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Emily Sundblad: *The Adolescent Ocean*

By Maisie Molot



Installation view, *Emily Sundblad: The Adolescent Ocean,* Bortolami Gallery, New York, 2025.

Nude women float amidst vibrant colors in Emily Sundblad's *The Adolescent Ocean*, on view at Bortolami Gallery until August 8. The artist echoes authentic societal pressures placed upon women by presenting women in fantastical settings. The fantasy of womanhood being beautiful and simply happy is depicted in a way that the complicated, messy, and defiant nature of women subtly takes control of the narrative. The historical, submissive nude is now sexually dominant while tinged with youth.

The Adolescent Ocean

Bortolami Gallery

New York
June 6–August 8, 2025

Eleven of Sundblad's paintings, most of which are oil and pastel on linen, are spread throughout three rooms in Bortolami Gallery. In the entrance of the gallery, we encounter a lone rectangular painting of two women with a penny, shell, and seven of clubs glued to the top. Further in, eight paintings hang in the gallery's largest, light-filled room. Of the eight paintings half of them are on uneven oval panels; three are large rectangles; one is a small triangular painting.



Emily Sunblad, *Mommy*, 2025. Oil and sand on canvas, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy Bortolami.

The eerie marriage in *A Wedding* (2025) hangs between a child in *New York May* (2025) and a young girl in a *The Adolescent Ocean* (2025) painting. Innocence is intermingled with maturity. The paintings are not presented in such a way as to encourage the viewer to imagine their own narratives. Through repetition, the themes of paintings blend into a singular question regarding the relationship between female identity, youth, and sexuality. Five paintings share the exhibition's title, reminding the viewer that this body of work is grounded in youth, and two are titled, simply, *Mommy*. These *Mommy* paintings suggest an identity struggle; one depicts it through stereotypical motherhood and the other through sexual objectification. Presenting two different definitions of "mommy," complicates the meaning of each painting as Sundblad illustrates how women should have no singular definition—despite society attempting to give them one. Nude women and symbols of nature —animals, water, shells, and flowers—reoccur throughout the paintings. The natural objects float in space, defying gravity, and butterflies magically glow. In a smaller room, two paintings depict oceans and visually describe the base of the *Adolescent Ocean* through sand embedded in the oil that expands past the sea, just as Sundblad is proving that youth exists past its assumed realm. Sundblad's brushstrokes and pastel marks remind the viewer that we are in her imagined world of women.

Sundblad explores the relationship between society's perception of women and a woman's reality through her rectangular *Mommy* (2025) painting. The large brushstrokes leave some canvas visible, turning the scene into a sketch of a dream—or maybe a nightmare. The brushwork looks fast but full of intention, as if the artist had to create this painting before her idea was lost. The top of the painting features a yellow rose. The rose's green stem interrupts the blue sky while the petals hover against a red background. An eye appears to be in the flower's center, overseeing the rest of the scene. Under the rose, an ocean composed of hues of greens and blues and covered in grains of sand stretches towards the horizon. The sand is not fully contained by the middle section and spills into the sky and onto the women. In the lower right corner, a nude woman is engaged in intercourse with a man. A blue IUD separates her from another woman. This woman's legs and skirt are covered by disembodied hands, and the ocean covers her unpainted top half. Next to her, a green woman's eyes look downwards beyond the scene. Finally, in the lower left corner is a cat that looks both frightened and ferocious.



Emily Sunblad, *The Adolescent Ocean*, 2025. Oil and pastel on linen, 68 x 80 inches. Courtesy Bortolami.

Mommy slips between a naive girls' world and the voyeurism women face. From left to right, the painting reads as a sliding scale of female sexual power. The cat, a symbol of female sexuality, represents the nearby women's conflicting feelings. The green woman appears desperate to flee the scene entirely. The next woman is protected with anonymity from the ocean covering her face. She may be disappearing into the ocean because she is running back to innocence—or her legs are being pulled out of youth's innocence before she is ready. Sundblad's fast, large brushstrokes mimic the urgency girls feel to grow into women. The nude woman engaged in intercourse is the only figure in *The Adolescent Ocean* making eye contact with the viewer, as Manet's *Olympia* did. Her gaze renders the act public and confident, while her legs wrapped around the man imply agency. Modern slang's "mommy" has turned maternal dominance sexual. The division between these women and the one engaged in intercourse being an IUD illustrates how adult sexuality aligns with female reproductive responsibility, a right that is under attack. Sexual dominance and youth exist simultaneously.

Sundblad unravels the false fantasy of womanhood, but leaves other questions open. Are the women prematurely sexualized or mature with lingering youth? What is this threshold? Sundblad portrays women as beautiful and powerful while simultaneously acknowledging that objectification and sexual expectations are ever-present. Sundblad's work suggests a conundrum or a paradox: women have gained more agency in contemporary society, and appearances can deceive.

Maisie Molot is a writer based in New York.