



PAINTERS ON PAINTINGS

Heide Fasnacht on Donna Moylan

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A slew of artists are inventing new landscapes, oftentimes from the debris and whatever else is surviving the Anthropocene. This is an abiding interest of mine. Verne Dawson's Wall-E folks farming; the great and good Norbert Schwontowski's parking lots for enormous crystalline settings and golden thunderstorms; Jules de Balincourt's rainbow lighting the urban nightmare; Julie Heffernan's lady trees bearing a new strange fruit; Greg Drasler's dream of an endless Route 66; Virginia Wagner's reconstructions of a habitat for what may be left of humanity; going all the way back to Max Ernst's Frottages...to name just a few.

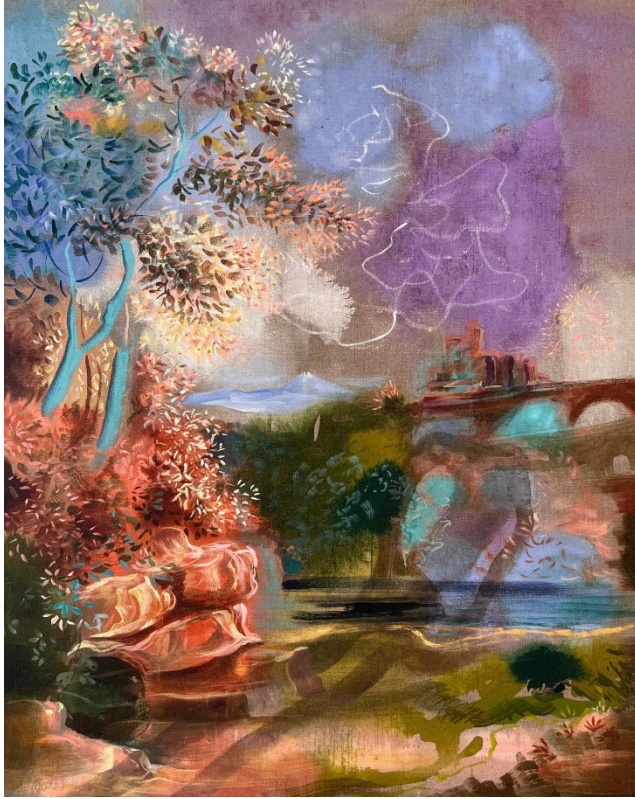
As a young student in Florence, I worked for Superstudio. I learned all about related visionary architects like Ant Farm, Gruppo 9999, Archigram and others who were proposing impossible projects to circumvent the assaults on our world considered the most worrisome at that time. Now it falls to artists to harness creativity in service to the slipping away of our world.

This all led me to my beloved Svetlana Boym, for whom the Darwinian term "exaptation" is pertinent to those of us using invention and creativity for a way out.

"Exaptation is described in biology as an example of "lateral adaptation," which consists in a cooption of a feature for its present role from some other origin. It happens when a particular trait evolves to serve one particular function, but subsequently comes to serve another... [birds developed feathers for their thermal properties; you know what happened next]. Exaptation can be seen as a redemption of the eccentric and unforeseen in natural history, a theory that could only have been developed by an imaginative scientist (Stephen Ray Gould) who sometimes thinks like an artist... Exaptation places eccentric imagination closer to innovation than the brutal struggle for survival of the fittest that extends from Darwin's theory of evolution to contemporary market capitalism." — Svetlana Boym, *The Off Modern*

This brings me to Donna Moylan. Let's not try to pin it down, the work of Donna Moylan, for it is in flight and gloriously so and that is what is good and alive about it.

In her current show at Bookstein Projects, Moylan travels across many timeless landscapes, night and day. Painterly passages sprout, fluoresce, spread and fade into fogs of mist, not so much as landscapes look, but as how they happen. And they happen with Moylan's hand and capricious color sense because these places are, well, hers. The space is at times Cartesian but unafraid to billow into something more hypnagogic. All this arboreal inventiveness seems right for this juncture of the Anthropocene, an exaltation at a time when we may all be called upon to reinvent the landscape. And we are there in her paintings, amongst the trees, cliffs and flowers, birds and flowers: tiny and taking it all in.



Donna Moylan, *The Visitor*, 2024, Acrylic, pastel and beads on linen, 30 x 24 inches

What some may take for abstract elements appear to me to be diagrammatic: mapping out flight patterns or some unseen force in the sky or above the head of the shadow of the protagonist in Moylan's painting *The Visitor*. Maybe they are the shadow's thoughts? The yellow and pink loop-de-loops in *Migratory Birds* trace their cyclical movements from one thumbnail landscape to another inside a Google-style frame.

The Astronomer shows a relatively tiny man on a relatively tiny ladder. His telescope is trained on a constellation in the sky resembling a floating, prone figure. Is it himself? (I think it is Caspar David Friedrich, gazing over all of us remembering the new Sublime and the Awesome to these many years after his death.)

Influences for Moylan range from the German Romantic painters to the Pompeii murals, among others. But here's what I think: however much one likes to tick off artistic influences, a different calculus is required to really comprehend work like Moylan's and the other

Exaptators listed above. One must know that the places she has lived, the trees she has hiked under, the house she built and, oh yes, even the skills she has, are only as important as the reverberations of all of that when they tunnel through the exapted hand that touches the canvas. And there are reverberations aplenty.

Heide Fasnacht made sculpture and large-scale drawings throughout her career and then returned to her first love, painting, in 2018. She is an exaptator.

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