



Ellie Cotton
A Study of Saint Francis
18 September - 1 October 2024

General Assembly is pleased to present *A Study of Saint Francis*, Ellie Cotton's debut solo exhibition. In this presentation Cotton explores Saint Francis, the 12th century ascetic preacher and founder of the Franciscan order, through a series of paintings set in contemporary and surreal contexts. A son of a rich merchant, Saint Francis renounced his wealth and his family ties, devoting his life to preaching to all creatures, including animals.

Cotton's curiosity about Saint Francis was sparked by a visit to the National Gallery's 2023 *Saint Francis of Assisi* exhibition, which surveyed depictions of the saint from the 13th century to the present. The artist was struck by Saint Francis' enduring appeal to artists, and the variety of ways he has been depicted for almost a millennia.

The National Gallery exhibition, and a trip to Assisi that followed, inspired Cotton to embark on her own artistic exploration of Saint Francis. Beginning with a series of drawings and culminating with the paintings in this presentation, Cotton places Saint Francis in contemporary contexts of her own imagining to absurd and playful effect. In the *Cloud Upload* series Cotton whimsically depicts Franciscans "uploading" data to the cloud through a game of parachute, drawing parallel references between renaissance works, where clouds convey spiritual and heavenly significance, and today's use of the term – where clouds are the storage units for everything digital.

In *Restoration with Saint Francis*, Cotton odes to monumental Renaissance paintings, with their vital scenes and rich symbolism. In the work, Saint Francis, toy plane in hand, is seen peeking out from underneath a table while two imposing bunnies stand above preparing a large airplane cake. The airplanes alludes to birds, to which Saint Francis often preached, as well as the concept of the painting as a metaphysical plane asserted by artists such as Philip Guston.

Beneath Cotton's humour is a thoughtful examination of nature, religion and technology in contemporary society. *Live Stream (Poor Clare)* surreally depicts Saint Clare, the patron saint of media and television and the first female member of the Franciscan order. Rendered with a hammer head, a motif continued from a previous body of work, Saint Clare holds a birthday candle and is filmed by two Franciscans on a camera dolly; she has gone live to share a message with her followers.