

**Nikki MALOOF**

*Women's Wear Daily,  
Nikki Maloof Looks Outside for Her Perrotin Debut*

*%041 %2023*



# Nikki Maloof Looks Outside For Her Perrotin Debut

The artist is presenting an exhibition of new paintings at the New York gallery. BY KRISTEN TAUER

**“This show has a lot of ideas** about mortality, and the way that we live with that,” says artist Nikki Maloof, several hours before the public opening of “Skunk Hour,” her debut exhibition with Perrotin. “There are heavy moments, alongside the everyday existence that we have to get through. And now that I live where I live, I feel like I’m pretty aware of the way that nature is a part of that, too.”

A graduate of Yale’s MFA program, Maloof lived in New York for several years before moving to Western Massachusetts with her family. “It’s very New England and picturesque. I’ve definitely become influenced by the surroundings,” she says.

Early in March, Maloof was back in the city to unveil her newest paintings at Perrotin’s Lower East Side gallery location. “These are existential paintings as much as they’re lighthearted and fun,” she says. “They also kind of catch you off guard – or I want them to, at least.”

Dressed in light green and pink, Maloof notices that she unintentionally matches the palette of her work installed on the gallery’s first floor, a colorful suite of domestic scenes that she has become known for in recent years. The show introduces a new element into the mix: the artist has broadened her purview from interiors to the world that exists right outside of the home.

The first painting Maloof created for the exhibition is “In the Yellow Room,” which features a black cat curled up on a bright yellow chaise. The coziness ends there: a dog peers from underneath the chair, a bird trapped in its mouth. Outside the window, a black bear walks across the yard, it too carrying a bird in its mouth. On the other side of the painting, so small you could easily miss it, a young child plays in the yard, unaware.

“This bear was from a real incident that happened, where I was outside and my



Nikki Maloof

daughter was like, ‘Mom, I saw a bear,’” says Maloof. “I didn’t see one anywhere. She’s 3, so you can’t fully trust everything she says,” she continues. “I went outside, I was grilling something for dinner – and I turned around and there really was a bear right there. Our neighbors have chickens, and it walked over so casually to the chicken coop and plucked one out and

walked away. It felt like I was watching a nature show – but it was real, and it was very surreal. These paintings are trying to encapsulate all of the intensity of life, and sometimes animals become a vessel for that. And sometimes it’s easier to use them to talk about that stuff.”

A series of tree paintings reflect the impact of changing seasons, and are also high-stakes environments for animal life: In one, squirrels and birds feast on ripe apples as a dog lurks on the ground. In an autumnal scene, a squirrel and hawk face off among the fire-hued leaves. A closer look reveals a woman’s worried face, visible through tree branches.

That woman – a brunette character that serves as a stand-in for Maloof – appears in several of the paintings, always part of the background. It’s a notable addition for Maloof, although the ephemera of human life is always present in her work, whether it’s a partially chopped onion or steaming artichokes that have been transferred to a colander.

“For the longest time I was trying to figure out a way to make paintings that were figurative without having to actually always depict a person,” she says. “I didn’t want [the person] to dominate the feeling of the painting.”

By keeping the human presence visually distant – a face peeking through a window, a child roaming a yard, a leg visible at the top of a staircase – Maloof is able to redirect viewer attention to different elements of the scene.

“When it comes to figurative, it can be hard because we immediately want to start unpacking the imagery, but I also really want these paintings to be about the experience of looking at paint and the experience of how they’re made,” Maloof adds.

She uses color to entice the viewer into the figurative details of her composition, and pairs bright, cheerful colors with

darker undertones – the cranberry carpet and walls of one painting leads back to the maroon product of a meat grinder set on a kitchen counter. In another painting, the same kitchen is visible through a window; a nondescript claw sticks out of a cooking pot. Outside in a fruit tree – its own frenetic microcosm – there’s a faint streak of maroon across several apples.

“When this painting was packed up the art handler was like, ‘oh, I think something got smeared.’ And I was like, ‘oh no, that’s just blood. Don’t worry.’ Those are moments where I want to upset the beauty and femininity and show a darkness,” she says.

The exhibition is named for Robert Lowell’s poem “Skunk Hour.” Maloof notes that the spirit of the poem – personal, haunted, lonely – captured the tone she was hoping to convey.

“He’s depicting the town where he’s living. And through that depiction, he’s also kind of slowly coming undone and showing the existential crisis that he’s in,” she says of Lowell’s poem. “It’s denoting a dark moment of the soul.”

Astute viewers might also take note of the joint smoldering on a shelf in Maloof’s titular painting, a connection that one of her friends recently pointed out. “I thought that that was really funny because it’s like, yeah, maybe skunk hour is that time of day when you’re alone on your porch smoking weed, and you maybe get a little too heady and are thinking way too much about life,” she says.

And while the period before debuting new paintings can also be filled with moments of overthinking, “Skunk Hour” has offered Maloof a different experience.

“I’m sort of an anxious person, so in general I struggle a lot with feeling like I’m unsure of if my ideas are working or not. But for this show, I just felt free for some reason,” she says. “I’m trying to hang on to that feeling.”

“In the Yellow Room,” 2022.

