

The Performative Canvas: Unveiling the Theatrical Essence in Louise

Giovanelli's *Pool*

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Louise Giovanelli, *Pool*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 70 7/8 x 55 1/8 in (180 x 140 cm). Photo: Pierre Le Hors

Louise Giovanelli's *Pool* skillfully merges color and texture, drawing parallels between windows and theater curtains to emphasize the performative aspects of art. Its striking, photorealistic appearance captivates the viewer. With more careful observation, the painting becomes a conversation on the theatrical aspects of modern art, both figuratively and literally.

The painting depicts a section of a cover which drapes over the canvas, its edges darkened almost creating a lens or a window into the painting. The white streaks that mark the top crest of the cover creates an elastic texture. The deep turquoise hues and the painting's title suggests that what is depicted is a pool cover. The dark, cropped edges create an impression of endlessness to the painting, like an interminable ocean, or an infinity pool; it also forces the

center of the painting into a spotlight, suggesting a source of artificial lighting. The painting is a portion of a larger subject, and the viewer is left, without context, with this ambiguous rendering. The material folds repeat in a vertical pattern; rounding up and down, reminiscent of both the waves of an ocean and a theater curtain. The painting accompanies *Pomme Bouche* by Claude Lalanne, a bronze sculpture of an apple with a mouth. *Pomme Bouche* is placed directly in front of *Pool*, appearing like it is onstage, perhaps engaged in a performance. The painting acts as a backdrop or the curtains of a theater, accentuating this notion of performance.

The artist of *Pool* is Louise Giovanelli, a 30 year old painter from London. From the onset of her career, Giovanelli has been fascinated with pop culture, painting stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Jimmy Hendrix. Soon after finishing her postgraduate studies at the Städelschule in Frankfurt am Main, she became fascinated with the old masters, specifically the traditional techniques used during those periods: oil, pencil, shading, and life painting. The desire to learn how artists before her achieved such mastery and the challenge in doing so inspired her to continue painting and evolving her art ¹. To start a painting, Giovanelli looks for images that fascinate her and crops specific details that she hopes to draw the viewer to. She uses her phone to distort and stretch the photo, creating ambiguity to the source of what she is depicting. Her work invites the viewer to search for the subject matter, involving them more intimately with the work. Giovanelli paints in thin layers like the old masters did, achieving the luminosity and digital feel of her artwork. Because of the long drying process, she often creates multiple pieces at once and bounces back and forth between them. Fabrics and hairs are important motifs in her work; she wants to make the viewer question how she rendered these complex textures, just as she asked the same question when viewing the works of Jan van Eyck,

¹ "Louise Giovanelli's Art: Exploring the Interplay Between Color, Texture, and Performance." Ft.com, Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/a0bfd459-e1f3-4940-8ec6-93546ccb7047>.

Rogier van der Weyden, and other Flemish painters ². Her process can be seen in *Pool*: the incredibly detailed rendering and luminescent texture, the cropped and ambiguous subject matter, and the motif of fabric (in this case a more elastic material), all exemplify her studio processes. Her work leaves the viewer with more questions than answers, beckoning them to dig deeper and interact with the work.

Pool creates an interplay between art and performance through the usage of theater curtains and ambiguity. *Pool* is displayed in artist Sarah Crowner's *The Sea, the Sky, a Window*, located at the Hill Arts Foundation in NYC. An excerpt from the show's press release is as follows: "Crowner's exploration of the interplay between painting and sculpture expands here to her focus on the relationship between viewer and artwork, which is further related to her interest in set design and the proscenium stage" ³. Crowner's interest in art being a stage can be seen in her many interpretations of the theme in the works juxtaposed around the gallery: *Platform (Stretched Pentagons)* juxtaposed with *Untitled* by Beatrice Caracciolo; *The Sea, the Sky, a Window 1, 2, and 3* juxtaposed with *Madame d'O* and *Untitled 1 and 2* by Cy Twombly; *Fluid Red Tone (in the break)* by Jennie C. Jones juxtaposed with *Madeleine II* by Henri Matisse; and *Pool* juxtaposed with *Pomme Bouche*. Crowner herself speaks of exploring the relationship between painting and sculpture in many of these works; *Pool* accompanies the sculpture *Pomme Bouche* in a way that evokes a performative nature to the piece. The arrangement of the two pieces is a model example of Crowner's interest in the proscenium stage: The apple acts as the performer on the apron of the stage, and the painting, with a texture eerily similar to theater curtains, is the backdrop of the stage which frames the sculpture like a theater performance.

² Lara Johnson-Wheeler, "Louise Giovannelli's White Cube Exhibition: An Interview." *anothermag.com*, *AnOther Magazine*, July 11, 2022.

<https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/14216/louise-giovanelli-white-cube-exhibition-interview>.

³ Hill Art Foundation, "The Sea, the Sky, a Window: A Project by Sarah Crowner." *Docs.google.com*, Google Docs. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mx4KNj1YgrLEe73zoHhj4Jtzisy2LO2U/edit?usp=sharing&oid=108229525494849306799&rtpof=true&sd=true>.

Unlike Crowner's *Platform (Stretched Pentagons)*, which explores a more intimate, interactive side of performative art, these two pieces act literally as a diorama of a theater, a proscenium stage.



Pool in company with *Pomme Bouche* by Louise Giovanelli and Claude Lalannes respectively. Photo: Matthew Herrmann

Pool also exhibits this motif of a stage upon itself. Crowner explains a theme she wanted to explore in the gallery: "I've been thinking about the window not only as a metaphor for painting, like that classic Renaissance view of the painting as a window onto the world. Paintings and windows are also a kind of staging ground. Through them, we learn so much about the world. We pay attention to what's around it, to what's through it... We negotiate presence, tension, and embodiment"⁴. Just like on a stage, windows also give a brief lens into a world; in this painting, Giovanelli embodies this idea of a window as a stage. Giovanelli intentionally

⁴ Hill Art Foundation, "The Sea, the Sky, a Window: A Project by Sarah Crowner." Docs.google.com, Google Docs. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1mx4KNj1YgrLEe73zoHhj4Jtzisy2LO2U/edit?usp=sharing&oid=108229525494849306799&rtpof=true&sd=true>.

crops images to leave out context and focus on important details. By doing so, she creates a brief snapshot into her own world.

Most notable are the intricate details of this piece, especially the rendering of the fabric. Initially when viewing the painting, the viewer may fixate on the painting's name, tying it back to the overall theme of water that *The Sea, the Sky, a Window* exhibits. The ambiguity of the painting, although initially frustrating, pushes one to look for details. In this sense, vagueness serves this painting to be more interactive than it lets on. After looking at the piece for some time, visitors are encouraged to take a broader view of the piece, immersing themselves in the space. As a viewer, one becomes part of the audience viewing the performance.

Giovanelli's oil painting *Pool* is a masterful exploration of the interplay between art and performance. A bit on the nose, the textures and motif of fabric often found in her work has a similar appearance to that of theater curtains. When digging deeper, the set design of the piece places it as a backdrop of another sculpture; the composition resembles that of a proscenium stage, a literal representation of performance. Giovanelli crops images depicted in her art, creating a lens into merely a small portion of a larger lifekind. This can be likened to the theme of Windows throughout *The Sea, the Sky, a Window*: Just like windows and this painting, theaters and stages give a small view into a larger world. Through *Pool*, Giovanelli shows the audience that paintings can be enjoyed not just as a decoration on a wall, but as a discussion, a performance. The realism and lamination of the colors and texture transports the viewer into a theatrical space. *Pool* makes a point that art should stimulate the viewer much like a performance, creating powerful displays that are unique and fleeting.

References

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