

The Somber Symbolism of Jill Mulleady

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Jill Mulleady, "A Fantasy of Transcendence and a Preoccupation with Downfall and Ruin" (2019), oil on canvas, included in Fight-or-Flight at Swiss Institute (all photos by Daniel Perez, courtesy of Swiss Institute)

Jill Mulleady's painting "A Fantasy of Transcendence and a Preoccupation with Downfall and Ruin" (2019) burns with the heat of a desert. Against a sky of jammy violets and scorching oranges that stretches above emerald waters, a boyish figure rests on a landmass bisected by the stream of a rushing waterfall. Massive and awkward, like a fallen Goliath, he presides over a whimsical world of miniscule fauna and conical trees. Fenced in by a metal security gate and punctuated by human skulls and beheaded fish, however, the scene is more industrial landfill than fairytale forest; the hulking figure, with jaundiced eyes and mottled skin, a bloated hand resting wearily on his heart, appears more feeble than fabled. To his right, a digital tablet projects holograms of a map and vague data charts, useless and garbled accumulations of information that no longer serve a purpose.

The 11 1/2 by 15-foot work is the centerpiece of Mulleady's US institutional debut, *Fight-or-Flight* at Swiss Institute (S.I.) in New York, curated by Laura McLean-Ferris with assistance from Daniel Merritt. Probably best known for rendering urban dystopias across sequences of multiple, color-drenched canvases, such as in those inspired by Edvard Munch's "Frieze of Life" for [this year's Venice Biennale](#), the Swiss-Uruguayan artist here challenges viewers with a single, colossal painting and a group of provocative conceptual pieces. Harnessing the visual languages of myth, desertion, and apocalypse, they speak to environmental crises and strongholds of power; to the plight of people forced to flee regions of unrest and the lonely aftermath of their survival. The works in *Fight-or-Flight* are not easy to unpack or stomach; they portray with somber symbolism an unsettling present and an uncertain future.



Installation view of Fight-or-Flight at Swiss Institute

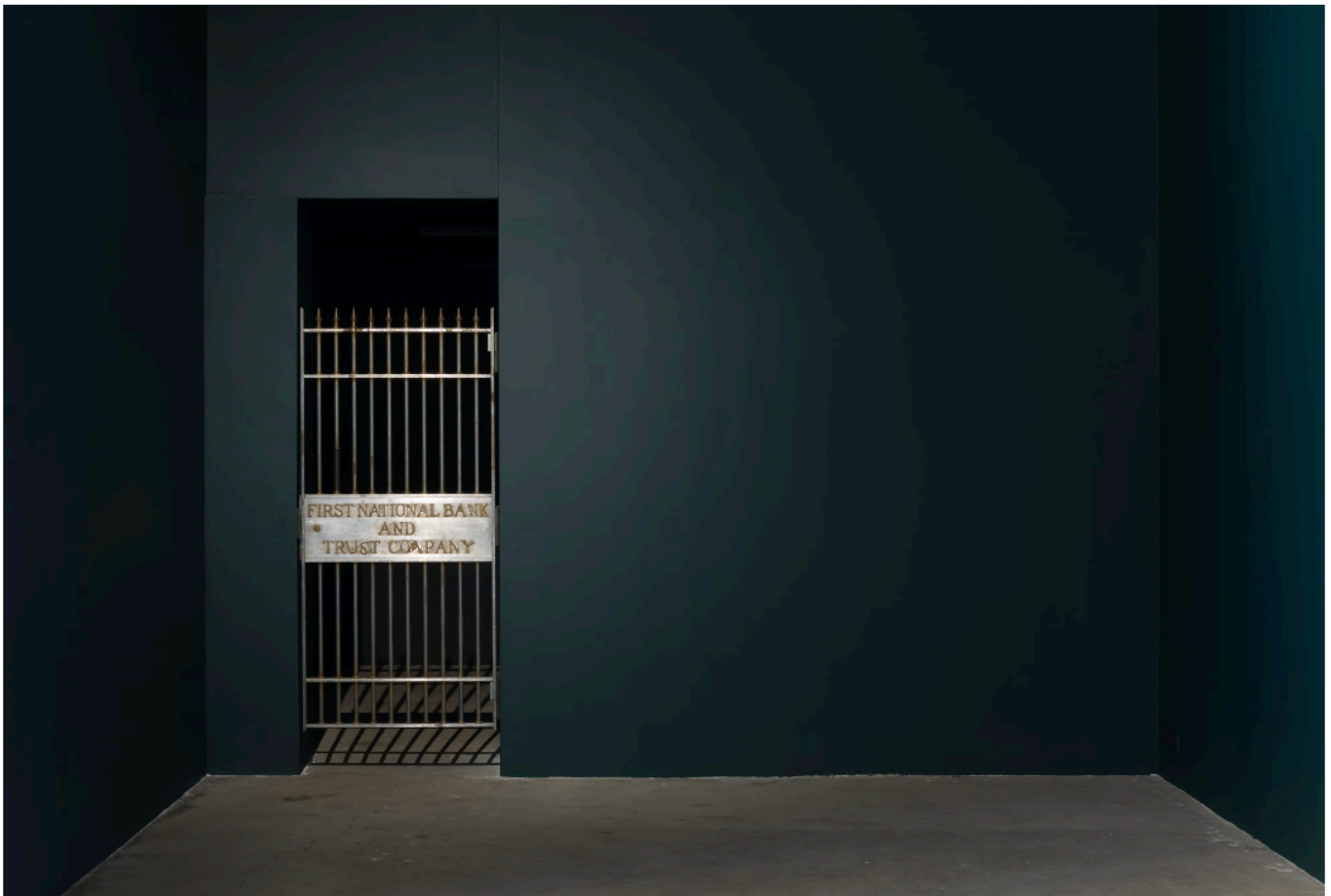


Jill Mulleady, "Pipeline" (2019), steel, epoxy, and oil

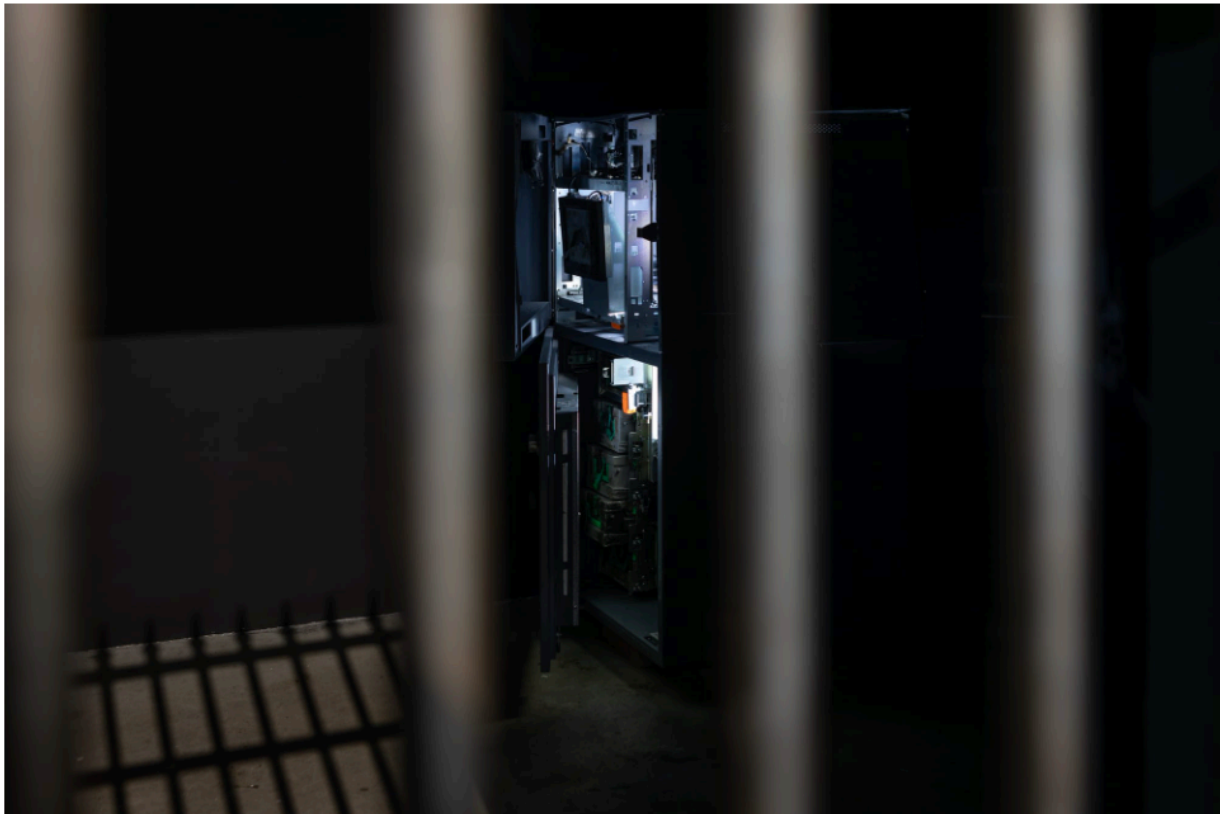
S.I.'s new location in the East Village, inaugurated last year, was built in 1954 as a bank, and the building housed a Chase branch until 2015 before Selldorf Architects undertook renovations. Mulleady has excavated this history, transforming a small corner of the main gallery into a safety vault by barricading the space with an original 1920s day gate sourced from an outpost of the First National Bank and Trust Company in Chicago. Nearly hidden in the darkness behind a wall partition, "Vault Room" (2019) is illuminated by bright overhead spotlights that cast ominous shadows of the steel bars onto the floor. Inside the room is an automated teller machine that shows signs of being tampered with, its doors cracked open to reveal its innards.

A sense of trespassing, ransacking, and plundering pervades “Vault Room,” but most palpable perhaps is the feeling of unshakable solitude, as well as the attendant suspicion that this place was abandoned long ago and we are parsing through its ghostly ruins.

A section from a used crude-oil pipeline is in the center of the gallery. The large tubular sculpture, “Pipeline” (2019), seems to have surfaced from underground, like the collection of plastic debris that rises to the ocean in the [Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#). A tiny gray mouse painted on the inside of the cylinder is the only embellishment to the otherwise readymade work.



Jill Mulleady, “Vault Room” (2019), stainless steel, brass, and automated teller machine



The interior of "Vault Room" (2019)

With these enigmatic works, Mulleady constructs a sparse stage for multiple, disquieting interpretations. The stillness of her minimal interventions evokes the impending danger of an aftershock or the menacing silence of a minefield, pulling visitors into the eye of the storm.

On the second floor, four multicolored woodblock prints depict a gargantuan humanoid rat on horseback trotting away from a city. Referring to the exhibition's title, a common term for the body's acute response to stress as it prepares to face or flee a possible attacker, the press release describes the rodent as "embodying a desperate fight for life." Seen in the context of Mulleady's installation downstairs, however, its threatening snarl evokes an absconding criminal, not a victim in search of refuge. Glancing backward, as if catching a final glimpse of the destruction it has left in its wake, the creature could be the architect of the 2008 financial crisis, riding on the backs of bailouts into a sunset of impunity — or the current president of the United States, who has virtually eluded punishment even as he threatens democracy and advances policies that favor the rich and further marginalize the disenfranchised.



Installation view of Fight-or-Flight at Swiss Institute

Or maybe it represents a sinister reversal of the Pied Piper of Hamelin legend, wherein the city's vermin become its saviors, luring away the parasitical human residents. As with Mulleady's giant in the central painting, allusions to folk tales serve to draw viewers into familiar terrain culled from childhood and stories. She understands how to exploit the power of these references to disturb and stir us. Banks and gas pipelines index some of the most wretched hoardings of wealth in a market-driven society, and the loss of innocence Mulleady suggests in her works epitomizes a present in which we can no longer turn a blind eye.

Her message comes at a climactic moment, when the ethical quagmires of blood money and abuses of power are flooding the art world at unprecedented speed, revealing the complicity of major cultural actors. (S.I. had to grapple with its own accountability earlier this year, when an open letter signed by 50 artists and writers brought attention to charges of domestic abuse faced by Tobias Madison, an artist included in the exhibition *Life and Limbs* concurrent with Mulleady's.)



The intensity Mulleady achieves in her smaller compositions doesn't fully translate to a mammoth canvas; some areas of the large painting here may come across as washy or imprecise to those who have seen in person the ocean-deep richness of her surfaces. Little didactic material or guidance, aside from the press release, is provided to viewers who wish to navigate the exhibition as the artist intended. This is all the more reason to applaud Mulleady and S.I.'s curatorial team, who chose to present an uncomfortable and, at times, ambiguous exhibition rather than a crowd-pleasing one. *Fight-or-Flight* represents a major step in Mulleady's career: she has determined to give us not what we want but what we need to see.

[Jill Mulleady: Fight-or-Flight](#) *continues at the Swiss Institute (38 St Marks Pl, East Village, Manhattan) through December 29.*

Correction: *A previous version of this review stated that an open letter signed by 50 artists and writers protested the inclusion of Tobias Madison in the exhibition Life and Limbs. The artists and writers did not protest the inclusion, but did bring attention to the charges of domestic abuse. This has been amended.*