Allison Katz: Artery
22 May – 31 Oct 2021

For more than a decade, Allison Katz has been exploring painting’s relationship to questions of identity and expression, selfhood and voice. Animated by a restless sense of humour and curiosity, her works articulate a tricky language of recurring forms – roosters, monkeys and cabbages, among other things – that are by turns familiar and enigmatic. Katz’s paintings, as well as her ceramics and posters, are frequently bodily and relentlessly wordy, thick with puns and allusions. What emerges from these multilayered works is a sustained and critical pursuit of what the artist has called “genuine ambiguity”.

Titled Artery, this exhibition is the London-based Canadian artist’s first institutional solo show in the UK. For Katz, “Artery” is a resonant and loaded title. Arteries are the blood vessels that carry oxygen-rich blood, flowing from the heart to the rest of the body. They are inside us (while “art” is itself nestled inside “artery”), as well as what connects us: “arterial” describes winding river systems, branching rail networks and subterranean cabling. This exhibition considers these networks and channels, the spaces between inside and outside, you and me, experience and image.

Shifting combinations of Katz’s own name are threaded throughout all of her work. This wordplay has seen her name become a slogan (“All Is On”), an alias (“AKA”) and, in this exhibition, a “MASK” (Ms. Allison Sarah Katz). All of the works in Artery were made during the last year’s series of lockdowns. This was a time when masks lost their association with persona, becoming instead something that has to be worn, an interface between the body and the world. Katz has long been preoccupied with painting’s relationship to not-touching, as both motif and subtext, and the ways in which it tries to go beyond this condition.

For a number of years, Katz has been using the motif of an open mouth, borrowed from a small woodcut by André Derain. She has described as an attempt to paint from the position of language, hunger or the tongue. In Artery, mouths frame and question meanings of taste and naming. Katz recently noted that, “I want to emphasise the non-order of things, from inside to out, as much as from outside to in.”

At Nottingham Contemporary, new works are installed along and behind a series of walls and passageways. This layout has been designed to echo and reproduce existing angles and doorways, creating a sequence of recursive sight-lines. Katz approaches the gallery space itself as a porous body, an organism that extends both up and down into the ground below. An access lift becomes doubled by a painting of its interior, rendered at the exact dimensions. Opposite is a small room-within-a-room, holding an aerial view of a subterranean network, burrowed into the sandstone below Nottingham. Caves are bodily spaces too, with stomachs and mouths.

Katz produces posters for every exhibition she makes. These run in parallel with her paintings, while also branching out into different graphic directions. For Artery, a number of new posters are displayed by the gallery entrance, as others are installed in City of Caves, which can be accessed at the bottom of the steps by Nottingham Contemporary. Visiting these caves last year, Katz was struck by how their forms coincided with those found in her own compositions. Another coincidence: Nottingham was the city where, in the 1940s, her grandparents met, having both fled their home countries. Creating this exhibition at Nottingham Contemporary has therefore been a homecoming of sorts, a reconnection to family roots and trees.

The questions the works in Artery ask – of communication and connection, of intimacy at a distance, of origins – are as much a response to this current moment as a continued exploration of themes that have persisted throughout painting’s history.


Credits

Artery is generously supported by the High Commission of Canada in the United Kingdom and our Exhibition Circle – Alexandre Y. Popovski, Michael & Ellen Ringier – and in collaboration with Camden Arts Centre, whose new exhibition of Katz’s work is due to be published in early 2022. The exhibition layout has been produced in collaboration with architect Caitlin Tobias-Kennessy.

List of works

First space, clockwise from left:
Ssik (2020), oil on silkscreened canvas
2020 (Femoral) (2021), oil, acrylic and sand on canvas
Elevator II (Nottingham Contemporary) (2021), acrylic on canvas

Second space, clockwise from left:
The Cockfather (2021), oil, acrylic and rice on linen
Stage Cock (2020), acrylic and rice on linen
M.A.S.K. (2021), oil and acrylic on linen
Nottingham Canal, 11 March 2020 (2021), oil on linen
Alley Cat (2020), oil on silkscreened canvas

2020 (Ephemeral) (2021), acrylic and sand on canvas

Corridor space:
Channelling (2021), acrylic on linen
Katzenhöhle (2021), oil and acrylic on canvas