ALMINE RECH

Alexis McGrigg
In The Beloved

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In The Beloved is the latest addition to the visual cosmology of interdisciplinary artist Alexis McGrigg. A sequence of painterly choreographies, this exhibition of new works extends the transcendent narrative she has been refining and expanding since 2015. The storytelling architecture from which these works developed concerns the artist's personal investigations into a multiform, pluralized conception of Blackness. McGrigg's practice encompasses painting, drawing, experimental video, and installation. These multiple approaches are channeled towards a set of artistic exercises which themselves rely on a constellation of influences across painting, literature and music. The dynamic breadth of her chosen wellsprings of information and mediums of experimentation are crucial to this assemblage of paintings at Almine Rech Brussels.

McGrigg situates herself as a multi-media abstractionist. This series of works reflects the wide net of reference points which infuse her particular style of ethereal pictorial expression. The pieces are suggestive of some of her influential touchstones, such as the variably surfaced, splattered color fields of the lyrical abstract painter Sam Gilliam and the startling blue of Yves Klein's conceptual pigmentations. With this exhibition, the artist has electrified her familiar chromatic palette. The deep indigo, striking violet and turquoise, traces of magenta and scatterings of gold which recur throughout her practice are cast with captivating vibrancy. Fabric dyes on canvas, mixed with acrylic and charcoal, are layered to create sinuous splotches and textured compositions. Crucially, these tactile coatings are more than a passive backdrop. The chronology of her method relies on this textured, multicolored surface as a point of emergence for her abstracted figures.

The cloudy silhouettes in these paintings are indeed prefigured by the space around them, created by a conjunction of chance and intention. McGrigg's technique allows for a measure of unpredictability, and the shapes of the figures are determined by where she sees them being revealed through the initial layering of dappled, swirling colors. The intermingling of interior and exterior—which is foundational to her conceptualization of "The Beloved"—is also visually rendered through the porousness between the figures and what surrounds them. The resulting material interchangeability captures the way they are not just of similar but the same matter. The paintings engage a Black metaphysics which skirts around presumed physical barriers between beings and their environments. Constitutively intermingled with their space, her spectral figurations are identified by their luminous contours: cloudy traces of white and loose outlines of dusted gold. While a few of them appear as solitary figures, most have companions, rendering this series as an enactment of McGrigg's investigations into collective and communal ways of being.

McGrigg's turn away from the terrestrial towards the celestial occurs in a lineage of similar gestures of Black cultural production. From Sun Ra to Octavia E. Butler, Black artists of various mediums have dislodged themselves from the earthly sphere as a way of refusing its dominant white supremacist terms of power, valuation, and existence. While McGrigg is not positioned within Afrofuturism in any definitive way, her practice enlivens an orientation towards imaginative exercises and forms of speculative creation along similar terms—experimenting with how Black peoples have taken on the task of imagining alternatives ways of being through her conceptual cosmology of paintings. Hers is very much a process of contemporary mythmaking, offering her paintings as a vehicle for a fabular technique which renders these paintings an intentional form of visual storytelling.

In The Beloved demonstrates the aquatic quality of the astral conjuring which define McGrigg's paintings. The artist activates the ways sky and sea are chromatically linked, as well as how both these spaces of impossible human habitation carry a valence of the mysterious and the unknown—and a related invitation towards fantastical envisioning. The artist's conceptual narrative is bound to the liquid movements of a cyclical temporality. The paintings hold a rotational elan,

sustained the dynamism of the figures themselves, animated by a delicate sense of constant metamorphosis. While there is a verticality to the pieces, especially those with clearer figures, these are not rigid spatial terms. McGrigg's paintings contain a sense of inward and outward motion, with the impression they might fold on themselves and actively mimic the same temporal cycles which inspired them.

The watery method of her pigmentations and hazy figurations are crucial to how these paintings orchestrate a dreamlike atmosphere of speculation. The velvety surfaces, incandescent colors and sinuous convergences of *In The Beloved* are the visual transmission of the artist's metaphysics of Blackness. Ultimately, McGrigg's paintings appear as expansive portals.

– Yasmina Price, writer, researcher and PhD student in the Departments of African American Studies and Film & Media Studies at Yale University.