

# TANYA MERRILL

# 2021.7.11–2021.8.30

■ A single image cannot convey a story—merely illustrate a moment, a scene, extracted from the story’s flow. Communicating a story beyond the most rudimentary level of complexity requires a sequence of images, like those in a comic strip, or one of those fresco cycles of the Renaissance, or a Chinese scroll that one unrolls section by section.

Since she does not construct such image sequences, it would be inaccurate to call Tanya Merrill a narrative painter. And still less does she illustrate selected scenes, which would imply that the story pre-existed the painting, like the tales from Byron, Shakespeare, and Ariosto from which Eugène Delacroix loved to take inspiration. And yet I would imagine Merrill—whose work’s primary sources are typically in other art rather than in writing—looked hard at the Delacroix retrospective that came to the Metropolitan Museum of Art a couple of years ago: Something like his work’s narrative energy, if not his attachment to familiar literary sources, runs through her art as well.

In both cases, that energy expresses itself in the first place as painterliness. Painterly, of course, is Heinrich Wölfflin’s term for a style marked by loose, visible brushmarks that blur or override the linear boundaries of figures and objects. In such art, things can appear somewhat unfixed from their assigned identities; they are either coming into being before one’s eyes on the canvas or dissolving into sheer atmosphere. “comprehending visibility in its entirety as a floating semblance,” as Wölfflin wrote. In any case, depicted things in a painterly painting are in and of themselves in movement, in transition, and therefore ready to change, to become part of a larger story yet to be defined.

But in the absence of a textual source, the painting still needs to take its place in a sequence for this narrative energy to find its place in a narrative. Merrill’s paintings, being available to narrative without yet being tied to specific stories of their own, display this narrative potential more fully when grouped together, even if one realizes that the resulting sequences are somewhat wayward or even arbitrary, given that their order is unfixed and that a different selection would yield a somewhat different tale.

Yet, even acknowledging the subjective and at best speculative nature of this perception, I can’t help seeing a particular and, it seems to me, necessary starting point for the discursive sequence implied by the dozen paintings in this exhibition: In the painting *Uprising*. It lends itself to being seen as a beginning precisely because it is also the depiction of an ending, literally of an overthrow. The primary motif is that of a rearing horse, an image that was well known to Delacroix (for example in the marvelous watercolor of *A Horse Frightened by Lightning* in the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest). In Western art, the rearing horse usually represents a testament to the strength and capacity of the rider who is capable of mastering it, as in Jacques-Louis David’s *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* or the Equestrian Portrait of Philip IV by Velázquez; and the same is true, for instance, in Japan, where we see images of samurai on rearing horses. Merrill’s horse, terrified by the ax being brandished (we don’t know by who) from the right edge of the canvas, is saddled but riderless. Amidst the vigorous brushwork with which Merrill describes all this, one might not at first notice (remember, painterliness catches things as they shift in and out of perception) what’s going on in the painting’s lower right corner: There we catch sight of the top of a hat, a pair of blue jeans, a shoe (pounced on by a ravenous dog): the cowboy who (unlike Napoleon or King Philip) has been humbled by being thrown from his steed.

This fallen rider, already so inconspicuous, is the only human male figure among these paintings. The start of the story is the downfall of male mastery—man has been thrown “off his high horse,” as the saying goes. From there, the story is only of women and animals, including female animals such as Dolly, the famous sheep who was created by cloning in Scotland in 1996. And yet there are continuities that suggest that we should see this female world as a continuation of the former male-dominated one. Could that beast grabbing a fish in its mouth in *Woman with Dog* be the same one we saw pouncing on the downed cowboy’s foot in *Uprising*? If so, then mightn’t the woman who is the former painting’s central figure—what a demonic expression she wears on her face!—be the offstage ax-wielder? In any case, carnivorous animals on the prowl—domesticated but no less savage for that—are recurrent: *Cat with Lobster* and *Snail*. Peaceable ruminants like Dolly aside, a world absent the human male appears to be hardly less dangerous than any other; death retains its inevitability (*Swan on the Shore*) and the earth itself may be a source of terror, as in *Mt. Etna* with its spectacular nocturnal eruption. Even without humans, high-flying promethean maleness remains, in the guise, for instance, of a *High-Flying Rooster*. Yet there is always a promise for the future, or at least that’s the message I get from *Women Whispering*—actually a winged angel conversing with an ordinary woman, both seemingly pregnant. It’s a sort of after-the-fact annunciation, and what I take from it is the assurance that life will continue, male or no male, and if it takes miraculous intervention to make that happen, you can count on it—though of course in Dolly’s case, it was science that filled the role of miracle-maker.

Unlike so many painters these days, Merrill paints with a light touch—and I mean that in two ways: Not only does she apply paint with such buoyancy and playfulness and grace that I’m almost tempted to define her style as neo-rococo, but perhaps more important, her imagery and its significance are never belabored, almost like an extra painterly touch given to images that she’s adumbrated for the pure pleasure of exercising her art on them. Still, the stories her paintings suggest—or rather, the stories we find ourselves tempted to hang on them—are serious. They represent an effort to find new ways to relate to reality—to what Merrill has spoken of as “the structure of power within the natural world, that of the food chain, predator versus prey, and the constant struggle between humans and nature”—from a position that is no longer dominated.<sup>2</sup> But really, the paintings won’t explain these struggles to us. We have to use the paintings, if we can, to tell our own stories.

—Barry Schwabsky

1. Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Early Modern Art*, translated by Jonathan Blower (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2015), p. 14.

2. Eugenie Dalland, “She Leaves a Mark: Meet Artist Tanya Merrill,” *Ssense* (September 3, 2019), <https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/she-leaves-a-mark-meet-artist-tanya-merrill>.

■ Tanya Merrill's work examines humanity's fraught relationship to nature and cultural portrayals of gender and sexuality through her own contemporary lens. Science and ecology, religion and mythologies, coagulate here into oil paintings rife with multiple readings. Fantastic and consequential scenes are populated by animals and people punctuated by sketched lines, lending her canvases a sense of effervescence and immediacy.

Reinterpreting motifs drawn from throughout art history, Merrill imbues a sense of familiarity to her storytelling as a means to decode 21st century concerns. What Tanya Merrill reminds us is how contemporary phenomenon—though novel in their circumstances – are in many ways a redux from ancient tragedies. Symbols and imagery make repeat appearances from one work to the next, building a mythology of personas and environments.

Tanya Merrill was born in New York City in 1987. She received her BA from Sarah Lawrence College and her MFA from Columbia University. Merrill presented a solo exhibition at Half Gallery, New York in 2020, and recent group exhibitions include Blum and Poe, Los Angeles; Gagosian Gallery, New York; and Clearing, New York. She has an upcoming solo show at 303 Gallery in New York opening this November. Merrill lives and works in New York City.

### 1. Uprising

2018  
Oil and oil stick on linen  
121.9 x 91.4 cm

### 2. High Flying Rooster

2020  
Oil on linen  
50.8 x 40.6 cm

### 3. Women Whispering

2021  
Oil and oil stick on canvas  
193 x 127 cm

### 4. Saint Teresa in Ecstasy

2020  
Oil on linen  
50.8 x 40.6 cm

### 5. Tigers on Display

2020  
Oil and oil stick on canvas  
193 x 127 cm

### 6. Cat with Lobster and Snails

2019  
Oil on linen  
40.6 x 50.8 cm

### 7. Ariadne on the Shore

2021  
Oil on linen  
111.8 x 86.4 cm

### 8. Dolly

2021  
Oil on linen  
182.9 x 121.9 cm

### 9. Mount Etha

2021  
Oil on linen  
91.4 x 60.9 cm

### 10. Swan on the Shore

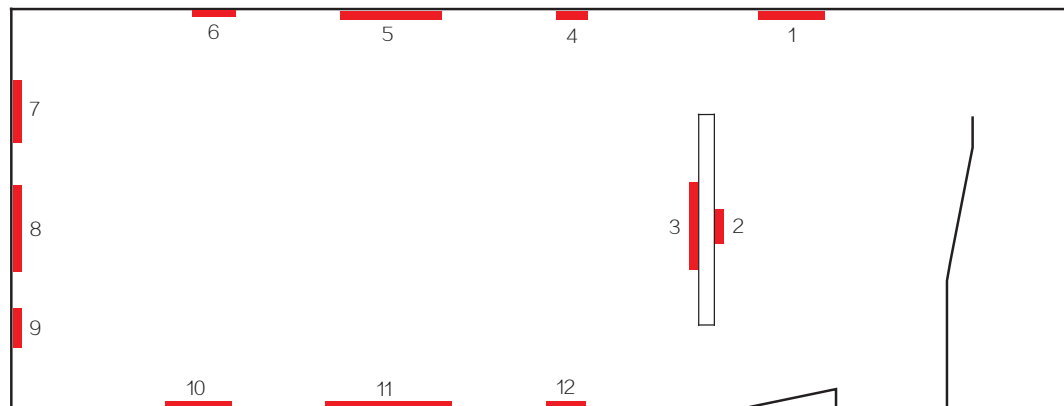
2020  
Oil on linen  
101.6 x 76.2 cm

### 11. Woman with Dog

2020  
Oil and oil stick on canvas  
157.5 x 177.8 cm

### 12. Silk Gloves Playing

2021  
Oil on linen  
50.8 x 60.9 cm



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