



January 15 – February 20, 2022

Helen Oliver *The Open Road*

Opening Reception: Saturday, January 15th / 6–8 PM / Free



Nadine, 1977

*There is a theatrical quality to Helen Oliver's paintings, their scale and earthy palette recalling, in one glance, those eerily charmed circus or movie marquee posters of yesteryear. This feels especially true of her portraits, which loom large enough to engulf the viewer in the formal contortions of their often-nude subjects. — Tom Breidenbach*

How! Happening: An Arturo Vega Project is pleased to present ***The Open Road***, a newly curated exhibition of paintings by **Helen Oliver** that takes off from her show which was cut short in 2019 by the pandemic. Known for her large-scale, vivid portraits and nudes, she delves below the surface of her subjects to uncover inner mysteries, emotions, and tensions.

*The expressivity of Oliver's paintings might appear to be part of a long tradition of psychological portraiture—from that of Otto Dix to Alice Neel. There is a humanistic quality to Oliver's*

*endeavor that she shares with those artists. There is, however, a consistent ambiguity in her work. . . This singularity might best be observed in Oliver's nude portraits.*

—David Ebony

On view will be a selection of portraits and intimate nudes that combine her eccentric, gestural line with the deeply felt presence of the sitter to create “images [that] vacillate between the hallucinatory, bordering on Surrealism, and a raw pragmatic quality that makes them appear utterly truthful,” says Ebony. Oliver’s blithe, bohemian character imbues her paintings with an imaginative inner narrative, and style that goes beyond any affiliations to contemporary art trends, schools, or movements. An air of whimsy permeates the portrait of her brother Edgar as harlequin, while languid nudes stare frankly at the viewer.

Since the late 70s, Helen Oliver has been an integral part of the artistic and performance-art scene of the Lower East Side, tapping into the personalities of the vanguard and rendering oil paintings of artists, musicians, filmmakers, and writers including Penny Arcade, Lenny Kaye, Mary Lou Wittmer, Louie Cartwright, Kembra Pfahler, Samoa, and Brian Damage. She is also well known for her stage-set design, especially for her brother Edgar Oliver’s plays, many of which premiered at La MaMa.

She was a founder of Pompeii Gallery on 10th Street (and later Forsyth Street) in New York City in the mid 80s. She has exhibited in New York, Paris, and Lucerne, and has painted three rooms at the Carlton Arms Hotel. Originally from Savannah, Georgia, she moved to New York City in the late 70s after studying in Paris and receiving a B.A. from The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. She now divides her time between New York and Tarquinia, Italy, where she makes her home.

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**Gallery Hours: Wed–Sun, 11–6 PM**