

Verity Coward | Charismatics

11 April - 17 May 2025

Brooke Benington is pleased to present Charismatics, a solo exhibition by Verity Coward. Building on her recent institutional debut at Flatland Projects, the exhibition brings together a series of paintings and a new sculptural installation.

Within Charismatics, the slack line of recognition is variously tightened and loosened between works. Landscape painting is rubbed down, emerging as the strange cousin of still life. Some paintings are tethered to a staged 'real' by stock imagery and emblems of our world - wads of cash, googly eyes, a rocket. These provide moments of connection amid the crash-bang of tangled forms and assertive structures. In other works, such familiar figures are absent, loosening the grip on reality.

Alongside the paintings, Coward expands her ongoing series of sculptural interventions using silver foil inflated with helium - ephemeral stunt doubles that find their absurd form and footing in the material world. The presence of these structures welcomes unpredictability, whilst their crude architecture instigates another removal from the real.

There is a certain irreverence to seriousness which Verity Coward applies to her work. She takes cues from mechanics, cartoons, tableaux, theatre... with mischievous influences from Punch and Judy to Looney Tunes to Goethe's slapstick tragedy Faust. Across this broad spectrum of references there is a commonality: absurdity, animation, action and rule breaking.

Verity Coward offers up some working examples. During early productions of Faust, puppets replaced actors as a way to play out the devil and sneak around censorship laws. In Italo Calvino's Baron in the Trees, the surreality of a young boy living in an arboreal kingdom functions as an anti-fascist allegory. Road Runner and Wile. E Coyote's world has no limitations, so new ones must be made up by its animators.

Coward is interested in these kinds of hijinks and ruses that smuggle in messages of freedom and agency. From antiquity to today, there's a craftiness and cunning in finding ways to rearrange and find distance from reality to make a move. How might we get what we want? To which rules must we bow? Coward feels their own work can be seen as a Trojan horse or soapbox car. There's a stunt being worked towards. A plan is hatched, much apparatus is gathered and all to fall away once the thing gets going.

The final paintings are made by working from staged cardboard and papier mâché models. Unseen in the final works, they hold a provisional and speculative role. Coward makes the models quickly and adapts to the give and will of the materials. Although she creates multiple stagings, sets and drawings, Coward is not repeating the process for the sake of studies. Each stage of the process is an opportunity to step away and take it to another place. It is set in motion but not plotted.

In the act of painting, Coward is practical and purposeful; everything is at work and rough-hewn. Coward speaks of their reluctance to adapt certain parts of the paintings once they have "settled into themselves", referencing the emergence of block shapes, frenetic underpainting or corners of landscape.

The balloon sculptures invite mischief and uncertainty into the exhibition spaces. Coward talks about them requiring a strong-handed lassoing and wrangling when they are being filled and raised, alongside absolute delicacy and care. Coward is interested in how the balloon sculptures fill another speculative role within her work. They are an unreliable presence in the exhibition space suggesting form and structure but without robustly providing it.

In the studio, Coward enjoys actively shifting the paintings around, rehousing them to different corners like a scene change. The cast of models now exist somewhere within the paintings. In some, their material origins are clearly visible, whereas in others they have submerged into something else entirely. The paintings lean towards the cartoonish, but unlike a cartoon they aren't weightless or unmoored. They are hitched to reality by the way in which they were rooted in the material world.

Written by Dolores Carbonari.

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BENINGTON

www.brookebenington.com
info@brookebenington.com
[@brookebenington](https://www.instagram.com/brookebenington)