

CASEY KAPLAN

121 WEST 27TH STREET
NEW YORK NY 10001
TEL +1 212 645 7335
WWW.CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM
INFO@CASEYKAPLANGALLERY.COM

Ella Walker

After great pain, a formal feeling comes

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After great pain, a formal feeling comes (341)

By Emily Dickinson, c. 1862

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

For her second solo exhibition with Casey Kaplan, Ella Walker (b. 1993, Manchester, UK) presents *After great pain, a formal feeling comes*, a new body of work that finds balance within the complexities of the human condition and its nearness to beauty. A monumental, unstretched painting titled *Chorus* (2023), first displayed as the focal point of Walker's solo exhibition by the same name at Kestner Gesellschaft, Hanover, Germany (2023), anchors the exhibition. Inscribed on the reverse, and not in plain view, is Emily Dickinson's titular poem; its language forms the backbone of Walker's steep range of references that, despite their asynchronous roots, all seek to elevate feminine ferocity. *Chorus* is shown alongside a suite of works on paper and a new series of paintings on canvas and linen, each reflecting a group of players in Walker's imagined stories.

Set within a period that extends from the medieval era, to the Renaissance, and through modern day, Walker takes referential freedoms within her female cast of characters. Figures dressed in gothic attire cross paths with the European avant-garde, who interact with and within Giorgio de Chirico's costumes and architectural constructions. The unique faces of Federico Fellini's 1960s films overlap with the elongated features of Piero della Francesca's women and Man Ray's classical subjects, bringing to life a historically linear, yet timeless, perspective of the female form.

Singing women, crouched performers, and posing dancers overlap within Walker's fictional architectural planes, mostly absorbed within their own narratives. Appendages are collaged and ascribed to bodies that are not their own, while elongated feet "mechanical, go round" in "a wooden way," as Dickinson describes. Walker contorts her figures to their frame, often crowding them into their own clothing. They exist

somewhere between repose and unrest, some victims of their craft, while others joyous in their arrangement, but mostly indifferent to the viewer's response. In a suite of all female subjects, Walker bestows confidence within each body depiction and stance — whatever their discomfort in circumstance is no match to their strength of will.

In *Chorus*, Walker sets the stage for a complex plot. As a group in Ancient Greek theater, the 'chorus' described an acting assembly with a communal voice to provoke the audience. Read horizontally, *Chorus* features a linear perspective for the viewer to engage with each character and scene as individual, but related. A stoic ballerina intersects a laying, nude figure, while a trio of affable, leotard-clad dancers are ignored by a bending, striped figure balancing a boulder on her back, crushed but maintaining the weight of pressure. In a continuation of the theme, *Chorus/Heads* (2024) presents a chorus of six hovering faces in a frieze-like composition, as if to watch and respond to the scene at hand. "Ceremonious, like tombs," they recall frozen reliefs of Roman funerary altars and, with disconcerting grins, span the expressions of the human experience.

Walker's practice encapsulates traditional fresco painting techniques both in process and medium. Underpaintings are layered in washes of natural pigments, acrylic medium, tempera, and ink. Flexible acrylic paste and marble dust enhance the texture of each surface, further enlivening Walker's subjects. Within this new body of work, looser paint application creates more fluidity, while blocks of figures and backgrounds are left bare or in progress. In *The Lovers* (2024), a maroon curtain suggests a backdrop for a troupe of stacked figures — its red drip runs freely, while peach marble dust in the right quadrant obscures a stage background and provides a stark contrast to the oyster white figure crouching in the foreground. She is repeated across multiple canvases, appearing with the same tragic face and interior pose in *Verdict for Boot!* (2024). Her absence of clothing underscores Walker's characters' general states of dress (or undress). A sense of ritual abounds, tested and pushed by Walker's approach to subvert the sacred and elevate a woman in action.