

## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

### Caragh Thuring

Private view: Thursday 4 June, 6–8pm  
Exhibition dates: 5 June–19 September 2026

Thomas Dane Gallery  
3 Duke Street, St James's, London SW1

#### *Above and Below*

Notes on Caragh Thuring's new paintings  
By Jennifer Higgie

So much of the world is invisible or partially hidden; it takes place in our heads, behind doors, beneath the earth or sea, online. This also applies to paintings. In the same way that music erupts from the space between the notes, there's often more to a painting than the paint. Some of the most expressive works of art are studies in restraint: what's not revealed can be as charged as what is.

Seemingly contradictory statements can still be true. For example: despite being a painter of great subtlety, one of Caragh Thuring's leitmotifs is that least subtle of military hardware, the submarine. She grew up near Dunoon in Scotland, which, from 1961 to 1992, was the site of a major US Navy nuclear submarine base at Holy Loch. This apparently peaceful environment – a vast expanse of water surrounded by rugged green hills – was regularly disturbed by the surfacing of enormous vessels, exploding into view like monsters from the deep. Witnessing this happen is one of the artist's earliest memories: the shock, the splendour, the insinuation of violence. She remembers, too, how at times, like a scene from a surrealist film, sailors would stand on the edge of the craft, saluting in their bell-bottoms. To add to the strangeness, near her home was a construction plant for enormous North Sea oil rigs, which were towed across the loch *en route* to their final destination. Caragh was struck by the unexpected interactions between humans and nature she constantly witnessed; it was a charged landscape.

Depending on your position, a submarine is a necessary defence or a monument to vengeance; minimal and menacing or a triumph of technology. Caragh depicts these underwater vessels as shapeshifters, untethered and monochrome against tartan patterns; as absurd as a giant metal cigar or as sinister as a warhead; made of bricks, in a desert, observed by time travellers. Their shape – phallic, comic, threatening – is a handy metaphor for the unconscious, the patriarchy, the unknown. Like painting itself, a submarine cannot be reduced to a single function.

Given her interest in the confluence of the hidden and the revealed, it's unsurprising that Caragh is also drawn to the primal power of volcanoes – which, until they erupt, look relatively benign. In some ways, submarines and volcanoes are not dissimilar: both are rich with metaphoric potential. When Caragh returned to painting after a long absence, the first work she made was a cross-section of a volcano. She was fascinated by the fact that their power is concealed until they erupt, an event she describes as a 'vigorous, mysterious concoction' that is 'constantly relevant to me, somehow'.

It can be limiting to pin down why certain subjects appeal to an artist; the unconscious must be allowed to roam, unhindered by reason. Why Caragh is interested in volcanoes is answered in her paintings. She's imagined them as exploding pyramids, as postcards, from a great distance and close-up; as time travellers, dormant, violent: what you make of them is up to you. In this, Caragh, who is the least didactic or complacent of painters, echoes the writer Susan Sontag's belief, expressed in her 1966 essay *Against*

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*Interpretation*, that art should be experienced as much by the senses as the intellect. To reduce it to a neat reading is to limit its emotional and sensorial impact.

The artist admires Sontag's novel *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* (1992), in which Vesuvius embodies the maelstrom that was 18<sup>th</sup>-century Naples; a symbol of both passionate love and political volatility. The novel opens with an epigraph from the Mozart opera *Così fan tutte*, Act II:

Dorabella (aside): *Nel petto un Vesuvio, d'avera mi par.*  
In my chest, I think I have a Vesuvius.

In 2023, Caragh painted a series of portraits, 'The Volcano Lovers', which were loosely inspired by the novel. It features delicate head-and-shoulder studies of the protagonists of Sontag's novel, Lord Nelson, Emma and William Hamilton, who were entangled in a love affair, and the French volcanologists and filmmakers, Katia and Maurice Krafft, who died together in an eruption at Mount Unzen, Nagasaki in Japan in 1991.

In his 2016 hymn to volcanoes, *Into the Inferno*, which also features the Kraffts, the filmmaker Werner Herzog observes that 'it is good the soil we are walking on is not permanent; there's no permanence to what we are, no permanence to the efforts of human beings, no permanence to art and soil.'

An intimation of impermanence hums through much of Caragh's work. Alongside more monumental subjects, she's intrigued by what she describes as 'the incidental things that people don't really care about'. Over the years, she's painted golfers, horses' legs and horseshoes, coins, walls and the 'picture windows' of Dutch homes; wonky vases, leaves and flowers, a lifting bridge, sticking plasters, adverts, bushes and stars. She's portrayed figures built like walls; a pre-modern man with flushed cheeks, smoking, his eyes wide in a glassy stare; military planes, suspended like sci-fi manta rays. Many of the paintings are created with such a lightness of touch they emit a kind of surreal luminosity, skewing the quotidian into something precious. Each composition has a range of registers and non sequiturs: a bow tie floating beside a fractured tree; ghostly orbs buoyant above a raw and rocky landscape. A volcano erupting behind a brick wall. A small head portrait of a red-lipped dandy affixed to a grey buttock next to a green cactus.

This is only a fraction of it.

Caragh says: 'I'm not interested in achieving perfection. There's no such thing.'

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When I visit Caragh's studio in East London in April, spring is arriving and buds are beginning to push up through the cold earth. It's an oddly prescient reflection of the evolution of her latest suite of large paintings. Slowly taking shape, they, too, are expected to bloom in early June.

The artist has numerous paintings on the go; her visual language is one of accumulation. When she starts out, she has what she describes as 'a clear visual beginning idea, intention, sensation, conceptual thought and feeling' but the final painting, and its title, emerge organically. Often, her compositions are prompted by a series of words that conjure an image – such as 'black painting', 'clouds', 'military planes' or 'ham' – which she describes as 'factual, like information'. This reminds me of Georges Braque's observation that reality is only revealed when it's illuminated by poetry.

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Paintings grow from a combination of abstract marks, occasional words and references to the physical world. At times, Caragh forces herself to go to what she describes as ‘uncomfortable, counterintuitive, even embarrassing places’ which is how, she believes, fresh ideas are born. She works rapidly, her drawing loose and bold; she blocks in colour and then stands back, leaving the painting alone until fresh inspiration arrives. Some paintings will be resolved in hours; others take months, or even years, to complete. The finished works recall the ways thoughts and images, both coherent and fractured, overlap and intertwine during the course of a long day. She occasionally prints directly onto a painting, or paints onto bespoke cloth she has had woven with images. Like pauses in an animated conversation, she frequently leaves parts of the linen untouched, which allows both the painting – and whoever might be looking at it – a moment to think, a chance to breathe.

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On that spring day in April, four large unfinished and untitled canvases were arranged on the walls. A pale, fleshy study of what might be hovering saints was emerging from a rough ground of crosshatches; two military airplanes were surrounded by a dense pattern that evoked missiles, fish and sperm. (She describes these planes as ‘vile and sinister’ but admits she can’t stop looking at them.) A submarine, rendered in swift strokes, lurked at the bottom of a canvas beneath roiling clouds and two large, black rectangles, that floated like redacted information over a secret document.

We talk about influences. Caragh cites – with admiration – Titian and the way he, and so many other Renaissance artists, mined familiar stories from the Bible or Ancient Greece and made them new again. In her work, certain motifs are on high rotation: bricks, grids, lines, ropes, clouds, submarines and volcanoes. Caragh is constantly reinvigorating her ideas, digging into them from myriad directions. She talks about how she’s often made two versions of the same thing, which she calls ‘strange pairings’. She declares she wants to paint twins. (She’s not a twin, but her dad has siblings who are.) She talks about bricks as the perfect fusion of the earth and a human intervention; a simple object that can be repeated in infinite combinations. We talk about art history and how, for example, there have been thousands of annunciations, each one original. In a culture that relentlessly champions the new, this recycling of the past is, in many ways, an act of rebellion.

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A month later, Caragh sends me through photographs of the paintings, which are beginning to blossom; they’re succinct, cryptic, playful. She includes some preliminary titles: *World Trade* is an image of pipes emerging from a concrete floor attached to a metal fitting, which Caragh describes as ‘a real creative bodge job born out of necessity!’. *The Annunciation* is a hallucinatory tangle of saints, ghosts and delicately painted lilies that obscure faces. *Starlink* is very sci-fi: a perfect circle of shimmering dots – I later discover they’re Elon Musk’s satellites orbiting Earth – against the vast expanse of the universe; to the left, a tiny rocket shoots towards it like a symbol of hopeless optimism; on the bottom right, a glowing mess of matter. (We know so little about the universe our planet inhabits.) The military planes have morphed into a trippy mash-up of 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology, a medieval leg, a hand and a dagger. The large black rectangles above the sketchy submarine are now filled with billowing clouds – storms within storms.

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At every turn, Caragh’s approach to image-making punctures conventional assumptions about time. In her hands, references to centuries, days or hours ago commingle, stacked up like the layers of a lasagna, or

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smashed apart, like a rock thrown at a pane of glass. Memory, here, is pictured as a paradox: despite being shaped by the past, it's often the most vivid thing about our present.

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In his book *Repetition* (1843), the Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard states that: 'Repetition is a beloved wife of whom one never tires because it is only the new of which one tires.' Later, he adds: 'What would life be without repetition? Who would want to be a tablet on which life wrote something new every moment, or a memorial to something past? Who would want to be moved by the fleeting, the new, that is always effeminately diverting the soul?'

In 1961, the artist John Cage – who believed each moment and object to be unique – wrote: 'If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all but very interesting.'

All of this chimes with Caragh's paintings. She understands repetition as analogous to 'making some sort of stew that never stops getting cooked. There are always remnants.' She mentions Agnes Martin's decades-long exploration of delicate grey lines upon lines and sees her approach as therapeutic: a record of time spent surviving the irrationality of existence. She describes repetition as a kind of relief, 'a space that is not pushing you, you're not having to do anything, to be at a cliff edge or try to find something different.'

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Caragh sees peculiarity everywhere, especially in the abundance of commercial images that are so familiar as to be denuded. For her graduate show, decades ago, she was inspired by an advertisement for the fashion brand Hervé Léger, which depicts two models smiling, their arms around each other, looking in different directions – an image of togetherness and separation that is oddly uncanny. The artist has returned to the composition repeatedly over the years, along with various other advertisements and has featured figures as slivers and shadows, made from bricks or silhouetted, intimated but unknowable.

Perhaps, then, it's not such a swerve that Caragh is fascinated by Medieval and Renaissance painting, much of which visualizes the arrangement of figures in very particular environments. She says: 'There's a sort of a reverence about them but you're not actually getting what you think you're getting; there's something else going on. Often, it's humour, as if the maker is trying to pollute a rigid brief with some autonomy.' It's also often about the selling of an idea, a religion, a ruler or a product that has become entwined, like knotweed, with various iterations of intimacy. Across history, humans are still humans: thinking too much or not enough, unable to express their vulnerability, struggling to find the words – or images – that can (hopefully) say what they can't.

Enigma, in Caragh's pictures, suggests the impossibility of ever fully understanding anything, least of all the planet we all share. Her approach to painting pushes against monolithic thinking; against assumptions that what is shall ever be. At a time of terrible bombast, an openness to myriad viewpoints offers a space to ponder the wonders and failings of the world; the never-ending entanglements of nature, technology and human beings that confront us every day. Perhaps real wisdom can only be experienced as fragments and glimpses. Caragh says, simply, that her approach is 'to take moments from things'. What these things might signify is not her job to explain. Looking has its own rewards.

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The opening of Caragh Thuring's exhibition will coincide with an exhibition of the later works of Prunella Clough, curated by Jenni Lomax, at 11 Duke Street, St James's.

For exhibitions and sales enquiries please contact:  
Phoebe Roberts: [phoebe@thomasdanegallery.com](mailto:phoebe@thomasdanegallery.com)

For press enquiries please contact:  
Patrick Shier: [patrick@thomasdanegallery.com](mailto:patrick@thomasdanegallery.com)  
Kitty Malton: [kitty@sam-talbot.com](mailto:kitty@sam-talbot.com)

Gallery hours: Tuesday to Friday 11am–6pm, Saturday 12pm–6pm or by appointment.  
Admission: Free  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 79252505  
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