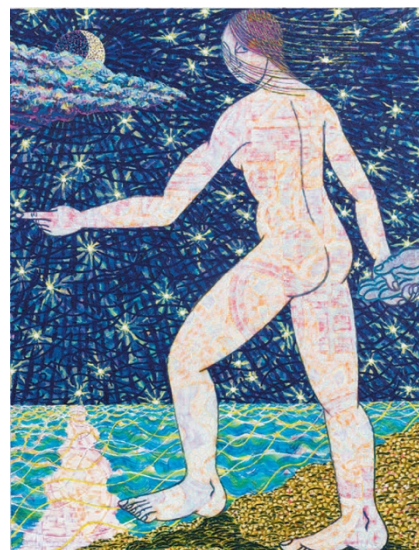


ARTFORUM

The paintings and drawings of "In Waves," Benjamin Degen's solo exhibition at Susan Inglett Gallery, are affecting reminders of those commonplace pleasures that we frequently take for granted but that are always deserving of reverence, especially in light of our alienating present: intimacy and human touch. Whether he is depicting two people watching a sunset, or bare feet stepping between seashells, Degen's mark-making vibrates with an ardor that transforms quotidian experiences into extraordinary events. This is the fleeting stuff that life is made of, the gossamer threads that connect us to each other.

Painting begins with drawing in Degen's practice, and the smallest gestures eventually lead to an extravagance of expression. In the six oil-and-spray-enamel works shown here, colors push up against each other, almost as if they are vying for new levels on the chromatic spectrum. In the seascape *Mångata*, 2020, fuschia, turquoise, and yellow are just some of the contenders within the rippling prismatic action of a moonlit cloud. This nocturnal, liquid energy continues in *Way*, 2020, which features a towering pink-and-orange nude walking along the beach. Her head is turned to meet our gaze as she holds the hand of someone who is out of the frame. Her hair catches starshine—she is at ease in her surroundings. The composition brings to mind the Star in the Rider-Waite tarot deck: an uplifting card that represents hope and the divinatory water bearer's transformative message of renewal.



Benjamin Degen, *Way*, 2020, oil and spray enamel on linen on panel, 84 x 60".

Mare Insularum, 2019, named for a lunar sea, is a close-up of a pensive face, backgrounded by the moon, a starry sky, and ocean waves. *Beach Goer*, 2019, strikes me as the daytime counterpart to this work: The faces of these figures, both men, are tightly cropped and fill the frame, facilitating an intimate proximity to the viewer. Degen's tenacious application of color approximates thermal imaging, a counterbalance of warm and cool that gives skin a glowy quality both somatic and auric. His hues do not blend but rather accompany one another in a tonal collaboration. For instance, in *Rise*, 2019, a panoply of shadowy purples and teal is counteracted by cross-hatchings of yellow and peach in the visage of someone lying in the grass—painted in chartreuse, violet, emerald—and a red sun evoking warmth on the horizon. The billowing striped waves of a blanket are rendered in short strokes and dabs of vibrant tints; each element and layer of the picture—sky, grass, person, etc.—is a noisy assertion, but the resultant mood is quiet.

The artist's black-and-white drawings made me particularly wistful when I viewed them on Susan Inglett's website while at home during quarantine. I had the sense of looking at a yearbook or scrolling through memories of happier times. *Genetrix*, 2020, is a solicitous image of two hands clasping. It's as if the elements within the picture—the star system, the creatures who abandoned their shells in the sand, the other minutiae of marine life—were forces that contrived to make this holistic union possible. Everyone and everything is growing and going, coaxed into being by the artist. From the lyrical flora of *Night Garden* and *Flor*, both 2019, to the passing shadow of *Cyclist in the Snow*, 2020, Degen summons those interstitial moments of actual bliss, the circadian raptures of another day come and gone.