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“Lucy Dodd: Miss Mars” at Sprüth Magers

by Anya Harrison

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Miss Mars is a feisty fireball. She takes crap from no one. Miss Mars might also be “only two inches tall, but she’s definitely a superhero; a tiny being with humongous powers.” Welcome to the multiverse of the New York-based artist Lucy Dodd. “Miss Mars” is also the title and subject of Dodd’s debut show in London at Sprüth Magers, on view from October 2 to November 17, and it promises to deliver not just a superhero punch but a loving caress, too.

Dodd is a natural storyteller, and her stories — or better, myths — go from the microcosmic to the cosmic in a nanosecond. The series of new paintings and works on paper that she brings to London are tied spiritually to the (now defunct) George and Dragon pub in East London; the legend of St. George; Dodd’s own English heritage; motherhood; St-Georgcum-Mars (translated into the language of universal myth); and the female side of St. George/Mars, an elemental spirit connected to nature. Ergo, Miss Mars. At the bottom of it all is an ongoing reflection about painting, specifically “dealing with the fact that I’m a woman painter in this day and age and the question of what do I have to offer?” Dodd said in an interview. “How do I make painting in this male-dominated world, so what I have to offer is the large, powerful aspect of the feminine.”



Lucy Dodd, “Open Plan,” installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 17-March 20, 2016.
(Courtesy Photography: B Ill Orcut T)

Enter Dodd’s canvases, on which these psychological battles play out between male, female and celestial energies, replete with all manner of organic goodness: squid ink, avocado, yerba mate, kombucha scobies. The list goes on. Rubbed, sprayed, smeared or stained onto the often large-scale, canvases that Dodd works with directly on the floor of her studio or another space, they undergo an alchemical transformation and impregnate the raw linen with their scent and pigment.

Like her subject matter, Dodd's choice of painting materials is dictated by "a deep yearning to be closer to nature," she said. "The first marks are always ones that I'm directly connected to, whether it's food or something very grounding from the earth. At the moment, this includes avocado rinds, onions and tulip extract. And then I introduce the outer "pollutants": the fluorescents and man-made pigments."

Initially she gives them free rein, allowing the range of consistencies to spill itself out and affect the canvas, before taking back control and guiding the work to completion.

You could call it a ritualistic dance, of sorts. Being confronted with Dodd's canvases is likely to evince a guttural, visceral reaction. Not content with hanging on walls, they often venture directly into gallery space, blocking pathways, demanding attention. Some also display a fantastic wonkiness, due to the unusual shapes of the canvases, and look like they've been caught mid-flight, about to go spiralling off in another direction. As a result of their impressive scale, their purposely in-your-face poise is difficult to sidestep. "Painting has its own unique language. You stand in front of it and have a reaction. Or not," Dodd said. Yes, her works are in a sense aggressive and pushy, but their colors and energy (remember Miss Mars) are ultra-feminine. "It's connected to the emotional body," Dodd added, "which is confronted within the scale of the painting.

So, in that way, they're forceful and reactionary to the time, space, country, elements within which I'm working." Miss Mars has spoken. Bam.