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HYPERALLERGIC

Chantal Joffe's Diaries of an Empty-Nester

A narrative unfolds in Joffe's *My dearest dust* that explores motherhood, loss, and individual identity as her daughter leaves home.

Rebecca Schiffman



Chantal Joffe, "Yellow Bed 3" (2024), oil on canvas, 11 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches (photo Rebecca Schiffman/*Hyperallergic*)

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Chantal Joffe's latest body of work reads almost like a graphic novel. Moving through *My dearest dust* at Skarstedt Gallery, her current exhibition of small- and large-scale paintings, a narrative unfolds that explores motherhood, loss, and individual identity. Joffe is best known for figurative paintings that often feature her and her daughter, Esme, in domestic settings. Mother and daughter appear here as well, but this time they are working through a new chapter in their relationship: the inevitability of growing up and leaving home.

The show opens with images of Esme sitting on a couch in striped socks, walking under cherry trees, and cooking in the kitchen. These small portraits offer no insight into the subject's interior life; it is as if Joffe has portrayed her daughter's likeness only. "Es Under the Cherry Tree" (all works 2024) depicts a fleeting moment as Esme walks beneath the tree, looking down at her hands, rendered as a jumble of juicy pink and blue lines. Situated at the bottom right of the canvas, her body angled toward the edge, by the next moment she would have walked out of the composition.

In "Es and Richard in the Kitchen," Esme is seen in profile, standing at the kitchen counter in a floral dress and apron, while Joffe's partner, Richard, sweeps something off the floor. Her long, forward gaze is completely disconnected from the viewer.

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Installation view of *Chantal Joffe: My dearest dust* at Skarstedt Gallery, New York (photo John Berens)

In contrast, Joffe's self-portraits are suffused with melancholy. In "Yellow Bed 3," the artist lays in the fetal position, propped up by a red pillow, nude and crying. Her face, composed of bold lines in reds, greens, and yellows, evokes the mask-like faces of Picasso's transitional works from the early 1900s, like "Woman Plaiting Her Hair" from 1906. Joffe's head seems almost completely detached from the rest of her body, and in this inhuman form, it serves as the composition's emotional center. She sits on the edge of the bed in "Yellow Bed 2," her feet on the floor, her head tilted downward, as if taking a moment to collect herself after sobbing or reflecting.

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While the first gallery is filled with these small-scale, ephemeral moments in Joffe's life with Esme, the second floor is reserved for massive canvases of Joffe and Richard as they adjust to life without Esme in the house. Joffe is on that same yellow bed in many of these works, now going through the motions of her day. "In the Kitchen" returns us to a familiar room, but this time Joffe sits on the floor in her dressing gown, eyes closed, knees to her chest revealing her lack of underwear. She doesn't cook, as Esme once did, but instead seems to meditate on the privacy and newfound solitude, or emptiness, of her home. "Richard in Bed" is a nod to Philip Guston's "Painter in Bed" (1973), his body wrapped in yellow and shrinking into the covers, but for his exposed arm. Both Chantal and Richard often appear locked in the experience of being alone, finding their own sense of self amid the void their grown child left behind.



Installation view of *Chantal Joffe: My dearest dust* at Skarstedt Gallery, New York (photo John Berens)

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Chantal Joffe, “Yellow Bed 2” (2024), oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches (photo Rebecca Schiffman/*Hyperallergic*)

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Installation view of *Chantal Joffe: My dearest dust* at Skarstedt Gallery, New York. Left: "In the Kitchen" (2024), oil on board, 84 5/8 x 59 7/8 inches; right: "Richard in Bed (For P.G.)" (2024), oil on board, 47 1/4 x 90 1/2 inches (photo John Berens)

Chantal Joffe: My dearest dust continues at Skarstedt Gallery (20 East 79th Street, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through June 15. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.