

SARAH THERESA LEE: WHAT BIG EYES YOU HAVE

September 18 - November 8, 2025

Opening Reception: Thursday, September 18: 6 - 8 PM

Gallery Two

Ricco/Maresca is proud to present Sarah Theresa Lee's debut with the gallery, featuring a new body of work created over the past year.

Lee conjures a world both familiar and uncanny, where something private unfolds under constant watch. Her settings are unmistakably domestic: powder-blue shopfronts, patterned linoleum, lace-covered tea tables, velvety settees, bathrooms with Glade spray. Yet her figures—masked, multiplied, disembodied, cracking under the surface—exist in a state of psychological suspense. The scenes feel lived-in, but the curtains never quite fall.

These interiors carry the soft trappings of childhood—grandmotherly rooms with a veneer of comfort that doesn't hold. Gradually, they reveal themselves as realms where setting and occupant move in silent complicity, generating scenes of charged proximity. Skewed perspectives and exaggerated proportions mirror the tangled dramas of their inhabitants. This is a world of erotic tension, power reversals, macabre humor, and surreal ritual. Its protagonists hover between girlhood and womanhood, mischief and menace, costume and confession.

Male figures are never fully present; they appear as grotesque surrogates—mannequin, puppet, prowling beast—more role than person. Children sharpen rather than soften the scenes—tender and volatile at once. These are not wide-eyed innocents, but miniature adults already drawn into strange, knowing games. Their costumes are elaborate; their eyes alert. They stare back.

Lee's visual language draws on myth, pulp art, and the vivid theatrics of horror cinema from the 1960s through the 1980s, while quietly echoing the private cosmologies of Leonora Carrington and the sensual ambiguity of Leonor Fini. Recurrent motifs—detached heads, animal familiars, household products (cosmetics, soap, milk, teapots, custard), red lips, nails and shoes, cigarettes, full moons, wall clocks—form a loose grammar that works less like narrative than an incantation. Her habit of designating objects ("cookies," "cat food") estranges the domestic, making the everyday oddly emphatic—like a label in a child's primer.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in her treatment of heads and faces as masks: removed, swapped, assumed—they become sites of transformation. Shapeshifting, unstable selves; femininity as both performance and possession; the doubling, troubling gaze of the mirror. The flatness of paint and saturated palette heighten the effect: each object emerges as if lit by stage lights, every

element tightly controlled and quietly hallucinatory—an intimacy reminiscent of Mexican retablos, where devotional images transfigure the everyday into sites of reverence and strangeness.

The title, *What Big Eyes You Have*, carries a fairy-tale tension—a phrase that hovers between innocence and creeping dread. It points to the act of looking and being looked at: seeing too much or being unable to look away. In Lee’s world, that gaze is never neutral; it becomes voyeurism, accusation, revelation. Power dynamics flicker: someone is watching, someone is pretending, someone is poised to strike. It is this meeting of surface charm and underlying mystery that gives Lee’s paintings their uncanny magnetism. Their lush color, formal rigor, and seductive strangeness invite repeated viewing—and promise new revelations with every return.

Sarah Theresa Lee (b. 1980) is a self-taught Irish artist based in London. She works as a psychiatric nurse and devotes the rest of her time to painting. Her subjects appear as if conjured from the layered sediment of memory, ritual, and dream. Though she drew compulsively as a child, Lee was discouraged from pursuing art and abandoned it for years. She began painting seriously during the 2020 lockdown, when the world slowed and long-dormant images began to surface. Since then, she has made a daily practice of it—finding time in the early mornings and late evenings, often at her kitchen table, whenever she isn’t working. A couple of years into this rhythm, her home flooded, and she was once again isolated—this time in a hotel room with COVID. In that suspended stretch, she created a series of paintings that marked a turning point in her practice: distilled, hallucinatory, and more assured. When she began sharing her work publicly, the response was immediate and affirming.

Her process is intuitive and unscripted. She paints without preparatory sketches, guided by a mental archive she describes as a “cabinet” of images and scenes waiting to be retrieved. Her works resist categorization: unvarnished and uncanny, they speak a visual language that feels less learned than remembered. Though the imagery is often psychologically charged, Lee doesn’t see it as connected to her work as a mental health nurse. During the pandemic, she was part of a team specializing in treating acute psychosis—working with patients in crisis by day, and painting by night to access a space shaped entirely by imagination. In recent years, her work has gained wide attention, appearing in exhibitions throughout the UK, Europe, and the U.S. Still, she paints as she always has: instinctively, privately, and on her own terms.