

Kirsten Glass
Night-Scented Stock

25 November–16 December 2022
9–20 January 2023

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in association with

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2 Kirsten Glass, *Flying Dream*, 2022
Oil, glitter and embroidery thread on canvas, 240 × 190 cm

Remember the Obverse

The woods that line the Esk valley, south of Edinburgh, are scrawled with signs. Overlooked by Rosslyn Chapel, the valley is a magical place where institutional belief and folk practices overlap or overwrite each other. I walk there often, tracing symbols carved into rocks on the path down to a hidden waterfall, finding offerings left in the nook of an ancient chestnut, wondering what rituals might have taken place the night before. And it's not only humans who write here: long glittering trails tell of night-lit snail journeys; deer tread narrow lines through bracken and horsetail.

As I walk, I notice three words: 'remember the obverse', written, rather gnomically, on the back of my hand. Sometimes, when I don't have a notebook with me, I jot things on myself, and that's what I wrote, sitting on the bus heading out of Edinburgh some days after visiting Kirsten Glass's paintings in London. As the letters faded in soap and time, I reinscribed them repeatedly until the reminder, if not the ink, sunk in.

Much has been written lately of magic's return to prominence in contemporary art and culture, although perhaps the idea of a return is rather a simplification: as Jamie Sutcliffe has asked, 'What if we had never really been disenchanting?'¹ Glass's paintings fill my mind as I walk, perhaps precisely because they are less concerned with specific places than with the creation of composite dreamworlds. Huge in scale, these paintings immerse you in smoky, lamp-lit nights, glittering, exuberantly textured, lighting up the world with tones of amethyst and sapphire. They are dark and strange but also, I think, celebratory. Patterns proliferate: triangles, hexagons, hexafoils. I think of all those marks etched into the walls at Rosslyn, and indeed across Europe, signs scratched into the walls of churches and homes, of farm buildings and everywhere else people felt need of protection. The lines between formal religion and alternative

beliefs were never all that clear. From Portugal to Scandinavia, Poland to Ukraine: as a symbol, the hexafoil crosses borders, connects cultures beyond identities of nation or soil.

In several of Glass's works, a single line marks a kind of horizon, but there is no sense of distance. Like maps or diagrams of constellations, everything happens on the same plane at the same time. *Flying Dream* suggests a subterranean landscape ('as above, so below', as the Theosophists had it) alongside a swirling, rose-like fleshy form reminiscent of Georgia O'Keeffe, and a triangular shard of glittering marble in golds, jades, ochres and pink. Above, partly shrouded, an ethereal purple figure emerges out of the mists, out of a myth. She seems to be towing a ship by threads of turquoise and silver, its prow echoed by the form in the painting's top right, a clean yellow outline blurring at the bottom into misty hilltop white.

Likewise, the various perspectives of *Hawthorn Helper* never coalesce into a world you can navigate. The more you try, the dizzier you feel. Coloured eggs tumble from a central pool of deep blue. A black circle in the upper left recalls the sound hole in a guitar, below which a series of repeated lines are like the ripples in a shoreline left by an ebbing tide. As I struggle to position myself in relation to the painting, eyes stare back at me, or rather the eyeless gaps of a black floating mask and a figure emerging or disappearing from a field of scumbled browns. There are sigils there – magical symbols formed from words condensed into symbols – concealed under planes of texture and colour. If the blank, staring masks feel disconcerting, the painting's title suggests a friendlier presence: somebody to help with the hawthorn, or perhaps the hawthorn itself as helper. At the base, a white figure seems to appear within smoke, hands placed over a ball rendered in paint the colour, appropriately enough, of haw berries. A large rabbit studiously ignores it all.

The rabbit's presence calls to my mind the writer Jessica Gaitán Johannesson's comments on the 'strangely familiar': 'This is a turn of phrase I've always liked,' she writes, 'because it should be a contradiction in terms. Most familiar things are also always strange.'² This relationship between the familiar and the strange is encapsulated by the animals once thought to assist witches in their work, known as familiars. What could be more

familiar than a cat or a raven? But what would be stranger than the idea that the animal has become a biddable servant? These familiars appear frequently in Glass's latest works: not only rabbits but also yellow butterflies, lilac owls, dogs, sheep, foxes and deer, rendered as black silhouettes outlined in glittering blue.

Magic is often thought of as very strange indeed, but mostly it involves domestic knowledge and things found close to hand. As a practice of the oppressed, magic has been exoticised as a threat and persecuted by the forces of science, capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy. Today, the magic of witches comes to many people in mediated forms – through art and books, films, television and a more or less hazy imagining of the world before or outside capitalism. Glass's paintings perform this mediation through their use of stock images. The collaging together of found imagery has long been a feature of Glass's work: around the early 2000s, she became known for paintings that collated fashion photography images of a certain kind of commodified glamour. (Glass, incidentally, notes that this particular mass-culture manifestation of 'glamour' is the same word that is used in magical contexts to refer to a form of enchantment. A similar play occurs in the title of another work, *News Casters*.) Her new paintings bring together flattened images of magic – animal familiars, pointy-hatted witches – which Glass reanimates in works such as *Night-Scented Stock*, simultaneously foregrounding the ways in which imagery proliferates online and asking us to look again at these images as types. (I hesitate to say 'archetypes' with all that pressure of the origin, and its associations with archives and authority.) For these are not individuals but symbolic presences, akin to the dogs and lions and horses capering through Pamela Colman Smith's famous tarot illustrations. Perhaps Glass's use of stock imagery might be seen as a way of tapping into a contemporary networked form of the collective subconscious. The image library as a data set of dreams. The familiar has become strange has become familiar has become strange again.

Glass's paintings do not only intervene in the dissemination of images. They are themselves the products of a magical practice. They are objects, maybe even talismans. Paint accrues

like sedimentary layers, applied with brush, fingers, palette knife, allowed to drip or crack. There are little passages of utter gorgeousness – light pooling on an oil spill, white spume on lichenous wavelets. Canvases are punctured and stitched. Threads of gold and silver, green and red, weave across the surfaces or dangle downwards. In some works, holes have been made but the thread removed. In others, little rocks hang from mouthlike apertures.

These are cryptic paintings. I mean this in the general sense that it can be hard to decipher the ideas embodied in all those symbols – masks, bundles of twigs (a warning about fascism?), candles, triangles, eggs, tree roots. It is true in a more literal sense, too – crypts are where bodies are buried. And you can tell, as soon as you spend some time with them, that much lies buried in Glass's works. Get up close and see what you can find, erased or concealed under layers of paint. This is where you start to discover a sense of time and therefore narrative – less in the things depicted than in the process of creation. Every painting writes itself over an infinity of possibilities. Previous forms hide somewhere under black. A texture of mountains beneath the mountains.

In *Hello Morgana!* I notice a shape repeated then buried under subsequent layers of paint. There are three of them on the left of the painting, where a glittering black raven flies away, leaving a trail of white dots in its wake. And there is one more in the centre, submerged beneath a haze of Rembrandt browns. And now, as I look again, is there a face there too? I couldn't see it in the painting itself, but at home on my computer screen there is the suggestion of a head. Am I imagining things?

Glass's titles seem to provide some clues, but perhaps this one is leading us down the wrong path. Morgan le Fay, or Morgana the Fairy, is a powerful magical figure of Arthurian legend, and those pink and maroon threads near the painting's bottom right form a capital M. Alternatively, what if the raven were in fact a crow, and not just any crow but the Badb of Irish mythology? Then this capital M might stand for the trio of magical sisters known as the Morrígan, and the painting's title would be a dreamlike muddling of multiple sources.

It is perhaps also worth mentioning that *Fata Morgana* is

a kind of horizon mirage, which for centuries was a subject of fascination for scientists, philosophers and mystics. (The Surrealist André Breton wrote a book-length poem by this name in 1940.) The term comes from the effect they seem to conjure, of castles in the clouds, thought by some to be summoned by le Fay. These mirages are caused by the refraction of light through bands of air at different temperatures. Is that what those strips of graded colour in Glass's painting are gesturing towards? I don't know.

Nor do I know what those four buried shapes once were, or what they are now. I also think it's okay not to know. There is joy in the not knowing. The mere presence of these buried shapes, whatever they are, undercuts the flatness of the other images – the silhouette of a fox or cat, its eyes cut out like a Venetian mask; a feather, drawn in wax pencil and held vertical by what looks like a disembodied wing or maybe a hand, outlined in white.

Thinking about shapes buried under paint, I start to think about all those disciplines that entail excavation: archaeology of course, but also psychoanalysis, etymology, gardening, grave robbing. I start thinking about things hidden in the walls of old homes or under floorboards, or inside boarded-up fireplaces – toys or shoes or little figures to ward off evil and then forgotten about, only to be found (or not) decades or centuries later, still in place but taken, by time, quite out of context, their original intentions faded, lost or, more intriguingly, seeped out into the very fabric of the world.

Glass has spoken of the particular 'temperament' of her paintings, each one 'holding and withholding a narrative'. They prompt a desire to look, to know, and each time gradually comes the realisation that there is a limit to knowledge, that there are things we will never discover. There is always something held back, evading sight, description, sense. And this is not a cause for regret but a catalyst for faith, a source of pleasure and delight.

And so, finally, to the note on the back of my hand: 'remember the obverse'. Sometimes we forget that a painting is always an object before it is an image. And, as beings that inhabit the world as much as images that create new worlds, Glass's

paintings have both a front and a back, neither possible without the other. The backs, like the fronts, bear the marks of their making, patterns made up of, well ... perhaps you can try to imagine as you stand before them in the gallery. What do you think might be there? I've seen them, so I know. Maybe you will too, if you ask the right questions.

Tom Jeffreys

- 1 Jamie Sutcliffe, 'Magic: A Gramarye for Artists', in *Documents of Contemporary Art: Magic*, Whitechapel Gallery, London, and MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2021, p.12.
- 2 Jessica Gaitán Johannesson, 'The Great Moose Migration', in *The Nerves and their Endings*, Scribe, Melbourne and London, 2022, p.50.



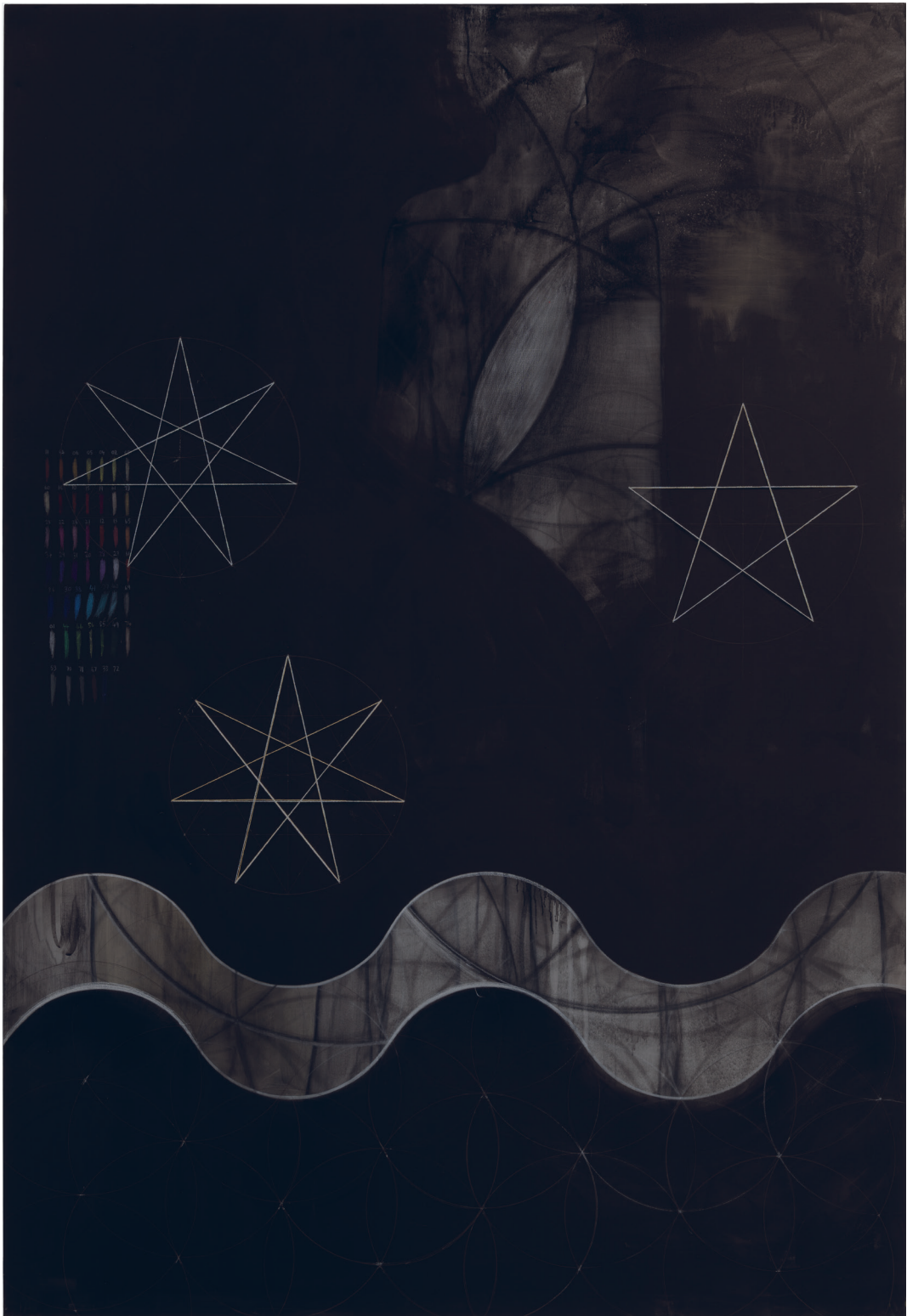
9 Kirsten Glass, *Night-Scented Stock*, 2022
Oil, glitter and embroidery thread on canvas, 239 × 168 cm

10 Kirsten Glass, *Painting with Hekate*, 2022
Oil, wax pencil, glitter, sand and embroidery thread on canvas, 240 × 190 cm

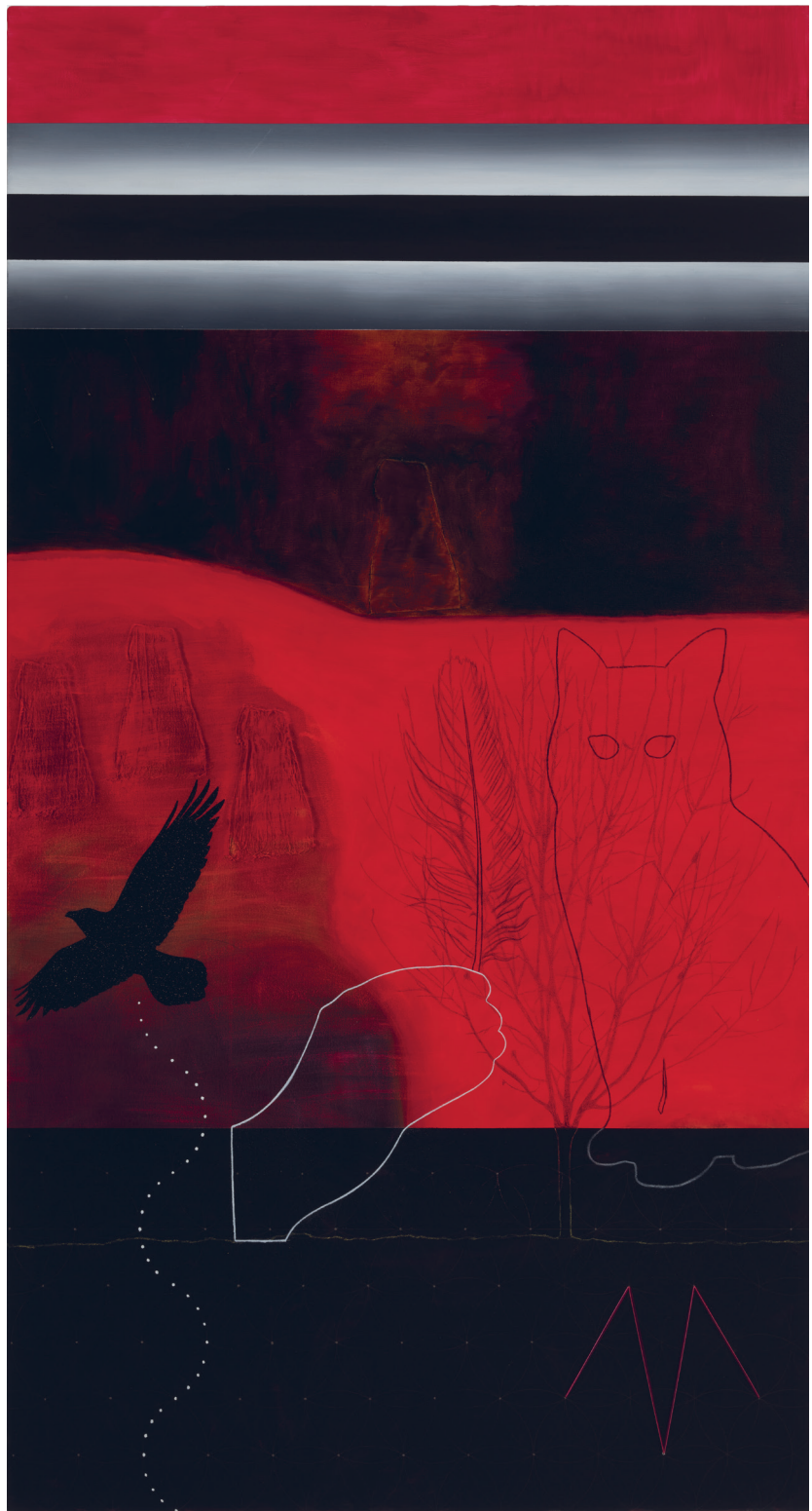


12 Kirsten Glass, *Hawthorn Helper*, 2022
Oil, wax pencil, glitter and embroidery thread on canvas, 195 × 160 cm





14 Kirsten Glass, *Sevens*, 2022
Acrylic, charcoal, oil and embroidery thread on canvas, 244 × 168 cm



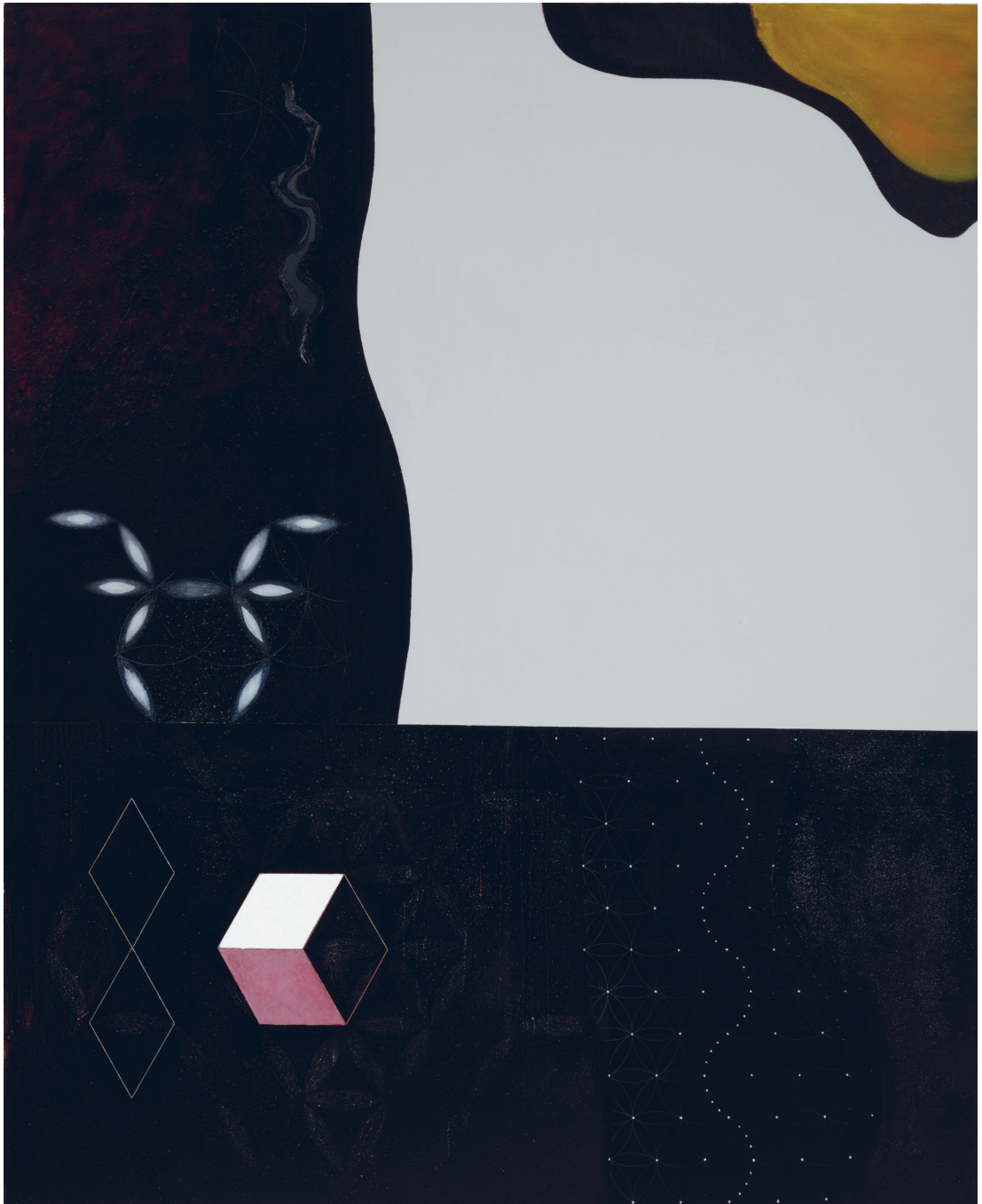
15 Kirsten Glass, *Hello Morgana!*, 2022
Oil, wax pencil, glitter and embroidery thread on canvas, 229 × 122 cm

16 Kirsten Glass, *Seaside*, 2022
Oil, embroidery thread and hagstone on canvas, 163 × 130 cm



18 Kirsten Glass, *Strangers*, 2022
Oil, spray acrylic and embroidery thread on canvas, 153 × 122 cm





22 Kirsten Glass, *Charmer*, 2022
Oil and embroidery thread on canvas, 195 × 161 cm



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