FRIEZE

Francesca Mollett Manipulates Form

At Modern Art, London, the artist abstracts scenes from nature to create ambiguous paintings



Francesca Mollett, *Vicinity*, 2025. Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London.

by Tom Morton
June 30, 2025

'Annual Honesty', Francesca Mollett's solo exhibition at Modern Art, London, is titled after the flower of the same name. Also known as the 'money plant', honesty bears purple blooms in the spring, followed by round, translucent seed pods, resembling a cascade of silvery coins or a cluster of pale, flat moons. It is an apt emblem of the young British painter's work, which is concerned not only with the way certain forms echo across the living world, but also with what we might call material candour.

While the canvases in this show are her most figurative to date, the insistent physicality of her handling – with its layering and scraping, its creation of almost geological strata and fissures – never lets us forget that they are, first and foremost, arrangements of pigment on a support. The 17th-century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza argued that, despite surface appearances, everything in the universe is made from a single, infinite substance, which he termed 'God or Nature'. In Mollett's work, paint functions in a similarly monadic manner. From it, all images emerge, and to it they ultimately return.

In *Vicinity* (2025), a bushy, spindly limbed tree thrashes in front of a long, low block of flats. While its mint-green leaves harmonize with the peachy tones of the brickwork, there is something giddy, almost seasick, about the painting's composition. The horizon line dips precipitously towards its centre, as though the building's foundations were being undermined by a network of underground roots. Here, the only potential signs of human life are the blank yellow lights that shine from a couple of the flats' many windows. We might wonder if the whole block has been abandoned and, if so, how long those bulbs will burn.

Sous-bois (Undergrowth, 2025) is similarly preoccupied with fecundity and expiration. Beneath a crepuscular petrol-blue sky, a wooden fence – depicted in deep linear perspective –stretches into the distance. Here and there, fronds of foliage press through its algae-dusted slats, while at its base gather piles of dead, windblown plant matter, like funeral wreaths placed at a graveside. To the upper left of the work, a few abstracted strokes of yellow pigment might indicate the presence of a guttering street lamp. This, however, is not what lights the fence, which rather seems to glow from within, as though it were some scaly, bioluminescent leviathan, wallowing in a dark ocean trench.

Mollett's *Terrestrial Stars* (2025) depicts a bed of spiky-petalled blooms, although they might equally be read as exploding galaxies – as below, so above. Almost five and a half metres long, it is a



Installation view, *Francesca Mollett: Annual Honesty*, Modern Art, London, 2025 | Photo: Modern Art | Courtesy the artist and Modern Art



Francesca Mollett, *Terrestial Stars*, 2025. Courtesy the artist and Modern Art, London.

thrilling epic of painterly possibility, in which surfaces constantly shift and torque, forms liquefy and coagulate, and colours and tones operate less as discrete pictorial elements and more as a complex, ever-evolving ecosystem. (Few painters employ green as skilfully as Mollett, who here sequences shades that recall everything from absinthe to wilted coriander, a parakeet's feathers to the Northern Lights).

Compositionally, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (2024–5) echoes the opening frame of experimental film-makers Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's seminal 1943 work of the same name, which depicts a single ruffled flower resting on the shadowy, high-banked driveway of a home in the Hollywood Hills. If this image is indeed Mollet's reference point, then she has abstracted it to the point that it's become closer to a dreamlike desert landscape, in which a mesa rises between two rock faces, whose red-brown mineral surfaces recall flayed skin and crumbling scabs. Whatever this place is (if indeed it is a place), it has knowledge to impart: about where we've come from and where we're going; about how the base matter of the universe expresses itself in countless, endless ways.