

KYLE STAVER



Tall Tales



Front cover:

Waterfall and Red Fox

2014 oil on canvas 68 x 58 inches

Left:

Study for Red Fox

2015 clay 14 x 12 inches

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Kyle
Staver

Tall Tales

SEPTEMBER 9 - OCTOBER 11, 2015



Leda
2015 oil on canvas 42 x 36 inches

On Kyle Staver

“Oh no, none of that matters. I don’t care about mythology.” It’s a little odd to hear Kyle Staver say these words, as we stand in her Brooklyn studio, surrounded by images of Pandora and Jonah, of a hapless Icarus and a slender, dangling Ganymede. Like a screenwriter waving away plot, or a cellist protesting that she doesn’t really pay attention to the score, Staver’s disclaimer sounds like another kind of myth, the kind intended to fool only the speaker herself. Because it’s clear that Staver *does* care about these ancient stories, cares passionately enough to reimagine them again and again, and to find in their fanciful predicaments a current of timeless anxiety.

Much of that anxiety is sexual. Although they are ostensibly set in glades and woods and even in midair, nearly every Staver painting has the boxy intimacy of a bedroom, with a couple at its center. Several of the new paintings steer close to the plaintive guilelessness of valentines. A pink nude looks trustingly into the eyes of the centaur she is riding. He turns tenderly (and improbably) to face her. It’s an opera buffa, a scene of absurd romantic abandon, highlighted by the setting—a glowing Poconos waterfall. But even here, when Staver’s sweet tooth is most evident, malice lurks in the margins. Leaping across the foreground, a malevolent fox appears, holding in his jaws a bloody dove. He leers knowingly at us, as if to say, “Good luck with that.”

Centaur, the fox reminds us, are seldom so gallant. Nor is Zeus, for that matter. But Staver’s version of the Leda story has nothing in common with Yeats’ memorably brutal account. Rather than a feathered rapist, Staver’s swan is a protective companion, preening calmly in the moonlight beside a dozing, apparently post-coital Leda. The improbable delicacy of the scene feels like a provocation, a riposte to Yeats’ implicit male triumphalism. Why not, Staver seems to have asked herself, give their union a happy ending—at least a fleeting one? The same wry, “why not?” spirit seems to have tempted Staver to portray that least intellectually respectable of all mythological beasts, a unicorn. Glowing an incandescent blue, the demure creature and his human girlfriend watch a meteor shower side by side, like teenagers on a summer night.



Left:
Unicorn and Shooting Star
2015 oil on canvas 42 x 36 inches

Right:
Study for Leda
2015 clay 10 x 8 inches



In paintings like these, Staver recasts fraught or kitsch scenarios in terms that are affectionate and yet strangely somber. She is no theorist, no polemicist, but it's easy to discern an intuitive agenda: a sly, willfully innocent, perhaps girlish, contrarianism. You might imagine the images tipping towards saccharine. Instead they feel macabre and drily comical—in other words emotionally dark, their surface sweetness a form of deadpan.

Elsewhere, the sexual anxiety is more overt, more humorous, more flagrantly Freudian. Pandora unlocks a quartet of giant phallic lampreys. Jonah emerges flaccid from the gaping mouth of a maternal whale. A spindly dragon, breathing fire, incinerates St. George's genitals. And yet, while these quick descriptions may not be exactly inaccurate, they feel slightly wrong. They betray the jaunty ambiguity of the paintings, which hold our attention because they feel, for all their legibility, remarkably playful and open. Our experience as viewers, in other words, has less to do with *what* Staver paints—satyrs, dragons, seagulls—than how Staver paints them.

That's a conventional thing to say, of course—a sense of priorities that marks the boundary between art and illustration. But it feels freshly true because Staver works with such immediacy, such captivating improvisational assurance. She's a natural big-brush draftsman, with bloodlines that call to mind David Park, Elmer Bischoff, and Lester Johnson. Further back, we might detect memories of Franz Marc's horses, Braque's doves, Derain's nudes, and of Matisse at his most raw and iconic—the Matisse of *Bathers with a Turtle*. Staver has woven these Modernist debts into her own distinctively clunky, athletic idiom. Equally important, she wears her debts with a winning lightness, so that we sense, first and last, the pleasure she takes in carving out curves, in adjusting halftones to suggest



Left:
St. George & the Dragon
2012 oil on canvas 70 x 58 inches

Right:
Ganymede
2015 oil on canvas 68 x 58 inches

the warmth of reflected light, in retouching an edge to single it out and give it extra life. Like a learned but slightly goofy magician, she delights in her own virtuosic performance of the basic pictorial trick: making shapes feel satisfyingly flat, within spaces that feel disconcertingly deep.

If there is one painting that does that most breathtakingly, it is Staver's *Ganymede*. Looking at this bizarre triumph, even the most dour, anti-pictorial eye has to feel a jolt of childish excitement. The oddly heightened deep blue of the sky; the bouldery, topiary shapes of the clouds; the dark drama of the eagle's feathers, spreading apart like broken Venetian blinds; the elongated figure of poor Ganymede himself, as limp and pink as a stick of taffy. Every part of the painting is a crude, lively invention. Every part—even the tiny, gratuitous cloudlet in the upper left corner—somehow enhances our sense of adrenaline and vertigo. This is what airline travel feels like, minus the plane. What a powerful romantic relationship feels like, in its first flashes of panicked happiness. What the act of painting feels like, perhaps, to Staver in her studio: being carried away.

—Alexi Worth





Pandora
2014 oil on canvas 68 x 58 inches

Right:
Icarus
2015 oil on canvas 50 x 42 inches

Back cover:
Releasing the Catfish
2011 oil on canvas 54 x 56 inches



