

Théo Viardin *Orphaned*

Exhibition Duration
April 10 - May 15, 2026

Opening Hours
Tue - Fr 11 am - 6 pm
Sat 11 -am - 4 pm

The ensemble presented by Théo Viardin in *Orphaned* is a strange one — biblical, profane, furiously anachronistic. Though we already knew of the young French painter's penchant for projecting his catastrophic visions and the worried masses of his alien morphologies into the realm of contemporary figuration, it is no longer in the future, but in the compulsive remembrance that the present maintains of its own pictorial memory, that the tension of his latest canvases lies.

For his second solo exhibition at the Galerie Kandlhofer, the artist presents a body of eleven paintings created over the past two years, in which he reflects, as a painter, on the future of religious figuration in an increasingly aporetic world. Painted in oil, alternating successively layers of paint and glazes energised by confident formal improvisations, the canvases are composed as a series of events, emergencies and urgencies that respond to one another and unfold ceaselessly before the viewer's eyes. The most striking formal innovations in the treatment of pictorial space lie in the proliferation of rugged zones – expanses of gold, reddish fumaroles, incandescent lava flows, trivially smeared ochre-coloured washes – spreading from one canvas to another like charming malware, creating, through their resonances, a great tension within the whole.

The paintings do not depict specific scenes, but rather convey the possibility of a more general event: some sort of gigantic end-of-the-world celebration – liturgical carnival where the echoes of ancient sacred forms manifest, in the mode of apparition, their post-apocalyptic becoming. Another striking effect resulting from the artist's latest major technical choices, particularly noticeable in the four largest canvases, is the use of much more blended and smoother brushstrokes, which fluidity tends to lend the painting a certain virtual quality. In *Sacred Study, Green* (2026), whose strict composition recalls that of Bellini, the green ceremonial cloth evokes less a symbolic threshold than a screen display error bar. To the fleshy masses that already placed Théo Viardin within the modernist lineage of meat painters, effects of bit rot and glitches bring the painter's pictorial programme closer to that of software saturated by an overflowing hard drive in some apocalyptic setting, endlessly iterating new frozen images from the heaviest fragments of his former files.

Although he has never been a storyteller, Théo Viardin now seems to be turning definitively away from narrative to devote himself fully to a form of retinal painting that finds its logic solely in the sensations it evokes. Despite their titles with their strong theological overtones, is that the paintings presented here have no 'sense'; or, at least, not in the traditional iconographic sense of the term: the signs do not refer to any higher spiritual reality; the visible refers to nothing other than itself. The virgins, mystical lambs and erinyes appear on the canvas like extras passing across the set of a film in which they do not play, and reappear from one panel to the next in the hallucinatory mode of an acid re-trip. In this respect, *Orphaned* seems to fully realise the Deleuzian pictorial programme, by wresting the figure from the realm of figuration – that is, from the realms of narration and illustration – so that it exists only in the mode of pure sensation, experienced and serving to make one experience it in a movement that blurs the medium of the painting and its viewer. Deprived of any coherent belief system, the liturgical figures confront the present in the manner of a sensory homunculus – veritable open-air nervous system condemned to experience, alone or with the support of the group, the metaphysical storms and ultra-retinal torments of our twenty-first century.

Is there any grace to be found here? Post-Apocalypse II – the largest canvas in the exhibition, is articulated around the negative space of a cross, darkened by the acid-hued shimmer of a mist, from which floating hands sprout randomly, in a corrupted version of Fra Angelico's Mocking of Christ. Nevertheless, the ferocity and vitalistic resolve with which the painter commits himself body and soul to the exercise of painting leave no sign of despair. *Orphaned* takes mourning as its central theme: the loss of a meaningful spiritual world from which these symbolic figures emerged, figures that still survive like great, silent animals; but also the horizon of this loss: the hope of a renewed, material faith for which the act of painting might once again serve as a kind of vehicle. Something has died in the history of images, but something new seems to have been born from this death, and these two play a four-handed melody that the painter manages to

capture. The entire tension of the exhibition – its entire formal, rhythmic and compositional logic, lies in this contradictory dual movement of mourning and its acceptance: accepting to let go and refusing to let go, conceding to letting it disappear and refusing to let it disappear. To this struggle must be added another, more pressing one, that of the sensuous against its own degeneration ; a decline against which Francis Bacon already warned,, in a century far less bulimically iconophagous than our own: 'There is a part of the nervous system that can only be reached through painting, and if that part dies, no one will want to paint it anymore. ' The visceral attraction exerted by Théo Viardin's canvases may have something to do with this. Even in grief, even wandering in the twilights of idols, a few orphaned sensations of painting remain very much alive. Persisting like the neuralgic pain of a phantom limb, something sacred still seems to survive in the experience of painting.

– Text by Axel Fried

About the artist:

Théo Viardin is a French painter born in 1992 in Paris, currently working in Marseille. Within his enigmatic paintings, he presents figures in mutation, at once human and colossal. His technique of successive oil layers, alternating shifting brushstrokes with ethereal glazes, reveals the inherent oppositions in his work: fueled by a dialogue with philosophy seeking to capture the forces that inform the living, as well as by the contemporary echoes of French Theory, his canvases cannot exist without the complexity of contrast. This tension is embodied in figures as powerful as they are vulnerable, situated within stripped-back group scenes characterized by bold color oppositions between subject and space.

Pursuing the inquiries initiated by artists such as Mark Rothko or Francis Bacon, Viardin explores painting as a means of capturing raw sensation, considering the result as a synthesis of his own sensory homunculus. His minimalist and sculptural approach to composing volumes becomes a deliberate attempt to transmit direct emotion through the materiality of the body and its tactility.

His work is rooted in various pictorial references from the history of representation, ranging from ancient myths to Christian church paintings. This active engagement with the genealogy of the human figure questions our relationship to the authority of cultural heritage in the production of sensation, placed in tension with the autonomy of persistent forms across eras. This aspect of his practice necessarily enters into dialogue with influences drawn from speculative fiction and anticipatory imaginaires. Operating within a post-humanist framework to address contemporary issues, Viardin utilizes the aesthetic freedom afforded by the biopunk movement to explore the extent of human morphology and the emotions that traverse it.

Viardin's solo exhibitions include: 'SPHINX I SILENCE', Blank Gallery, 2025, Tokyo; 'Enigma', PACT Gallery, 2024, Paris; 'Beautiful Chaos of Existence', L21 Gallery, 2023, Palma de Mallorca; 'Solitudes', NBB Gallery, 2023, Berlin; 'Et In Arcadia Ego', Galerie Kandlhofer, 2023, Vienna; 'Jusqu'à ce que nous redevenions sauvages', Linseed Projects, 2022, Shanghai, China; 'Distant Echoes', Number Three Spitalfields, 2021, London, UK; 'Toute présence se mêle avec les pierres', L21 Gallery, 2021, Palma de Mallorca, Spain.

Viardin's participation in group exhibitions include: 'UNVEILING THE UNKNOWN', (Duo show), TEMEPSTA Gallery, 2025, Milano; 'The Guiding Thread', Suzanne Tarasiève, 2025, Paris; 'EARLY MAN 2', The Hole, 2024, NYC; 'Apocalyptic Changes of State', Brush with greatness, 2024, London; 'Gado Gado', Everyday Gallery, 2022, Antwerp, Belgium and 'Have we Met?' Curated by Thom Oosterhof, Tesoro Collection, 2022, Amsterdam, Netherlands.