

Pilar Corrias

**KAT
LYONS**

Herd

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Pilar Corrias Conduit Street
8 March–6 April 2024

Herd



Herd 2023
Oil on canvas | 121.9 × 152.4 cm | 48 × 60 in

a harvest; a herd; a high-rise

Daisy Lafarge

It was June, and the sky was burning. The infamous city skyline blazed orange for three days and as many nights, leaving the Empire State Building's antenna barely visible through the haze. Hundreds of miles away, wildfires tore through Canadian provinces and territories. But for the inhabitants of New York – human, animal, vegetable, mineral – the immediate effect appeared to be one of colour; colour, that is, as a side effect of light and distance. In a phenomenon known as Rayleigh scattering, the particulate matter generated by wildfires changes the way light bounces around the atmosphere, meaning that red and orange light replace light with a shorter wavelength – blue. I think blue: blue of a blue sky, blue of the sea, blue light of my phone screen that keeps me up at night.

This coinciding of colour and climate catastrophe – as deeply implicated, rather than merely illustrative – is one place to start with painter Kat Lyons's body of work. Colour, as a mercurial physical phenomenon, smudges any easy distinction between nature and artifice, perception and reality, the domesticated and the wild. Lyons is deeply invested in the muddying of these categories, and the ways we use them to confer value and meaning on the non-human world. Her paintings create palimpsests of their subjects, refusing to settle on or suggest any one reading or interpretation. An animal depicted in her work, therefore, is never singular but multiple; it is all at once: meat, agriculture, symbol, fantasy, nostalgia, political subject, mirror, technology, companion, prey, deity, enemy. It is, in other words, a herd, a flock, a swarm. Or better, a *swarming*.

In *The City (June 6, 2023)* (2023), the wildfire-orange skies provide an apocalyptic backdrop to the drama of species as it plays out in the urban environment. The lowly pigeon – usually ranked as vermin – takes on heroic proportions, as if to signify

its virtue of resilience. Pigeons thrive so well in cities, Lyons tells me, because they are able to nest in its cramped conditions. In becoming precarious renters, they secure their home; in becoming less birdlike they become – not exactly more human, but a secret, third thing. Pigeons are too close to humans to be seen as wild; but if one marker of an animal's 'wildness' is the anthropogenic threat to its habitat, does something like a wildfire, which poisons and clogs city skies, restore some vestige of 'wildness' to the pigeon, who can't escape or navigate its toxic haze?

It's this secret third thing that Lyons's paintings move towards; neither a nostalgia for the idea of pure nature, liberated from human intervention, nor the anthropocentric sidelining of non-human life. Rather they exist in the messy, complicated tidal zone that contains both compassion and cruelty, life and death, conservation and liberation. The work also transgresses another binary, that of city and country. In these paintings, Lyons draws on her experience both as an urban-dweller and as a worker on a rural regenerative farm. A painting such as *Chasm* (2022), therefore, is not an anatomical fantasy, but wrought from the experience of extreme proximity to animal life and death. Staring straight out at the viewer, the bull of *Chasm* both alarms and disarms our looking. Its flesh on display reminds us of its meat, but you'd be hard pressed to call it *appetising*. It is powerful, beautiful, intimidating; Lyons has mentioned that she wanted this painting to convey the daunting experience of approaching a bull in a field. The incarnadine flesh on display also recalls the red flag of the matador – another kind of viewer who knows exactly how much this creature, in the moment of encounter, has the physical – if not agricultural – upper hand.

The brute reality of agriculture, as well as its useful romanticisation, forms another refrain in this series. *Final Harvest* (2023) vividly animates the trope of reversing the terrestrial and the celestial to depict a fantasy of abundance. The ghostly asparagus and brassicas – which could be at home in a Dutch still life arrangement – are here embraced by the roots of a tree, whose canopy is laden with creatures and beings considered pestilential, or at best unsightly: worms, fungi, snails and insects. Liberated from gravity, these bioluminescent pests verge on the angelic, reminding us of their vital role in soil health and ecological biodiversity; without them, there can be no abundance. On first seeing this painting, the eerie glow of its produce puts me in mind of industrial production, of the artificially bright glow lights used to grow vegetables on a mass scale. But Lyons also draws our attention to the scene of a *final* harvest; luminosity then becomes a sign of imminent burnout – the bright burst of a star before collapse, the manic flowering of a plant before death. I think of a line by the poet Denise Riley: 'since, speaking botanically, flowering's a sign of distress'.

Like all true disciples of ambivalence, Lyons allows hope to intersperse these reckonings. The pig and bull of *Hiemal Arc* (2023) perform a duet of domesticated life, and its symbolic overcoming, as the bull performatively leaps through his stablemate's death in an attempt to pierce the sun. 'Hiemal' refers to winter, and the scene depicted, containing both death and renewal, figures the cycle of seasons and their quiet metamorphosis as trees shed their leaves to make way for new growth. It seems to exist as a footnote to the other paintings, an idyll that forges a resilience to reality's harsher edges, and reminds of a passing remark in John Berger's novel *Pig Earth* (1979). Written during the fifteen years he spent living and working in a peasant farming community in the French alps, *Pig Earth* documents the cyclical time and labours of interwoven human and animal life. "There is nothing sadder than a death," says the farmer's wife Marie, whose sentiment is heightened by her ambivalence: "and nothing forgotten more quickly".



Hiemal Arc 2023
Oil on canvas | 121.9 × 182.9 cm | 48 × 72 in

Left: Elegy in Light 2023
Oil on canvas | 90.2 × 90.2 cm | 35 ½ × 35 ½ in





Chasm 2022
Oil on canvas | 203.2 × 152.4 cm | 80 × 60 in

Pollen 2023
Oil on canvas | 152.4 × 203.2 cm | 60 × 80 in





The City (June 6, 2023) 2023
Oil on canvas | 152.4 × 203.2 cm | 60 × 80 in

Following: **Final Harvest 2023**
Oil on canvas | 198.1 × 223.5 cm | 78 × 88 in

To Meet a Pigeon

Amber Husain

There are people whose hatred of pigeons is so developed, so assured that it threatens to become doctrinal. The people have been waiting, prepping, for most of their lives to go to war with pigeons. They have already militarised the lids of their buildings, helmeting rooves with little bayonets and shielding their crannies with nets. These people will splash their own pavements with chemical soup to make the little buggers' feet fizz; put up signs in the park warning children against the urge to keep them alive.

These people were children once too, and were told as soon as they could hear that, one day, they would be killed by a pigeon. Say 'pigeon' and some elder would try to invoke a vague bubonic scourge, seeping and stinking and ripe. No beast so tousled with vape juice and soot, they warned, could be other than a messenger of death.

But the haters do not really believe this. They have heard of a bygone time when healthy children let whole flocks of pigeons fly, roasted, into their mouths.¹ Of a time when pigeons were fattened straight from the egg on half-masticated bread. Of a time when pigeons were sacred.

But then came all the machines for industrialising birds; there was chicken to eat instead. No more human need for the pigeons, but many more of them around to feast on our hot, fragrant garbage and catch in our bland land of shops, making lifestyle porn of what we humans could never cherish.

The birds of Kat Lyons's epic painting *The City (June 6, 2023)* (2023) are up to something strange. They surface from thought clouds of smoke to loom magnificent over our world: the wildfire-orange empire we have tried to choke them out of. The canvas may be characteristically vast, but the birds are somehow bigger still, as though to mock the tangled, little nest New Yorkers have caged themselves in. We built ourselves cities we wanted to love but the pigeons loved them more. Lyons's birds have seized the buildings with their deadly crowns of thorns and are plopping out eggs from the bowels of them like sky-scraping PEZ dispensers. We are so very jealous of the pigeons, who are so prodigiously fertile. We too long to fly without all the pollution and border controls.

Some people feel so guilty about their hatred of pigeons – our unwanted, inedible surplus – that they simply cannot look. Others feel guilty enough to and try

and do something to help. Away from the canvas, Kat Lyons is one such agent of pigeon reparations. Away from the canvas, the artist has worked for an urban pigeon rehab, where other manageably rueful humans conspire in the pigeons' best interests. They think about ways to stop letting the pigeons smash their brains against the glass we've put up to house our little business transactions. They see these fatal collisions and see the cost.

The City (June 6, 2023) has one such bird approach a pane of glass, but stop just shy of pulverisation. It is as though, beak to beak with his own reflection, he manifests a whole other body for himself on the panel's other side. We would think these birds were two, pressed up against the glass that separates a jailbird from her lover, were it not for the chalky complexion of the weirdo mirror bird. If Bird 1 looks in the mirror and tries to fathom what he sees, Bird 2, his faded doppelgänger, is not forthcoming with answers.

Away from the canvas, Kat Lyons is moved to try and help the pigeons. In front of it, she faces the fact that she doesn't really know what they are.

For this is the thing about trying to coexist with fellow species: in order to help or harm them, we must first try to grasp what we are dealing with. We must try to know both who an animal is and the extent of what has been done to them. This attempt to get meaningfully close to species not her own would seem to be the effort animating much of Lyons's creativity.

The paintings gathered in *Herd* are coextensive with earlier works, which stage awkward encounters with livestock. Having lived on a small farm during the Covid-19 pandemic, Lyons bore daily witness to people handling, naming, governing, loving and killing various creatures without ever really seeing them; parsing them only in terms of their fitness to serve human wants. For all the curious tenderness of Lyons's cross-species meetings, there remains a fundamental awareness that the Other will resist human knowledge. Not only are her close-ups unmasterable, but so are her canvases scattered with shadowy miniature creatures. Reminders, she suggests, of opacity, they meaningfully signify nothing.

When I asked Kat Lyons how she felt towards the animals she paints, she was wise enough to be stumped. Her hyperobsession is not just with non-human life, but how human emotion towards such life has been 'managed' by a logic of dominance. What would it mean to ground our meetings with animals, she asks, in something other than jealous self-advancement? How to look at a pigeon with both enough humility and intent that you might let yourself let the pigeon fly?

The psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, student *par excellence* of the destructiveness of guilt, was also convinced of the emotion's promise. In Klein's formulation, while there are those so keen to allay their own remorse that they see straight past their own wreckage, love-bombing pigeons without really trying to understand their plight, and those whose guilt is so total they must plot to poison them instead, there remains an opportunity to turn our guilt and grief into acts of imagination. In *Herd*, Lyons does the creative work required. She constructs a frame to accommodate birds; she builds a green Elysium pollinated by flies and wasps. Our duty, after all, is not to 'master' what can be known of animal life. It is simply to know enough that we too might fly free from all that effort to master.

1 According to writer Fahim Amir, whose book *Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It)* (2020) is an inspiration both for Lyons and this piece, the phrase 'waiting until roast pigeons fly into your mouth' is a German proverb drawn from the medieval fantasy of a land of plenty.





Kat Lyons in her NYC studio, 2023

Kat Lyons (b. 1991, Louisville, Kentucky, USA) completed a BFA at Virginia Commonwealth University and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture (2019). Recent solo and group shows include: *CYCLES*, TANK, Shanghai (2023); *PRESENT '23: Building the Scantland Collection of the Columbus Museum of Art*, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus (2023); *A Journey*, Yuz Museum, Shanghai (2023); *Au-delà*, Lafayette Anticipations, Paris (2022); *Fire Figure Fantasy*, Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, Miami (2022) and *Early Paradise*, Pilar Corrias, London (2021). Lyons's work has recently been acquired by the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; Frye Museum, Seattle; X Museum, Beijing, and Zuzeum, Riga, among others.

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