

ARTFORUM



Gracie DeVito, *Machiavelli Heart Break*, 2019, oil on cotton, 15 1/2 x 14 1/4".

Gracie DeVito

OVERDUIN & CO.

A long time ago, I saw a video of Gracie DeVito worming out of a hole in a wall. The act was simple, and even under the aegis of performance art (it was a gallery wall), it made the crossed-armed spectators break into smiles and giggles. I had yet to become a performer myself and failed at the time to fully appreciate how much of a feat simplicity can be.

Paintings can be experienced as performances. Critics have an impulse to slow them down to dissect their operations, but if we'd just let them *happen* once in a while, we might better understand what they do. The art historian Michael Baxandall felt that it was impossible to describe a painting, that in interpreting a work one could only convey feelings about actions that had taken place in the past. His belief suggests that our insistence on meaning undercuts the incisiveness of delight. And the dozen dreamy paintings in DeVito's "Motion Picture Seaweed" were delightful as hell.

Pruning a tree ensures bounty, as does nixing a press release for a show. Having fettered the art world's temptation to indulge in aureate institutional babble (though we cynically admit that "the poetic" can be leveraged as its own breed of jargon), DeVito, even with the title of her show, freed us to play louche games of association, inching closer to the "erotics of art" for which Susan Sontag rallied.

Who *wouldn't* want to peek at an effort to marry the soothing hostage situations of the theater and the aquarium? Importantly, DeVito's hook is followed by a chorus: Marine blues, greens, and purples wash across her canvases, their movement caught in its weave. She massages the paint into the supporting fabric, relishing the creamy smooch of oils with the touch of a cinematographer. The frames, too, shirk neatness. *Father Gin*, 2019, a chaotic spray of leaves and bruise-colored flora, and *Mediterranean Ouroboros*, 2020, a softer aquatic image, are framed in ash wood with wonky edges that hug the pictures' unwieldy lines. The gallery assistant pointed out that these custom constructions were actually modeled on the curves of a guitar—another invocation of performance hovering around the painting.

Other frames were fabricated askew to accommodate works on loose cotton painter's cloths (*Mid-City Romance* and *Mother of Curls*, both 2019) and on hard panels cut to resemble dropped fabric. The conventionally framed works

suffered by comparison; luckily, these numbered only a few. My favorite painting didn't have a frame at all: *Machiavelli Heart Break*, 2019, is a painter's cloth folded into quarters and crawling with iconography of devilish midcentury delights—playing-card suits, a martini olive—even as the overall effect remains pastoral. The cotton seems to hold the paint even more brightly than the canvas. A vivid little stain of a heart rises from the hazy greenery. It's upside down.

A mentor and clown teacher (my nonperformer days are behind me, thank God) once explained to me the appeal of physical comedy in terms of erotics: “As a performer, you want to create just enough of an image for the audience to dream around you.” The paintings in “Motion Picture Seaweed” were just enough, each one a little cosmology of fuzzy signs that invited interpretation, sure, but also imagination—which, unlike the former, you can't do wrong.

— Christina Catherine Martinez