

Alcon Blue, the spirit that presides over Emiliano Maggi's new paintings and sculptures, is an extraordinary butterfly: one whose larvae are nurtured by ants. This is less a parable of collaboration though, as of beauty born from death, with the ants compelled to ignore their own offspring who duly starve. The artist's world is also one of hybrids and shape-shifters that are as seductive as they are threatening. With oil on linen, he riffs on the butterfly's distinctive wings with dripping moody violets and peacock feather blues. From these liquid marks, enchanted realms swim into view, shadowy woods or underwater kingdoms whose denizens are the stuff of magic and myth: comely musicians, naked youths and beast-people who walk on all fours or sport horns or antennae. Some wear full breeches, others witch's pointed hats. In ceramic sculptures with uncertain surfaces and mottled skins of pale aqua, human faces sprout from nests of leaves and bronze flower stems from clay.

There's a freedom that extends across sex and species, as forms orgiastically melt and merge.

Time too is fluid. While the work's concern with mutable identity speaks to the present, Maggi's historical interests underline that transformation and hybridity is an age-old part of human experience. He cites the similarity between renaissance dance choreography and garden design and the 1926 fantasy novel, *Flower Phantoms*, about a young woman falling in love with an orchid, among his recent references.

One of Maggi's clearest antecedents though is the decadents' art of "beautiful untrue things", as Oscar Wilde had it, and which pushed at received notions of perversity. His figures recall the linear elegance of illustrators like Alistair yet their literally florid forms are unsettling too. Maggi's blue-skinned revellers playing, or perhaps toking, on suggestively long pipes, invite us to follow them and lose a bounded sense of self. As with the story of the cuckoo larvae that destroys the ants that raise it to become the Alcon Blue, there is a death with this process of rebirth.

TEXT BY SKYE SHERWIN