



The Mystical Promise of TM Davy

At Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate, the artist presents the beauty of myth as a way to address sorrow and shan

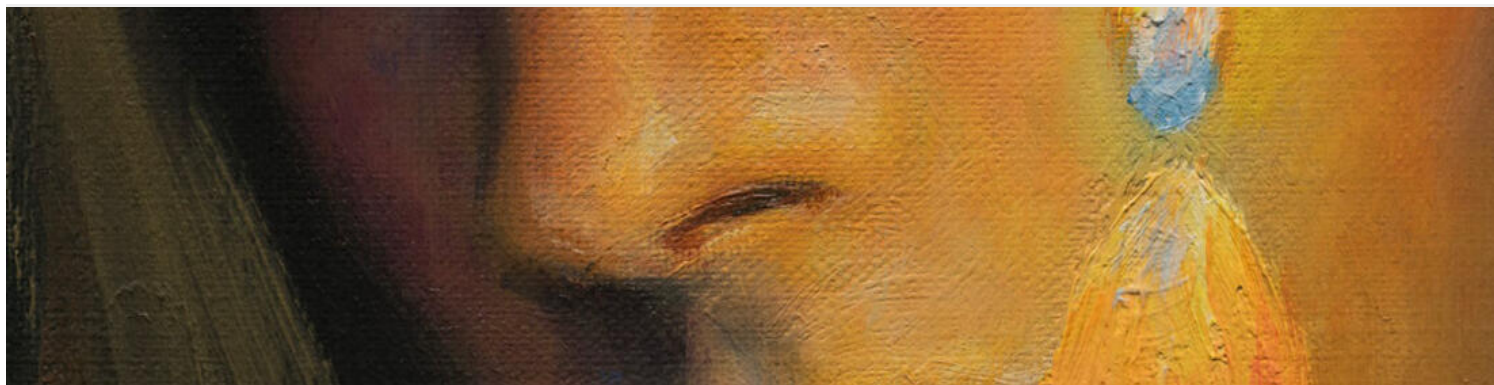


BY ANDREW DURBIN IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 12 MAY 25



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Go to any national gallery in Europe and, in the wood-panelled trenches of baroque-era painting, you are likely to find a work by Trophime Bigot. For 30 years in the early 17th century, Bigot divided his time between France and Italy, depicting figures illuminated only by candlelight. These are strange, sensual works – largely overlooked by scholars and critics today – in which every event in history and religion occurs at night, from the Descent from the Cross to the Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian.



TM Davy, *green elf*, 2025, oil on linen, 31 × 23 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate

Every time I see an exhibition by TM Davy, whose 'Tine Mara' is now on view at Carl Freedman in Margate, I think of Bigot. Since his 2014 solo show at Eleven Rivington in New York, Davy has painted the enigmatic faces of friends, fellow artists and his partner, Liam, lit by candle. 'Tine Mara' – the artist's first UK solo exhibition – opens with nine technically accomplished portraits that build on these earlier works, showing figures once again captivated by candlelight. But to his catalogue of human faces Davy has now added the mystical and creaturely, from an elfen ear poking out from the blonde hair of the figure in *dreamer* (all view 2025) to the green-skinned youth of *green elf* to a recoiling *red dragon*. In the centre of the room stands a repurposed wardrobe, onto the front of which the artist has painted a faerie, a Gandalf-like wizard, a burrow and a cat (*wardrobe*). Above a full-body mirror at the work's centre, Davy has inscribed the word 'Here' at the bottom, 'Now'.



TM Davy, 'Tine Mara', 2025, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate

The paintings included in the rest of the show amplify the mystical promise of the first room, expanding scale and scope. In the middle gallery, five medium-sized works (all titled *tine mara*) depict candles melt on rocks in a raging sea – a great burst of colour, light, wax and foam. The only painting here to deviate from this series, *mare mara*, shows a white horse standing in calmer, moonlit waves. The next room holds the remaining canvases in the show, all bright paintings of seaside caves at sunset, inspired by the landscape of the Ker coast, where he has been living for several months. Two works show familiar figures: *fairy* appears to borrow the frizzed red hair of the late British singer-songwriter SOPHIE; the pregnant *mermaid* has the face of the artist's partner, Liam – a frequent subject.

As I toured the show, I kept returning to the words on the wardrobe: 'Here', 'Now'. Their cold certainty was strained by the fancy of Davy's paintings, which are so unlike what most contemporary artists make today. Here, now, trendy artists climb the tree of knowledge and return with the fruit of information. Here, now, we don't have much time for dragons and faeries, or for Davy's clear antecedents, such as Bigot, Gustave Moreau, George Frederic Watts or the pre-Raphaelites – all artists who saw the beauty of myth as a way of addressing sorrow and shame.

TM Davy, *tine mara IV*, 2025, oil on canvas, 1.2 × 1 m. Courtesy: the artist and Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate

So, too, for Davy. In a video produced for the exhibition, he connects his interest in sprites, satyrs, mermaids and other fantastical figures to the childhood shame he felt about his queerness. These paintings reject that shame by embracing fairy tales – the faggy fluff we are taught to dismiss as unserious. This idea gives his work its vitality and unmistakable power. ‘I’m living always at the end of my brush,’ he says in the video, standing between two slabs of rock. Before him, the pearly expanse of the English Channel comeslingles with sky. Fantasy allows Davy to dwell within the ‘grand illusion we’re inside of,’ he says – the here, the now, exalted rather than grieved.

TM Davy's ***Tine Mara*** is on view at Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate, until 22 June

Main image: TM Davy, dreamer (detail), 2025, oil on linen, 26 × 21 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate



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Andrew Durbin is the editor-in-chief of *frieze*. His book *The Wonderful World That Almost Was* is forthcoming f

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