



Issy Wood, *Relapsing in2 mysticism*, 2019, oil on velvet, 39 1/2 × 23 1/2".

Issy Wood

JTT

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Somewhere between realism and surrealism sits a distinctively uncomfortable yet curiously seductive pictorial mode I call perverted realism. It draws on traditional, even ostentatiously conventional representational styles in order to estrange them, but without resorting to the overtly self-contradictory strategies of, say, René Magritte, or the blatantly subjective grotesquerie one finds in the work of an Ivan Albright. Painting of this sort is almost by definition dark in temperament. But much of it is chromatically dark, too, conjuring spaces full of shadow and murk. Think of Michaël Borremans, an established representative of this mode, thanks to his cultivation of an ominous, disquieting tone. It's easy for this kind of art to go wrong, dependent as it is on a precise sensitivity to the correct ratio between the banal and the sinister. But it seems to respond to the present recrudescence of all-encompassing anxiety: Different from the existential angst of the postwar period—that consciousness of the void underlying being itself—today's version is a more pragmatic apprehension of the incalculable multiplicity of threats stemming from any number of apparently unrelated but equally unavoidable conditions, ranging from surveillance capitalism and climate change to transmutations in the cultural structures of identity.

In this atmosphere of malaise—and amid a general efflorescence of figurative painting—a perverted realism has become an appealing stylistic choice, but it seems to come to few practitioners as naturally as it does to Issy Wood, a twentysomething London-based painter who recently had her New York solo debut with “daughterproof,” which included nine paintings plus a sculptural ensemble consisting of painted clothing (coat, trousers, boots) distributed throughout gallery. Her touch might read as tentative at first: Fluttery, smudge-like brushstrokes seem to just gradually coax the depicted volumes and surfaces into existence—but it's an existence that's ever so slightly vague and blurry, as if a strong wind could disperse it.

The paintings are most convincing when they offer the least encouragement to interpretation. For instance, a spatially disorienting, cropped view of a car's steering wheel, gearshift, and door (*Car interior / the sack*) or a weakly gleaming set of knight's armor (*Relapsing in2 mysticism*, both works 2019), suggest no easy allegories. You have to look at them as they are, in their inherent oddity—which is amplified by the unusual surfaces Wood has employed: The former work is painted on burlap, with the result that her depiction appears gauzy, indistinct; the latter is on black velvet, which the artist uses to tone down the gleam of the armor. If you go on to brood about why your wheels get you nowhere, or how a paladin's metal carapace might offer false security, that's your business.

Wood's reticent but not particularly refined marks might seem to cast doubt on the substantial reality of what she chooses to paint. But the more time one spends with these pictures, the more aware one becomes of the underlying aggressiveness with which Wood buttonholes her subjects; she's actually no more hesitant in tackling her imagery than a cat is shy about dealing the coup de grâce to a mouse it's tormenting. Whatever you think you see in these paintings, it's probably what Wood's own lyrical prose, offered in lieu of a press release, calls a “funhouse reflection, actual reflection but not too much.”

— *Barry Schwabsky*