

ARTFORUM



LOS ANGELES

CRITIC'S PICK

Emma Webster

Sir Philip Sidney describes his Arcadia as “so perfect a model of the heavenly dwellings.” For “Arcadia,” her first solo exhibition, Emma Webster showcases painted landscapes of a similarly mythic *locus amoenus*. These canvases feature 2-D oil renderings of 3-D dioramas that she cobbles together in her studio. The maquettes juxtapose surreal bucolic scenery with clay animal figurines, plastic foliage, and art-historical iconography evoking everything from work by Albert Bierstadt to Francis Bacon, Hieronymus Bosch to John Martin, and Western film backdrops to elementary school arts and crafts.

Although the exhibited works are not collages themselves, that patchwork sensibility remains even after Webster has translated the imagery of her

modeled tableaux in paint. These Frankensteinian idylls, with their filmic set design, betray the underlying truth of all landscape painting: Every image of nature is a product of human handiwork. The history of art is a history of artifice, of painters rendering landscapes from their points of view and thereby shaping them, tainting them. Representations of nature are always already spoiled.

Yet the postlapsarian world of Webster’s pastoral dreamscapes somehow retains an Edenic sublimity through its foregrounded artificiality—these locales, while uncannily familiar, are like no place on earth, each so perfect a model of a model of some heavenly dwellings.

-Tyler Malone

Los Angeles Times

Review: Emma Webster's landscapes take you into a sublime, magical world

By DAVID PAGEL | FEB 23, 2019 | 7:00 AM



Detail of Los Angeles artist Emma Webster's "Still Life," on view at Diane Rosenstein Gallery in L.A. (Emma Webster and Diane Rosenstein Gallery, Los Angeles)

Emma Webster's paintings are grand affairs: sweeping landscapes filled with forests and mountains and rivers and lakes, some bathed in golden light and others shrouded in shadows so deep you shudder. Albert Bierstadt's majestic pictures of the American West come to mind, as do the sublime vistas painted by the Hudson River School.

Webster's oils on canvas are also modest: informal still lifes filled with toy-size creatures (often bunnies and butterflies, but also flamingos and penguins and carousel horses) that she has made out of unfired lumps of clay and placed in tabletop dioramas. Some of her setups come with 2D trees (paper doll style). All include pint-size theatrical backdrops (collaged from watercolors and photographs). And all are lighted by flashlights or candles or a bare bulb.

Childhood playtime comes to mind, as do grade-school craft projects, cuddly stuffed animals, model railroad layouts and books filled with wonderfully illustrated folk tales.

Conceptually, Bierstadt and playtime have very little in common. To travel, in the mind's eye, from his spectacularly theatrical 19th century masterpieces to what precocious kids can do with cardboard and Play-Doh is to cover a great distance — and then some. But Webster's paintings make you feel as if you could reach out and touch both at once.

Her skills with a paintbrush make that magic happen. Each of the 15 variously sized paintings in “Arcadia,” the L.A. artist’s hometown solo debut at Diane Rosenstein Gallery, is, above all else, a pleasure to behold.

The paint is juicy. It’s been applied generously. Some passages look as if they’re still wet. Nothing has been fussed over. Freshness is everywhere. Not a trace of micromanaging can be detected.

The brushstrokes are bold, applied swiftly and without second thoughts. Yet they’re also wickedly efficient in their capacity to depict the textures and weightiness of 3D objects, not to mention light and shadow, liquids and gasses. And the colors are luscious, richly blended primaries and secondaries and tertiaries that are saturated and sensual and accentuated with blinding highlights. Think Paul Gauguin by way of John Singer Sargent with a little Lucian Freud tossed in.

Compositionally, Webster’s pictures are especially sophisticated. Sometimes she structures her paintings so you feel as if you’re in the thick of things: face-to-face with a mythical bull or deep in the weeds of an Edenic garden, where all sorts of creatures crawl. At other times, she telescopes space, packing great distances — and everything in them — onto the picture plane, without making it feel cramped.

In Webster’s hands, the picture plane is never a single thing, a unified whole, a closed totality or a place where only one story unfolds. It’s a malleable, multidimensional world where memories and fantasies intermingle and time and space expand and contract. There’s plenty of room for whimsical dioramas and sublime landscapes — and for viewers who like painting to take them to places they can’t get to any other way.

Diane Rosenstein Gallery, 831 N. Highland Ave., L.A. Tuesdays-Saturdays, through March 23. (323) 462-2790, dianeroseinstein.com

Emma Webster at Diane Rosenstein Gallery

by Jody Zellen
March 6, 2019



Emma Webster, *Arcadia*, Diane Rosenstein Gallery; Photo courtesy of the gallery

In *Arcadia*, Emma Webster, a recent Yale MFA, creates landscape paintings that are a mélange of styles and iconographies. She draws from historic painters like Bosch and Bierstadt to juxtapose their expansive, idyllic views and sense of scale and space with depictions of plastic foliage and quirky animal figurines. Webster begins by making small-scale tableaux and dioramas which she then translates into large-scale oil paintings. The fifteen works encapsulate a post modern interpretation of Arcadia that is more of a pastiche than something familiarly bucolic. *Still Life* (all works 2018) is a surreal environment with colorful rolling hills populated by a range of animals and figures each presented in isolation and having very little to do with each other. In the foreground an expressively painted bull gazes at or past a larger than life rabbit. The sight line ends at a young child standing in the shadow of a leaning tree. It is hard to discern what the people within this world are doing, Are they farmers? Travelers? Nested in the hills is an American flag. It is surrounded by an expanse of green. A figure

painted in white tones dangles from the top of the composition amongst clouds and a small few birds. Fake-looking trees dot the landscape appearing as if cut from a different scenario. The composition is a series of horizontal striations that move from dark (earth) to light (sky) filled with different species who could not co-exist in reality.

Park Service is a similarly enigmatic and ambiguous landscape with snow-filled mountainous peaks in the distance. A white swan floats toward the center hovering above what appears to be a body of water. Trees whose leaves appear to be contained in plastic bags emanate from blue rocks and cast dramatic shadows onto the ground. A fire breathing creature guards the foreground. A darkly painted large tree leans in from the left side of the frame, its anthropomorphized branches casting an ominous aura onto the environment.

Webster's way of handling paint fluctuates from the representational to the abstract and she has a knack for mixing styles within each painting. Some aspects of the works are rendered with exacting detail while at other times a few dabs of paint are all she needs to depict a living organism. *An Aside* presents a receding seascape. Gestural abstractions sign for tree-tops before a sky that transitions from blue to light orange as it meets a deep green plane. Is the 'aside' the human element— two figures— a woman washing the foot of a man by the water in the foreground, or the post apocalyptic tenor of the landscape.

Webster's *Arcadia* is hardly utopian. Her landscapes are places where animals run wild, trees have a plastic sheen and the color of day and night is slightly off putting, as if something catastrophic was about to happen or just happened. The paintings call attention to our changing climate and present what is, as well as what could be if we let things get out of control.

EMMA WEBSTER (USA, b. 1989)

EDUCATION

- 2018 MFA, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT
2011 BA, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2019 *Arcadia*, Diane Rosenstein Gallery, Los Angeles CA

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2018 *Tails*, Next to Nothing, New York, NY
Heads, Next to Nothing, New York, NY
Spirited Densities, Thomas Erben, New York, NY
Way Out Now, Diane Rosenstein Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Calico Sunset, Pt.2 Gallery, Oakland, CA
Wild Seed: Yale MFA Thesis Exhibition (Curated by Robert Storr), Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT
- 2016 *First Year Show*, Yale School of Art, New Haven, CT
Deal With It, Woskob Gallery with Maake Magazine, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA
Origins, Spinnerei (Pilotenkueche), Leipzig, Germany
- 2015 *Crank*, Southern Exposure, San Francisco, CA
Time Heels All Wounds, Turpentine Gallery, Oakland, CA
First Person Once Removed, Pro Arts, Oakland, CA
She Wolf, Present Works Gallery, Milwaukee, WI
Bloom, Norton Factory Gallery, Oakland, CA
Friends with Karma, Pro Arts, Oakland, CA
- 2014 *New Paintings*, Mark Wolfe Contemporary Art, San Francisco, CA
Endless Summer, Bergelli Gallery, Larkspur, CA

AWARDS & DISTINCTIONS

- 2018 Anderson Ranch Painting Residency, Snowmass CO
2017 Royal Drawing School at Dumfries House, Scotland
2015 Vermont Studio Center Residency, Johnson VT
2014 Ox-Bow Artist Residency, Saugatuck MI
2011 Raina Giese Award in Creative Painting
2010 Undergraduate Academic Research Angel Grant for Painting
2006 Academy of Art University Award for Best Figure Drawing

PUBLICATIONS

- New American Paintings, Pacific Coast Issue #139, Juried by Nancy Lim, December 2018 / January 2019
New American Paintings, Pacific Coast Issue #127, Juried by Jarrett Gregory, December 2016 / January 2017
Emma Webster. Fresh Paint Magazine, Issue 7, April 2015, p 26-27.