

REVIEWS LONDON

Emma Rose Schwartz

Brunette Coleman

By Peter Brock



Emma Rose Schwartz, *Certain Planet*, 2024, oil, paper, conté, charcoal, chalk pastel, and graphite on canvas, 59 7/8 × 17 3/4".

Seeing Emma Rose Schwartz's London debut, "Old Mortality," felt like getting sudden flashes of someone else's childhood memories. Her paintings' elegantly distressed surfaces offer glimpses of implied narratives featuring female protagonists—several of whom stare intensely outward. The figures' anatomies feel reimagined rather than observed, with body parts folding or fading into one another. Crudely drawn buildings and other architectural fragments suggest locations whose significance would be legible only to their author and presumably the characters within the work. As viewers, we are left to weigh these diffuse details against the concentration of affect found in the faces with finely drawn features that punctuate these scenes.

Schwartz's palette consists of ruddy bursts of sienna and other earth tones amid large swaths of beige and gray. One of two tall canvases hanging next to each other, *Certain Planet* (all works 2024) depicts two figures with reddish hair in a curious configuration: A girl, loosely drawn, lies on the ground holding a rodent between her hands while above her hovers a woman with long flowing hair and a pair of opaque white legs. Irregular chunks of pink paint hover amid gaps in what could be her torso, whose chunky solidity grounds what is otherwise an airy composition. These works are strongest when looser passages of opaque paint pull against the graphic economy of the faces. The figures in *Fortunate Relative* appear atop some pale blue foliage with hazy pink blobs denoting flowers. The suggested scenery sweetens an anatomically confused depiction of what looks like a mother holding her daughter, but these blooms and leaves are also compelling simply as colorful shapes.

Schwartz's chromatic restraint and rugged drawing distinguish her from the legion of young painters using a stylized figuration à la Kai Althoff to make enchanted scenes that evoke a bygone era, and often indulge in a chromatic opulence and decorative flourishes. Schwartz's pictures feel more connected to farmhouses than cosmopolitan decadence. Although the resulting images look quite different, her practice of adhering thin paper to her canvases and painting on top of the crinkled surface recalls the work of Samuel Hindolo, another contemporary painter who cultivates patina and visible wear. *Middle Creek* has large areas whose primary attraction is the rhythmic energy of Schwartz's hand scratching into wet paint with a tool, while a large black cloud hovers above. This passage holds together much better than the passage in *TV Sunrise*, where the texture of crinkled paper becomes monotonous as it fills out the shape of a couch outlined in charcoal, which occupies most of the large canvas.

In the gallery office hung two paintings whose saturation and density seemed to break with the rest of the show. Warm light bathes the face of a seated figure in *Out Front*—an ominous image with the spooky intensity of a séance. In it, Schwartz abandons her tendency to leave raw canvas between the facial features and successfully merges scratchy lines that articulate, for instance, an eyelid with splotchy shading that describes the curvature of a cheek. The sense of mass makes this figure feel like much more than a mere symbol, amplifying the impact of this work considerably.

Schwartz's visual language is imbued with a sense of the past. She immerses us in the fragmentary logic of visual memory, with details whose significance is implied but never explained. The evocation of nineteenth-century painting creates an immediate familiarity that grants viewers smooth entry despite

the works' enigmas, but at the cost of diminishing the friction that opens new aesthetic territory. The paintings' strength turns out to be inseparable from their limitations.