



## Megan Marrin

August, 2017

This painting by Megan Marrin, *The Breed*, gives us a still life of a corpse flower, complicating a tradition that has deep ties to the *vanitas* and *memento mori* urges. What happens when that tradition is inverted—when life, not death, marks putrefaction? What can we say when the corpse comes of age?

*The Breed*, like the other works in Marrin's show, *Corps*, which is currently on view at David Lewis Gallery, resonated with me. Perhaps it's because they're terrifically well-painted, or perhaps it's because I'm a native of Los Angeles, which is home to its own corpse flower. But there is more to this show than technical facility and interesting content. On two different registers, I'd say that these works, like Jaimie Warren's, are investigating much older traditions.

*Corps* at David Lewis is a spacious and balanced exhibition of eight paintings of *Amorphophallus titanium*, a.k.a. The Corpse Flower. As the artist notes in her statement, "There were to be eight paintings, four life, four death, all the same size, all the same color palette, underneath all is cinnabar green, no painting happened over white canvas." The corpse flower is the largest blooming flower in the world. It is quite rare, but there are a handful of examples grown in city gardens around the country. Saint Louis has one, as does the Huntington Library and Gardens in Pasadena. But what's most notable about the corpse flower is not its size, but the strong, pungent odor that it emits, signaling insects to pollinate. The flower's second most notable feature is its time to bloom, which can take a full decade.

Marrin's eight works document the bloom of a corpse flower, and in doing so form a four-by-four pendant of life and death. *Breed* for instance, depicts the famous bloom in its decline. Its towering inflorescence, which in the nearby painting, *The Hunger*, stands purple and erect, is now collapsed and blanched of color. The handling of paint and Marrin's technical virtuosity create a near pho-



Megan Marrin, "The Breed," 2016. Courtesy of David Lewis Gallery



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torealistic depiction of this living, dying, stinking thing. And in that way, the works seem to harken to the still-life tradition, and especially its seventeenth-century Dutch roots.

Four hundred years ago the still-life became a space for the Dutch to enact their Calvinist ideologies while also creating paintings that were suitable to a middle-class market (which had no need for devotional imagery). Great still-life painters like Rachel Ruysch and Clara Peeters filled their works with objects both bursting with life and flirting with decay. For them, these hyper-realistic works served as morality tales—*memento moris*—that life, in all its glory, was a fleeting thing. I see these same urges pulsing through the works at *Corps*, only now the story is somewhat stranger, because this flower's maturation implies a kind of death, so its greatest moment of aliveness is also the one that reminds people most of their own decrepitude. Marrin seized on this paradox, and the results are fruitful. Is there not something inescapably *fleeting* about a flower that takes ten years to blossom, only to bloom for a day?

We could also say much of her painting these atop cinnamon green, and not a typically white-primed canvas (you can see this, if you look closely). Green primer was once *de rigueur* for tempera painters, who utilized green and red's status as complementary colors. When someone like Duccio underpainted his Madonnas with green it allowed their reddish flesh tones, once applied on top, to "pop," or have more saturation. That Marrin would underpaint green for overwhelmingly green canvases would seem to have the opposite effect, a kind of tonal flattening, or at least play a part in their unique appearance. This I also find quite interesting.



Megan Marrin, *Corps*, David Lewis Gallery. Courtesy of David Lewis Gallery



Megan Marrin, "The Legacy (STL)," 2017. Courtesy of David Lewis Gallery