



Emma McIntyre, *This body holds swamp stuff*, 2022, oil on linen, 248.9 x 177.8 cm

# BIG CRAFTY ANGELS IN THE GARDEN

The rococo delights of  
Emma McIntyre's abstraction

by Evangeline Riddiford Graham



A blonde on a rope swing flings up legs supple as goose necks. Down from her peachy efflorescence—skirts, matching garters, soft beginnings of a Bourbon double chin—falls a shoe so dainty it could fit in the palm of a man's hand; and there is a man, waiting ecstatic in the rose bushes. Abundant, fleshy and vague, the roses might as well be dahlias, or the lost butt cheeks of Cupid.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard's masterpiece *The Swing* (1767–8) isn't an obvious point of reference for an artist who favours mark-making and motion over pedantic frills and tricorne hats. But rococo, that school of frenzied ornamentation, thrives on flowers. And in artist Emma McIntyre's ebullient abstract paintings, the stylised motif of the flower crops up where you least expect it—sometimes delineated with primary-school conventionality (a tree is a triangle; a house is a triangle atop a square; a flower is a circle with petals), sometimes blurred into confetti.

In McIntyre's most recent paintings, prepared for her New York debut at David Zwirner (opening 21 September), flowers emerge from almost nothing: a blotch, a spiral, a hibiscus squiggle. Once you start looking, you can't help but participate in McIntyre's project of proliferation. A shadow daisy floats atop a miniature field of incarnadine. A poppy blushes into oblivion. And on the bare ground of a huge canvas, roses swirl so big and blowsy they threaten to overgrow the frame. Wouldn't we be so lucky, to have rampant giant roses as our weightiest concern. Destruction would, at the very least, be beautifully perfumed.

McIntyre paints in a cavernous studio in Los Angeles: enough space for her floor-to-ceiling canvases to sprawl between rooms, and for smaller works to find a private nook. Her studio mate is Kahu, a rangy, wire-haired hound. As McIntyre and I chatted this July, he lay patiently at her feet. I forgot to ask if his tail has ever been trialled as a brush. Its scale is perfect for McIntyre's long strokes.

Those big swooping lines and generous blobs suggest flowers stylised almost to the point of polka dots (another motif McIntyre favours). Too cute, too familiar, her flowers tickle the 'tastefulness' of minimalism with the destabilising spectre of kitsch. What makes a flower or polka dot 'tacky' is over-use, so McIntyre goes further, repeating these would-be clichés across many canvases, until, under her inquisitive pressure, they pop.

As McIntyre points out, flowers contain all of art history. A bud may droop under all that baggage, its complexity wilting into incoherence. Stuck in symbol purgatory, halfway between meaning everything and meaning nothing, a painted flower can be abundant or deadweight. It's a contradiction straight out of Fragonard: while rococo corkscrewed between joyful and silly, the hindsight of the French Revolution lends the movement's "aristocratic dream-world" a *danse macabre* quality.<sup>1</sup> Roses, or rolling heads? McIntyre animates these nested contradictions—pleasure and risk, appetite and nausea—in mark making of abbreviated intensity, and in sweet, treacherous surfaces. To look at a McIntyre painting is to ice-skate on a cake: you admire the glaze at comfortable cruising speed



until a detail, so subtle you barely register it, snags your blade and you find yourself immersed in something sticky. Desire? Memory? Butter?

McIntyre recognises the alchemical process of sensory experience and memory as an intrinsic quality of painting—and she pushes the sensual heft of paint to its limits. The artist transforms pigment into pulse with the sweeping arm of a magician: here, a warm, lustrous oil ground; there, paint loosened and tipsy with spirits. Now pour! Lately she's added to this potion iron paint—mineral suspended in binder—which she then oxidises for a rusted surface, inspired by the metallurgical experiments of Sigmar Polke (meteor dust) and Robert Rauschenberg (oxidised copper).

The new iron paintings gleam in contemplative radiance, pooling inward in the way a sense of déjà vu can simmer for days on end, even returning over the span of a life. Think of Proust with his madeleine. Or the courtier who commissioned Fragonard to depict his mistress on a rope swing and wearing a milkmaid hat, in a bid to immortalise the brief thrill of her giggle.

Other paintings evoke light as it is remembered: the white glow of sun on sand, the way foliage against a blue sky becomes untethered, a green so bright it can only blow away. These might be memories, or something less readily formulated: a likeness leading away from language, away from individuation, to pure sensation.

In seeking new shapes for the nebulous, McIntyre bumps the uninhibited redundancies of rococo against the energy of feminist performance artists like Carolee Schneeman, who reinvigorated painting as, first and foremost, an action done by the body. What is left behind is excess—not cascading flounces, but the trail of female flesh. Both routes—rococo and feminist—bypass monuments and arrive at transience. With McIntyre as navigator, the intersection is

Emma McIntyre, *Walked on dawns*, 2022, oil on linen, 213.4 × 182.9 cm

OPPOSITE  
Emma McIntyre, *I have hung our cave with roses* (detail), 2022, oil on linen, 170.2 × 200.7 cm



Emma McIntyre, *Pearl Diver* Installation  
View, Chateau Shatto, Los Angeles,  
February 2023. Photo: Ed Mumford



only a little bit heartbreaking, like yellow flashed through orange. It can't, shouldn't, doesn't last.

After completing a BVA in painting at Auckland University of Technology, McIntyre pursued an MFA at Elam School of Fine Arts. There, McIntyre remembers Peter Robinson pointing out to her: "You don't really care about what you're painting, you just care about paint. So why aren't you painting abstractly?" Fair enough, McIntyre thought. She hasn't looked back.

After she dispensed with description in 2016, a perspective-warping grid appeared in McIntyre's paintings, etched through wet paint with a fingernail or charted in impasto daubs. This grid might be understood as a recessed compositional device—an artist's manipulations made explicit. Or perhaps it's a grid à la Pierre Bonnard, a favourite of McIntyre's, in which hatched patterns of wallpaper, tablecloth

Emma McIntyre, *I have hung our cave with roses*, 2022, oil on linen, 170.2 × 200.7 cm

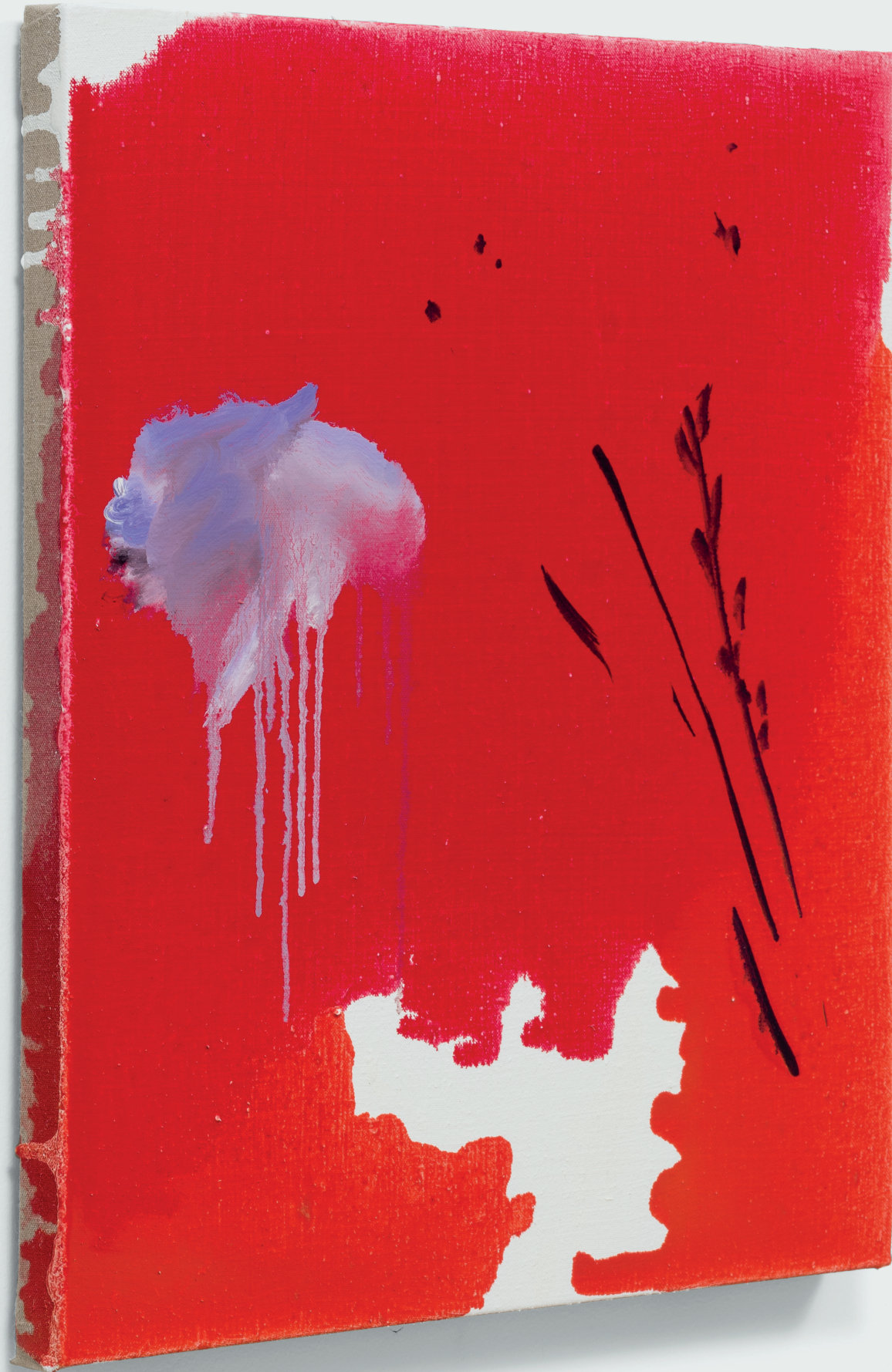
Emma McIntyre, *Coral made*, 2022, oil and blackened bronze on linen, 30.5 × 35.6 cm



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and dress hover above rooms, furniture, bodies. On a McIntyre canvas, the grid's simple, tantalising paradox of distance and proximity coughs up spider webs, vinyl dance-floors, a tessellated-cube net. In a permissive practice, there are options. You can slice up that nicely iced cake with a discerning fork, or you can smooch it all over your face. Go on, eat the painting.

While McIntyre paints her massive canvases in just one or two sessions after their initial preparation, her smaller pieces build up over weeks, accumulating paint until dense compositional experiments emerge. On still smaller pieces of cardboard, she tests ideas with quick decisive marks, the equivalent of sketches. These parallel practices inform and train one another along a trellis of brushwork.

In 2020, McIntyre moved to California to study at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, where she took a painting class with Richard Hawkins. She describes the experience as life changing. Hawkins encouraged students to explore further and further back in art history; in this delving, McIntyre let go of the gridded constraints of her previous work. Looking back to the eighteenth century, she arrived at the asymmetric hedonism of rococo and the thrill of its proscenium arch—the studied bend of waterfall or foliage or curtains that marks the entrance to a painting, and controls our journey through it.

But the embrace of McIntyre's proscenium is bigger, less didactic, than the fairy-tale trees of Fragonard, or the theatrical drapery of François Boucher. A McIntyre arch might be a paint-laden body part dragged across the canvas; a dappled spurt of green, yellow, purple; paint dripped in the horizontal growth of wind-struck mānuka; the all-surrounding green bower of Watteau, *fête galante* picnickers replaced with cadmium red polka dots. Which isn't to say figuration is disavowed. Among the work McIntyre is developing for her show at David Zwirner, a wistful white heron ghosts two canvases, sly as an estuary trick of the light. In another series, a small violet swirl splotches an enormous wash of iron-oxidised colour: a rococo festoon atop post-war German rigour, a pāua shell lolling on oil spill.

That rusted quality, McIntyre notes, isn't just the domain of practised alchemists like Polke: amateurs and home decorators might buy iron paint to touch up the patina of their "big crafty angels in the garden." This is an artist making room for the professionals and the passionate, the Fragonards, Polkes and unnumbered Anonymous. Virginia Woolf posited that Anonymous was often a woman, excluded from the artistic mainstream and instead seeking refuge in unsigned imagination.<sup>2</sup> "But what is the state of mind that is most propitious to the act of creation[?]" Woolf wondered.<sup>3</sup> McIntyre's painterly garden, welcoming to rustic angels, art history scholarship and five-petal flowers, is both answer and invitation.

A small constellation of postcards and printouts from this expansive canon is pinned above McIntyre's desk. She pointed me to a Florine Stettheimer postcard nestled in the centre: a faded reproduction of Stettheimer's *Family Portrait II* (1933). The painting boasts a dizzying tour of art history and influence. The three Stettheimer sisters



and their mother are accompanied by a crowned gargoyle (neo-gothic!), the Chrysler Building (art deco!), fringed curtains (rococo!) and exquisitely flattened textiles (Les Nabis!). It's all dwarfed by an enormous bouquet, plonked in the middle of the painting: red poppy, white lily, pink rose. "This work in particular has infected my mind," McIntyre told me. "The people are so small and the flowers are so big."

McIntyre has inherited Stettheimer's adoringly decorated, dense simplicity and remade it on her own terms. Her rust overflows. Her proscenium frame welcomes. You don't have to see flowers, and some viewers will surely argue that they can't see them. They wouldn't be wrong in their opinion. But you are certainly *allowed* to see flowers, if flowers are what you desire. For McIntyre, ornamentation transforms painting into more than a scene—it becomes a stage, a site of activity and imagination, tension and release. The idea applies to abstraction as well as figuration: gesture has potential as both prop and performer, thinks McIntyre, and the application of paint can be driven by a private narrative just outside the frame.

What remains is the adventure of taste; the pleasure of looking.

- Emma McIntyre  
21 September–28 October 2023  
David Zwirner, 34 East 69th Street  
New York City

Emma McIntyre, *who looks on the light of the sun*, 2022, oil on linen, 38.1 × 43.2 cm

OPPOSITE  
Emma McIntyre, *Little hell flames*, 2022, oil on linen, 40.6 × 35.6 cm

PREVIOUS  
Emma McIntyre, *Monograph of a stain (detail)*, 2022, oil, acrylic and indian ink on linen, 250.2 × 198.1 cm

Emma McIntyre, *Hyacinthus*, 2022, oil on linen, 228.6 × 198.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto, Los Angeles