

SASKIA NEUMAN GALLERY

Lily Hargreaves

If I Could Squeeze the Universe into a Ball

05.11 – 18.12.2026

In the exhibition *If I Could Squeeze the Universe into a Ball*, Lily Hargreaves' point of departure is a strange and tragic episode from Europe's interwar period: the mysterious story of the *Galápagos Affair*, which unfolded on the remote island of Floreana during the 1930s. A group of Europeans descended on the island with the idea of starting their lives anew — leaving civilisation behind and creating an existence on their own terms. However, their attempt to shape life according to their own ideas of freedom and self-determination instead developed into a story of power and conflict.

A central point of departure for Hargreaves' approach to this history is the German-born Dora Strauch's autobiographical account *Satan Came to Eden*, in which Strauch recounts her experiences during her years on Floreana. Strauch's personal testimony gives Hargreaves access to the story from an intimate and subjective perspective. The book functions almost as a passage into a world of ideas and conflicts, where the nature and people around her gradually take on a mythical quality. It is also from here that several of the plant and flora motifs in the paintings are inspired by and drawn — species that Strauch describes and that Hargreaves subsequently brings to the forefront through the language of painting. Hargreaves allows the plants to undergo a process of stylisation and displacement. They are carefully delineated and ordered, yet at the same time seem intent on growing beyond the structure that holds them in place. As a viewer, you can discern a recurring movement in Hargreaves' paintings: the human attempt to create order encounters the organic and ever-changing.

For Hargreaves, the Galápagos affair also acts as a prism through which the European interwar period's view of nature is crystalized. Following the First World War, at a time of political upheaval and the dissolution of empires, many people sought to distance themselves from modern civilisation. Nature became an imagined counterpoint to modernity, a link to what was primordial and still entirely unspoiled. In Hargreaves' paintings, the island of Floreana becomes a place where humanity's need for order and self-determination is set against something that cannot be controlled. Nature is both the object of the human gaze and a force that eludes it.

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Hargreaves' stylised visual language refers to the precision that characterised British painting during the interwar period. The formal language functions as a means of escapism. It becomes a way of understanding a world in flux and of approaching historical material that today appears both distant and difficult to grasp. At the same time, the paintings' carefully balanced surfaces contain an inherent ambiguity, in which myths and subjective experience are allowed to exist side by side.

The title of the exhibition, *If I Could Squeeze the Universe into a Ball*, is borrowed from T. S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. The sentence expresses the impossible desire to gather the limitless and contradictory into something that can be held in one's hand. In Hargreaves' work, it becomes an image of humanity's striving to create meaning and regain a sense of personal agency at a time when the coherence of existence seems to elude us.

By returning to a story that has long been regarded as a strange parenthesis in Europe's past, Hargreaves opens up another space for contemplation. Within this space, the Galápagos affair becomes a story about humanity's relationship with nature and with the idea of being able to start anew. In the paintings, this story lives on as a series of images in which history and imagination merge, and where humanity's attempts to create order are constantly confronted by a world in flux.

Lily Hargreaves (b. 2000, Reading, UK) is based in London. She received a BFA from Goldsmiths (2022) and an MFA from the Royal College of Art (2024), where her work was selected for the institution's annual painting award. She has also been awarded the Tooth Traveling Scholarship and the BAGT Open Founder's Prize, been a finalist for the ACS Studio Prize and Valerie Beston Prize, and been nominated for the John Moores Painting Prize. She has previously participated in the residency programmes Good Eye Projects and Xenia Creative Retreat.

If I Could Squeeze the Universe into a Ball is Hargreaves' first exhibition in Scandinavia and at Saskia Neuman Gallery.