



Back Seat, 2023. Oil on canvas. 72 × 54 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

KELLY BEEMAN

SUMMER

September 6 - October 14, 2023

Perrotin is pleased to present *Summer*, Kelly Beeman's first solo exhibition at Perrotin New York. On view from September 6 through October 14, the exhibition debuts a series of paintings and drawings that depict subjects partaking in summertime idling. Beneath their near-perfect surfaces, Beeman's protagonists draw from childhood nostalgia and invite contemplation of deeper layers of narrative and interiority.

It's a hot, slow summer, somewhere in the suburbs. The young girls—and occasional guys—in Kelly Beeman's paintings, drawings, and watercolors are taking it easy: sunbathing, eating a slice of watermelon, dozing in the backseat of the car, sipping cherry limeades by the pool. They go for strolls and stargaze. When it's raining they retreat indoors, gazing wistfully out the window into the backyard. These scenes of summertime idling are familiar, but also hazy and strange, like a memory or dream. Most notably, the female characters are all impossibly identical, long-limbed brunettes with feline eyes and perfect pink pouts. The boys, muscular and wavy-locked, could be their brothers. And Beeman includes few clues as to the exact location or time period, beyond the odd phone or vehicle. Everything is rendered in simplified lines and patterns, planes of muted color that skirt on the edge of geometric abstraction.

Beeman never went to art school but she began painting and sketching versions of these scenes when she was a child. It started as a form of imaginative play with her sisters, the equivalent of make-believe with dolls. But, growing up Oklahoma City, she also felt a deep longing for adventures and escape, eventually landing in New York in 2004. Her paintings at the time reflected this spontaneity—loose, messy, and cathartic. After completing a degree in sociology at Hunter College, she spent four years living abroad (first in Bolivia, and later Argentina). This distance from her home country prompted another shift in her creative approach, away from expressionist canvases and toward figurative compositions depicting stories from her past. She delved into her New York memories and then her childhood and teenage years, experimenting with different styles and techniques. Clothes, she found, were a particularly evocative channel for character and mood. She began to dress her languid beauties in gorgeous outfits, often inspired by real-life designs. The fashion world took note, and soon after her return to New York in 2014 the illustration commissions began to flow in, from luxury brands around the globe.

Over the past few years, Beeman has moved on from fashion illustration work, fleshing out the world of her characters in different ways. In her first solo show, *Wish* at Perrotin Seoul in 2022, she showed both watercolors and oil paintings of female figures, many of them running, in an



Park Bench (detail), 2023. Oil on canvas. 72 × 54 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.



Zoo Visit / Flamingos (detail), 2023. Watercolor on paper. 24 × 28 1/2 inch. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

unspecified location. In *Serenade* at Art Fair Tokyo 2023, she introduced a male character to tell a kind of love story. Now, the scenes in *Summer* take us to the mall, to the park, to the zoo. The outfits in these works are mostly invented, or sometimes modified from vintage designs. On the whole, they are less extravagant than the usual designer garb—in *Back Seat*, for instance, a dozing passenger wears high-waisted jeans with a striped tee: all the better for a simple life of leisure. These clothes continue to offer important information about the characters, but other aspects of the compositions are also brought more sharply into focus: the dynamic between individuals, for instance, and their physical environments.

Yet the faces and figures in these new works—and the world in which they swish and float about—are as serenely charming as ever. In conversation, Beeman laughs about the suspicion that beauty is often met with in contemporary art circles. The visual pleasure of her pictures is deliberate and hard-won, the result of a meticulous process of sketching and reworking compositions until the elements are all in harmony, ready to be translated onto canvas or archival-quality paper. But then, as Beeman points out, perhaps suspicion is an appropriate reaction, because complete harmony does not exist in reality. Beeman's carbon-copied girls and boys are like the mythical nymphs and sirens of Pre-Raphaelite paintings: seductive, and interchangeable, illusions of youth and loveliness. They do not sweat or betray a hint of discomfort—

In *Rollercoaster*, the woman's shiny hair flows perfectly in the wind, while in *Park Bench* she sits back in her evening gown, not a crease in sight. No one has ever looked so unruffled in a heatwave. As Beeman has put it: "It's not true or real, but our desire for it is."

From another perspective, the repeated faces—symmetrical and nearly expressionless—are not unlike masks. What, then, is the more complicated truth beneath the shadowless surface? What was it that led to the close, possibly protective, embrace in *Mother and Child*? Who is the girl on the red dress speaking to in *Telephone*, and is she happy about it or not? Might the idealization of these images be an example of that psychological phenomenon known as rosy retrospection—when our recollections somehow look much better than our present experiences? The titles of the works, factually descriptive, offer little by way of context. In Beeman's art, the viewer is left to fill in the gaps: to project their own feelings, associations, and memories of summers past.

— Gabrielle Schwarz

[More information about the artist >>>](#)