

LOWELL RYAN PROJECTS

Contemporary
Art Review

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Erin Trefry at Lowell Ryan Projects

February 28, 2024
Text by Thomas J. Stanton



Erin Trefry, *A tale of giant tricks*
(2024). Oil on cotton fabric, 43 x
63 inches. Image courtesy of the
artist and Lowell Ryan Projects.
Photo: Charles White.

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The works in Erin Trefry's latest exhibition, *Happy Phantom*, are literally over one hundred years in the making. For her third solo show at Lowell Ryan Projects, Trefry works with paintings created by her great-grandmother, a self-taught artist in the late 19th century. The original works depict romanticized scenes, including women lounging on seaside rocks and an Indigenous American couple embracing. These unframed cotton canvases were stored like fluttering spirits for decades, exposed to the elements and subsequent generations. When Trefry eventually inherited the paintings, she turned them around and stretched their surfaces. The effect is wondrously disorienting. It seems almost impossible that the works have not been altered beyond Trefry's simple adjustments. In some works, it's as if whole scenes and figures have been neatly removed. We encounter lines and colors that have survived the wear and tear of decades, drawing our attention to the manifestation of time. While we might imagine that these paintings have been languishing in an attic, Trefry's reversal reveals another narrative, told through the faded lines and spot stains. The works have in fact been evolving all these years, capturing a dialogue between past and present.

Trefry's efforts open up a line of communication with her distant relative that spans time. *Causeway across the sea* (all works 2024) features a ghostly figure at its center, gazing into its watery reflection. Many decades ago, the figure was the painting's focal point, but over time, it has been rubbed out, becoming the brooding apparition that appears now. The bleeding blues and browns of the water that serves as this figure's romantic mirror, the wooded background, and the open sky above them are now brought to the fore. The person at the center has faded, while nature seems to carry on.

Other works display the more transformative effects of time. *A tale of giant tricks* is soaked in a deep orange, its parlor setting heavily obscured by leopard spot stains and big ashy burns. The painting depicts a faded outline of a figure in a rocking chair surrounded by dogs, some obedient and others rambunctious. Through the years, the figure has been reduced to an almost genderless outline, the stains of time spreading and swirling into a warm, encompassing lava wash. The original sentimentality of the scene has been drained and turned into something much more bizarre. Trefry's reversal makes the details in each painting sparser, ultimately centering the blemishes of age as an active collaborator—one that can expand the meanings of the work in electric ways.

Hung directly opposite, in *The biggest lough* the tender faces of two figures—perhaps a mother and a child—emerge from ephemeral, powder-white swirls while sharing a delicate kiss. A pair of angel wings seem to sprout out from the child's back, but they blend too closely with the painting's swirling, cottony texture to be certain. Though the work has been complete for decades, Trefry's reversal, alongside the passing of time,

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makes it appear as if the images are unfinished, in the process of being created anew. Making art involves understanding when a work is finished. In *Happy Phantom*, Trefry has embraced an entirely different path. The artist's reversal of these 19th century fantasies reminds us that artistic works are always in a sort of unfinished state and that time turns everything into phantoms. As the apparitions begin to take shape, Trefry's transcendent discourses with the past open us up to the beautiful decay of new beginnings.

Erin Trefry: Happy Phantom runs from January 27–March 2, 2024 at Lowell Ryan Projects (4619 W. Washington Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90016).



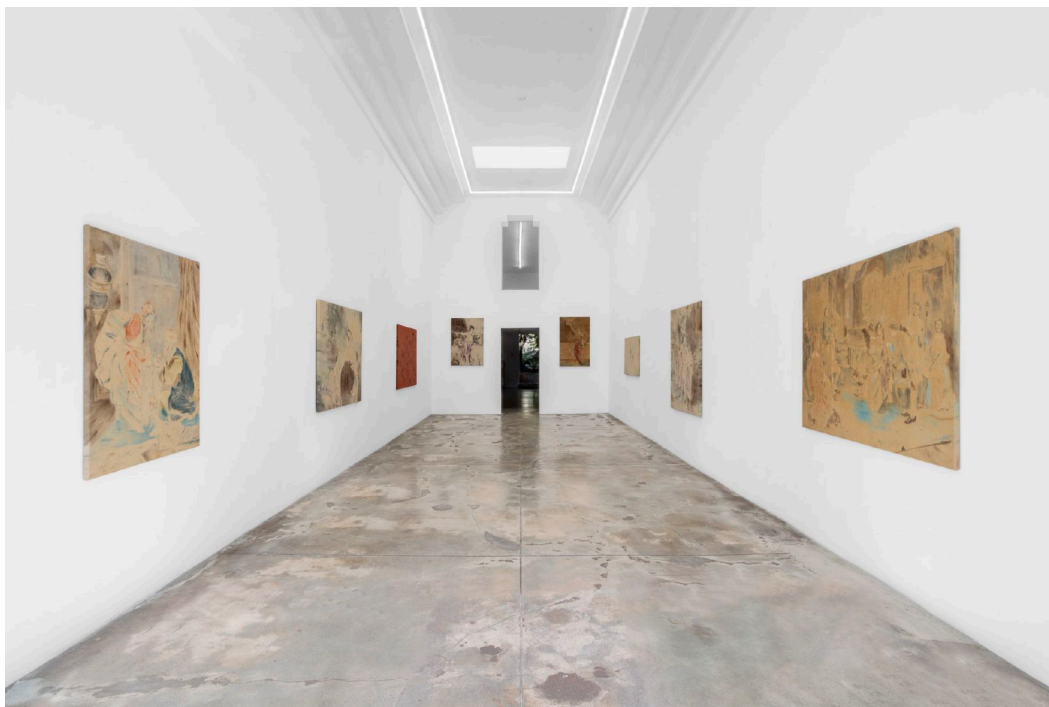
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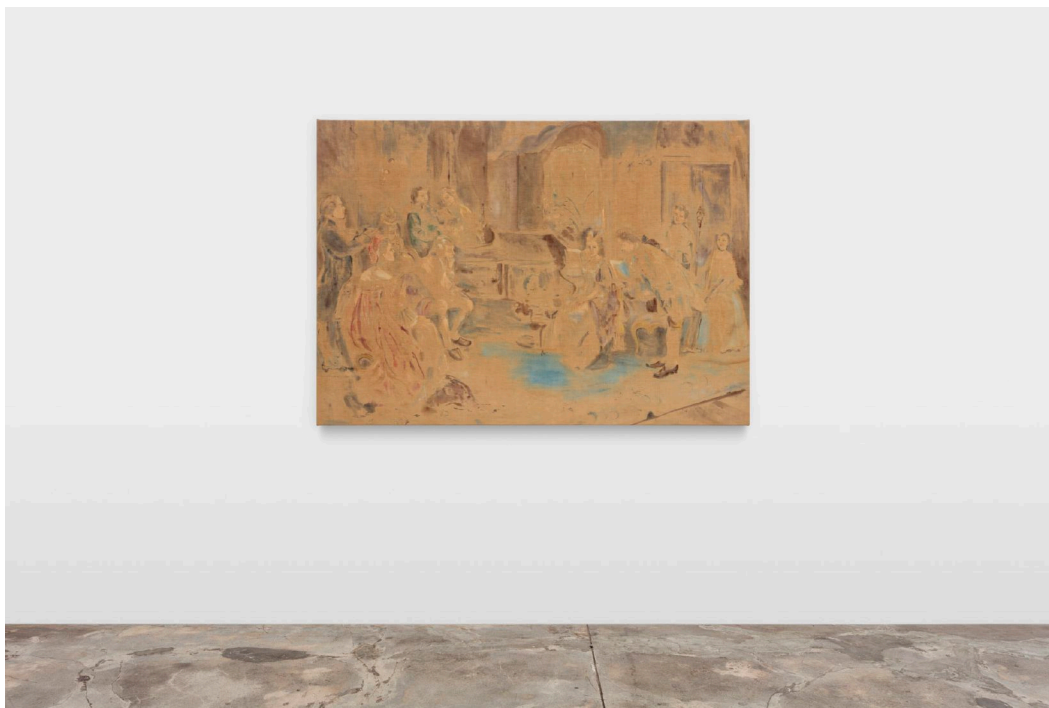


Erin Trefry, *A tale of giant tricks* (detail) (2024). Oil on cotton fabric, 43 × 63 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Lowell Ryan Projects. Photo: Charles White.

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**Erin Trefry, *Happy Phantom*
(installation view) (2024). Lowell
Ryan Projects, Los Angeles,
2024. Image courtesy of the
artist and Lowell Ryan Projects.
Photo: Charles White.**



**Erin Trefry, *Nest of salt*
(installation view) (2024). Oil on
cotton fabric, 45 × 64 inches.
Lowell Ryan Projects, Los
Angeles, 2024. Image courtesy
of the artist and Lowell Ryan
Projects. Photo: Charles White.**

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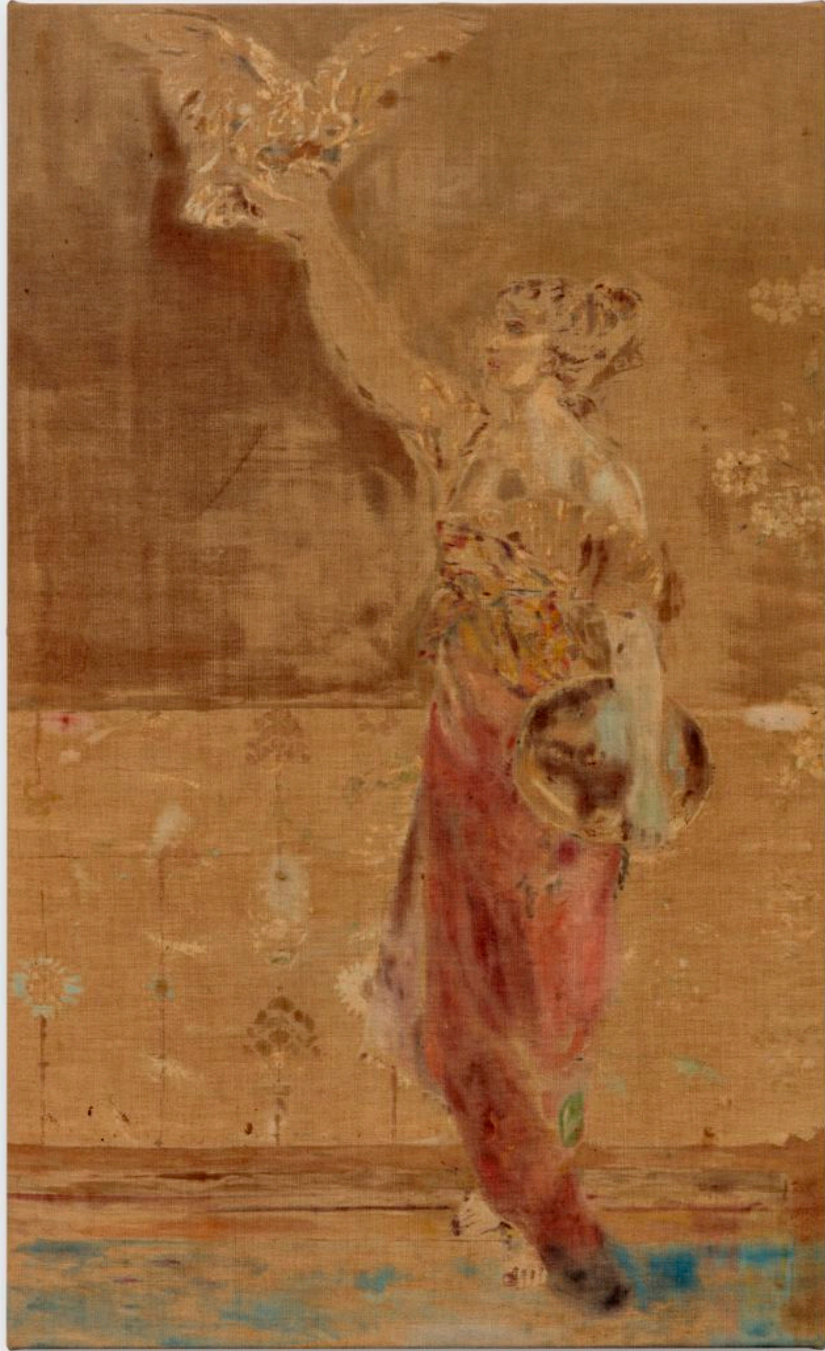
Erin Trefry, *Nest of salt* (detail)
(2024). Oil on cotton fabric, 45 x
64 inches. Lowell Ryan Projects,
Los Angeles, 2024. Image
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**Erin Trefry, *Happy Phantom*
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Erin Trefry, *As tall as the giant*
(2024). Oil on cotton fabric, 46 x
28 inches. Image courtesy of the
artist and Lowell Ryan Projects.
Photo: Charles White.

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Erin Trefry, *Causeway across the sea* (2024). Oil on cotton fabric, 29 x 28 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Lowell Ryan Projects. Photo: Charles White.

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Erin Trefry, *The biggest lough* (2024). Oil on cotton fabric, 28 x 45 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Lowell Ryan Projects. Photo: Charles White.