



What is it about JJ Manford's psychedelic interiors that are so alluring, so inviting? At first I thought it might be the furniture: the dignified pretzel chair framed between windows overlooking a skyline at sunset, or the vibrant, geometric carpets laid in bright but elegant patterns. Perhaps it's the presence of animals, lording over living spaces while their humans are away or asleep, or the profusion of lush flora in whimsical planters. In the 15 magnetic paintings comprising "Moon Salon," Manford's second solo show at Derek Eller Gallery, the artist's gift for reverie is on clear display.

Nearly all the paintings are made with oil stick, oil pastel and Flashe on linen, though several works on burlap bristle with warmth and tactility. Red and blue are Manford's strongest colors—a rich and roiling fire in the belly of a woodstove feels thrillingly alive, as does the prevailing mood of nocturne, a deep, velvety indigo that envelops apartments by nightfall, interrupted with pinpricks of light from neighboring buildings. Scale and perspective propose new hierarchies of attention. A regal Dalmatian sits alert beside a radiant bouquet in a Miró vase. Doorways are nearly life-sized, while hallways and stairwells lead offstage, gesturing toward invisible quarters. A sense of mystery runs through the works like an electric current; they are portals to another, more vivid reality.

Animals recur throughout, as pets and decorative objects (toucan vase, toy stegosaurus) or as images within images. Tigers adorn a Tibetan tapestry; a moose appears in a painting by the folk artist William Hawkins. While the human figure is absent, its presence is felt everywhere in these stylish but lived-in rooms—scenes that could belong to a Brooklyn brownstone or a farmhouse upstate. Each painting conveys a distinct sensibility honed through the collection and arrangement of exquisite things; Manford calls them "image constellations."

The artist excels at intertextuality, explicitly naming his references, Interior with Niki de St. Phalle & Sophie Tauber-Arp, (2021) and inspirations while evoking a suite of associations through color and subject. Lee Mullican's rich palette comes to mind, as do David Hockney's recent terrace paintings. With its intense focus on the strange intimacies we develop with our cherished objects, "Moon Salon" feels part of a larger, ongoing conversation around visualizing the domestic, with Hilary Pecis, Carlo D'Anselmi, Becky Suss, Jonas Wood, Igor Moritz and Ann Toebbe as his principal interlocutors. Charles Sheeler's Americana (1931), with its collapsed perspective and strict but lavish attention to minutiae, feels like an austere forebear.

In this marvelous suite of works, Manford extends a generous invitation to collaborate on a fiction: imagine life in these houses, with these enchanted things; imagine a world dense with allusion, where art from various times and places sit beside the rituals of daily life. While I stood in the gallery, staring into the mouth of a wood-burning stove, I overheard a couple debating which piece to purchase. Where would it fit in their home? Would it fit? They gravitated toward the larger pieces, the ones on burlap, which vibrate with a magnificent, almost furious energy. I began to imagine who they were, these strangers, and what their home might look like. —Christopher Alessandrini