiles, cushions, frills. These elements function both practically and rhetorically, actors in a visual script that plots multiple unfinished narratives. But, familiarity is unsettled by the presence of the protagonist. Stability and calm are quietly disrupted. Her motions trouble the illusion and, all of a sudden, cast everything into absurdity. Lavish costumes, sentimental expressions and prop-like objects blur the line between domestic space and theatrical stage; refuse any fixed perceptions of time or place. When coherence and realism are stripped away, the expression of non-sense prevails. No single element is entirely readable - not the design of her set, her makeup, her costume, nor her expression or body language.

These works do not speak a story we are trusted to comprehend: they remind us instead of our spectatorship. With extravagant attention paid to every detail, Simpson enacts a deliberate dismantling of theatrical codes, disorganises visual reference points and resists linearity. In so doing, she erects an arena for a new aesthetic of fragmentation, tension and chaos. Objects, detached from their assumed functions, can no longer be grasped at as anchors of narrative or meaning. Objects are doorways to a realm where recognition is constantly deferred.

Bodies

In *Exquisite Mess* (2024), a bold red carpet adorned in blossom motifs stretches to appear almost infinite. A figure lies half-dressed in a throw, her upper body relaxed whilst her lower body twists in discomfort. Even the throw itself seems tense, caught in a state of strained stillness. Around her, a bird mid-motion and a half-open book suggest suspension, paused in an unknown moment between unknown actions. A ribbon, stiff like the body, spurns its expected softness to offer a subtle hostility; a torment lingering in near-imperceptibility beneath the languid setting. The model's distant gaze and sombre expression deepen the force of detachment, as if she drifts far from us, lost in thought. This distortion, this surplus of unsettled detail, destabilises an otherwise neat composition. There is too much; an excess that throws off balance and renders an image strange and unresolved.

Roland Barthes posits an understanding of this complexity in *S/Z*³. He writes:

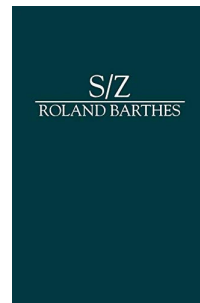
“As supplement, the body is the site of the transgression effected by the narrative: it is at the level of the body that the two *inconciliabilia*¹ of the Antithesis (outside and inside, cold and heat, death and life) are brought together, are made to touch, to mingle in the most amazing of figures in a composite substance (without holding together), here whimsical (the *macédoine*²) and later chimerical (the arabesque created by the old man and the girl when seated side by side). It is by way of this excess [...] that something can be told and the narrative begin.”

(Barthes 1990: 28)

Barthes proposes that narrative does not emerge from clarity, but from contradiction. The body becomes the site where binary oppositions collapse, where incompatible

1 *Inconciliabilia*: Latin for “irreconcilable things.” Barthes uses it to describe binary oppositions (e.g. life/death, inside/outside) that are not resolved but brought into contact through the body.

2 *Macédoine*: A French term for a mixed salad. Used metaphorically to describe the body as a whimsical mixture of incompatible elements, held together without unity.



3 *S/Z* (1990), Oxford: Blackwell, Roland Barthes



Exquisite Mess (2024), oil on canvas, 135 x 100 cm



forces interact without ever fully blending. The excess, the overflow, is precisely what allows the story to begin.

In many of Simpson's paintings - *The Night Within* (2024), *Big Blue Tutu* (2025), *Somewhere Between the Clouds and the Stars* (2025) - this idea takes visual form. It is the body conceived as a container that mixes the incongruous - tenderness with tension, skin with vein, stillness with distortion. These figures do not conform to logic or stable meaning. Instead, they convey something affective, visceral: like how, in storytelling, emotions such as desire, fear, or grief erupt physically, through blushing, sweating, bleeding, or trembling. These bodily signs disrupt neat narrative categories. Perhaps that is why we can't locate harmony in these paintings. Their images never cohere into unified compositions. Like Barthes' *macédoine* (a medley of mixed vegetables or fruits), they are chaotic assemblages. Or, like the arabesque he describes: two bodies, side by side, old and young, male and female, implying both desire and decay in one disturbing figure. However, it is precisely this messiness, framed in Simpson's paintings through bodily instability or a refusal of coherence, that allows a different kind of storytelling to take place.

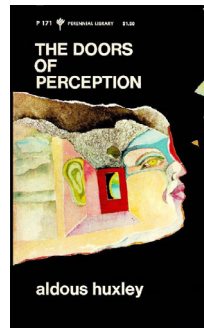
Costumes further extend the body's presence. Simpson contrasts elusive, and often melancholic, expressions with exaggerated garments such as rippling satin robes and sculpted metallic gowns, each fold and texture carrying rhetorical weight. The fabrics are alive: creased, gleaming, or stiff with ornamentation, they disrupt visual stasis like veins beneath skin, heightening the tension in a figure's posture or gaze. The result is a quiet intensity, where fabric does more than adorn; it shapes the emotional tone and thematic direction of the work. This power echoes Aldous Huxley's observation in his *Doors of Perception*⁴ that drapery, though ostensibly nonrepresentational, often "sets the tone of the whole work of art... express[ing] the mood, the temperament, the attitude to life of the artist" (Huxley, 1977:27). For Simpson, costume is a language that whispers in folds

and roars in texture.

Arabesque

In ballet, the term *arabesque* refers to a classic pose in which a dancer extends one leg behind while balancing on the other, forming a line both graceful and weighted with tension. In both literary and choreographic contexts, the *arabesque* embodies a delicate balance of opposing forces: those of form and imbalance, grace and strain, beauty and instability. This central duality informs how Barthes, as cited earlier, uses the term to describe the striking visual pairing of an old man and a young woman seated side by side at a party in Balzac's *Sarrasine*. For Barthes, the *arabesque* serves as metaphor for how opposites may intertwine without total reconciliation; how the body may become a site of narrative disruption.

In the context of Simpson's paintings, I borrow this notion of the *arabesque* not only because it mirrors the visual complexity and chaos of her compositions, but because it speaks directly to her background in ballet. In an earlier conversation, Simpson shared that her formative training as a dancer taught her to express emotion, narrative, and mood through bodily movement. This physical sensitivity informs her paintings, which so often centre the body not in static poses but in poised, elegant gestures charged with tension. As Simpson herself observes, the creatures she paints - swans, cats - are selected for more than their symbolic weight. Her animal world exists in an innate formal harmony with dance: "The elongation, the bending, the twisting of an animal like the swan really complements compositions influenced by rhythm... The same with the cat: not only its temperament, but its graceful form lends itself to ballet." Throughout her works, visual *arabesques* emerge: a straight wrist overlapping the curved neck of a swan; a cat bowed beside an upright figure; two swans entangled in asymmetrical embrace; a human body folded next to a stretching cat. These forms are



4 *The Doors of Perception* (1977),
Harper Collins,
Aldous Huxley

neither unified nor separate, but caught in moments of entanglement, suggestive of a kind of grotesque beauty. Like a dancer suspended mid-air, Simpson's imagery holds together what might otherwise collapse. The *arabesque* here realises an excess of form with an overwhelming resistance to simplification or closure.

As Edgar Allan Poe writes, "There is no exquisite beauty [...] without some strangeness in the proportion" - a sentiment that resonates with the unsettling elegance of Simpson's compositions. Despite their precise complexities, these works offer resonance. It is with a lack of fixed meaning and balance that Simpson forges a connection between the world *within* her image and the position of her viewer *outside* it. Her handling of disruption and ambiguity invites a questioning of the boundaries between immersion, in the scene, and detachment, outside it. This connection is not formed by narrative or clarity, but with the softest touches of nuance; a language subtle yet shared; a momentary bridge between realms. When communicative stability is so fleeting, disparate elements can, for a second, hold together, however loosely. Wholeness can be felt, but not understood.

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Detail from *Two Slaves* (2024), oil on canvas, 50 x 35 cm

” Not an inch of smooth surface here, not a moment of peace or confidence,
only a silken wilderness of countless tiny pleats and wrinkles with an incessant modulation -
inner uncertainty rendered with the perfect assurance of the master hand. ”

– Aldous Huxley,
The Doors of Perception



Detail from *Somewhere Between the Clouds and the Stars* (2025), oil on canvas, 135 x 110 cm

Estelle Simpson and Catherine Li A Conversation on *Révérence*

Peckham Levels, Monday 7 April 2025

CL: I thought we might start with the most common question for artists: What is your process for composing a new piece?

ES: I'm starting from both memory and emotion, a bank of imagery that stands out to me. In a pretty uncritical or non-judgemental way, I just naturally follow what feels right to express. It's not about thinking, "It has to create this mood." It's more intuitive than that.

I think having that kind of fictitious approach - not really copying from reality, if it's a reference, not directly replicating it - gives me the freedom to let an image emerge that's filled with my personal way of seeing the world. I wouldn't say I start with the figure. For me, I approach the canvas as a whole, thinking about all the elements at once. How does the figure interact with the way the curtain falls? How do I want the figure to sit?

Considering all these elements as equally important, a mood will naturally emerge from the way everything communicates. I might find that the overall mood of the painting doesn't quite match the gestures of the figure. So I'll go back in and maybe edit their movement or posture, trying to match everything up so it feels like all the elements are communicating together. So yeah, there's definitely an editorial process.

CL: "Interiority" seems central to your work, not just in terms of physical space but as an emotional or psychological condition. How do you translate that into painting?

ES: There are interiors, and there are definitely markers of the home. But for me, *the way I create what feels like a very intensely psychological space, comes from bringing together two quite disparate worlds. One is the world of dance, stage, and ballet, and the other is the domestic. They're very different: one performative and choreographed, the other private and intimate. When those two worlds come together, something quite surreal can happen.*

Using the aesthetics of the stage and applying them to the home allows me to heighten certain atmospheres. So that everything in the composition can begin to echo an emotion or reflect how the figure is feeling.

CL: Since you mentioned that, in your paintings, two different worlds merge... I definitely feel there are lots of 'dualities', like exterior and interior, visible and invisible, beauty and anti-beauty. They are often expressed through elements like curtains, and the skin. How do you think these visual motifs shape how we perceive what is being revealed or concealed?

ES: In the home, curtains are used to create privacy or to divide the outside from the inside world. On stage, though, curtains act as a frame, a 'reveal'. They surround the figure, blurring the boundaries between the functionality of the curtain, and I find that really interesting. Furniture, rather than comforting or anchoring the figure as it would in a domestic setting, in my compositions it can feel cold or flat. More like a prop on stage. And this creates quite interesting contrasts.

Playing with two very different, often contradictory, emotions. That's where the dualities come from, really. For example, in *Exquisite Mess*, there's a figure lying on the floor, and their pose is twisted and contorted. The body suggests discomfort. But their facial expression: it's not exactly calm, but there's a sense of inertia, of deep thought. The expression contradicts the body's tension. And I think that's interesting, because *in life, you can*

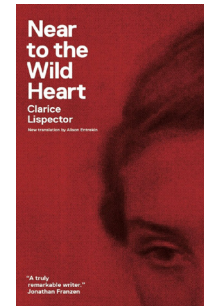
sometimes experience moments within the everyday that feel confusing, like a mixture of happiness and sadness, or excitement and complete dread, all at once. These conflicting feelings can happen simultaneously, and I find that really compelling to explore.

I love novels that explore protagonists in that way; it might be more like a stream-of-consciousness style, not necessarily a direct narrative, but more fragmented. You see moments where their emotions contradict each other. One book that comes to mind is *Near to the Wild Heart*¹ by Clarice Lispector. The character, Joanna, completely embodies that kind of duality. She's both adventurous and vicious, but also has these sorrowful, limiting experiences. There's a line, "Joanna was, sadly, a very lucky woman." It's in relation to her marriage, and it captures that contradiction so well – this life-defining moment that should be joyful also feels incredibly sad to her. It's a signifier of attachment, of lost freedom. I'm not saying I'm painting Joanna, but those moments where you're feeling both things at once: *that's* what I'm trying to capture. Just that mood, where opposing emotions coexist.

CL: But would you also give your protagonist a life story, an identity, or even a name?

ES: To be honest, I think the way I pull from such a mixture of source materials means the paintings feel quite fragmented. They resist a clear storyline or a defined sequence of events. For instance, some of the references I use for the portraiture come from ballet books, especially old, second-hand volumes on costumes or headdresses. I really enjoy painting those embellishments and exploring a wide range of dresses.

The references don't directly relate to a character or a specific narrative, but they do come from real circumstance. And for me, freedom-wise, it's important not to replicate something exactly. It's more about piecing together different elements to create my own imaginary scene.



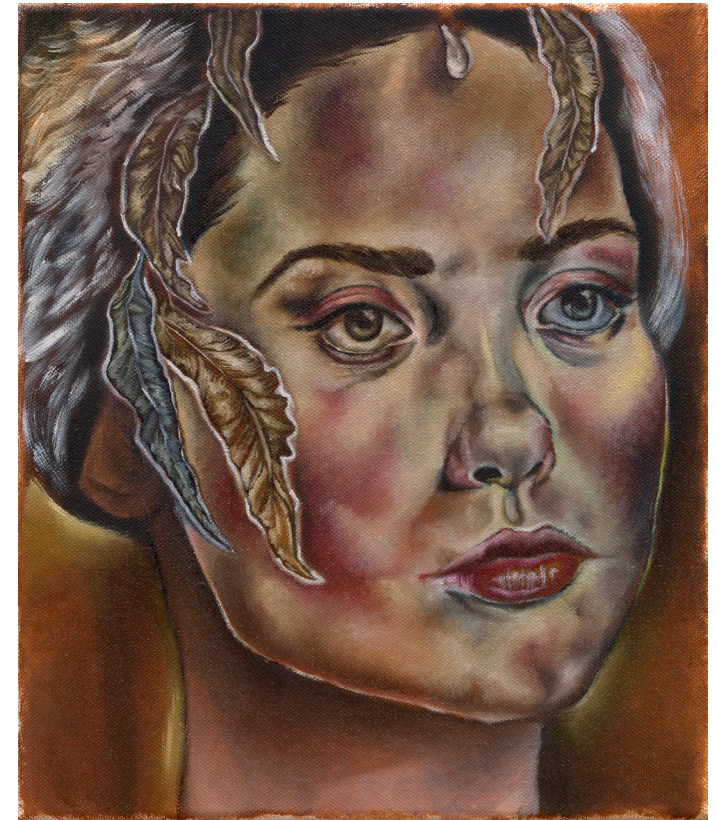
1 *Near to the Wild Heart* (2012), New Directions, Clarice Lispector

CL: You used to dance ballet, which is an embodied, temporal art form. Painting is a more static, visual stage. How do you see the influence of your dance experience on your painterly experience? Do you feel the two mirror each other, or do they exist more like parallel universes within your practice?

ES: For me, dancing ballet from a young age, especially in those formative years, definitely shaped the way I process the world. It echoes in various aspects of how I approach things now. I've started to see how my painting practice correlates to the way I would prepare for a dance. With the larger paintings, I approach them a bit like preparing a big performance. I know I'll be spending months on them, putting in hours to meticulously render certain aspects. It's that long process of practice and refinement, followed by a final moment of presentation, like an exhibition. With ballet, it's the same: you'd spend months rehearsing, developing a piece, and then the actual performance might only last a few minutes. Those few minutes felt like a flash, they're momentary yet so intense and exhilarating. Then it suddenly ended, and that moment felt like a dream.

In ballet, you tell a story through movement, through the body, and those formative years of dance classes really trained me to observe the body in a specific way. I learned how to express a certain mood, a concept, or a story through movement, which taught me to be naturally attuned to the form of a dancer's body. That understanding helps create a comfortable and intuitive painting process for me.

And going back to the idea of duality – there's something really interesting in ballet itself. You have this elegant, graceful way of bodily expression, but the stories being told are sorrowful or tragic. Like *Swan Lake*, a story of difficult transformation and loss, yet it is told through something so beautiful. That contradiction really appeals to me, and it's something I try to explore and apply to those intimate environments where emotions are conflicting.



Portrait of a Swan Lake Dancer (2025), oil on canvas, 25 x 15 cm

CL: I noticed that the characters in your paintings have these really intense skin tones. To me, it feels like you can sense the strength and power beneath the surface, the beauty, but also something deeper. I think that reflects a kind of duality, too.

It reminds me of how we often see ballet dancers as these graceful, beautiful symbols of a story, but behind that beauty is all the intense laborious practice: the stress,

the pushing of the body to its limits. And I feel that same contrast quite strongly in your work.

ES: Definitely. I think when you paint from personal experience, you develop quite a sympathetic view to presenting both the light and dark aspects. I still love ballet, I still love dance. I think they're beautiful forms, and I'm grateful for my years spent learning to dance.

But at the same time, I'm also aware of the more difficult, sometimes darker aspects that exist in that world. *In my paintings, it's really important to me that – even when there are magical or whimsical elements, or that kind of exhilaration from performing a dance – I don't over-romanticise that imagery.* I want to show the reality as well.

It's hard to create that balance, but I think in pursuit of duality I can touch on both. The figures might have frills, almost like an essence of beauty and luminosity, at surface level. But when you look a bit closer, the skin texture shows reality. And I hope that through that contrast, the work holds a kind of sympathetic understanding of the light and the dark.

CL: Indeed, texture and materiality play a strong role in your work. How do you decide on the surface and the weight of those objects that inhabit your paintings? The curtain, perfume bottle, cushion, or feather?

ES: I've considered how I naturally tend to want to render every single layer of fur, to really bring out those aspects and create the exact softness of certain environments. The exact heaviness of a curtain.

You have to accept that memory isn't always reliable. Often, the things in our memory might seem more wondrous than they actually were. I rarely remember the exact details - like what was said, or specific smells - but I remember, viscerally, how I felt. I still remember the textures of fur from the cats I grew up with - like, I



can really visualise the fur. And every time I touch a cat now, it brings me back to that memory directly. It's why certain memories stand out to me. And I know that's different for everyone.

Some elements are rendered in a much flatter way. The curtains especially can vary - sometimes they're heavily built up, really layered, and other times they're minimal. *I find that kind of variation really interesting, especially as a way to embed emotion into an object - to animate the inanimate, to bring a kind of unfamiliarity into something very familiar.*

I've never been formally taught how to paint. I've mostly learned by looking - at other painters, at works that move me - and trying to figure out what they're doing. I remember seeing a painting at a Francis Bacon² exhibition where he'd rendered a curtain in this really striking way: a flat block of colour, with slashes of white to suggest the folds. It was simple but really emotionally charged. That stuck with me.

I ended up trying something similar in a painting called *A Stitch in Time*. It was the first time I used that kind of technique of having flat colour underneath with a luminosity on top. It created an interesting effect: the curtain wasn't behaving like a curtain should. It wasn't framing the figure - it was just flat, overpowering with the slashes of illumination. Quite violent, in its way. I wanted to take that further, so I did a small study of an armchair cushion, playing with ideas of glow and weight and quilting. Then I applied that study - turned it into a painting of a figure sitting on an armchair, where the chair feels completely unsupported, almost taking over the composition. It was really fun for me to explore how to make these inanimate things feel alive or active in some way.

CL: The cat and the swan appear frequently in your paintings. What draws you to these figures? Do they carry symbolic meanings for you, or are they more



2 *Seated Figure* (1961),
Francis Bacon.
© Francis Bacon



A Stitch in Time (2024), oil on canvas, 100 x 50 cm

personal presences within the spaces you create?

ES: These two animals exist very much within our regular, everyday world, but throughout time we've projected mythologies and magical elements onto them. They've become creatures that lend themselves to more fantastical, storytelling worlds. *I'm more drawn to natural elements to create that fantasy. Some people might go to science fiction or outer space, but for me, using animal or natural imagery is a way to almost dream within reality.*

I have a really small-scale study of a swan, really close-up - it was the first time I explored that image. I really wanted to replicate this experience I'd had, seeing swans at night on a lake. Against the darkness, with the park's spotlights, they took on a different energy than they have during the day. illuminated entities, shining through the murkiness. It was such a beautiful experience, and I just thought, "I want to paint a little swan portrait right now." So I did.

Creatures I'm drawn to also work formally - in terms of shape and line. The elongation, the bending, the twisting of an animal like the swan really complements compositions that are influenced by dance and rhythm. The same with the cat: not only its temperament and associations, but also its rhythmic purr and graceful form lend to ballet. By reusing that image, it began to take on more meaning for me. I started to analyse: why was I so drawn to this image of the swan? And then, through the balletic elements, *I found myself drawing connections to Swan Lake, one of the most well-known ballets. The Swan Lake narrative itself is full of these beautiful costumes- feathers, luminous textures, the gloves on stage - all depicting transformation. The mutability of the human and animal form really lends itself to that mythical story. I found it fascinating to explore, and so the swan image became quite an important image of transformation in my work.*

What also excites me is this idea of interspecies

mutability - the sense that species can blur or be misread. Sometimes someone will completely misinterpret what animal is in a painting - they might see a cat as a dog, for example. And that excites me, because it shows the paintings can be seen completely differently by someone else. I find that really interesting. It speaks to how nature itself can be a transformative, blurred thing, and how organic forms can flow into each other in quite a surreal way.

CL: Your colour choices feel deliberate - rich, bold, high-contrast. How do you work with colour in relation to mood and meaning?

ES: I see colour as very much a communicator. The colours in my work are definitely informed, in part, by ballet and the stage. There's this costumery that comes from stage performance - it's often very colourful and bright, and it looks really attractive from the audience's



Study of a Cat in a Bow 1 (2024), oil on canvas, 29 x 41 cm

perspective. But then, as a dancer backstage, there's also this sense that it can feel a bit tacky. All the sequins, all the costume sets, when seen up close and together, can feel quite gaudy, or over-the-top.

Colours in my paintings reflect duality - they can enhance beauty, but also bring out more unsettling elements. When rendering skin, I might begin with a wash on the undertone of the skin, maybe something green, and that already sets a particular energy or mood. It's both considered and intuitive - depending on the mood that's emerging. Ultimately, it's all about creating a certain feeling. As the mood reveals itself to me through the painting, then that is also how the colour reveals itself to me.

CL: There are a lot of red paintings in your work, but only a few that feature other colours. What draws you to red, and what led you to make that choice so prominent?

ES: Red has such an intense presence. It's also a colour that's linked to devotion or adoration, and at the same time to anger or violence. So again, there's that duality - it can show conflict, bring out tension or deep emotion, especially when placed next to a figure.

CL: If your paintings were to be placed in conversation with another artist's work - past or present - who would you imagine that to be, and why?

ES: One that really stands out to me is Paula Rego³. She also makes quite fantastical images, and similarly uses female protagonists to indicate the full range of human experience and emotion. She paints figures that can feel confident and assertive, sitting upright with this strong presence, but she also depicts figures that are contorted or in pain. That ability to explore both strength and pain is something I find really compelling.

I especially love her *Dog Women* series - these figures clutching pillows or lying on beds - there's something



3 *Love* (1995), Paula Rego. © Paula Rego

about their physicality that feels powerful and emotionally charged. Something I'd love to achieve in time is her ability to confront difficult, quite uncomfortable subjects - things that society glosses over, especially in relation to the difficult parts about being a woman.

I've also mentioned before some of the women associated with Surrealism, like Leonor Fini. I think it's a bit of a shame that she's often remembered more for her personality and presence at social events - like the incredible costumes she wore, sometimes dressing as half-animal, which is amazing - but I wish her paintings were recognised more fully too. And she embodied art in all aspects of her life - she was involved in designing props, theatre sets. Her works are incredibly detailed, like better than Dali's landscapes, and what really resonates with me is symbolologies and the themes that she draws on.

I feel privileged to be working in a time when there's more visibility for women artists, and I have this lineage of female painters to look back to. During their lifetimes, artists like Leonora Carrington and Fini were vivacious and influential, even within male-dominated circles, but over time in history their contributions have just been glossed over. I feel fortunate that those voices are re-emerging. There's still a long way to go - I mean, I've been to Tate Modern and counted maybe three or four female painters represented in the 'Surrealism' room.

CL: You have titled this first solo show as *Révérance*; could you talk a bit more about what led you to choose that title and what it means to you?

ES: Initially, I imagined the title in the balletic sense - *révérance* is the curtsy or bow you perform at the end of a dance. On stage, it's a way of giving thanks to the audience, and in class, it's about thanking the teacher for the lesson. I liked that gesture, and I also liked the idea of a single word as the title - something succinct, especially since there's already so much going on visually

in the exhibition.

Then, the title started to feel even more fitting because, in English, “reverence” carries the meaning of deep awe or appreciation. *I liked that layered meaning - it reflects my sense of reverence for things in the everyday, and for the natural world.* So the title ended up encapsulating both those threads.

CL: Doesn't it also feel like you're saying farewell to a certain chapter?

ES: Yes. It does feel like, not necessarily the beginning of the end, but more like the end of the beginning. That sense of a first act drawing to a close. I suppose, in a way, it's like saying goodbye to a certain phase - though not in a final sense. It's more about letting go. A lot has gone into these paintings, created across different emotional states, and it feels a big step of putting them out there. When exhibiting, I do feel a sense of exposure - of vulnerability. I know I'll probably look back on this body of work in years to come and see things I can't fully see right now. That's the nature of painting - sometimes others can see more in it than you do.

A kind of duality also comes through in the painting titles. For example, *Purple Spotlights* references something that's technically impossible in a stage environment. When you're performing, you're blinded by the glowing lights - you can't actually see into the audience. And vice versa, from the other side, the audience can't really see the performer in full detail - they just see this illuminated, overexposed presence. That's why the costumes are often so extravagant backstage - they're designed to be seen under those intense lights, which transform them into something more beautiful or glamorous.

There's often a contradiction built into my titles - like *Exquisite Mess* - where the beauty and tranquility are mixed with the disorder. *That's a thread that runs*



To See through Purple Spot Lights (2025), oil on canvas, 115 x 85 cm

through my practice as well: the careful, controlled layering of paint, the meticulous rendering, but also the expansive, shifting range of references and moods I'm drawing from. For me, the paintings are about embracing everything and letting all those elements come to the surface.



Soul of the Swamp (2024), oil on canvas, 28 x 45 cm



Behind the Curtain (2024), oil on canvas, 100 x 50 cm



The Light Within (2024), oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm



Big Blue Tutu (2025), oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm



Somewhere Between the Clouds and the Stars (2025), oil on canvas, 135 x 110 cm



Two Swans (2024), oil on canvas, 50 x 35 cm

Biographies



Estelle Simpson (b. 2001, Leeds) is a painter, writer and curator who lives and works in South London. In smooth, careful oils, Simpson shifts between scales—intimate animal studies sit alongside figures portraited in life size. Her process is intentionally internal, eschewing sitters, life models and photographs to paint entirely from her mind's eye.

Under Simpson's delicate brush, human, animal and object are at once alive: curtains bristle in windowless rooms; the scarlet velvets of an armchair breathe as deeply as the girls hunched atop their cushions. Drawing from the rich histories of Surrealist and Symbolist art, and that of balletic performance, Simpson treats everyday minutiae with reverence.

Simpson graduated from Camberwell College of Arts, London, in 2023, and was selected for that year's inaugural New Blood Emerging Art Prize showcase at Saatchi Gallery. She has since exhibited across the capital, including at Norito Gallery, Outhouse Gallery and Southwark Park Galleries.

estellesimpson.com
[@interst3llars](https://www.instagram.com/interst3llars)

Catherine Li is a London-based curator whose practice centres on site-specific exhibitions, public programmes, participatory art, and digital archiving. Her work approaches curating as a way to contribute to cultural creation and open up space for reflection and exchange, with exhibition as platform for innovation and research.

catherinelii.org
[@cath_erine_li](https://www.instagram.com/cath_erine_li)

After completing a Master's in Culture, Criticism, and Curation at Central Saint Martins, she was selected for the Curator-in-Residence programme supported by the Austrian Cultural Forum London in 2023. She has since worked with organisations including Peckham Levels, Bomb Factory Art Foundation, Central Saint Martins' Museum & Study Collection, NEoN Digital Arts Festival, Lot Projects, and Peckham Drawing People Together. Her work focuses on building opportunities for artists, communities, and public bodies to connect and collaborate. She has initiated participatory and cross-cultural programmes such as *Artist Lunch Box* (2023–2024) and *Peckham Workshop Festival* (2024, 2025), which foreground artist exchange and collective making.

Estelle Simpson's *Révérance* is presented by Tache.

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Gallery Assistant

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Texts: Catherine Li, Lauren Fulcher and Estelle Simpson
Graphic design: Catherine Li

Photo credits:

Artwork photography: Todd-White Art Photography
Artist portrait: Luke Walker

Inside front cover: *Cushion Study* (close-up), 2025, oil on canvas, 15 x 25 cm, Estelle Simpson

Back cover: *Swan*, 2023, oil on canvas, 15 x 10 cm, Estelle Simpson

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For exhibition details, installation views and to enquire on available artworks, visit www.tachegallery.com or email info@tachegallery.com.

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