

Nathanaëlle Herbelin

And there is a place you will not be able to return to

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Press Release

Nathanaëlle Herbelin's second exhibition at the gallery presents a new series of portraits and interiors that navigate the fragile balance between immediate, everyday experience and the weight of an unsettled world. At once intimate and expansive, these paintings reflect a desire to hold on to moments of connection—small yet significant interactions with friends, neighbours, and family—amidst an undercurrent of grief, uncertainty, and shifting realities. Herbelin's approach is neither sentimental nor detached; rather, she paints with an acute awareness of how personal and collective histories intertwine. The act of painting becomes a way to ground herself, to acknowledge absence, and to bear witness to both quiet rituals and emotional thresholds.

While Herbelin's earlier works were characterised by vibrant colours and clearly defined settings, the paintings in this exhibition embrace ambiguity. Figures emerge from undefined or weighty backgrounds, emphasising presence over place, memory over setting. *Arie*, the artist's late grandfather from Israel, is painted posthumously from photographs. His depiction resists traditional hierarchies of representation—someone who might not typically be immortalised on canvas is here granted a quiet yet steadfast visibility. Herbelin's gaze is both tender and unflinchingly honest, stripping away embellishment to reveal the raw intimacy of her subjects.

This evolution is also evident in *Raphael et Anne-Sophie*, an artist couple expecting a child, and *Theodora*, which depicts a fellow artist—all living in the same arrondissement. In the first painting, a pair of eyes can be discerned in the upper right corner, an unmistakable nod to the Egyptian Fayum portraits that remain a touchstone for Herbelin. The second work incorporates a detail—a hand—from another painting in the exhibition, *Mathieu et Melvil*. Here, a detached hand rests on the sofa as an *ex-voto*, symbolising a personal sacrifice he made in his life. This is akin to the expression 'giving one's right arm', which underscores the lengths one would go to for love, devotion or necessity.

Herbelin's late grandfather, Arie is also an absent presence in two of Herbelin's works depicting Jewish mourning rituals. In *Shiva*, Herbelin reconstructs, from memory, a bird's-eye view of her grandfather's home during *shiva*, the seven-day mourning period following a funeral. The painting reflects the charged atmosphere of this ritual, in which the bereaved remain at home, marking their loss through time-honoured rituals: sitting on low chairs, covering mirrors, and lighting a candle in remembrance. The second, larger work on this theme, *Dîner aux œufs durs* [Dinner with Hard-Boiled Eggs], interprets the *Se'udat Havra'ah*, the meal of condolence that follows a burial. Hard-boiled eggs—along with bagels, lentils and other round foods—are central to this meal, symbolising the cycle of life and renewal. The composition of the painting takes inspiration from Egon Schiele's *Die Freunde (Tafelrunde), groß* [The Friends (Round Table), Large], 1918. Just as Schiele painted his own circle of friends gathered around the table, Herbelin populates *Dîner aux œufs durs* with her own acquaintances as well as imagined figures. Among her recurring subjects is Merlin, a young boy who used to live near the artist's previous studio. In this full-length painting, he is depicted amidst flowers, set against an abstract background that seems to distance him from immediate reality. This treatment heightens his vulnerability while marking a shift in Herbelin's

practice—where previous works featured defined environments and vivid colours, these new paintings lean into atmospheric ambiguity. The ornamentation of her earlier work has given way to restrained yet expressive backgrounds, rendered in subtle, evocative tones—making way for new art historical references, such as the early work of Max Beckmann or Christian Schad.

While portraits remain central to Herbelin's practice, her nuanced depictions of interior spaces are equally poignant in conveying mood and atmosphere, revealing the psychological depths of her subjects. Two interior scenes, in particular, evoke contrasting realities and psychological spaces: one depicting a desolate kitchen, *Ustensiles*, and the other, *Jérémie qui donne le biberon*, portraying the artist's partner, Jérémie, feeding their baby in a hotel room in China where the artist recently completed a residency. The panoramic view framed by the window in the latter painting contrasts starkly with the small, barely visible window in the kitchen, a subtle indicator of confinement and diminished hope. Similarly, the personal possessions on the hotel table stand in contrast to their near-total absence in the kitchen, despite other clues suggesting a recent human presence. The latter painting holds the quiet act of care in tension with the busy, impersonal cityscape beyond, reflecting the contrast between private tenderness and the vastness of the outside world.

The interplay between interior and exterior spaces—both literal and psychological—in this new body of work mirrors the artist's negotiation of past and present, presence and absence. Whether reconstructing her grandfather's apartment from memory, capturing the transient intimacy of a shared meal, or painting figures from her neighbourhood, Herbelin's works resist easy narratives. Instead, her paintings offer a space where the everyday and the existential coexist, where the act of looking itself becomes an act of recognition.

Nathanaëlle Herbelin (b. 1989, Tel Aviv, Israel) obtained a Master of Fine Arts degree from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris in 2016, during which time she was invited to participate in an exchange programme at The Cooper Union, New York. Herbelin's first solo exhibition in Asia, *Feel the pulse*, opens at the He Art Museum in Shunde, China (8 March to 8 June 2025). It will showcase the works made during her residency at the museum in 2024. Recent solo include *Être ici est une splendeur*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris (2024); *À la surface, le fond de l'oeil*, French Institute of Tel Aviv (2022); *Et peut-être que ces choses n'ont jamais eu lieu*, Umm Al Fahem Palestinian Art Center (2021), *Devenir Peinture*, Yishu 8 prize, George V Art Centre, Beijing (2021); and group exhibitions such as the FRAC Champagne-Ardenne (2021); Passerelle Art Center, Brest (2020); the museums of the Abbaye Sainte-Croix (Sables d'Olonnes, 2019); Bétonsalon, Paris (2019); the Beaux-Arts Museum of Rennes (2018), Collection Lambert, Avignon (2017) and Fondation d'Entreprise Ricard, Paris (2017).

The exhibition title comes from the poem
Eyes Sadness and Journey Descriptions (תיאור
מסע עצבות עיניים), from the book *Behind All This,
Hides Great Happiness* (כל זה מסתתר אושר גדול)
(מאחורי) by Yehuda Amichai.

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