

MONICA DE CARDENAS

Nikki Maloof's Paintings Will Sate You

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*Nikki Maloof, "Dismemberment," 2020, Oil on canvas, 62 x 50 in
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Forbes

For her entire career as an artist, Nikki Maloof has been afraid that she only has a finite number of paintings within her. Whenever she puts one on canvas, she's worried that she's tapped from the decreasing number of paintings still left — like eggs from an ovary, perhaps. "This could be the end," she always tells herself.

From the perspective of a critic who has watched her work for many years, Maloof is not running out of paintings; rather, her talent is swelling, growing, conquering all other painters, like the alien protomolecule conquers human life in the television series *The Expanse*, if you'll forgive the reference. There's a sense, looking at the paintings in "Nervous Appetite," her current show at Nino Mier—the show closes on December 19—of being stuffed with visual language. Not stuffed in an unpleasant way, but rather stuffed to the exact moment of utter and complete satisfaction.

Maloof began the paintings in the show at the beginning of the pandemic. "It was such a bizarre time to be creative," she says. "I felt so many moments of paralysis, and yet, at the same time, having something to focus on was really good for me."

Maloof, who was trained in classical still life painting as an undergraduate at Indiana University—she went on to receive her MFA at Yale University in 2011—set out to paint fish. Painting fish, she says, is so absurd, but also so multifaceted. "There's a grossness and a beauty in the material," she says. "These transformations happen that you can't even anticipate until you're scratching some random itch that leads you to it."

Fish of all types appear in the paintings — dismembered and disemboweled fish, fish on plates, fish on ice, fish in frying pans. The fish are joined by other marine creatures such as sea urchins, octopus and crabs. Even though fish are everywhere in the paintings, they aren't the subject. The subject, instead, seems to be Maloof's consciousness—that of a painter and mother of two young daughters, trying to keep her shit together under insanely stressful circumstances, and managing, just barely. But so beautifully, as well.

"I'm always really drawn to situations that depict the multifaceted landscape of being a human," she says. "Those moments of intense anxiety peppered with joy.

For example, in *Preparation* (2020), Maloof shows a countertop composed of checkered



*Nikki Maloof, "Chard Recipe," 2020, Oil on canvas. 62 x 36 in
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tiles, upon which lies the components of a meal, laid out for preparation. Beneath the counter, three drawers are pulled open, showing various cutlery and kitchen implements. Each surface has a different pattern rendered in exquisite detail. There is a sense, looking at the painting, of the sort of panic a working mother feels at 5pm, with her kids at her feet, and dinnertime approaching. The subject is not the meal, but the feeling of being overwhelmed. She has emails to check, or ideas she's



Nikki Maloof, "Preparation," 2020, Oil on linen, 65 x 58 in
© Nikki Maloof Photo credit: Stephen Petegorsky



Nikki Maloof, "Dinner Is Served," 2020, Oil on canvas, 54 x 70 in
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ruminating on, and she's tapped out of energy. One stubbed toe, or burned fish, and she'll be screaming on her knees until someone calls the police. But likely, she'll finish the meal, and start the same insane balancing act again in the morning.

"There is an aspect of putting my nervous energy into the painting, and finding a place of meditation," Maloof says. "I have these moments where the paint is really fresh and happening really instantly, without a lot of labor, and then these moments where there are long periods of tedium, knitting together these intense pleasure moments."

This balancing act is captured in so many of the paintings. In the way that the legs of a crab lay on top of a lace tablecloth, which itself lays on top of a blue cloth on a table, in *Dismemberment* (2020). Somehow, giving off the impression of being gently placed there. In *At The Fish Market* (2020), where types of food — limes, leeks, sardines, eggplant, lobster — are organized in such discrete sections that you know it was made during a time when Maloof was particularly organized in her real life.

The more you look at the paintings, the more they reward you. *Dinner is Served* (2020) is an entire Luis Buñuel movie within the frame of a single rectangle. The fabric on the tablecloth is the same as the fabric of the wallpaper, but still, through adept shading, the hard surface of the table itself emerges. In the center, two smoking fishes wrapped in chard, and accompanied by a tendril of octopus, cool down. Each of the four plates contain a scene rendered in the tones of blue delftware, which itself references Maloof's maternal ancestry. The scenes depicted in the delftware are surreal: a camel in an enclosure, visited by two lovers in 19th century garb; a lion in a cage in a bucolic landscape.

"When I started making those plates, it was the most joy I had in painting in a long time," Maloof says. "I just wanted more and more."

It's too easy to wrap that sentiment up neatly, by saying that everyone has to find ways to survive during 2020, so I won't. Instead, I'll say that I look forward to what Maloof does next, with her voracious, growing talent. Not many painters could capture the balancing act of consciousness in a series of paintings of dead fish. But Maloof, miraculously, can.