

# ARTFORUM

## Hélène Delprat

CARLIER | GEBAUER

The title of Hélène Delprat's first solo exhibition in Berlin, "TO SLEEP TO DIE, NO MORE," can be understood as a reflection of the ways in which we are touched by our cultural past without necessarily knowing it. It sounds like a misremembered line from Shakespeare or some other poetic phrase we no longer fully understand but still recognize as part of our linguistic heritage. This type of slippery relation to our past is also found in Delprat's phantasmagoric painterly compositions, which take historical and cultural references and distill them into an idiom uniquely her own, yet somehow familiar.

*Mes invités* (My Guests), 2015, is a large acrylic-and-pigment work that greeted visitors like a portent in the gallery's vestibule. While it exhibits techniques she uses in making her other paintings, such as diluting pigment to create a phantomlike underlayer of paint, Delprat here has added writing to the composition. Names of artists and brands such as POLKE, CHANEL, GINA PANE, DISNEY—some more visible than others—are spelled out in light-yellow dots in the amorphous, washed-out, blue-black shape that almost fills the rectangular canvas. A clue to the rest of the exhibition? Not really, since the other paintings on view didn't directly refer to Sigmar Polke, the Walt Disney Co., and so on, even if some faint connections turned up. *U-Boot* (Submarine), 2018, for example, contained smiley-face suns (and one that is frowning), a cheery swordfish with a zigzag bill, and a googly-eyed cloud-like shape, any of which might recall a character from *Finding Nemo* or some other animated film for kids. The creatures float through a diaphanous blue-green field punctuated with dollops of white paint, which is overlaid with a blackish mesh-like design that covers much of the canvas and brings to mind Polke's raster-dot paintings. Like Polke, Delprat deliberately obscures her references: The fish might look like a Disney character, but it is actually based on the laughing sawfish emblem of the German Ninth U-boat Flotilla; other paintings also included elements with similar World War II-era origins.

The googly-eyed cloud was also found in *Que vous avez de grandes dents!*, 2018, whose title renders Little Red Riding Hood's "What big teeth you have!" in French. In this work, though, the cloud looks surprised, and the lines emanating from its open mouth suggest wind. Or perhaps they imply shock, since beneath the nebulous form two

large missiles are about to collide. One of them has a white-gloved wolf standing on it, which could be inspired by either the Blitz Wolf from the eponymous American anti-Nazi cartoon from 1942, or the Big Bad Wolf familiar from Disney cartoons. He faces backward, brandishing a huge flag, and looks at his own grinning and jack-booted reflection in an ovoid shape floating above the missile's vapor trail.

For all their comedic elements, the figures found in Delprat's works are a metaphorical reflection on our violent history—one that is often altered or repurposed by popular culture, as the title of the exhibition has been. "To die, to sleep / No more" is a line from *Hamlet*, part of the well-known "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, but its chiasmic inversion in the show's title reflected the ways we are touched by our cultural past without necessarily knowing it.

In *La guerre élégante No. 2*, 2017, the "elegant war" was a hodgepodge of figures, including a grinning tree, a marching soldier, smiley faces, and an odd-looking masklike face in the center of the painting. They are all placed seemingly at random against a mishmash of yellow paint splotches; burnt-umber grids; orange, brown, and blue swirly lines; and (again) a blackish lacelike pattern. The fantastical images in this work are blurry and prone to distortion, like memories. Also like memories, Delprat's paintings go through a process of amalgamation and creation, reminding us of the constructive nature of historiography and even of perception itself, and pointing to more connections between the past and the present than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

—Aaron Bogart



Hélène Delprat, *Mes invités* (My Guests), 2015, acrylic and pigment on canvas, 88% x 102%\*



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