



The Book of Violette: Invisible Vegetation of Desire,
2025, acrylic on canvas, 39 1/2 x 79 in
(100 x 200 cm).

48 WALKER ST | FEB 14 – MAR 22, 2025

Kelly Sinnapah Mary

The Book of Violette

James Cohan is pleased to present *The Book of Violette*, an exhibition of new work by Kelly Sinnapah Mary, on view at the gallery's 48 Walker Street location from February 14 through March 22, 2025. This is Sinnapah Mary's first solo exhibition with James Cohan. The gallery will host an opening reception with the artist on Friday, February 14 from 6-8 PM, and a conversation between Sinnapah Mary and writer and curator Andil Gosine on Thursday, February 20 at 6 PM.

Kelly Sinnapah Mary creates paintings, sculptures, and installations that draw upon the complex interrelationships between folklore, literature, inheritance, history, and the natural world. *The Book of Violette* represents the latest chapter of an ongoing visual notebook in which the artist explores a rich repository of memories, mythologies, and superstitions. A deep enmeshing of figure and landscape is central to Sinnapah Mary's practice, and reflects both her resistance to the racialized anthropocentrism at the heart of the imperialist enterprise and the artist's connection to her ancestors. Drawing upon the work of Caribbean intellectuals such as Suzanne Césaire, Maryse Condé, and Édouard Glissant, Sinnapah Mary interweaves the physical environment that surrounds her home and studio in Guadeloupe with fantasy, science fiction, and archetype to speak to contested histories and the lived experience of diaspora. In the artist's hands, surrealism becomes both a strategy of imaginative thinking and a way of evolving the semi-autobiographical figures that populate her paintings and sculptures.

The Book of Violette takes its title from the female protagonist who appears throughout the paintings in the exhibition in various guises and is named for the artist's grandmother. Like Sinnapah Mary's schoolgirl avatar Sanbras, Violette shapeshifts from composition to composition, at times an older woman, a girl, a young boy, or an animal. In some paintings, she is a delicately veiled first communicant, in others, a resplendent, reclining odalisque, her Black skin tattooed with verdant plant life that curls like vines alongside symbols and stories from fables, religious texts, and the artist's own daily life. Like her grandmother Violette, the artist lives close to the land, tending to her garden a part of the daily ritual of her studio practice. In her paintings and objects, Sinnapah Mary posits deep and reciprocal kinship connections between the human, animal, and botanical that express an understanding of the ways in which landscape can hold memory, tethering us to those who came before us and will come after.

The artist remarks, "*I'm telling stories that exist between the real world and a fantasy world. Through my characters, I create a community, and they build their own beliefs and their own lives across the canvases. This community—of people, plants, animals, and all the hybrid entities in between—are part of an ecosystem that's created to protect the knowledge of our grandparents and our ancestors—how to live in harmony with nature and to heal with plants. They strive to protect this heritage, and to build a new world where animals, plants and humans can live as one.*"

A strong counterweight to Sinnapah Mary's interest in her ecological environment is her engagement with the constructed space of the feminine and the domestic. Tableaus marked by the pastel wallpaper and steaming cups of tea are always shot through with a dreamlike, at times sinister, bent. This compositional strategy destabilizes our understanding of the quaintly familiar—suggesting deeper tensions and further metaphysical dimensions to the artist's painted universe. In *The Book of Violette: Man Yaya taught me about plants*, 2025, a young girl with her hair in braids seated for an afterschool snack sports a third eye. In *The Book of Violette: Auntie Maryse*, 2025, a woman dressed in an exquisitely rendered gown of bridal white sprouts multiple limbs, a tribute to the artist's aunt who was killed in an automobile accident. These superhuman attributes recall the pantheon of Hindu deities such as Vishnu and Kali, proposing a new cosmology of the artist's creation that intermingles her own autobiography with Biblical and Vedic texts.

In the monumental polyptych *The Book of Violette: This earth, ours, can only be what we want it to be*, 2025, many-limbed and multiheaded school girls cavort with human-animal hybrids in an expansive landscape that recalls the compositional complexity of Hieronymous Bosch. Sinnapah Mary often works in a multipanel format. The recurrence of certain motifs and objects throughout a body of work—such as the red boots that appear in several paintings in the exhibition—proposes a sense of narrative continuity and connection, laden with symbolism, even as the central figures themselves are often depicted in flux.

Kelly Sinnapah Mary (b. 1981, Guadeloupe) holds a degree in visual art from Toulouse University. Her work has been shown both in Guadeloupe and internationally at Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico, San Juan, PR; Aicon Gallery, New York, NY; Kunstinstituut Melly, Rotterdam, Netherlands; Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL; IDB Gallery, Washington, DC; Osage Foundation, Hong Kong; Foundation Clément, Le François, Martinique, and the 34th Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil. She has been featured in major group exhibitions including *Surrealism and Us: Caribbean and African Diasporic Artists since 1940*, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, TX, 2024; *Very Small Feelings*, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, India, 2023, and *everything slackens in a wreck*, curated by Andil Gosine, Ford Foundation Gallery, New York, 2022.

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