

MATRIX 289

Zeinab Saleh
Signs Of A Softer World

DECEMBER 10, 2025–APRIL 19, 2026



Drift and Echo

Anthony Graham

Zeinab Saleh's (b. 1996, Nairobi; lives and works in London) paintings radiate emotion, a force that we cannot always see but that we can feel—like a current slowly pushing us along what appears like still water, or a sound reverberating through a room. Through washes of color and combinations of texture, Saleh expands both perceptual and psychological boundaries, creating visual depths that invite us to fall ever deeper into pools of paint and wade through swaths of color and light. Sitting with these paintings reveals not only formal complexity but also the mutability of images, as the abstract becomes recognizable yet somehow seems to change the more we look at it.

In *Drift* a lone swan sits on a body of water. Its stillness belies the current underneath, a movement so slight it remains imperceptible. The swan's reflection is a companion of sorts, offering not only a mirror image but also a visualization of interiority: the self, redoubled. Throughout Saleh's work, there is a sense of drift and echo—of motions without clear direction, of stillness on the brink of action, of a story unfolding in ways we cannot quite describe. Focused on quiet moments, tender scenes that we might breeze past, Saleh suggests that softness might be a way to slow down and resist the urgency and chaos that fill our daily lives. This exhibition creates a space where we can shift our attention to the minute, where the intimate might be made immense.

When Saleh and I first began planning this exhibition, she was living in Dubai after many years in London. She had adapted to her new home, adjusting to new rhythms of life and the absence of other familiar ones, and the location had informed her practice, too. The high temperatures in Dubai offered her a new speed, as layers of paint dried in hours rather than days, and she was working from home, rather than in a separate studio.

Certain formal elements from her surroundings also entered her paintings. Arabesque railings, made of wrought iron bent into curvilinear patterns, are found throughout the region. This design—these objects—appears in both *Love letters* and *Despite grey clouds*. Realized at dramatically different scales, the two paintings create distinct spatial intimacies. They also offer varied ways of relating to the decorative pattern. Perhaps we are meant to look directly at the image of these patterns, like gates separating two spaces, but their shadows suggest that instead we might be looking down on them, with their shadows cast upon the ground. The patterns also function as frames, drawing our eyes across the canvases, pointing to the fields of vegetal impressions beneath and behind their looping forms. As in dance, these arabesques hold a specific posture—but only for a moment, before continuing to move, to change, to take on new shapes.

Just before she began the paintings for this exhibition, Saleh moved back to London. Her yearlong sojourn in Dubai having come to a close, she

returned to her studio at Gasworks, where she had been working for several years. In some ways, the idea of return courses through the paintings in this exhibition. While Saleh's move home lends the works a recursive quality, it is not exactly one of repetition, but rather about what happens after a period of transition, of transformation. Many of the images and materials she used are drawn from walks. When returning to a familiar path, how do you notice what changed while you were away? What about you changed, too, in that time?

Fluidity seeps into Saleh's painting. Materially, there is a watery quality in her use of acrylic—thinned to cover the canvas in washes of color, their variation creating subtleties of light and shadow. There is also a mutability to the objects she depicts. A leaf appears as a trace, an impression; nearby it might be painted through careful re-creation. Between these two formal registers, there is a slippage that shifts our orientation. This often takes place through the motifs that recur throughout Saleh's paintings, taking on meaning in ways that are less symbolic than they are narratively mysterious. In the repetition of the familiar character of a cat or a specific decorative pattern, for example, Saleh builds up thematic connections across different canvases. What matters most is our attention, the ways in which we recall and relate to these images as we notice them.

Certain subjects in Saleh's paintings suggest a world inhabited by people, who are perhaps just outside the

frame. At the center of *Closing ceremony*, a chair, draped in white fabric with a bow at its back, sits in an eerily empty space. Pink petals float through the air, and the only visible figure is a black cat, seen from behind, witness to the events, either just before or just after they've happened. The scene vibrates with everything we cannot see but can only imagine. In *The local game*, two hands decorated with henna stretch across a carrom board. The game involves sliding discs, depicted here as thickly painted seashells. The work's textured surface recalls the powder that helps the pieces glide across the game board.

In earlier paintings, Saleh often worked with charcoal and chalk, rendering hazy images almost entirely in black and white. Over time, she has begun to use acrylic colors, opening up her palette to a range of blues and greens, even reds and purples. In her paintings for this exhibition, she returned to charcoal, incorporating it alongside acrylic paint. The combination of mediums adds another layer to her compositions, which build up texture and color while remaining luminous and ethereal. Her muted yet richly textured surfaces lend her works a dreamlike quality. Images appear not to be grounded in reality, like a memory we can only recall imperfectly.

At the same time, her paintings feel as though we are looking through a layer of fog. While it can be difficult to see through, fog also clarifies, brightens. Against a clouded backdrop, the thing in front of us can become suddenly clear. There is

also a surprising speed to this kind of seeing. Something that we cannot make out in the distance is, all at once, plainly in front of us. Of course, fog is also variable. Sometimes it is like a veil, blurring the edges of what we can see, softening the world and making it difficult to discern the boundaries between one thing and another. At other times, fog is heavy, almost solid like a wall, dividing the formless air and defining one realm from another.

In *Pearl moon*, ripples of water sit beneath an open sky, both filled with a mix of painted and pressed leaves. Dividing the canvas are several white spheres—a string of pearls, a row of full moons. There was a new moon the day that I began writing this essay. Though marking the start of the next lunar cycle, the moon itself remained out of sight. As the moon continues its orbit, coursing along an unseen current, its energy echoes through the sky. Here, in its own recursive journey, the moon is at once new and the same, a singular object measuring time and space, and designating the moments when, even if we cannot see it, something new has just begun.

MATRIX 289 / Zeinab Saleh: Signs of a softer world is curated by Anthony Graham, Senior Curator.

The exhibition is part of BAMPFA's ongoing MATRIX series of contemporary art exhibitions. Founded in 1978, MATRIX provides artists with an experimental platform to make and show new work.

The MATRIX program is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis.

Works in the Exhibition

Alone with company
Acrylic and charcoal on linen
75 x 55 in.

Closing ceremony
Acrylic, charcoal, and colored pencil
on linen
43 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

Despite grey clouds
67 x 63 in.

Drift
75 x 55 in.

Fragments of prayer
50 x 60 in.

Love letters
15 $\frac{10}{16}$ x 11 $\frac{13}{16}$ in.

Pearl moon
23 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

Shadow garden
23 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

The local game
Acrylic and colored pencil on linen
43 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

Unless otherwise noted, all 2025,
acrylic on linen, courtesy of the artist
and Château Shatto

Cover: Zeinab Saleh, *Fragments of prayer*
(detail), 2025; acrylic on linen; 50 x 60 in.;
courtesy of the artist and Château Shatto.