

Viktor Mattsson

Pleasure Island

February 2 — March 14, 2024

Since time immemorial, the human imagination has conjured visions of utopian realms where life is easy, and dreams of relaxation and plenty are fulfilled. Such places have rivers that flow with wine, skies that rain cheese; trees bear ready-cooked meats, and grilled geese fly directly into one's mouth. Lands of utmost luxury and comfort, where physical pleasures are within easy reach, and life, unfettered by obligations and mundane tribulations, succumbs to the allure of perpetual delight. In the pursuit of such an idyllic enclave, **Viktor Mattsson** presents *Pleasure Island*, his first solo exhibition at Newchild. Comprising a collection of oil paintings rendered in thin layers of blue hues and textured surfaces, the artworks are rich with allegory and humour, ingeniously illuminating mankind's naïveté in the relentless pursuit of a paradisaical existence.

The exhibition's title, *Pleasure Island*, draws inspiration from Carlo Collodi's renowned story of Pinocchio. In the tale, "Pleasure Island" is an enchanting place where wayward boys revel in unrestrained amusement, ostensibly free from rules. However, concealed beneath this alluring facade lies a sobering reality—the boys undergo a gradual metamorphosis, transforming into donkeys and losing their human essence as they indulge in reckless behaviour. In Mattsson's paintings, this theme is symbolized by characters being lured into the wrong decisions while in pursuit of virtuous paths, succumbing to shiny temptations such as drinking, or attempting to perform a good deed. This ethereal realm in Mattsson's paintings becomes the focal point where characters alternately experience joy with crude despair, drawing parallels with historical depictions of "*Cockaigne*" or "*Luilekkerland*", where humour is employed as a nuanced vehicle to convey a timeless moral dilemma of our existence.

In the paintings, Mattsson's characters are progressively descending into misguided choices, symbolically nodding to archetypes associated with masculinity, ethics, and faith. The Cowboy, a human figure always wearing a cowboy hat, potentially symbolizing the human condition, serves as the central figure in many of his paintings, influenced by angels, devils, and clowns—yearning for goodness but grappling with the allure of temptation and life's complexities. The Clown, often donning a pointy hat, embodies the deceptive "friend", serving as an ally to the devil, promoting excitement while contributing to the cowboy's downfall. The Devil, depicted as a horned figure with clawed nails, is a caricature of death and destruction, often representing temptation and depicted in proximity to clowns, always revelling in laughter. Butterflies, painted ghostly or left as white canvas shapes, serve as symbols of purity and innocence, often appearing as mirages. Flowers, aligned in meaning with butterflies, symbolize nature as the ultimate positivity—a beacon of peace and tranquillity. The wine Glass serves as a placatory tool for the devil and clown, luring the cowboy in the search for fleeting pleasures, contrasting with the positive symbolism of the flowers and butterflies. And lastly, the winged heads or angels are symbols of goodness and correctness, always portrayed as handless and almost transparent to emphasize their futility in influencing the cowboy's choices as they attempt to guide him towards the correct path.

The symbolic choice of blue pervades the exhibition, recognized widely as the colour of sorrow, it envelopes both the environments and figures depicted in Mattsson's paintings. Ultramarine blue, neutral tint and titanium white, described by the artist as "a poor and sad palette, [with] no hope in

sight," convey the ambience of a chilly night or a realm of nothingness. The characters, also depicted in various hues of blue, exist within this endless emptiness or void, utterly disoriented, perhaps nurturing the belief that they are "on the way to a better place", Mattsson explains. This pictorial constraint characterizes the artist's fascination with pushing the limits of his practice and the formal aspects of painting.

Mattsson's work is refreshingly direct, evident not only in the execution of his pieces but also in his conceptual methodology. Unafraid of embracing sentimentality, the artist employs humour to engage with ethical quandaries. His piece *Where Is Mother* portrays the struggle that "doing the right thing" sometimes carries. Against a scratched blue background, a cowboy figure with a sad expression, tears streaming from their eyes, holds a glass in one hand and offers a flower to an angel in the other. Interrupting the action is the devil, whose long-nailed fingers attempt to interfere with the gentle gesture performed by the cowboy. The uncertainty of the gesture's impact on the angelical figure and the ghostly depiction of the flower suggests a desperate and impulsive attempt to perform an act of kindness, perhaps influenced by the liquor in his glass. The blurred, almost ethereal rendering implies a surreal, perhaps alcohol-fueled night or dream, while the title *Where Is Mother*, adds a layer of poignancy, hinting at a sense of being lost and pathetic, seeking the comfort and safety associated with maternal warmth.

Another poignant exploration of emotional duality is a small canvas titled *Tears of Sadness*. Suspended from the ceiling in the back gallery, slowly turning, the artwork consists of a small double-sided canvas that plays on balance, both literally and metaphorically. On one side, a weeping pale figure with long hair stands in front of a background of butterflies, confronting the viewer with a deep sense of sadness. On the back side, the anticipation of a contrasting emotion is thwarted as the painting reveals a similar portrait of an even more depressed character. The ironic work offers a stark and uncompromising declaration of anguish without any embellishment. Its title sarcastically plays on the conventional expression "tears of joy," as Mattsson humorously challenges expectations and explores the unyielding nature of despair, presenting a caricatural commentary on hope and human optimism.

The relentless search for joy appears to culminate with the work *Finding Paradise*, a parodic portrayal of a cowboy with a dazed gaze, clutching a glass in his hand, and his chest pierced by a sword, as if by accident or fate. Butterflies ascending in the blue background evoke a sense of bliss or bewilderment, potentially signifying the journey toward eternal peace often promised after death. The piece provides a commentary on the cost of pursuing earthly pleasures while simultaneously challenging religious convictions.

In a quest for happiness or the promise of a blissful afterlife, Mattsson's oeuvre emanates humour and wit, as he delves into the most sombre aspects of the human psyche. The works in *Pleasure Island* bring forth Mattsson inquiry into angst, doubt, and the longing for a utopian existence with the use of a memorable and uncomplicated aesthetic, light-hearted and brimming with satire and joy.

Viktor Mattsson (b. 1988 in Umeå, Sweden) received his MFA from Umeå Academy of Fine Arts and earned his BFA at the same university. His works have been exhibited across Europe and the UK, and is part of the public collections of M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp; The Public Art Agency Sweden, Luleå Municipality, Skellefteå Municipality and Region Västerbotten. The artist lives and works in Antwerp.

Pleasure Island is on view from February 2 to March 14, 2024. Opening hours are Wednesday through Saturday from 13:00 to 18:00 hrs.