

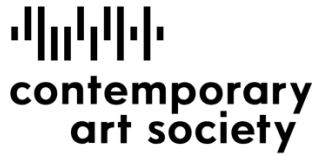


Contemporary Art Society | Friday Dispatch

[The nostalgic, ghostly atmospheres of Nicholas Marschner](#)

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The nostalgic, ghostly atmospheres of Nicholas Marschner

Fitzrovia's [Alice Amati](#) offers an inventive and progressive programme entirely unlike any of the 'new generation' of central London galleries which have opened in the last half decade. Behind the Fitzcarraldo-blue façade, the Italian-born and Manchester-educated gallerist displays everything from kinetic sculptures (Rachel Youn, 2025) to splayed skeleton cut-outs (Annabelle Agbo Godeau, 2024). You will arrive feeling intrigued – perplexed, even, or bewildered – and leave begging to know what will be on show next.

Most of all, Amati has a particularly exciting programme of emerging painters. Alongside Louise Giovanelli and Ian Hartshorne, she founded the [Apollo Painting School](#) in 2024, and last February staged a thrilling display featuring the inaugural graduates of this initiative. If anyone tells you that the youngest of contemporary painters have run out of ideas, tell them to take a cursory look at the work of Ally Fallon or Isobel Shore and they will quickly realise that this could not be further from the truth. Amati has her finger on the pulse of some of the most exciting contemporary painting across the country, and indeed across Europe, and especially in Germany.

One of Amati's discoveries is the London-born and Berlin-based artist **Nicholas Marschner**. Amati showed Marschner in the group show *Panta Rhei* (Greek for 'everything flows') at the gallery last summer, alongside Sophie Birch, Merve Ceylan, Sam Creasey, Rike Droescher, amongst others. His work is enigmatic, restless, unusual. The figures in his multimedia works do not possess defined features: no eyes, nor mouths, nor fingers, but move through densely atmospheric spaces like puppets, automations, or manikins. They have human shapes, but they are not humans *per se*. Despite the nostalgic atmospheres conjured by Marschner's surfaces, they also feel strikingly of our own time; or, more specifically, conversant with the art of our time. The bodies in his pictures are ghostly and sometimes translucent, but are in no way frightening, a quality carried over by other contemporary artists, like Denmark's Sergej Jensen, whose experimental use of materials Marschner cites as an influence.

Marschner is interested, he tells me, in 'what people do with each other'. It is difficult to know whether the modes of relation between his figures are benevolent or hostile: they could be teacher and students, choreographer and dancers, or less hierarchical relations like friends or lovers. Marschner's figures turn from (or is it toward?) one another. One image suggests a love triangle at the end of its course. Overall, though, it is difficult to get a sense of depth of field. In their opaque relation between individual and group, they remind me of Oskar Schlemmer's *mise en scène* of Bauhaus stairways.

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Nicholas Marschner, *Untitled*, 2024, colour pencil on paper collage Ph. Tom Carter

Marschner often works by layering several thin layers of paint over and over, and then applying washes of various consistencies, which lends the works a feeling of flatness. In *Untitled* (2024), for instance, we encounter a troupe of figures but struggle to make out how far they are from one another, nor the size of the space in which they are in. Combined with gift wrapping paper and fabric, the oil paints look like they could even be a single core colour but, on closer inspection, there is a real richness of palette, illuminated like a stage.

The theatrical element of these works is striking; we want to know who the characters are, to understand their motivations, to get inside their head, but they seem more like actors in a rehearsal looking for a playwright to invent the narrative for them. 'This deliberate ambiguity, the purposeful gaps and elisions, ultimately make for a deeply generous narrative, rich with possibility', Thomas McMullan writes in the short accompanying catalogue essay: 'Viewers are invited to step into this theatre as a participant, joining the puppets on stage, piecing together half-forgotten memories.' Indeed, this is exactly what Marschner's pictures look like: memories. The images are oblique and hazily nocturnal, half-revealing themselves only through a thick fog.



Nicholas Marschner, *Untitled*, 2024, oil and pastel on cotton in artist's frame Ph. Tom Carter

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McMullan's direct and erudite writing is a useful anchoring point to familiarise us with the elusive contexts of Marschner's work, but the artist himself joyously throws spanners in the machinery. When exhibited in the past, Marschner has draped curtains or muslin dust sheets across the walls to play on feelings of theatricality and abjection. This time around, Marschner has scattered what he calls 'fragments': short textual interventions that juxtapose and provoke associations with the paintings, but do not attempt to explain them.

In their digressive and polyvocal tone, these fragments remind me of the collagist Dada poems of fellow adopted Berliner Hugo Ball. 'Morality is always lying around', reads one fragment, meandering somewhere near a 'Bahnhof' or the 'littered world' of the 'Straße', as though right and wrong are merely objects to be lost, stolen, borrowed, or forgotten about in the impersonal city. The experience of reading these short texts can feel like eavesdropping upon a conversation between two people who know one another well but are struggling to find the language or the inclination to really tell the truth. Reading the fragments while looking at the paintings is a wonderfully disorientating experience.



Nicholas Marschner, *Untitled*, 2024, mixed media on paper laid onto fabric Ph. Tom Carter

The fact that Marschner has made his home in Berlin feels material to the work. In *Untitled* (2024), composed of mixed media on paper laid onto fabric, the artist has inscribed the German word 'verfügbar' (meaning 'available', as in 'to be obtained or procured') into the corner of the picture. This word stands in ambiguous relation to the two, or perhaps three, feminine figures – the one closest to us even looks pregnant – as the composition may stand as a blurred and flattened out department store window with manikins and advertising slogans, or else some more abstracted array of disparate associations recalled from memory.

But there is something more. There is a grittiness and a happy imperfection to Marschner's works that befits Berlin, that 'poor but sexy' city of lost and found (and seldom permanently discarded) objects, a city which refuses to be well maintained, a city of secrets and role-playing and anonymity. Marschner's world offers all these qualities and once you force yourself inside it is very hard to leave.