

## Introduction

Janiva Ellis's (b. 1987) first institutional solo exhibition in Europe opens with a dialogue across eleven paintings made specifically for this occasion. The works incorporate representational imagery and abstraction, moving through contradictions and complexities.

Three threads traverse the exhibition: the religious, the landscape, and the erotic. Each carries a long association to painting and has been renegotiated repeatedly throughout art history. Ellis works her way through the existential questions that European art history has passed down as universal and unavoidable. These are not mere subjects but inherited, canonical structures of meaning that the artist inhabits and metabolizes, laying bare what they keep silent. Language runs through the work in a similar way: it can hold meaning together but also allow it to drift apart, thus revealing simultaneously what the act of naming omits.

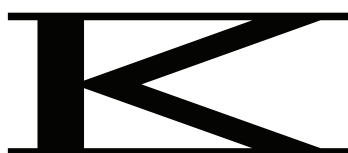
What rises to the surface in each painting may at first glance appear to be the final layer, but it is in fact the most recent state of something that has been reworked over time. Earlier decisions lie beneath the surface, gestures that have been revised, erased, or covered over. Ellis's process accumulates in layers, drawing motifs from digital images, archives, and chance encounters. Her paintings move across several different registers at once, technical and cartoonish, monumental and oblique, with the comic and the catastrophic remaining in close proximity without necessarily explaining each other.

The exhibition's title, *Geneva*, has accompanied Ellis for some time. In English, the title is phonetically similar enough that the artist's first name, Janiva, can be mistaken for it, leading to a recurring assumption. As in the paintings themselves, recognition here begins with the familiar before gradually dissolving. The fact that this moment now finds its place at the Kunsthalle Basel lends it a particular poignancy.

# Janiva Ellis

## *Geneva*

1 May –  
9 Aug. 2026



## Janiva Ellis: *Geneva*

At Kunsthalle Basel, Janiva Ellis's exhibition *Geneva* unfolds as a constellation of works that seem to approach the viewer through a shifting set of conditions rather than a fixed set of images. What emerges is not so much a sequence as a field in which meanings take shape only to dissolve again immediately afterward. In this process, the artist shows us that the religious, the landscape, and the erotic are part of a visual logic within the tradition of painting itself.

### Fractured Universality

With *Glint* (2026), the religious emerges first. A languid angel appears at the threshold of the exhibition—at once present and in motion, holding the viewer's gaze while never fully stabilizing within it. Here, the religious begins to register less as a subject than as a way of seeing, long embedded in painting itself: the persistence of the sublime as a universal claim, and forms that speak beyond any particular position. This inheritance, however, is not neutral. It has been shaped by assumptions in which the universal has always taken on a concrete, historically situated form—such as whiteness, which masquerades as neutrality and thereby renders other ways of seeing and representing invisible.

### Shifting Grounds

In *When God Splits the Atom* (2025), elements of catastrophe, environment, and figure coalesce into a moment that feels both formative and unstable, as if the image were still in the process of organizing itself. Not far away, in the same room, *Philosophie Zoologique* (2025) shifts this register, introducing language alongside the religious as another framework. Here, language is not technological in its resolve, rather it overwhelms, jumbles and falls over itself like an existential quest for meaning and becoming through the interpretation of clunky Western epistemologies.

The landscape shifts under this pressure. Loosening from its reliable, grounding function, it becomes contingent, relational, and undecided. Sculptural references migrate into painting and unsettle spatial relations from within. In *Das Gift* (2026) and *Inner Blitz* (2026), coherence and fracture materialize together. What clings to landscape painting—distance and a gaze that orders and dominates—is retained and holds the images in tension.

### Proximity as an Imposition

In the second room, the erotic hinges on proximity. The second room gives the impression of entering something that perhaps one should not be granted access to. The distance from the narratives that might still have been possible before become harder to maintain, and the atmosphere condenses into another kind

of contiguity. In *Do I Move You* (2025), bodies appear intertwined at a scale that resists easy orientation. Eroticism here unfolds not merely as a scene but as a condition in which desire, exposure, and observation remain entangled. A gaze appears to be present within the image itself, as if the act of looking had already been anticipated. Within this field of tension, ecstasy does not simply discharge itself. It converges again within chaos. In this density lies a paradoxical order that recurs throughout the exhibition.

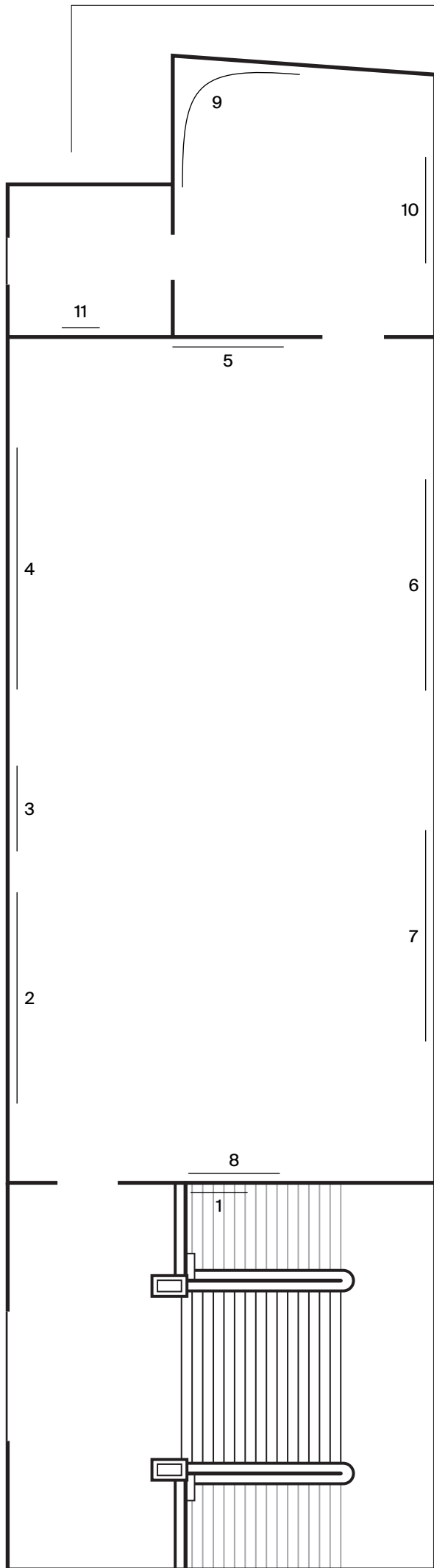
This carries into the large-scale curved painting *May Day* (2026), where movement, crowds, and conflict expand and converge like cinematic montage. Figures and forces appear densely interwoven, making it difficult to determine where one ends and the other begins. Echoes of struggle and transcendence rise to the surface, pointing to a mode of thinking that continues to shape Western self-understanding, yet without settling into a fixed meaning. Ellis turns this imagery into a point of arrival and departure by inscribing her work into this visual tradition while simultaneously distorting it.

Some figures in Ellis's paintings sustain a kind of stubborn attention that does not release. The cartoonish figure appears in this present body of work differently than in the past, in sharp glimpses. In *Une nuit agitée* (2026), it holds a position that is neither fully inside nor outside the image. It becomes the witness to a condition that does not resolve. More broadly, this exhibition seeks to place observations into view. Not: look, here is the thesis. Rather: this is what it feels like. With that, the role of the cartoon shows how closely tension and relief, the grotesque and the serious, panic and comedy, lie beside one another in these paintings.

### Coordinates in Motion

In the final room, *Imfall* (2026) introduces a subtle displacement, meaning that a view of Zurich appears within an exhibition in Basel titled *Geneva*. Geographic and linguistic coordinates slip. "Imfall" (meaning "actually" in Swiss German) subtly redirects the exhibition's gaze back toward those shifts and slight displacements that have marked it from the beginning.

The exhibition does not so much conclude as return to its own conditions. What may have first appeared legible begins to shift again, suggesting that what the exhibit exposed was only ever the first layer among others.



## Room 3

- 11 *Imfall*, 2026  
Oil on canvas  
76.2 × 60.96 cm

## Room 2

- 9 *May Day*, 2026  
Oil on canvas  
220 × 545 cm
- 10 *Do I Move You*, 2025  
Oil on linen  
219.71 × 178.12 cm

## Room 1

- 2 *Inner Blitz*, 2026  
Oil on canvas  
193.04 × 375.92 cm
- 3 *Heal Concept*, 2026  
Oil on linen  
203.2 × 152.4 cm
- 4 *Philosophie Zoologique*, 2025  
Oil on linen  
269.24 × 414.02 cm
- 5 *Let's Regress*, 2026  
Oil on linen  
193.04 × 193.04 cm
- 6 *Das Gift*, 2026  
Oil on linen  
193.04 × 375.92 cm
- 7 *When God Splits the Atom*, 2025  
Oil on canvas  
193.04 × 375.92 cm
- 8 *Une nuit agitée*, 2026  
Oil on linen  
203.2 × 152.4 cm

## Landing

- 1 *Glint*, 2026  
Oil on canvas  
121.92 × 91.44 cm

The exhibition is made possible with generous support from the LUMA Foundation, Peter Handschin and Martin Hatebur, طول و عرض (Tul w Ard), as well as Jackson Tang, and George Freeman.

L U M A  
F O U N D A T I O N

The mediation projects are realized through the generous support of the Thomas and Doris Ammann Foundation and the Canton of Basel-Stadt. The *Espresso Tour* is made possible through the support of Lavazza.

The artist would like to thank Mohamed Almusibli, Lena Katharina Reuter, and the whole Kunsthalle Basel team; Oliver Newton, Margaret Lee, Jasmine Lee, Grace Sanabria, and Megan Yuan of 47 Canal, along with Anthony Torrano, Davis Campbell; and Rószka Farkas, Christopher Eperjesi, Peter Hammond, and Meli Ulkumen of Arcadia Missa.

She also extends her deepest gratitude to her mother Sophie Beyer, and to Kelela Mizanekristors, Carolyn Lazard, Takiaya Reed, Chakeiya Richmond, and Justin French for holding her down and inspiring to grow.

Curated by Mohamed Almusibli

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The Kunsthalle Basel bookshop stocks publications on Janiva Ellis alongside its broader selection of art books. You will find a selection of publications related to the artist in the library of the Basler Kunstverein.

More information at [kunsthallebasel.ch](http://kunsthallebasel.ch)

## Public Programs

*Rosennacht*, Kunsthalle Basel × Jugi Dreirosen

22.05.2026, Friday, 4–8 p.m.

Monumental painting at *Rosennacht* at the Dreirosenanlage.

*Mal•Mal*, in German and English

27.05.2026, Wednesday, 6–8 p.m.

Life drawing in the current exhibition; drawing materials provided.

*Bau das Unerwartete*, Basler Ferienpass

★ 13.07.2026, Monday, 2–5 p.m.

★ 14.07.2026, Tuesday, 9 a.m.–noon

What does your world look like? Build it using cardboard, colours and shapes inspired by Janiva Ellis's art.

For children and young people aged 6–12, free admission

*Curatorial Tour*, with Yana Kadykova (Curatorial Assistant), in German

★★ 14.07.2026, Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.

*Mittwoch-Matinee*, in German

29.07.2026, Wednesday, 10 a.m.–noon

The current exhibitions are explored at lunchtime as part of the series of events organized by *museen basel*.

Afterwards, participants can engage in lively dialogue with refreshments on the terrace of Kunsthalle Basel.

Price: 10 CHF

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## Thursdays at Kunsthalle Basel

*Espresso Tour*, in German

07.05.2026, Thursday, 12:30 p.m.

The exhibition's key points are presented in twenty minutes, accompanied by an espresso.

*Director's Tour*, with Mohamed Almusibli, in English

★★ 06.08.2026, Thursday, 6:30 p.m.

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## Sundays at Kunsthalle Basel

Public guided tour, in German

03.05.2026, Sunday, 3 p.m.

07.06.2026, Sunday, 3 p.m.

*Espresso Tour*, in German

21.06.2026, Sunday, 3 p.m.

The exhibition's key points are presented in twenty minutes, accompanied by an espresso.

Public guided tour, in German

05.07.2026, Sunday, 4:30 p.m.

*Espresso Tour*, in German

19.07.2026, Sunday, 4:30 p.m.

The exhibition's key points are presented in twenty minutes, accompanied by an espresso.

Public guided tour, in German

02.08.2026, Sunday, 4:30 p.m.

★ Registration at Basler-Ferienpass website

★★ Registration at [kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch](mailto:kunstvermittlung@kunsthallebasel.ch)

More information at [kunsthallebasel.ch](http://kunsthallebasel.ch)