



## Gary Hume's Swans Dissolve into Abstraction

A new exhibition at Sprüth Magers, London, showcases the artist's distinctive style, reimagining animals and humans through layered forms and enigmatic reflections



BY FINN BLYTHE IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 19 SEP 24



Twenty-five years after Gary Hume represented Great Britain at the Venice Biennale, the artist continues to confound expectations with his dynamic body of work, as evidenced by his exhibition of new paintings and drawings at Sprüth Magers, 'Mirrors and Other Creatures'.

Flora and fauna – especially avian creatures – remain central themes in his repertoire. However, instead of the garden birds that peppered his earlier work, Hume has lately turned to the regal and altogether more imposing form of the swan. For an artist who takes such obvious delight in the delicate economy of line and form, the swan's sweeping silhouette (first emerging in the series of drawings 'Swans', 2021) is perhaps a logical choice, the motif affording him no shortage of complex, interlocking arrangements.

In the exhibition's opening room, two swan diptychs (all works *Untitled*, 2024) exemplify this sumptuous interplay, one in satinwood paint on aluminium, the other in charcoal, pastel and acrylic on canvas. Both paintings, presented stacked rather than side-by-side, evoke the swans' reflections in water – a mirror effect that becomes a mirage. Hume's hallmark rigorously flat representation underscores his interest in form and pattern while recalling art nouveau's elegant, swirling line.

The smaller diptych, immediately striking for its charcoal and pastel rubbed over raw canvas, beguiles by showing the artist's hand in a way that his gloss paintings do not. The elongated swan necks slither like black snakes. Where they converge, their outlines coalesce into scarcely decipherable entanglements of eyes, heads and beaks, which, in turn, yield new, ambiguous forms. Whatever Hume's subject matter – human, animal or plant – its initially simple appearance pulls the viewer into increasingly complex visual layers.

Elsewhere, Hume edges closer towards abstraction. In one painting, produced using his characteristic pairing of satinwood and gloss paint on aluminium, the meandering curves of a mysterious black silhouette – containing shards of pure green, white and purple – recall the fluid energy of Henri Matisse’s paper cut-outs, such as *Le Cow-boy* (The Cowboy, 1947). Only a beak suggests the presence of a swan. In other paintings, we encounter conglomerations of bills, the avian body almost completely dissolved, pointing aggressively in different directions and projecting a palpable sense of threat – although, by comparison, this work emanates an enigmatic aura.

While swans take centre stage here, the human body makes, quite literally, a bit-part appearance: two versions of a sinewy foot, flexed like a ballerina *en pointe*, and a torso morphing into a flower, or embellished with hair-like silver tinsel, give a uncanny flavour. Two concurrent shows of Hume’s work are also taking place in London at Lyndsey Ingram (‘Gary Hume: A Selection of Prints 1994–2022’) and Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert (‘THIS WAY/THAT WAY’), which celebrates his well-known, bold, colourful paintings from the 1990s. However, the new works at Sprüth Magers are characterized mainly by chromatic understatement, with a paler palette of greys, browns and faded pinks.

Hume is an expert at oscillating between figuration and abstraction, using outlines to isolate forms, flattening their mass and distilling their essence. In some of the paintings here, he almost completely dissolves the swan motif, breaking it up into puzzle-like mosaics. In one, he employs grey, brown and white for different fragments of the swan’s image to confuse our perception further. At its best, Hume’s work enchants viewers in its refusal to reveal itself fully and invites us to look again, with the promise that there is always something new to discover.

*Gary Hume’s ‘Mirrors and Other Creatures’ is at [Sprüth Magers](#), London, until 19 October. ‘Gary Hume: A Selection of Prints 1994–2022’ is at [Lyndsey Ingram](#) until 03 October, and ‘THIS WAY/THAT WAY’ is at [Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert](#) until 26 October.*

*Main image: Gary Hume, Untitled (detail), 2024, satinwood on aluminium, diptych, 1.5 × 2.4 m each. Courtesy: © the artist, Sprüth Magers, Matthew Marks Gallery and DACS, London, 2024; photograph: Joe Hume*