

SILAS VON MORISSE GALLERY

HYPERALLERGIC

[ART](#)

Whale Paintings Evoke the Giant Mammals' Suffering and Scarring

Juliette Dumas's large-scale paintings of whales' flukes manage to refresh a subject that has borne more than its share of sentimentality.



[Peter Malone](#) April 16, 2018



Installation view of *Juliette Dumas: Angels* at Silas von Morisse Gallery (all images courtesy the artist and Silas von Morisse Gallery)

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For an artist to address the whale, a subject that's been romanticized for two full centuries and exposed to every level of public discourse from international litigation to grade school posters, would require a fresh perspective, which is what I believe Juliette Dumas has managed to summon in her current exhibition at Silas Von Morisse. Applying rather drastic techniques devised specifically for an aspect of the subject with which she is passionately engaged, a topic as worn as our relationship to our Cetaceous cousins is once again revised.

Titled *Angels*, the show consists of a half-dozen paintings of various dimensions, several quite large, presented in a two-panel format that employs its dividing vertical as an axis for the symmetrical image of a whale's flukes. The notion that flukes resemble an angel's wingspread is a troublesome allusion in the context of a subject that has borne more than its share of mawkish hyperbole. Yet its vaguely ethereal connotation is surprisingly adaptable to the unusual thesis with which Dumas paints her subject. Each work's actual title is more pragmatic, basically "Whale Fluke" followed by a citation of a distinguishing feature, either a color scheme or a name, like Charlie or Neri — names, I assume, of living and breathing whales.



Juliette Dumas, "Whale Fluke (Night)" (2018), clay and gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 60 x 144 in

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Perhaps there is no need to remind readers that whales must routinely breach the ocean's surface to draw breath. But the empathy Dumas relies upon, as a cornerstone of the series requires that I check that box, as it relates to the fresh narrative she elicits from an otherwise overexposed topic. It is the whale's estrangement that seems to inspire her. Each painting repeats the view of the animal's tail as it swims away from us. Yet the expectation of sentiment is turned on its head by the intensity of each painting's maltreated surface. This likely shamanistic abuse does not read as a save-the-whales protest so much as a recognition of the animal's indifference to the world it left behind.

Whales are by any measure extraordinary but seem tragic in Dumas's fraught vision. By successfully skirting their evolutionary destiny, insolently rejecting their once land-based existence, whales proved both rebellious and ill prepared for their rebellion, traits with unflattering human parallels. Aside from some remarkable compensatory adaptations—some can hold their breath for up to 90 minutes—they also carry the mark of their transgression in the form of scarring. With industrial hunting all but eliminated, whales continue to get battered by barnacles, underwater outcrops, shipping, the occasional predator, all of which leave traces of their mutinous existence on their exposed hides. Apparently, it is this scarring that sounds a cue for the artist.



Juliette Dumas, “Whale Fluke (Le Grand Bleu)” (2018), clay and gouache on paper mounted on canvas, 60 x 144 in.

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The scratching she practices is of two basic types: hatching by means of a sharp etching instrument that define the flukes' outline; and tracks of a heavier tool used with a relative ferocity that clearly mimics disfigurement. It is as if the abused surface rather than the paint or its layering of grounds is the key element of each piece. From their molested and curatorially fragile surfaces emanates a sense of loss, an expansion of the distance the whales chose to put between themselves and their fellow mammals.

The most impressive is the 12-foot-wide "Whale Fluke (Le Grand Bleu)" (2018). It is a layering of paper, mounted on canvas, coated with clay, painted with blue gouache, then vigorously scraped. According to the gallery staff, it was also washed and doused with water at various stages of its creation. The result is a flaking and peeling surface that surrenders its distinctive image to the materials that survived the onslaught. The effect, from a distance obliged by its scale, is both stately and resigned; an image that amplifies the viewer's irrelevance to the whale's consciousness. It leads one to consider that perhaps Dumas's reference to our elusive angelic friends indicates a similar measure of indifference. Courbet would have painted an angel for us to ponder, if only he found one willing to show up.



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Installation view of *Juliette Dumas: Angels* at Silas von Morisse Gallery

[Juliette Dumas: Angels](#) continues at [Silas Von Morisse Gallery](#) (109 Ingraham Street, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through April 29.



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