JOY DIVISION



Renée Estée, *Slip Away (what comes is better than what came before)*, 2025, oil paint, synthetic polymer paint, mica, charcoal on canvas, 183 × 219 cm. Courtesy of the artist and COMA

by Grace Sandles

RENÉE ESTÉE's practice treats grief as evidence of love, working the slippage between reality and myth, this world and the next. Her upcoming exhibition at COMA, *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy*, turns that inquiry toward folklore and superstition — the small rituals we build to navigate uncertainty, and the meaning we're willing to read into coincidence.

One for Sorrow, Two for Joy borrows its title from the magpie counting rhyme and explores how folklore turns chance into meaning. "I'm interested in how rituals, omens and inherited superstitions become methods of navigating uncertainty," Estée says, "revealing our desire to locate patterns and imagine correspondences between visible and invisible worlds."

That sorrow and joy are separated, in the rhyme, by a single count strikes her as instructive: "Fate and feeling might hinge on the smallest encounters, and ordinary moments can become charged with extraordinary significance if we're willing to read them that way."

Estée studied painting at the Victorian College of the Arts before an MFA at Hunter College in New York, where she stayed six years. "It taught me how to live inside uncertainty," she says of the city, "how to make work through constant movement and change." Back in Naarm Melbourne now: "Distance has a funny way of revealing the patterns you couldn't see while you were living them. Across each place I've lived, I've kept returning to similar questions — love, death, memory, folklore, the ways we construct meaning from experience. The landscapes have changed. The questions haven't."

Her reference points range from Edvard Munch, for his "ability to transform profoundly personal experiences into something archetypal," to Jenny Watson, whose "combination of vulnerability, wit and apparent simplicity" she finds generous. Like Anne Carson and Virginia Woolf — whose work, she says, "moves so fluidly between memory, mythology and lived experience" — Estée's paintings move between modes of storytelling: rituals of grief and celebration, superstitions, love letters, epitaphs, personal mythologies, the psychology of landscape and memory. "I'm fascinated by the stories people inherit and invent to make sense of the world," she says.

Each work in *One for Sorrow, Two for Joy* is a step beyond an answer — free writing, then quick intuitive works on paper, then paint, until the canvas starts asking its own questions back. Estée stays in conversation with the surface while mixing a colour in oil, "dragging it across the canvas, waiting for areas to drip, simmer and stain," layering in references to poetry, myth and music pulled from her notebooks. "I like to think that the paintings start with, and carry, a voice," she says. "Oil paint is beautifully unpredictable, especially the egregious amounts I use. It slips, resists, obscures and suggests things I couldn't have anticipated. I try to leave space for those accidents because they often lead the painting somewhere more interesting than I could have consciously conceived. In that sense, painting itself becomes its own form of folklore — an act of noticing, believing and allowing meaning to emerge gradually."

"One question I keep returning to, both while I'm painting and when I'm looking at works that have stayed with me, is: How do we tell stories that make the unknowable feel momentarily inhabitable?" Estée's paintings don't answer that question so much as sit inside it — gestural, moody, unresolved — asking the viewer to do the same: to resist the pull toward fixed interpretation, and let the works call up their own memories, losses, superstitions.

On view at COMA
7 OCT – 14 NOV 2026