



Down to Earth — on a new level



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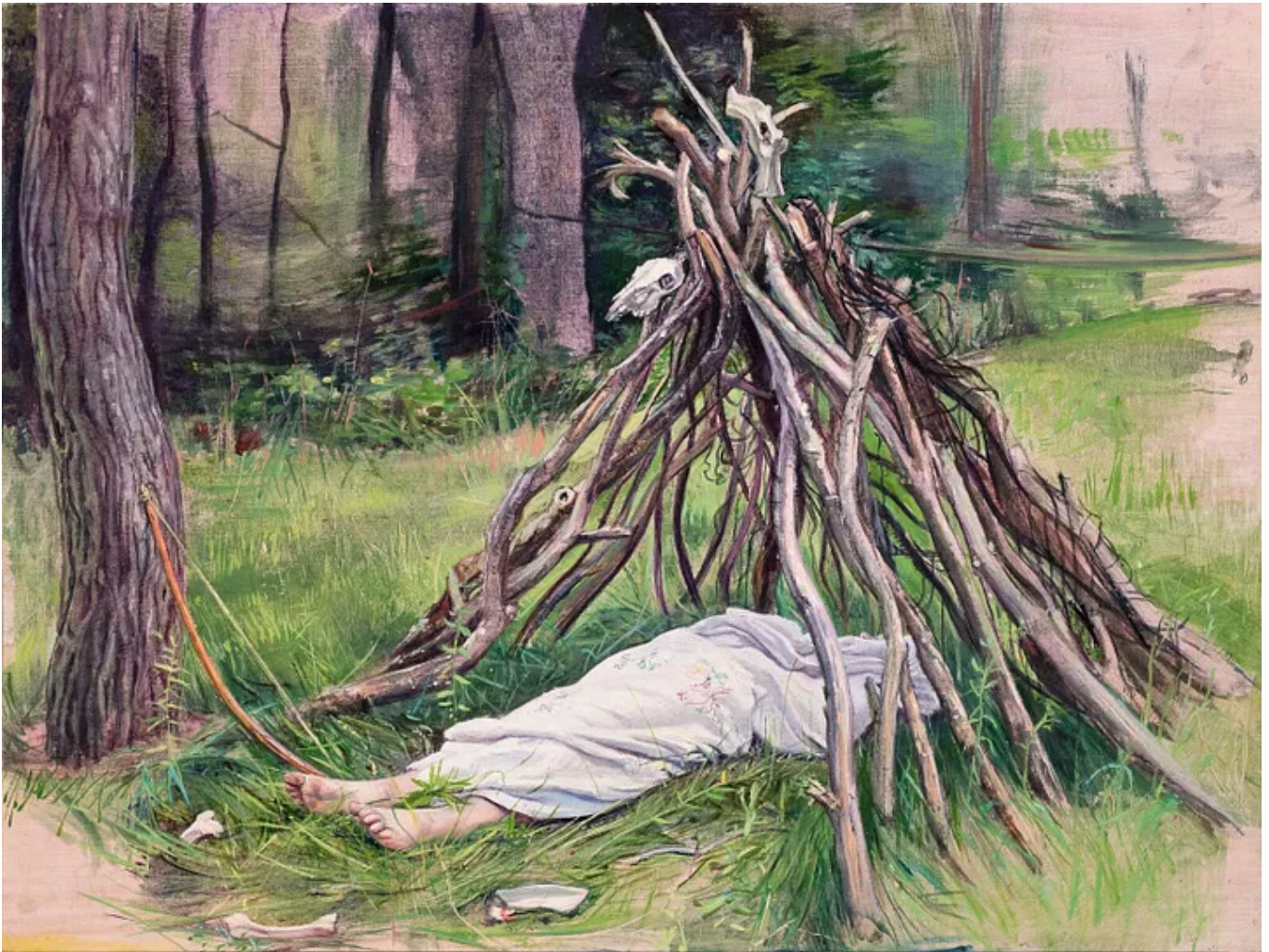
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a review of “Natural Proclivities”, at the Shirley Fiterman Art Center, curated by Kim Power and Melanie Vote

“Nature becomes a ‘thing’. Used, it is corrupted, and man’s vital instincts along with it. An abyss gapes open between nature and man.”

— Alfredo Bonanno



Melanie Vote, "Recumbent Huntress", oil on linen on panel

This is the state in which we find ourselves in these anthropocene days: nature, once a vast monolithic and untouchable entity, has over the course of human history become a resource to be exploited. Especially as human impact encroaches upon the remainder of our planet's wild places, and the pristine beauty of our world is churned into the endless mundanity and decay of the built environment, we find ourselves less and less able to commune with nature. What role does art have in this? Can it be redemptive?

Natural Proclivities, an exhibition at the Shirley Fiterman Art Center at Borough of Manhattan Community College, is an envoy and recent arrival from this rift between nature and humanity in the form of works in paint, photography, thread, and mixed media. The show consists of works by 31

artists, each with a unique response to humanity's collective expulsion from Eden.



Rafael Perez, "Messier" oil on panel

The works vary drastically in style and tone — and this variance in itself is perhaps a strong testament to our relationship with Nature. Somber works like Lisa Lebofsky's painting depicting the stillness of a frozen lagoon at

nighttime are juxtaposed with bursts of liveliness like Elisabeth Condon's *Tsunami Plants*, which is a veritable explosion of sights and textures to parallel the great Cambrian Explosion of prehistory.

In fact, the use of texture is a notable thematic tool in many of the works on display. In a painting by Bradley Castellanos, a drab forager seemingly composed of recycled newspaper collects vibrant and fibrous plants into a basket, illustrating quite clearly the conversion and repulsion of nature into something other, something to be used. This parallel is also well-depicted in Gregory Thielker's *Differential*, in which a verdant environment appears to zoom past the viewer, leaving only the road resolute. Likewise, in Melanie Vote's *Fire*, much of a windowpane is presented in intensely realistic detail, chipping paint and all, as a foreground to a pastoral scene in which a fire burns. Here Nature is sandwiched between two man-made artifacts, and Vote seems to be saying that medium or frame are more noticeable than wild unharnessed content. Not a value judgement, just an observation, the painting seems to assert.



Daniel Bilodeau, "Fast Fashion", oil on canvas

Other artists seem more concerned with representing the pure natural, rather than any kind of ideological construction of Nature. Hyperrealistic works by Emma Tapley and Tanya Marcuse are journalistic and detailed studies of the natural processes of growth and decay. These are eye-catching and skillful works that perhaps do more to submerge us into that ideal

natural realm than some of the more thematically ambitious works of the show.

Dotting the gallery are sculptures by Eteri Gocha and Naomi Campbell in plastic and other media, imitations of foliage, creating shrine-like corners of the space. I am not quite sure what to make of these, stooping to view them from all angles, feeling like I'm somewhere between glass menagerie and garden of earthly delights. It is the unique predicament of a person or society that has fallen into the cracks between nature as primordial matrix and as pure untouchable aesthetic. At Natural Proclivities we find ourselves taken in by the vague figures in the astounding swamp paintings of Inka Essenhigh, which seem to just ooze into their surroundings, and we find this oozing incomprehensible, untoward, abject. We can look fondly on the joviality of Julie Heffernan's *Mayday 1663*, in which a group of outdoor revelers gather under the makings of a circus tent, and we can feel nostalgic for a bygone time in which human communion with nature was comfortably mediated. We can examine the figures in the futuristic luxury utopia in Ali Miller's *Orienteering*, which seem to be made of the same starstuff as their surroundings, and feel a kind of hopeful connection — but we are plunged into a meditative disquiet by the deep wilds of Zachari Logan's *Eunuch Tapestry* — even more so when we notice a human figure concealed in the brush. Here, trapped between divine primordial unity and pre-apocalyptic abjection, there is space only for longing.



Zachari Logan, "Eunuch Tapestry 4", pastel on black paper

Some of the most striking works of the show deal with the natural only tangentially. I stand in front of *Origin*, a dour semi-abstract painting by Brooklyn artist Alyssa Monks, for quite some time. It seems to speak in a language otherwise reserved for the ceremonial and the ancient, gazing back at me from a maddening veinal universe that lies beyond or, perhaps, deep within. This is not the lonesome call of the mortal being, ousted from Eden, kept outside its gates by technology and the other trappings of modern civilization. This is the abyss itself.

Natural Proclivities is on display now until July 27th at the Shirley Fiterman Art Center in downtown Manhattan.





About the Curators:

Kim Power is an artist and art writer. Her paintings reflect her deep commitment to community and the environment. In a series entitled This Land she is assembling a body of large and small plein air and studio paintings that speak to a sense of place and belonging through representation of landscapes that have become iconic to the surrounding population not by designation but by through the daily experiences of the people that live and have lived in symbiotic existence with their environment. Power has written for ARTPULSE magazine, The Brooklyn Rail, ArteFuse and Quantum Art Review and works as a freelance writer and presenter, helping artists mold their artist statements, press releases, catalogue essays, exhibition texts and grant applications as well as acting as a panel moderator and an artist interviewer for art exhibitions.

<http://kimpower.net/>

https://www.instagram.com/thisland_kimpower/?hl=en

Melanie Vote, born in 1973 originates from Iowa and is a painter and multimedia artist based in New York. She received a BFA from Iowa State University and an MFA from the New York Academy of Art in 1998. Her work has been exhibited nation-wide and internationally in solo and group exhibitions at Flowers Gallery (New York), The Lodge Gallery (New York), Sloan Fine Art (New York) and DFN Gallery (New York). Her work has been shown at the Indiana Contemporary Art Center, Jenkins-Johnson Gallery, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, The Hangaram Art Museum and ADAH Abu Dhabi. Most recent solo exhibitions have been at Galleria Farina (Miami) and Hionas Gallery (New York). She is a recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant (2006) and has been awarded numerous artist residencies, including Jentel in Banner Wyoming, KHNC for the Arts and the Vermont Studio Center with a full fellowship from the Dodge Foundation

(2003). She teaches painting at the New York Academy of Art and has also taught at Pratt Institute and The New School.

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Written by Mike Gusev

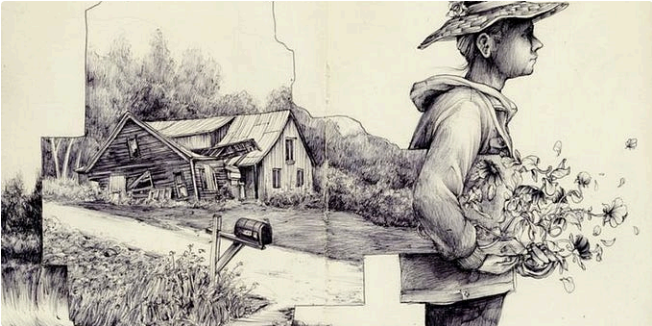
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