



Maxwell Williams, “Jesse Mockrin’s Cropped Rococo Paintings Break the Spell of Art History,” *Artsy*, March 18, 2016.



Left: Jesse Mockrin, *Garden of Love*, 2016. Photo courtesy of Night Gallery; Right: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, 1767. Image via Wikimedia Commons.

Jesse Mockrin’s Cropped Rococo Paintings Break the Spell of Art History

By Maxwell Williams | March 18, 2016

An arm reaches through lush greenery with a raised pinkie finger, gravitating towards a figure caught mid-air, wrapped in a flowing pink gown; one stocking-clad leg points to the sky, just a moment after launching a tiny shoe into the air, pictured nearby. The scene is familiar and enticing, but very different than the original, like a cover of a classic love song performed well by a modern-day pop singer.

“Fragonard is the most-often referenced painter,” says Jesse Mockrin of her work, as she gestures to this painting, which directly quotes from the Rococo master’s canonical 1767 canvas, *The Swing*. She is standing on the cement floor of Night Gallery in South Downtown L.A., surrounded by “The Progress of Love,” her new show of paintings. “But there are some other painters [referenced] too,” she goes on,

2276 EAST 16TH STREET, LOS ANGELES 90021
NIGHTGALLERY.CA



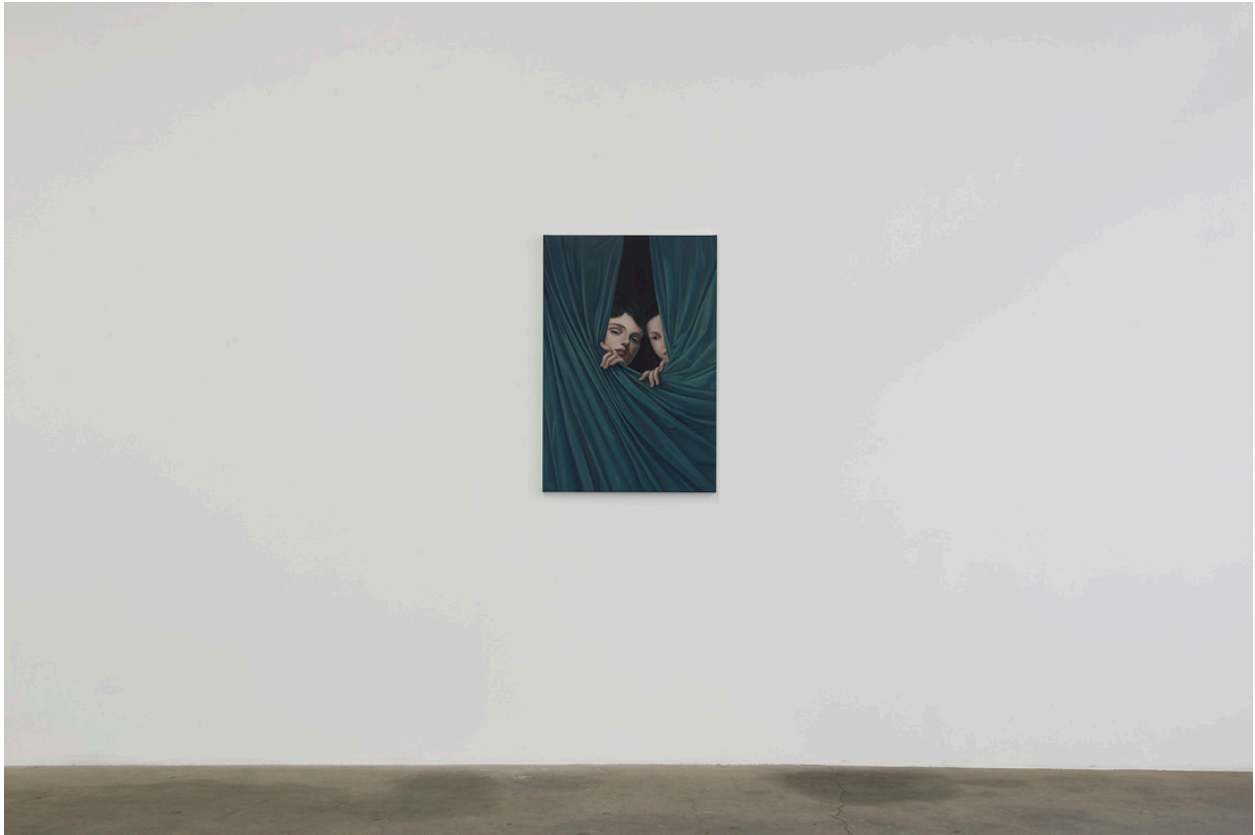
“like Boucher, and lesser-known painters like Deshays and Perronneau, who liked pastels.” And while Mockrin’s works share some of the same formal qualities as an 18th-century Rococo composition—though they’re a bit too askew to actually be mistaken for one—the works in question are decidedly 21st-century.



Installation view of “The Progress of Love.” Courtesy of Night Gallery.

Mockrin grew up in Maryland and began painting at 15, taking classes at the storied Yellow Barn studio before attending Barnard College in New York. But she shied away from painting there—her thesis was a photography project—before returning to her original medium in grad school at University of California, San Diego. There, she studied under figure drawer Amy Adler, who encouraged her to continue her pursuit in the face of criticism from her classmates. “I got a lot of [discouragement] in grad school from other students, because at that time I was working from some of my own photographs, and they were like, ‘Why paint them? Just keep the photograph. Give us the reason,’” she says, laughing it off. “I think that ultimately people are going to keep making figurative paintings. And the more it’s taboo, the more it’s a guilty pleasure.”

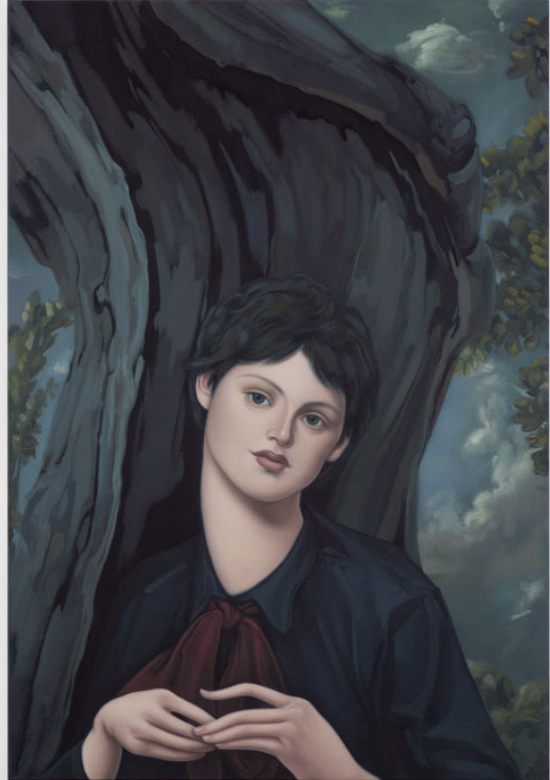
After graduating, she connected with Night Gallery, whose owners Davida Nemeroff and Mieke Marple have been champions of new figurative painting over the past few years. “The Progress of Love” is Mockrin’s second solo show with the gallery; in it, more than a dozen artworks are scattered through the space, each seemingly a fragment or detail of a larger painting. “The cropping and excerpting of these pieces suggest this larger world outside,” she says, and adds, “I’m hoping that the cropping disrupts that immersive fantasy.”



Installation view of "The Progress of Love." Courtesy of Night Gallery.

The painted fantasies are luxuriantly verdant worlds of plant life and strange, pallid characters with skin the color of moonlight or perhaps uncooked pancake batter, as Mockrin suggests. "The skin is not real," she says. "It's got this quality that's like plaster or porcelain. It's not a fleshy, meaty human body. It's some other kind of texture."

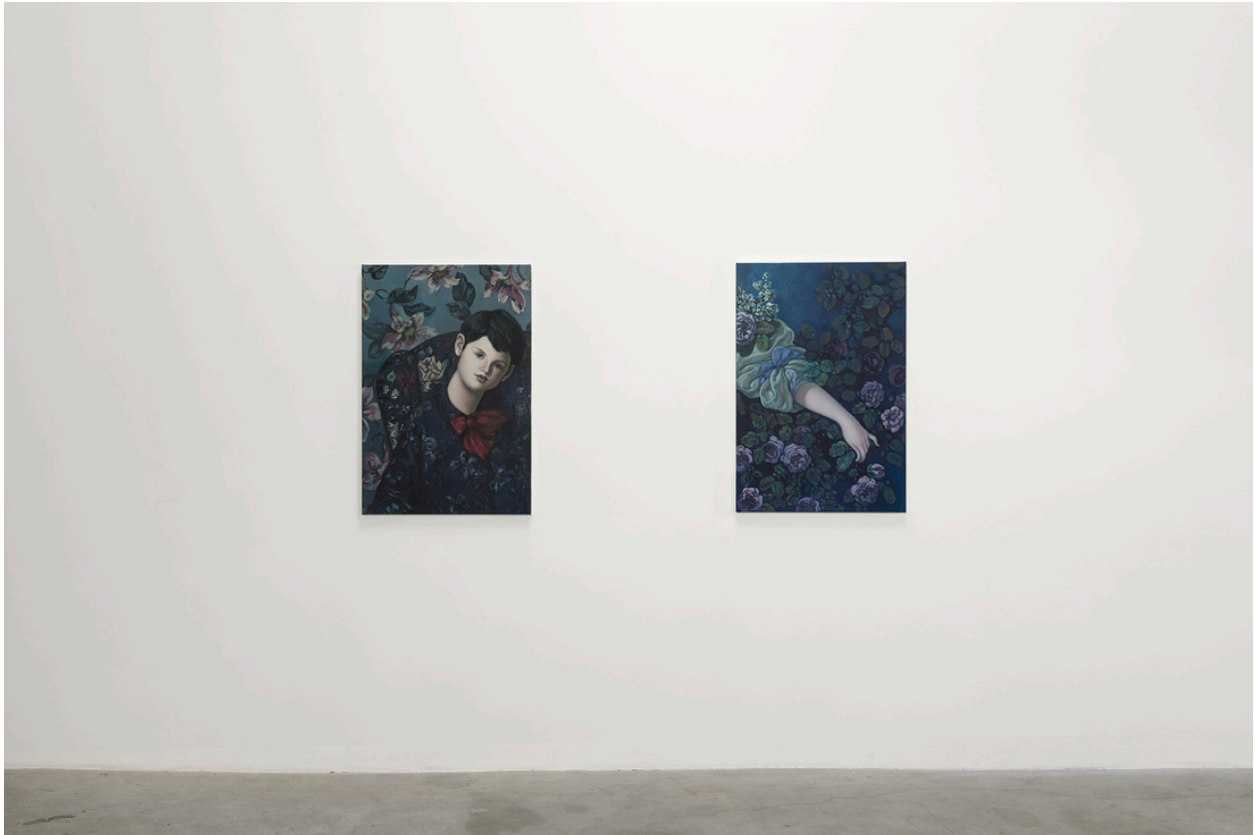
And the fact that they are all oil paintings gives the works a very flat, contained feeling—something Mockrin further highlights by draping curtains or fabric around some of the figures. In the lynchpin piece of the show, two young, androgynous figures peek out from behind what looks like a stage curtain. "With the last group of paintings, I was thinking about the rectangle as a window or your field of vision into which things are being asserted," she says. "I was thinking of those as if the curtain was pulling back, and you could see this fragment of a larger scene...For me, the fabric is also playing with two-dimensional and three-dimensional space, so it fills the canvas with this flatness of surface, like this whole painting is a dress, and the whole body is getting lost inside of that."



Left: Jessie Mockrin, *The Stroll*, 2016; Right: Jessie Mockrin, *Twisted*, 2016. Photos courtesy of Night Gallery.

It was a men's fashion magazine spread with the theme "Dark florals are in for men" that spurred the new paintings. "They had floral wallpaper, and all these overflowing floral prints, and it had this visual connection for me to these flowery Rococo paintings by Fragonard and Boucher," Mockrin recalls. "That was the visual link that interested me. And there are other interesting links, like these transgressions of gender that are happening at the same time—this fluidity."

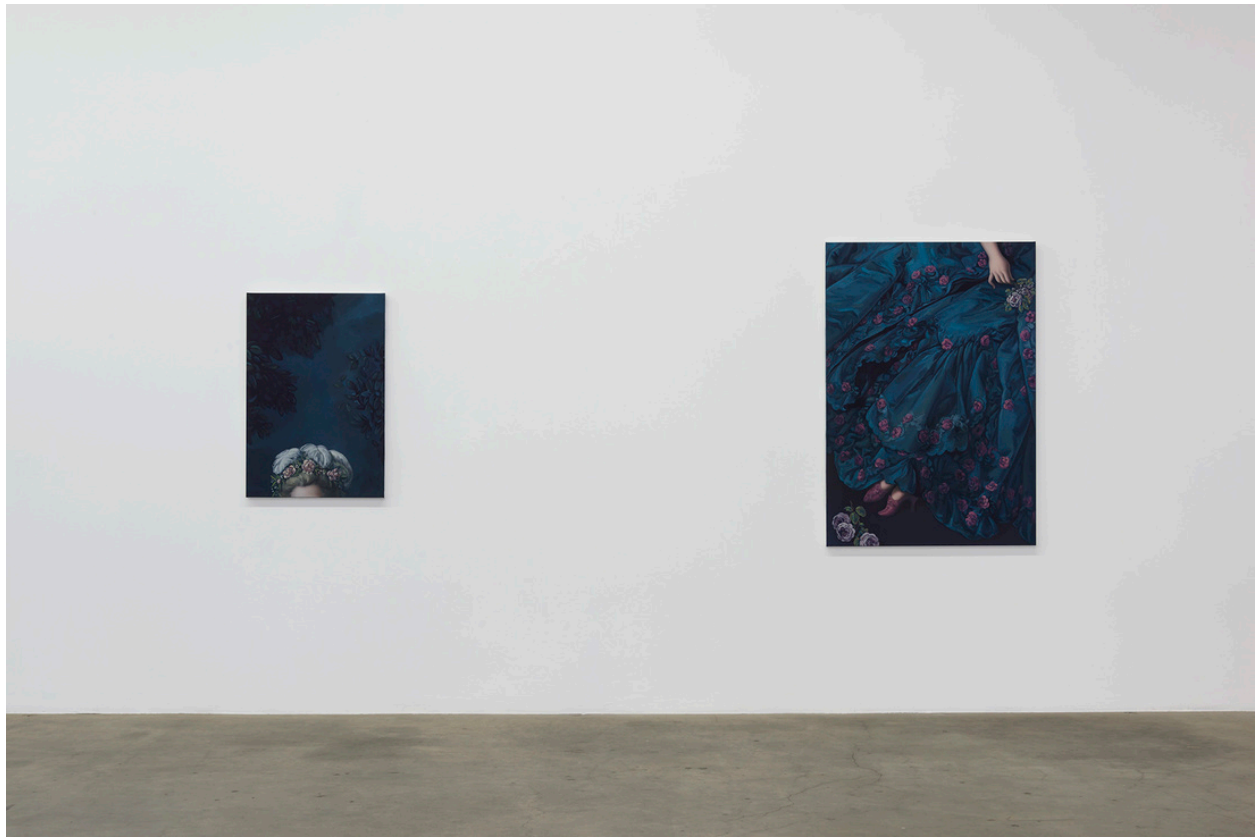
The men in Mockrin's paintings are dandies—which is perhaps 18th-century parlance for gender fluidity. "I'm definitely interested in these androgynous faces; a lot of the faces come from Ingres," she says, conjuring images of the Neoclassical master's famed *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) or lavish portrait of Napoleon. "Ingres has these amazing facial proportions happening, like the eyes are too far apart. There are always heavy eyelids and deep-set eyes, small mouths, small noses."



Installation view of "The Progress of Love." Courtesy of Night Gallery.

This synthesis of past and present fashion is something Mockrin has turned to in past shows. "In all of the bodies of work I've made, I've seen something happening in contemporary culture imagery that correlates with historical painting that interests me," she says. "In the past body of work, the contemporary imagery was Korean pop stars, and then I was looking at historical paintings of adolescent boys—a lot of John Singer Sargent—and there were similarities just in the way they were dressed. These big bow ties that were popular for young boys in 1905 were being used by dandy K-pop stars. These things that are traditionally reserved for the realm of the feminine are now being employed by both."

The figures in the new paintings are of an indeterminate age (Mockrin suggests perhaps they're 27, though trying to look 17) and are meant to have a sensual, erotic quality. "I titled the show 'The Progress of Love' after the Fragonard Room at the Frick. There, it is a narrative series about these suitors pursuing the woman, and her having a secret meeting, and her choosing the one. Then they're old, and they're looking back at their love letters. So by giving it that title, it does encourage viewing each picture as what one part of the story could be."



Installation view of "The Progress of Love." Courtesy of Night Gallery.

But Mockrin doesn't want her images to be taken as puritanical. In fact, "pervy" is the word she chooses. "It's not all romance," she says with a laugh. "There's tension underneath that. *The Swing* is changed, not just by the zooming in, but also, the shoe is much closer, leaves are encroaching from all sides, and they're much closer to you."

In this, Mockrin's paintings are beautiful, but they're also a bit unsettling. The way that they're cropped creates a kind of confusion of where to look; the viewer feels uncomfortably close to the subjects. But there's a modernity built into the images, too; Mockrin's subversion of the classics perfectly captures the way gender shifts through history, illustrating how those norms, when faded, can encapsulate a moment.

"The Progress of Love" is on view at Night Gallery, Los Angeles, March 12 – April 16, 2016.