

to Be

Revelations

ISSUE 06

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ISSN 2653-3677

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Renée Estée's *Choral Ode*

words CHLOE BORICH

Enter speculative visions of the afterlife as imagined by Australian New York-based artist, Renée Estée.



Renée Estée
I Count The Hours In Between, 2023
oil paint, ink, charcoal, found fabric/lace, bronze charm on canvas
214 × 206 cm
Courtesy of COMA Gallery





RENÉE ESTÉE
Waiting To Hold You, 2023
 oil paint, oil bar, gold leaf, charcoal on canvas
 189.0 x 184.0 cm
 Courtesy of COMA Gallery

Encountering a Renée Estée painting is like stumbling across a book that has been left open. Except here the spine is shaped by timber and the pages clipped from canvas, as if smoothed down mid-chapter and faced out into better reading light. To observe one of Estée's paintings is to decipher a coded narrative, guided by fragmented poetry, symbolic characters and collected talismans. Dense layers and gestural brushstrokes of oil paint, ink and charcoal meld together, revealing hallowed scenes that transpire somewhere between Earth and the heavens. Imbued with tales from ancient mythology, they too possess a darkness, haunted by the inevitability of death. More than that, they are deeply reverent and curious, depicting eclectic imagined worlds merged with Estée's own.

Estée's compulsion to make art has always been instinctive. As a child, she was infatuated by the music her parents played and would reference beloved record covers and song lyrics in drawings and paintings, enshrining them with her own hand. "Whenever I really loved a song or a poem or a story, I'd *have* to paint it as a way to show love to it, or as a way to intertwine myself into it", Estée explains.

Years later, she was pulled toward the inimitable cultural centre of New York, fascinated by the city's history of iconic resident artists and musicians. In 2020, Estée commenced a month-long research project in the city using a grant she'd received during her undergrad at the Victorian College of the Arts. As soon as she arrived, she knew that she would stay. Guided to apply for the MFA program at Hunter College by leading alumni and internationally acclaimed French painter, Jules de Balincourt, Estée was accepted and her place in New York cemented.

During her first year living abroad, Australia was ravaged by bushfires and the onset of the global pandemic soon followed. These events led Estée to consider the crucial role of the "dead in structuring the lives of the living, and the ritual and performance around memorialising someone or something lost." Ideas of ceremony and remembrance became inseparable from the work that she was making, which evolved into poems, love letters and eulogies, as well as markers of

place, both real and imagined. Contending with the emotional and physical distance from Australia, painting was a conduit for Estée to connect with people she had lost and those she feared losing.

After graduating from her MFA, Estée set to work in her studio apartment on a new series that would become her debut solo exhibition, *Choral Ode*. Presented at COMA Gallery, Sydney, the exhibition navigates ideas of mourning, commemoration and celebration through speculative depictions of the afterlife. *Choral Ode* takes its title from a lyrical poem performed during a classical Greek drama that transitions between stage right and stage left in three parts—strophe, antistrophe and epode—to convey the meaning of the beginning, middle and end of the plot.

In this exhibition, Estée's large-scale paintings assume their roles within the chorus, echoing poignant messages of love, longing, life and loss throughout the gallery. Like figures in the midst of a procession, they are ceremoniously placed, suspended centrally within each of the four rooms. Turning slowly on their wires, their presence is almost ghostly. Moving through the space, the viewer's proximity to themes of death becomes ever more apparent—although there is nothing to fear.

Carry Home (I saw houses in the river, I saw fields on fire, I saw the end once more) portrays a transient scene of relocation. The work sees a horse presiding over a charred, flaming foreground. Two female figures emerge at the animal's side, mirrored by a pair of slithering snakes. Gazing towards the right they anticipate a new direction. Behind them, the outline of a house suggests a home that once was. Reclaimed textiles and sculptural trinkets embellish the composition: a beaded applique adorns the face of the horse like armour; a miniature shrine frame is inscribed tenderly with the words 'I love you'; lace hearts hand-cut from curtains that hung in the artist's childhood home beat across the canvas. The floral lacework is a recurring medium throughout the series, providing what Estée describes as a sentimental "passageway to the past" that physically layers and maps her personal familial history within the active gestures of her mark-making.

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 RENÉE ESTÉE
Final Wish (detail), 2023
 oil paint, oil bar, charcoal, gold and silver charms, pearls, glitter, gold leaf, collaged canvas on canvas
 199.0 x 196.0 cm
 Courtesy of COMA Gallery

This textured approach to composition continues in *I Count the Hours In Between*. An angelic figure adorned in lace floats amid a restless sea of spectral faces and bodies, as if about to ascend past the threshold of the very canvas she inhabits. Text scrawled into the sky reads 'I count the hours as the years go by...', reflected by a pool of numbers below, inscribing the time taken to complete the painting, as well as the weeks since the artist had returned home.

In *Final Wish*, Estée envisions an angel bringing forward an important message, offering an allegory of legacy and veneration. The winged figure strides across the canvas, gazing back over her shoulder. Her eyes are starred with flashes of gold, pearl tears from Estée's mother's earrings roll down her cheek, a small horseshoe token over her heart reads 'good luck.' Looking ahead, a bull falls in step beside her, representing a potent symbol of the dance of death and the spectacle our mortality beholds. The narrative continues to unfold as they move towards a poem inscribed onto a piece of canvas from another painting, which has been adhered to this one's surface. Bridging past and future, the text combines the request of someone who has departed: 'Lay me where the flowers grow...' with the physical enactment of their wishes by their mourner, '...I grow flowers, I pick flowers, I lay flowers down, I name flowers after you.'

There is a desire within Estée's paintings to press up closely to the reality of death. To not fear it, but to reach out and reveal what lies beneath its veiled facade. Through her *Choral Ode*, these intentions are brought to the surface by sensitively navigating ideas of spirituality, memory, time and grief. Within her otherworldly realms, Estée holds a flame up to the afterlife with a sense of openness, illuminating the shadowed thoughts our minds once feared to explore. [EXEUNT]



RENÉE ESTÉE
Final Wish, 2023
 oil paint, oil bar, charcoal, gold and silver charms, pearls, glitter, gold leaf, collaged canvas on canvas
 199.0 × 196.0 cm
 Courtesy of COMA Gallery



RENÉE ESTÉE
It Comes and Goes (Sometimes I Think of You), 2023
 oil paint, gold leaf, found gem, charcoal, collaged canvas on canvas
 184.0 × 189.0 cm
 Courtesy of COMA Gallery



RENÉE ESTÉE
There Was A Time I Held You Close, 2023
 oil paint, ink, watercolor, charcoal, gold leaf, bronze charms, oil bar on canvas
 196.5 x 185.0 cm
 Courtesy of COMA Gallery



RENÉE ESTÉE
Not only I, 2023
 oil paint, oil bar, china marker, charcoal, gold leaf on canvas
 184.5 x 169.0 cm
 Courtesy of COMA Gallery