

SARA NIGHTINGALE GALLERY

Contemporary Fine Art

PRESS RELEASE

Re-Wilding: JoAnne Carson and Suzanne Unrein opens on October 22, 2022 at the Sara Nightingale Gallery, 26 Main Street, Sag Harbor, NY 11963, sara@saranightingale.com, (631) 793-2256. Opening reception: October 22, 5:00-7:00pm.

A Return to Eden

American artists were neither the first, nor will they be the last, to champion within their work an intimate relationship to nature that verges on ecstatic animism. Even so, it's probably fair to suggest that the past hundred years witnessed a remarkable trajectory of painting within the US that hews closely to the Symbolist, Expressionist and Transcendentalist legacies endowed upon us by a string of far-flung predecessors, beginning with Thomas Cole and Frederick Church in the 19th century Hudson Valley, continuing through to Agnes Pelton, Charles Burchfield and Georgia O'Keeffe in the first third of the 20th, and including a myriad of kindred spirits working today. Artists operating within this tradition tend to share three essential characteristics: a collective urge to invest the vegetable kingdom with dynamic life, a drive to explore the human spirit's boundless capacity to articulate and satisfy our animal nature, and an effort to erase all artificial frontiers between humans and nature writ large.

In *Re-Wilding*, their two-person exhibition of new work, painters JoAnne Carson and Suzanne Unrein join forces to re-articulate this position from two closely related perspectives. In Carson's work, both flowers and trees take on strongly animistic properties, their leaves, branches, stems and flowers bursting with kinetic exuberance, while the humans and animals who populate Unrein's paintings seem to frolic in an orgiastic whirlwind of activity. Everything alive appears blissfully aware of its mutual interdependence on everything else — a notion underscored by Unrein's use of large swatches of color that overlap multiple subjects and intermediary areas, serving to visually merge human, animal and vegetable forms.

To endow the landscape with such supernatural powers requires a particular variety of faith at this juncture of human history, when a global reckoning is beginning to occur with respect to the Anthropocene, and our species' recognition of our moral and metaphysical failure in attempting to force nature to bend to our wishes. Although scientists and climate activists have been close to unanimous in their assessments of the danger we face for a generation or more, it has taken such blunt meteorological evidence as devastating floods, cataclysmic fires and dangerously high temperatures for a majority to begin giving the matter serious attention.

Suzanne Unrein's paintings project a utopian vision of a world in which all forms of life co-exist in synchronous harmony. Nobody has a need for clothes, tools or shelter, since animals are full partners with us in the cycle of life. Against a patchwork of dazzling skies, her brush traces broad, fluid outlines to describe multiple overlapping or adjacent species at once. Most, but not all, of her figures are female, with several sporting non-human heads, lending an extra frisson to works like *The Sea Queen* and *The Parade*, which seem to teeter on the edge of a no-holds-barred interspecies orgy. With an overriding benevolence that recalls Thomas Hicks' iconic painting *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Unrein's broader purpose seems to be an effort to super-charge humans' identification with other species by way of a pagan vision of how we benefit when we intermingle and share our intimate lives. She's not telling us to go out and do the things depicted in her paintings, but rather, like her, to have a sense of what envisioning them for ourselves feels like.

The best way to describe nature as we find it in JoAnne Carson's paintings is that everything alive has become magically transformed into a flower or tree. Whether they act courageous, bashful, exuberant, boastful or flirtatious, Carson's plants are always in full-on action mode, indulging themselves in a broad spectrum of human behavior and emotion. Such fanciful whims, while serving as an all-purpose vehicle for her surrealist-tinged, fantastical palette and brushwork, are also engaged in a form of double duty. For instance, her painting *Day for Night*, with its hallucinatory vision of a grand glowing orb hovering in the sky in midwinter, might at first appear to transpose the pyrotechnics associated with the legend of Christmas onto a less religious framework, but it also gleefully indulges us in the childlike wonder that invariably accompanies our contemplation of that moment in the calendar when the days start to lengthen, and spring is just around the corner. Carson's painting *Volunteer*, which takes the updated term for weed as its title, possesses petals, blossoms and leaves, but also a number of hard to identify appendages that lend it a giddiness tinged with sci-fi.

At the core of their work, Carson and Unrein share a deep commitment to exploring what Eden might mean to those of us who are hyper-aware that we are living through an age of accelerating environmental decline. One possibility is that theirs is a last-ditch effort to bend the human imagination to confront the very real possibility that either nature will eventually respond to our reckless rapacity by rejecting us outright as future inhabitants of earth, or else our human greed and carelessness will trigger a catastrophic global event that dooms both the planet and ourselves. Whether it is too late to save the planet isn't really a provable argument anymore, whereas the shared mentality with which we confront an uncertain future has never been more critical. By evoking an all-but-lost paradise that somehow, inexplicably, might still be within our grasp, their paintings serve to prod us as fellow inhabitants of the Eden we may never see again that even the most pessimistic scenario can never be interpreted as absolving us of our shared responsibility to make sure that oceans, lakes, rivers, plants and animals that have been left to our care do not perish as a result of our recklessness. What might actually save us all in the end is something like a clarion call to action, rooted in a rekindled appreciation for the real and imaginary beauty of our natural environment, both of which Carson and Unrein go to extraordinarily creative lengths to illuminate.

---- Dan Cameron

For more information:

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