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Seeing between the layers with Jen Wink Hays' Vacationland show

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“Passion lies between one mark and the next, and also within all of them.” Howard Hodgkin

Jen Wink Hays paints with the canvas flat on her studio table, peering down into its emergent world like a bird in the sky. Playful and beguiling, her paintings and works on paper induce a sense of wonder, curiosity and even elation. It is a feeling akin to looking out of the airplane window flying high above the clouds, perhaps en route to a favourite place. The eye searching, the mind wandering and the heart dreaming, hence the title to her first show opening in Miami at Art Bastion on the 22nd of April: Vacationland.

“I am originally from a beautiful, small town in coastal Maine where I experienced a salty-air childhood directly from the pages of a Robert McCloskey book. I moved to New York City as a teenager to attend Barnard College and have somehow lived in big cities ever since,” says Hays.

A sense of dreamtime is of particular relevance to the work of Hays. Captivating at first glance, both the repetition of form and a distinctly aerial perspective give her work a familiar, almost cartographic aspect. We intuit her paintings as an imaginative landscapes. Certain aspects of her work draw parallels with the Dreamings of Aboriginal artists, recalling memories of their native landscape through naive mapping. The term is used to describe relations and balance between the spiritual, natural and moral elements of the world.

One might imagine she is channelling memories from her childhood whilst working from her studio in Pennsylvania, near the home which she shares with her husband artist Tyler Hays and their children. Her titles too reinforce this sense of a landscape observed from above: Moving Ridge, Sunken Meadow, Hidden Causeway, Field and Stream and Other Things. Mapping somewhere, in particular a feeling about a place, is central to the interpretation of her work, but the process is less about nostalgia and more about creating uninhibited. With this dynamic new body of work for Vacationland, Hays had the place in which these paintings would be shown in mind: Miami. A city Hays describes as her “happy place”.

“Miami is the city I have returned to again and again over the years to recharge and reset. It has special significance for me and I associate it with optimism and renewal. As I set out to create the work for this show, I noticed an instinctive brightening and energizing of the color palette that reflects my feelings about this place.”

Locating the work in an actual place however, is far too simplistic a reading of the work. Just as a first visit somewhere or a chance encounter might spark curiosity, the key to appreciating these works is to look more deeply. Step into the work and you will discern a sophisticated interplay of multiple layers, which both obscure and secure the biomorphic forms within. These units of pattern are comprised of bounded areas or volumes that contain a repeating combination of elements and number of colours.

Unlike Aboriginal Dreamings which call a specific terrain to mind, these biomorphic forms are brought forth unconsciously in a kind surrealist automatism – one that channels an inner state rather than any specific place. Hays begins each new work from this unselfconscious position: each mark on the canvas informs the next, giving a rhythm and flow to the work and a sense of organic growth.

Surrealist automatism is a method of making art in which the artist suppresses conscious control over the making process, allowing the unconscious mind free reign. Pioneered by the Dadaist Andre Masson, other notable artists who used the method include Jean Arp, Salvador Dali and Joan Miro whose work was “a sandbox for the subconscious mind, a re-creation of the childlike”. [1] His pictorial language, with its instantly recognisable motifs, marked a soulful connection to the landscape of his childhood. Still a popular starting point for artists like James Hunter or Frances Aviva Blane, this method liberates the artist from rational control and allows them to discover the uncharted territories of their subconscious mind.

“Lately my work has become much looser and more gestural as I’ve moved from gouache back to oil paint. It has been a revelation for me in terms of process and the experience of art making.”

The strength of Hays process and resulting images lies in what she does next, after this initial outpouring. She intervenes: building up the painting through a series of increasingly controlled layers. This intervention, like a zoom in zoom out, is also procedurally connected to our constant toggle between the organic and the synthetic. Her use of colour too conveys this delicate interplay, often blending earthy tones with riotous neons. It is the plane in the sky, above the clouds.

This first layer of intuitive, automatic and unconscious marking gives each painting an authentically Hays signature.

“I like to play with dispersement as if the individual forms in a painting are responding to an unseen force. I like to close in on detailed under-paintings with lush fields of opaque oil paint. Painting in distinct, incomplete layers allows me to explore the idea of concealing and revealing — an active process of choosing what to present outwardly and what to keep under wraps.”

The thick, impasto layers of paint that follow are like the safety and convention of clothes after a day frolicking on the beach, or hiding under the blankets. Herein lies the beauty and charm of the work, a dual rhythm that invites deeper knowledge.

“Even though this tends to be an additive, building process, I am actively working with the notion of excavation as well. I imagine that by painting in this way, I am something of an archeologist toiling away to reveal hidden, long-forgotten information.”

There is something soothing in this process, and it brings us back to this position of floating. We might be looking down at a blanket of clouds or at the sky reflected in the water. Hays gives us her Miami dreaming with the works in Vacationland, and brings a fresh and vivid perspective on this magical city.