

Molly Maine & Michael Salk

Ghosts as Cocoons

Molly

These paintings came from the desire to move my previous series, *The Stare's Nest*, in a more minimal direction. As I began drawing compositions, I was haunted by the ghosts of figures that I erased and moved to new locations on the canvas. These ghosts became essential both to the composition and to the way I began to think about the series. I wanted to paint the transformation of one living thing becoming another: a natural alchemy.

Aesthetically and technically, my paintings have been influenced by 17th century Dutch painting. The canvases take substantial priming and preparation, followed by a period of drawing and revision before any painting occurs. I use glazing to create more atmospheric darks and luminous lights. Aesthetically, I am fascinated by the way Dutch still life painters depict decay. Jan Davidsz de Heem's *Vase with flowers*, c.1670 (Mauritshuis collection, Den Haag) was a primary inspiration. It beautifully represents a pantheon of imperfections, rot, insects and blemishes that the viewer perceives after the first impression of one of the most vividly and skillfully painted still lifes extant. The flowers are captured across all moments in their lifespan—bud, bloom and decay—

and the arrangement contains flowers from incompatible seasons, extracted from time in a way that is both splendid and impossible. The imperfections and blemishes on the fruit are embraced. They expand the scope of time and reality in the painting—the preciousness of the moment of fully ripe fruit and blooming flowers.

In *Ghosts as Cocoons*, many of the birds are dead and some are doubled, captured in two possible moments. I am not certain whether there are many moths surrounding the birds, or whether I have painted one moth and found a pattern in its constant movement. In my previous work I used moths only as a compositional element whereas in this series they have become structurally and conceptually integral to the paintings. The patterns of moths that surround the birds are modeled after the stamped golden nimbuses that encircle the heads of saints in medieval art, and they are transferred onto the canvas in a manner that resembles stamping. I envision them as a natural counterpart to a nimbus, made not of gold but of living, moving insects.

I rely heavily on literature and poetry for inspiration, and for the last several years my imagery has been influenced by Yeats, Stevens, and Keats, all of whom make extensive use of birds. The poems from which I drew my titles, *My Descendants*, *Ghosts as Cocoons*, and *To Autumn*, all deal with the same issues of fruitfulness and decay that I have been exploring. I also think of these painting as seasonal, *Ghosts as Cocoons* being a spring painting, *Flourish and Decline* summer, *The Half-Reaped Furrow* fall, and *Fearful Symmetry* a winter painting.

VI. Is there no change of death in paradise?
Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
Hang always heavy in that perfect sky
Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
With rivers like our own that seek for seas
They never find, the same receding shores
That never touch with inarticulate pang?
Why set the pear upon those river-banks
Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?
Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
The silken weavings of our afternoons,
And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,
Within whose burning bosom we devise
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.
-From *Sunday Afternoon*, Wallace Stevens

Michael

Although initially we believed the horrible noise in the middle of the night was two owls fighting, it was in fact the sound of forest animals devouring a carcass. For two nights running uncanny screams and cries emitted from the woods. Later that month, walking with a camera after a heavy rainstorm, I stumbled on a femur. I discovered thin bones, shards of jaw, vertebrae and finally a complete skull, as well as a ribcage that had nearly melted into leaves on the forest floor. The bones were picked clean, except for one chunk of pale fat between two vertebrae.

Over a period of five days I documented these bones with a modest digital camera, a tripod, and a lot of patience. For this show, we chose photos that felt like counterparts to the series' paintings, which explore the play of light in the forest and in which bones are partially revealed or obscured by shadow.

After nearly a week living with these bones, I became very familiar with them, and in my mind they demarcated a map of the forest. Pass the brilliantly white flute-like bone and the darker femur, cross the creek, turn left at the square set of broken bones and the joint capsule, pass two halves of the lower jaw, and then, behind a log, the rest of the skull. Until I was placing them in plastic bags, I was not even aware that I had never touched them. On the last day of my trip, I collected the bones to use for still lifes and to photograph in the winter. The temptation to leave them in place was strong but I felt sure that some animal would want to chew them and every trace of them would have disappeared. The feel of them was a shock and a revelation: smooth, delicate, cool, substantial. Nor was I able to walk through the forest afterward without reliving the impression they left on my memory of each location.

My most immediate photographic influences for this series are Brian Forrest's stunningly dark photos of forests and Lee Friedlander's late photos of floral stems and branches. I have spent time looking at Dutch painting over the last several years, and this work provided a mental context for me as I was shooting. Thanks to Joseph Webb for ensuring that digital work printed as I envisioned it.

Ghosts as Cocoons

The Grass is in seed. The young birds are flying.
Yet the house is not built, not even begun.

The vetch has turned purple. But where is the bride?
It is easy to say to those bidden—But where,

Where, butcher, seducer, bloodman, reveler,
Where is sun and music and highest heaven's lust,

For which more than any words cries deeper?
This mangled, smutted semi-world hacked out

Of dirt... It is not possible for the moon
To blot this with its dove-winged blendings.

She must come now. The grass is in seed and high.
Come now. Those to be born have need

Of the bride, love being a birth, have need to see and to
touch her, have need to say to her,

"The fly on the rose prevents us, O season
Excelling summer, ghost of fragrance falling

On dung." Come now, pearled and pasted, bloomy-leafed,
While the domes resound with chant involving chant.
-Wallace Stevens