

NINE LIVES

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FORTNIGHT INSTITUTE

21 East 3rd St. NYC

Jessica Alazraki

Greg Burak

Plum Cloutman

Chioma Ebinama

Katelyn Eichwald

Shanique Emelife

Hadi Fallahpisheh

Cielo Felix Hernandez

Sally J. Han

Mary Herbert

Miho Ichise

Thaleia Karpouzi

Minyoung Kim

Sean Kierre Lyons

Mayumi Nakao

Chris Oh

Mike Ousley

Alison Schulnik

Tao Siqi

Agata Slowak

Cheri Smith

Paige Turner-Urbe

Aleksandra Waliszewska

Andersen Woof

Nine Lives is a group show that looks to examine the perennial motif of cats within art. Across generations and cultures, felines have been used as a vehicle for symbolism, with their presence pointing to myriad signs - ranging from rebirth, femininity, to the domestic, and most perhaps most ominous and alluring, black magic. In this presentation, we are exposed to the various ways in which artists both lovingly and often equivocally portray this ever elegant and mysterious creature.

Felines have long been subjects of human devotion. Within art, their presence can be traced back to the ancient Egyptians, for whom cats were not beloved supplicants, but revered deities. Today, cats remain an indelible symbol of intuition, independence and rebirth; qualities with equivocal connotations. Cats are considered harbingers of both good and evil. As spiritual guardians, their invocation is a protection from maleficent spirits, but in the hands of dark magic, they portend a dangerous unravelling. Perhaps it is this dichotomy which has sustained human interest in these mysterious and divine creatures.

Within *Nine Lives*, we encounter the myriad ways contemporary artists have visualized their adoration and intrigue of these unpredictable creatures. In the paintings of artists Chioma Ebinama, Thaleia Karpouzi, Agata Słowak and Aleksandra Waliszewska, we see how cats are aligned with the female spirit, anthropomorphic symbols that complete the image of woman through a primal allyship. Within each of their works, the characterization of both feline and the female is classically one of seduction, mystery and danger: the power of the pussy. This vision is confirmed in the titling of Karpouzi's painting, *Devilish*, in which a woman with an impenetrable gaze poses like a modern odalisque, while a salivating black cat confirms her sexual prerogative. For Waliszewska, woman and cat are merged in Greek mythological fashion: head of one, body of other. Painted in an absorbing black on black palette, a pair of amber eyes emerge from a silhouetted frame. The image is riddled with a sense of intrigue that is heightened by the solid viridian background. In the work of Agata Słowak, the cat

becomes an extension of the artist's own image, both cute and fierce, as it assists her in the process of self-laceration. As John Berger writes in *Why Look at Animals*, our chosen animal is a projection of one's own identity, providing "a mirror to a part [of us] that is otherwise never reflected." For Słowak, the equivocal symbol of the cat completes this complex image of how a woman sees herself.

Beyond their perpetual association with the female spirit, this exhibition also offers examples of the ways in which cats have come to occupy a singular position as the contemporary, internet verified definition of cute. In the work of Hadi Fallahpisheh, we see the qualities of such cutedom taken to their most extreme - a face flattened to the point of concavity, features enlarged into comic abstractions. By contrast, Andersen Woof's *What Did I Do to Deserve You* conveys the bewitchingly adorable nature of their pet with haptic brushstrokes that conjure the deep softness of the cat's Russian blue fur as it engulfs the picture plane. In case we needed any confirmation of this cuteness - which as Edmund Burke once explained is ultimately a reaction to witnessing something's extreme vulnerability - the artist embellishes their cat's shuttered eyes with a pair of pitifully large tears. Whether it be their elegance, overwhelming beauty or confounding character, this exhibition is testament to an ongoing interspecies love affair.

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