

PSYCHE FOR SORE EYES

Sly, surreal and somewhat sinister, *Last Night I Dreamt of Manderley* at Alison Jacques gallery doubles down on a Gothic theme. Curator Daniel Malarkey's subconscious is open to analysis

Alice Inggs, *World of Interiors*, 7 February 2025



Anna Calleja, *The Pain is Normal Don't Worry*, 2024. Courtesy Alison Jacques. Photo: Michael Brzezinski

'We have a perfect name for fantasy realised. It's called nightmare,' said contemporary philosophy's rebel luminary Slavoj Žižek in one of his pithier pronouncements. Distance from the real – the suggested antidote to this problem – is foundational to *Last Night I Dreamt of Manderley*, a surreal-heavy show at Alison Jacques gallery. For its curator, Daniel Malarkey – a name that adds a frisson of determinism to the fabulist theme – his work is 'always about the collective unconscious'.

Originally premised on folk stories, *Manderley* took on a new, uncanny meaning during the curation process and the show's naming. 'I realised my subconscious had been curating an exhibition about my favourite book from adolescence, *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier,' says Malarkey, who sees the narrative, with its moral ambiguity and heroine's journey, as fitting the archetype of a Gothic fairy story.

Sigmund Freud, never one to pass on the psychosexual, had things to say about fairy tales, in particular thorny entanglements and, no doubt, bushes, though Malarkey leans more towards Carl Jung when it comes to sly symbolism. Enter the dream (or nightmare) of *Manderley*, doubled in the first line of the novel and the curator's subconscious.

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Maeve Gilmore, *View from Le Chalêt, Sark*, c1947. Courtesy Alison Jacques
Photo: Michael Brzezinski

Whether Malarkey's claim is strictly true or a retroactive application to works very much open to allegory is perhaps a question for the shrink's chaise, although you can find more than a few curious (and apparently incidental) parallels between passages from the book and the artworks, not least Tancredi di Carcaci's *Aeolian's dream* (2025), a bronze sculpture depicting Gothic arches topped by thorns and a woman's watchful face. 'Wherever I walked in Manderley, wherever I sat, even in my thoughts and in my dreams, I met Rebecca,' says Du Maurier's unnamed narrator, the second Mrs de Winter. Similarly, for a visitor to this show, wherever you walk, there is *Rebecca*: the windows open to the sea, the white cats, the uncanny figures, the wrought-iron gates, the driftwood and rope, the rhododendrons, the antique wallpaper, the almost-silhouettes, the subtly erotic scenes, the sense of expectation...



Mariana Varela, *The Burial of Athala*, 2018. Courtesy Alison Jacques
Photo: Michael Brzezinski

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Organised around three rooms – the Dream, the Grand Staircase and the Underworld with its Ancient Woods chamber – the show opens with Nicola L.'s *L'Escargot / The Snail* (1996), alive with candles, like a flickering will-o'-the-wisp in the window of the gallery. Ian Godfrey's timeless toylike sculptures, Theodora Allen's *The Starry Vault* (2023) and Jean-Marie Appriou's space-age take on *The Birth of Venus* (2022) give a whimsical, childlike cast to the first room, which opens on to a space suffused with slightly sinister domesticity in the form of Anna Calleja's fabric scissors and Quentin James McCaffrey's eerie interiors ('They feel part of a fairy tale without knowing to which story they belong,' says Malarkey of the latter).



Quentin James McCaffrey, *Mirror with Drapery*, 2024. Courtesy Alison Jacques.
Photo: Michael Brzezinski

In the Grand Staircase – 'named after the one in the book' – a viewing platform at the top of a flight of stairs (you have to use your imagination to conjure the stately sweep) gives a second perspective on the room. Here are scenes that seem lifted from Rebecca's pages, though Malarkey insists this was coincidence (or, rather, subconscious): Santi Alleruzzo's sleeping figure might well be resting in a boathouse while Richard Slee's *Tent* (1997) holds a young bride captive and Jerzy Beres's *Grip* (Chwyt) (1989) could be the wreck of a ruined boat.

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With more than 30 artworks in the show, spanning ‘generations and geographies’, there are infinite ways to interpret the connections between them, some of which are as loose as a dream: for instance, the tangential link between Maeve Gilmore, who was married to Gothic master Mervyn Peake, and Aleksandra Waliszewska, great-granddaughter of fairytale writer Kazimiera Dębska; or the biblical charcoal drawings by Mariana Varela on the stairwell to the Underworld that recall Gustave Doré’s ‘Inferno’ etchings for Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; or the Surreal sisterhood of Dorothea Tanning, Leonora Carrington and Monica Sjöö.



Lewis Brander, *Quaking Aspen*, 2024. Courtesy Alison Jacques.
Photo: Michael Brzezinski

In the belly of the basement one is confronted by Maggi Hambling’s portrait of Sebastian Horsley, a startling work that may well have resided in the Gray-faced dandy’s attic before his untimely overdose – is this a reference to Wilde or De Winter, one might ask. A stained book made for the show by Chidinma Nnoli nods to *Rebecca* and the plot-twist-revealing diary, though it is another work that, by chance, draws a stronger parallel: leaving the final room, Lewis Brander’s *Quaking Aspen* – an energetic oil rendering of trees – could be described in Du Maurier’s own words as ‘shot with crimson, like a splash of blood’.

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In this is both the trouble and the delight of the show: the tricky double theme creates the sensation of two separate puzzles having been put together, resulting in often indecipherable abstraction. Depending on how lucid you like your viewing experience, the effect of the realisation of Malarkey's curatorial desire might change from dream to nightmare. But that's something to take up with your subconscious.



Dorothea Tanning, *Odalisque Plagued by Eyrinis*, 1982. Courtesy Alison Jacques
Photo: Michael Brzezinski