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27 SEPTEMBER 2023
Online

CURATED BY
TINA SAUERLAENDER

ORGANIZED BY
THE MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT
CAT BLUEMKE AND JONATHAN CARROLL

***ECHOES FROM THE FUTURE : SPECULATIVE CREATURES
AND POST-HUMAN BOTANICALS***

Artist Aviv Benn with curator Tina Sauerlaender

Tina Sauerlaender: Hello, Aviv.

Aviv Benn: Hi Tina. How are you?

Tina Sauerlaender: I'm fine and you?

Aviv Benn: I am great. I'm enjoying floating around with all my paintings around me.

Tina Sauerlaender: Aviv. In the exhibition we present your latest painting series in which we encounter speculative nature, inhabited by grotesque beings and creatures with big eyes who stare out of the image facing the viewer. What is the series about?

Aviv Benn: So the series is about the relationship between humankind and nature, but I took a more existential approach thinking about when we are in nature, there is this ideal of, this is where we were supposed to connect and find the true self, like we came from nature. So once we are back in nature, we're supposed to feel this elevated and spiritual moment. But I feel there's something about nature that's rejecting us and causing us conflict within ourselves as well and with nature. So this existential idea of going into nature to find ourselves, but do you really find yourself and what we do find isn't necessarily peaceful and harmonious.

There's some kind of rejection or feeling that is eerie, bizarre. That is why I use these like creatures that are human-like and we find this

connection with them, but there's something a little bit off-putting. Weird. Grotesque, like you said. And they're becoming one with nature. They're dissolved by nature, but it's something that's devouring them. It's not a harmonious united experience.

Tina Sauerlaender: I see. And that's why they all face us. Why they look at us.

Aviv Benn: Yeah, so exactly. So the imagery of the eyes that's repeating throughout the series, it's a sense of connection that you look at something and they look back at you, but once you remove the eyes from the image, it becomes abstract.

So thinking is this connection even there? If I remove one element and the whole picture just dissolves and changes, so is the connection even real? Is it really reassuring? That's why. Yeah. And for me, they're like vessels, these creatures. So I pour meaning into them with each changing series.

Because they've been introducing my work in the last several years. So for this body of work, it's nature.

Tina Sauerlaender: And why did nature become such an important topic for you or the relationship between human kind and nature?

Aviv Benn: It's kind of an intuitive search. It's not that I come up with a topic and then I think

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about how to illustrate it.

It's more just these images that come up to me and reappear, and then I mold it as the series progresses. So for this one, I was thinking about the history of art as well, just like the usage of flowers in memento mori kind of trajectory. And then I started thinking about looking for meaning, looking for ourselves and just like how we introduce nature into that.

And obviously, with climate change and everything that we're encountering constantly, it's kind of hard to escape that. But the search is always from the inside out and reflecting on thoughts and feelings, and then it's this in out motion, like in the work itself?

Tina Sauerlaender: Yeah, exactly. It feels like it speaks directly to my inner self, to like, on a meta level, it's intense being with your works, I have to say. And luckily it's not all like climate change based or negative, but your work is very poetic, very beautiful, very mystical.

And I particularly like the titles you give your paintings like for All The Fire That Blaze So Dark For Us, or, And Who Knows If The Flowers In My Mind. They are very poetic. They're also very cryptic. How do you find your titles?

Aviv Benn: For each body of work, I find the series of poems that reflects what I'm trying to talk about.

So for this one, I use Charles Boler, Flowers of Evil. So each painting is not an illustration of the poem, but I go through, so before I start, I start reading, and then when I title my work, I kind of comb through all the poems in the collection and things that stand out to me I write down in a notebook.

And then when I look through my work, I think what the emotion or the feeling the

kind of bubbles when you look at the painting and match the title to the painting, but they're opaque as well. Like you said, they're mysterious. They try to add meaning, but they don't necessarily really give you the key to understand the work. I like leaving a lot of space for the viewers to bring their own narratives. So the same as using repetitive imagery like the eyes or snakes or flowers with these specific series. It's the same with the titles. You feel it's something that will explain, like language give you key to understanding the work, but it also creates a sense of like something that like is opaque and again, giving you the sense of bringing you in, but pushing you away. So you can bring your own thing, but it's cryptic like you mentioned. So it's a big part of my process as well. It's important to me.

Tina Sauerlaender: Yeah. Maybe you can tell us more about your painting process, by describing one particular work of the series of the works we are exhibiting, how it came into to existence.

Aviv Benn: Of course. I start all my painting when in abstract ground, and then it's like a Rorschach ink block test.

I recognize shapes and I pull them out to the surface, and it's again, like finding meaning within shapes and injecting your own meaning into a shape. And then usually I work on a series as a whole, so it's not like all the paintings are around me, but I do try to create relationships between the paintings.

So for instance these two over here, they were created as a diptych because they're facing each other, but they're like kept at arms distance as well. And then I just shape out the painting and then it becomes more defined. And because I work on a series, I try to push each painting in a different direction.

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So I do try to keep them together in the space and see how they react to each other. Also, in terms of composition, color, they create the whole universe that's cohesive.

Tina Sauerlaender: With this approach you create a universe which is very immersive, and this is why I love that we could install it in the virtual space to also create also this kind of immersion in a graspable way the viewers of your work. You work as a painter, did you ever exhibit in a virtual show before?

Aviv Benn: I think I exhibited with a show you curated a while ago, but it was very initial in terms of what virtual exhibitions were like. Having this experience of an actual space that's interactive but also is an echo of what's in the artwork. So the figures in the paintings float and the painting themselves float.

Obviously it's impossible to do in physical space. So I really, really enjoy this experience of the paintings behave as the figures, it's something really unique and the fact they relate to one another in this spiritual space. And they are speaking about artificial nature, nature that couldn't exist and they're floating around.

It is immersive, fake nature landscape. And you can approach them up close and you can see how they relate to one another. Something really unique. It's really opens another way of thinking about my work as a painter, I never deal with any like VR or visual spaces.

So it's something really unique for me that I never had the experience of like doing before. It was really cool.

Tina Sauerlaender: Awesome. Yeah. I'm really happy that you say this because, well, you trusted me with the hanging I suggested something and I'm happy to hear that, that you,

you're happy with it, too.

Aviv Benn: Yeah. I really appreciate your approach as a curator, and I think you have such a unique vision and you really use artworks as your medium, I feel as a curator and you build this entire universe. So for me as an artist, I feel my work ends when I finish the work. But what the vision of the curator wants to bring or how you contextualize the work, I think it's really important and it's not my place to interject, like obviously I can give my input, but I really trust you. You curated my first solo show ever. Been working together for several years now, so obviously I give you like a free hand. Also, you have the vision of the entire show, which I do not have. So yesterday when we had at the opening event and I saw how all the work came together and all the different approaches and different artists you pick it looked amazing and it was really interesting to see my work being contextualized alongside these artists that are dealing with virtual reality and more post internet and thinking about the posthuman in a different way than I do. So it was really exciting.

Tina Sauerlaender: Thank you so much, Aviv. That is really great.

Yeah, one of my approaches in the different shows I do, is to discuss the conditions of the physical and virtual and to state that both realms have their own conditions and what we can use. Whatever realms we want to use for the conditions we want to evoke. Whatever is the goal, we can choose the space for it.

And both worlds have the advantages or also disadvantages, depending on what you want. Now that you have a little experience, with virtual exhibitions, maybe you can let us know your, your personal view on the advantages or disadvantages of exhibiting in the physical world and the virtual world.

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Aviv Benn: For me, someone that creates objects that are physical, I feel every painting is a body. when I stand in front of a painting in a museum, like I stand in front of the same painting that Philip Guston stood in front of when he created it. There's something really spiritual about that experience. But like I said earlier, we are working under the laws of physics. I can't make my paintings float around. [Virtual exhibitions] it opens a different way of thinking about work. That the work can not adhere to the laws of physics or you can enter physically into an artwork I think it's something really powerful and activates a different emotion and it's spiritual. Obviously anyone anywhere with a proper internet connection can visit the show and when it's a physical exhibition you need to go and experience it in person. So I think both are equally important. Being a painter, my instinct to say all work needs to be in person. But after experiencing this exhibition, it was something really unique and opened up a whole new world. Literally. So it was really, really cool.

Tina Sauerlaender: Thank you, Avi. That's really great. I'm happy to hear. Well. So what's what's next for you? Can you already talk about the upcoming shows or the next ideas for the next painting series?

Aviv Benn: I'm actually going to participate in residency in Portugal called Pada. So there I will create a new body of work. This body of work was like really intense to create, so I'm kind of excited to step out of the studio and creating a different context with alongside other artists.

I think it's really important to not only work in solitude, but to work with different people. Like in proximity as an artist, it's kind of rare because usually you're by yourself in the studio. I don't know what's next in terms of

bodies of work. I'm like excited to find out because it's I feel like said a lot with this body of work and I'm excited to move on to the next one.

Tina Sauerlaender: Sounds great. Thank you, Aviv. It was a pleasure having this conversation.

Aviv Benn: Thank you so much. It was great. Thank you. Bye

Tina Sauerlaender: Bye.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Aviv Benn's paintings are a visual universe starring symbolic archetypes that pop up and reappear time and again, and together formulate the dreamlike world they inhabit. These colorful figures take over the entire painterly space, encompassing their surroundings, dissolving and merging, floating in an unknown limbo. Benn views painting as an act of compulsion and a ritualistic repetition of images, motifs, and ornaments. Repeating the same imagery over numerous canvases, informs a narrative that stretches beyond the boundaries of a singular artwork; new relationships are woven together to build a vivid myth throughout her work.

avivbenn.com

ABOUT THE CURATOR

Tina Sauerlaender (she/her) is the co-founder and co-director of the exhibition platform and international [collective](#) of independent curators, [peer to space](#) (since 2010). She has been curating and organizing large-scale group exhibitions like [Resonant Realities](#) (Exhibition of the VR ART PRIZE by DKB in Cooperation with CAA Berlin, Haus am Lützowplatz, Berlin, 2021), [The Unframed World. Virtual Reality as Artistic Medium for the 21st Century](#) (HEK Basel, 2017), or initiated and co-curated [SPECULATIVE CULTURES. A Virtual Reality Art Exhibition](#) (Kellen Gallery, Parsons/The New School, New York, 2019). She focuses on the impact of the digital and the internet on individual environments and society, on virtual reality in visual arts, and on exhibition making in [virtual realms](#). She is also the artistic director of the [VR ART PRIZE by DKB in Cooperation with CAA Berlin](#). She is co-founder & CEO of [Radiance VR](#) (since 2017), an international online platform and research database for virtual reality experiences in visual arts that includes the [Radiance VR App](#) for VR Art for Meta Quest headsets.

She holds a PhD from The University of Arts, Linz, Austria. The title of her dissertation is *PERFORMING IDENTITIES. Self-Representation in Art from the Renaissance to Virtual Worlds*. In conjunction with her PhD she curated the online exhibition [performingidentities.net](#). She is a lecturer for Digital Art History at the University of Applied Sciences in Bielefeld, Germany. She gave talks on Virtual Reality & Art at re:publica (Berlin), ZKM (Karlsruhe), New Inc (New York), Kunsthalle (Munich), University of Applied Arts (Vienna), Digifest (Toronto), Technical University (Prague) or Roehrs & Boetsch (Zurich).

She is the founder of the [SALOON Berlin](#), the initial branch of the [SALOON Network](#), an international network for women working in art.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Echoes from the Future: Speculative Creatures & Post-Human Botanicals

Disruptive human activity threatens the Earth's ecological balance, eradicating biodiversity and shared resources. *Echoes from the Future*, curated by Tina Sauerlaender (peer to space), highlights artists working across diverse media to preserve nature, reveal environmental devastation, and speculate on future life forms. The virtual exhibition features work by artists Aviv Benn (ISR/UK), Laura Colmenares Guerra (COL/BE), Reiner Maria Matysik (DE), Sarah Oh-Mock (DE), Bianca Shonee Arroyo-Kreimes (CAN), Sabrina Ratté (CAN), and Tamiko Thiel (US/DE). In rendering current environmental issues visible within a virtual reality landscape, *Echoes from the Future* immerses audiences in alternative post-anthropocentric futures and speculative ecologies.

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Aviv Benn
Laura Colmenares Guerra
Reiner Maria Matysik
Sarah Oh-Mock
Sabrina Ratté
Tamiko Thiel and /p

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