

Press Release

August 30
October 11, 2025Opening
Saturday, August 30, 2025
from 11am to 8pm

Lopsided Philemona Williamson

A rebellious teen in her little red dress brandishes arms and flag. Two children on a branch pick oversized birds. Three dolls with dislocated arms wiggle against a pink background. Everything in Philemona Williamson's paintings echoes with childhood memories. Not in the narrow sense of the early years of life, but in the Freudian sense of *infans*, this transient, unstable and indecisive period when we awaken to the world, to ourselves and to others. Between two stages of life, the painter navigates amid androgynous figures and unclear intentions. Other pictures, other painters have explored the contortions and effects of derealisation: we may think of Balthus's bold and lascivious young women or Gauguin's mixed-race and silent figures. But the significant difference is that Williamson is a woman and that she looks at these bodies, i.e. herself, with more understanding and accuracy and, importantly, without the problematic male gaze. Her oeuvre is more akin to Paula Rego's turbulent narratives, featuring autobiographical elements in a style that is both feminist and fabulist. In both cases, the female body is the subject and actor of its destiny and of the image it projects.

For her second exhibition at the Semiose gallery in Paris, Williamson presents a body of small works that are rarely shown. Among them, *Taking a Rest* (2024), the strange portrait of a black housekeeper doll seated in a woven wicker armchair, summarises in just a few features her family story. The artist grew up with her mother, her father and the two older daughters of the wealthy Greek family her parents worked for as housekeepers. Clearly, her story is not a common one, nor is her experience of segregation and inequalities. Despite their differences—in standards of living, skin colour and background—little Philemona was adopted, so to speak, with no formality other than shared games and laughter. The charm of childhood lies in this freedom to welcome without judging. This is what shapes the painter's universe. First in her iconography: there are no group with assigned roles, no rules, no gender. Then in her technique: no premeditation, but rather an impeccable painting, more brushed than applied, without design or constraint. The image builds up progressively as the painting evolves around an element that stands out of the rest. This is why she can topple over in a blink of an eye towards daydreaming.

Some may say that she steps "through the looking-glass," and indeed there is something of Lewis Carroll and his beloved Alice in Williamson's work. But mostly, there is something of James Matthew Barrie's wincing Peter Pan. It is worth noting that her figures are often shadowless (like Peter Pan in search of his own at the start of the story), that they float, insubstantial, in the pure colour, that few of them smile, that many look uneasy. Although the artist takes us into the world of childhood, she does so without naivety and does not hide the more concerned side of it, which she states herself with great formal mastery and a true dramaturgical density. In *Playtime* (2024), for example, a withdrawn young woman suddenly seems too big to fit in the picture. In the midst of her toys, nuances clash: red and pink against the skirt's blue, the doll's white cotton against the dark skin. And that sidelong glance, white as a blade, cutting through, drawing us in, yet slipping out of view, like in almost all the paintings. Another artwork, the most allegorical from the selection, further pushes the logic of boundaries: *Boundary Crossed* (2023) shows two small Valkyries, one with a bare breast, the other with her face hidden, on a merry-go-round horse still cluttered with their dolls. This relates to the unsettling phase of growing up,

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leaving childhood, crossing the boundary. Around them, the large flowers and the sun-yellow background evoke the promise of blossoming and the threat of burning one's wings. Under the innocent and joyous appearance of her compositions, Williamson explores the deepest motivations behind desire and rebellion. However, she never concludes, explains or resolves anything. Unlike Wendy, in Peter Pan's story, she does not sew the lost children's shadow back on.

Thibault Bissirier

The art historian Thibault Bissirier holds a degree from the Sorbonne and the École du Louvre. He is the author of a thesis on *Jeunes collectionneurs d'art contemporain en France* (Young Contemporary Art Collectors in France, presented in 2019). As an art critic and cultural journalist (*The Steidz, La Perle Paris*), he is interested, namely, in the young French scene, painting and the issues of heritage, traumatic memory and intimacy narratives.