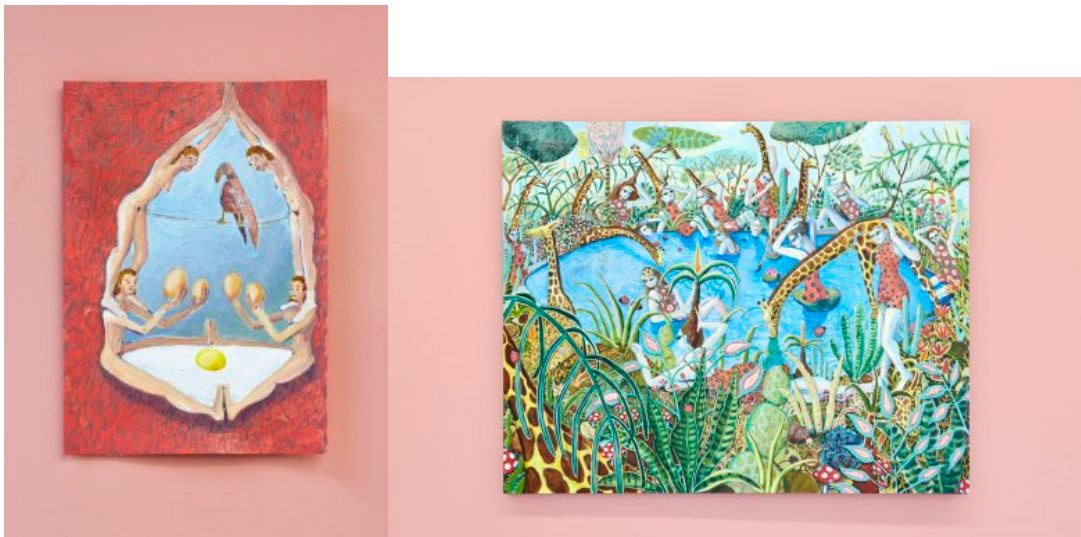




MARLENE STEYN @ LYCHEE ONE

Marlene Steyn's ceramic artworks look like they have been transported to Earth from a surreal world. String-like faces are woven into one another, both connected and disconnected at the same time. The characters within the works appear all to be women, who – though stretched – cling on to each other, holding hands, supporting the networks they have created with their interwoven limbs. The series of paintings and sculptures are exhibited hanging from the ceiling, balancing off light-beams, and on plinths against walls. Part of a new exhibition titled *Unbuttoning My Belly* at London's Lychee One, they are inspired by eco-feminism and the South African landscape.



Painted a soft shade of pale pink, Lychee One gallery has been transformed into a feminine space in which to exhibit Steyn's work. In a painting titled *The Incubator* (2019), four nude women balance on top of one another, hovering over four eggs – a motif that is predominantly associated with motherhood, fertility and femininity – one of which has been opened. The work – which also includes the image of a bird – sets the tone for an exhibition heavily influenced by women and nature. "I've become intrigued with eco-feminism, especially the reimagining of female positions: from an exploited womb to a creative, pulsating and poetic life force that resists picket fences or pruning", says Steyn, "This has led me to start interweaving female characters with fauna and flora inspired from my South African landscape." In another work, *Oasisters* (2019), women and giraffes are painted bathing together in front of a beautiful blue oasis. In some instances, the giraffes' necks grow out of the top of the women's heads, creating the illusion of strange but beautiful mythical creatures.



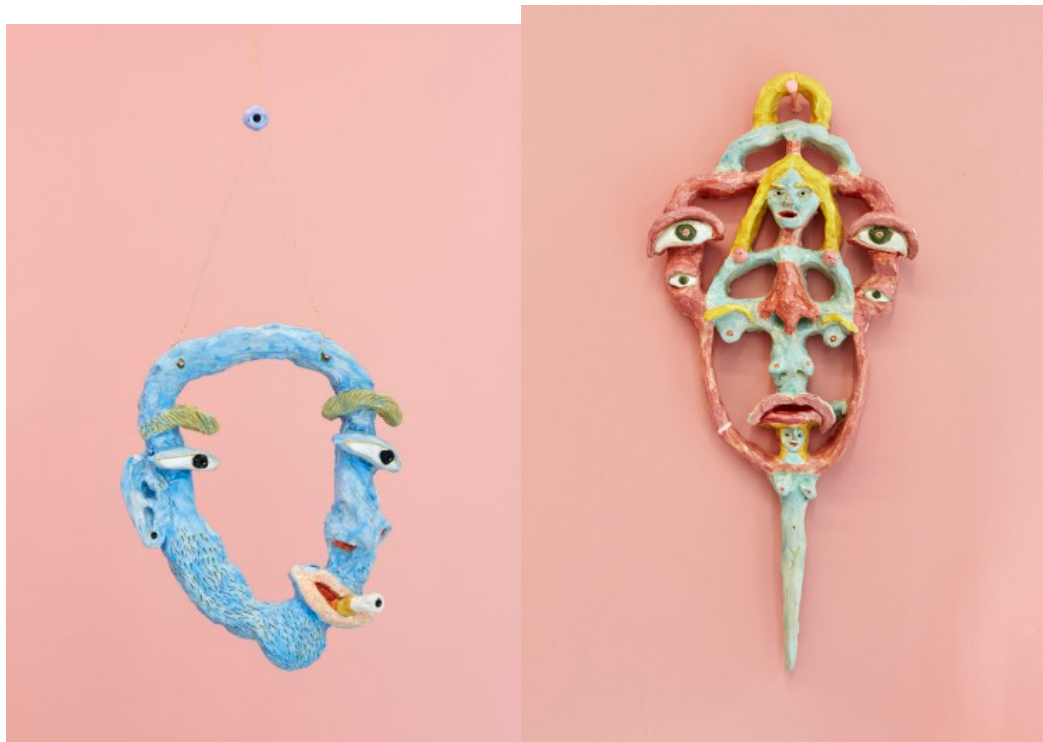
Marlene Steyn, *The Stirring of Spaghetti*, Oil & Mixed Media on Canvas, 150 x 180 x 4 cm, 2019

The slender necks of the animals' necks in *Oasisters* mimics the rest of Steyn's oeuvre, where bodies are pulled and thinned out in every direction. It is as though her characters are pieces of string that together can easily be twisted into knots or hung loosely into intricate patterns like crochet or lace. In fact, they could even be likened to pasta, as in *The Stirring of Spaghetti* (2019), where Steyn's figures are tied together with that familiar yellow substance that is usually formed from a recipe of durum wheat, water and eggs.



Marlene Steyn *Unbuttoning my belly* Installation View

Yet, while Steyn's paintings are beguiling, it is her ceramic works that really present a sense of enchantment. Usually focusing on facial features that have been separated from their owners' bodies, the works seem both bizarre and charming. *Wandering Eye, I Wonder* (2019) for instance sees two googly eyes stare out from a distance on top of a blue outline of a face. Out of the character's mouth however, another lone-eye pops out, as though this mysterious creature is ogling you from its lips. These ceramic characters don't seem real, and it is as though they have fallen into the gallery from out of a dream. "I've always been slightly obsessed with the unconscious", says Steyn, "A space that denies negation, a space that overflows with dreams, darkness, trivial matter and that slips and drips." This sense of "dripping", or perhaps hanging as it were, can be felt in *Hang Ovaries* (2019), a three part work in which a womanly figure suspended from the ceiling interlocks with an S-shaped face and an eye. "I'm an insomniac, an over-thinker, and an even bigger over-feeler, and for me painting and sculpting is a means of dealing with this whirling inner world", adds Steyn, "The title for my show *Unbuttoning My Belly* in a way means to open the screw cap of the unconscious and let out some vapors. Be it empty skyscrapers, spaghetti strands or monkey love."



Other standout works include *Womandala* (2019), a ceramic work where more than four pairs of eyes can be made out of a series of female bodies, with breasts doubling up as noses and hair as mouths. The mandala – a spiritual symbol in Indian religions – represents the universe, with Steyn's *Womandala* presenting an image of the cosmos that is predominantly female. Likewise, *Sky-scrape-her* (2019) illustrates women as the building blocks that support mega-structures. The painting on canvas shows a tower of nude female bodies support one another to create an alternative version of the huge buildings we are so used to seeing in our 21st century cities, and which are most often associated with women.



Marlene Steyn Unbuttoning my belly Installation View

In *Oogamy eyes* (2019), a butter-yellow creature has two fried eggs for eyes and a rasher of bacon as lips. Like *The Incubator*, eggs play a central part of the work. This time however, they are not shielded by the nude limbs of interlinked women, but are standing free from a chamber of female protection. Unlike the painting, the ceramic work does not feel as feminine or maternal, but nevertheless, evokes the feeling of soft bewilderment ever-present in Steyn's work. "My paintings usually take months of simmering and obsessive layering", she explains, "Where my ceramics happen in a playful, intuitive fashion, with me sitting on the floor." As the title suggests, in Steyn's ceramic works, it is as though she has unbuttoned the belly of her painted figures, opened them up and presented them in clay, inviting her audience to wander around her unconscious, and maybe even to consider what it would be like if they unbuttoned their own bellies.

Marlene Steyn: Unbuttoning My Belly is on display at Lychee One, Unit 1, The Gransden, 39-45 Gransden Avenue, London E8 3QA until 6 July 2019