

GREENE NAFTALI

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Jana Euler
The Traveling Legends of the Morecorns

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8th Floor

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This is strange realism, but it's a strange reality.

All serious art, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what in fact is going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this belly of the universe, the womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story. In Jana Euler's new paintings, the legend has not only action but a hero — a tragic hero, alas — the *Morecorn*.

In art there is time to gather old ideas and sow new ones, and still the story isn't over. The mythological unicorn once told the time on another world, a world of beginnings without end, of initiations, losses, transformations, and translations. The unicorn still populates the imaginations of children, who might ponder how to meet one, or become one. The kitsch, fairy-tale imagery, set in rainbow-scapes, is endless. All this collides with the applied magic of Silicon Valley and its desire for infinite growth, where venture capitalist Aileen Lee coined the term *unicorn* to describe the mythological startup with a billion-dollar valuation. In this world of magic, the rainbow belongs to Apple, and a logic dependent on rarity and scarcity of time and goods can sustain itself only through perpetual growth. Euler's creatures must grow hugely elongated noses to hold the multiplying number of horns, leading to severe imbalances, filling half the paintings, dragging down the once-weightless bodies. Euler's *Morecorns* look as if they've suffered as many tricks as conflicts, fewer triumphs than snares and delusions, missions that fail, people who don't understand.

I had been considering the unicorn as motif since I was first invited to write this piece, but when I meet Euler at Greene Naftali to stand among the works, she's all about process, material, and technique. She is in New York for her first exhibition with the gallery, and is excited and nervous. She has been painting the series over the past year, despite having seen less art and fewer people than ever, a state of intensity and emotions that we are all too familiar with. The paintings are unusual. For a second they look anemic and veiled, less luminous than I'd expected. But every step changes their appearance. Move left or right, approach and step back: the images shimmer like oil on water. To yield these translucent and opaque tonalities, with their many gradations of reflection, Euler has used iridescent paint. It makes sense, because Euler insists that one must see paintings in person, and iridescent colors are very difficult to photograph. Every brush stroke is both translucent and reflective, throwing light, producing no stable mark. Euler had to step into painting as a defamiliarized experience, and there were many surprises. The translucency means that all mistakes can be seen; reworked unicorn body parts are visible as shadows. Everything was experiment, and she needed to relearn her techniques. This produced a sense of freedom, and a challenge: Can I get away with this kitsch, on the level of material and motif, and can I make good work that is serious but funny? It is not easy to tell the story of how we have wrested new forms of social and intimate life from a pandemic.

We are surrounded by ten *Morecorns*, each facing left, wreathed with stylistic elements from der Blaue Reiter, the Baroque, Romanticism. They are depicted in precarious situations. One leaps through a ring, breaking its horns; others find themselves at a loss at the edge of a cliff, atop a peak, splashing through water, surrounded by meteors, caught mid-air on a giant spiraling horn, trapped in a hole, galloping into the collapsing horizon. The forms into which Euler has forced the *Morecorns* express her now-familiar sense of composition: figures crowd the canvas, pressing on all edges, folded, pulled, stretched, slanted, upside down. The energy here does not flow; it leaks, drains, bursts, or stagnates in a state of utter exhaustion. For emphasis, the artist has built thick wooden frames and painted them matte grey, which make the paintings cumbersome and object-like even as they somehow suggest the screen image. The images shimmer and reflect, while the frames swallow light, a dull enclosure for the wild *Morecorns*.

The *Morecorn* as form and protagonist is funny and unwieldy, bringing to mind the similarly strange beings of another of Euler's series, *Great White Fear* (2019), which features phallic sharks bursting from the sea. How different those paintings feel today, barely two years later; it makes me wonder how *The Traveling Legends of the Morecorns* may seem in the future. This exhibition could be another attempt to awkwardly and boldly imagine how the familiar, entangled emotions of the present might some day feel.

The gallery entrance is dominated by a large painting of a wall-plug outlet timer, in line with Euler's well-known paintings of electric receptacles; a real timer regulates the lighting in the gallery, which suddenly changes at programmed intervals, causing the paintings' haunted scenes to change appearance. Euler has long been interested in energy and where it comes from: electricity, or sources that are even more fleeting: beauty, imagination, harmony, expansion, the wild freedom of the mythological unicorn. All of these more philosophical sources of energy are now depleted by a dark conjunction of pandemic tragedy and what is clearly a late-neoliberal state that no longer functions. Humor, however, might be one energetic force that can still push around the strange vibrations in these paintings.

Artists dream of painting the complexity of the feelings of their time, of registering the intimate and secret, the social, cultural, and political, of reflecting on the state of art and the world around it. In this show, we are faced with a myth made tragic by a desire for ever-more: the nose can never be long enough nor the horns plentiful enough. To escape this failed way of being we need other kinds of magic, other paths to abundance, and the connections to nature and to wild freedom that might have been on our minds when we dreamed up the original unicorn. Despite our recent ruptures and tragedies, we may now have the beginnings of a stronger collective consciousness. Although depleted and interrupted, Euler's *Morecorns* remain seekers: wild and cosmic, ready to expand and illuminate.

Jana Euler (b. 1982 in Friedberg, Germany) lives and works in Frankfurt and Brussels. Recent solo exhibitions include Greene Naftali, New York (2021); Artists Space, New York (2020); Galerie Neu, Berlin (2019); dépendance, Brussels (2018); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2017); Cabinet, London (2017); Portikus, Frankfurt (2015), and Kunsthalle Zürich and Bonner Kunstverein (2014/2015). Significant group shows include Manifesta 13, Marseille, France (2020); Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (2019); Tai Kwun, Hong Kong (2019); Greene Naftali, New York (2018); mumok, Vienna (2018); Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, Geneva (2017); Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden, Germany (2013); and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2013).