

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Reverdie

A reverdie is a type of medieval French poem that celebrates the ‘re-greening’ of the earth. The buds and shoots that spell the end of winter appear each year like they’ve been conjured, nosing up through the soil and bursting from the branches. Their colour is as soothing as it is startling, symbolising an abundance still building momentum. Sometimes a reverdie might feature the symbolic figure of a beautiful woman, or a tale of romance. Elsewhere, it straightforwardly describes a mode of reflection on the changing of the seasons.

If spring can be read as a hinge – the moment where one moment folds into the next – it is also a state of becoming. It is a promise of something in progress, a passageway to bounteous months of growth and warmth. It paves the way for these long, high months of summer, where winter recedes into the distance and everything is overwhelmingly alive. A reverdie is not just an acknowledgement of the fertile pleasures of sunshine and leaves and flowers, nor even the surround-sound chatter of birds and insects, but an acknowledgment of immersive renewal. That which lay dormant is now stirring. The earth is turning on its axis once more, yielding a change that is as new as it is inevitable.

Reverdie gathers together a group of artists whose work, although varied, shows some affinity with the natural world – or at the very least demonstrates a strong sense of place. It features landscapes both real and imagined, scenes both calming and unsettling, feelings of both serenity and abandon. These paintings by Jen Wink Hays, Danny Leyland, Connie Harrison, Ed Burkes, Rhiannon Salisbury, John Abell and Margaret R Thompson were created across different continents and under different circumstances, but together they beckon the viewer into a set of vividly realised terrains that burst with life.

Each artist goes through separate experiential and material processes to reach this terrain. Jen Wink Hays likes to build fields of colour. Often, she starts with the familiar: recognisable landscape shapes, lines that hint at mountains or open plains. But these quickly leap off into abstraction, a delicate balance between chaos and control found in the shapes that float through empty space. John Abell’s oil paintings draw on historic imagery – his burning ships reminiscent of a Viking funeral or the Spanish Armada – to create scenes unbounded by time. These compositions are dominated by fire. It creeps up from the boats and down across the water in lurid reflections, voracious and cleansing. Margaret R Thompson’s work is rooted in the New Mexico landscape where she lives – and the landscape itself is embedded in the work. Using materials including oil, wax, raw pigment, and earth, her absorbing narrative paintings investigate the idea of the sacred. They probe at the line that wavers between the known physical realm and the mysteries – psychological, spiritual, mythical – that linger just beyond the horizon.

Connie Harrison’s works begin with the taking of photos. She edits what she has seen in photoshop: manipulating the scales and adding jarring elements. The known world is rendered odd, this composition then recreated layer by layer using oil paints and wax

paste. The paste makes the boards thick. Like an archaeologist, Harrison's work is largely about what she scrapes away to reveal. A work is built over time, her tactile landscapes constructed through a constant process of addition and subtraction. Danny Leyland's paintings also have a sedimentary feel, disparate moments and timelines compacted like layers of rock and soil. Cars roll over prehistoric bones. Canoeists float above living rooms, serenely paddling past the picture frames and fireplaces. There is a shimmering quality to these works, a porousness that captures not only the slippages and elastic boundaries of dreams but the way in which we can exist in two places at once. The body is only ever physically in one location, but the mind can roam as far as it pleases.

Though not consciously explored by many of these artists, this also shows that holds a trace of recent history. The pandemic was a time of closure and closeness, where those freedoms of the mind often had to substitute for movement of the body. This past year has been a time of heightened renewal, the outdoor world extra-heady and ultra-expansive in its embrace of those who go seeking it. One can't help but feel the uninhibitedness in Ed Burkes' paintings a little more intensely right now, with its implied freedoms, its collective rhythms that move beyond words. In his euphoric works, limbs become kaleidoscopic: segmented in movement, just another pattern alongside the flux of grass, water, and sky. In another painting by John Abell, titled *Midsummer*, a sea of pink bodies sway around a maypole – that towering symbol of rebirth.

For an artist working in a studio though, there is always a necessary separation between location and imagination. In constructing or even reconstructing a landscape that one is not in front of, a form of temporary transportation must occur – the holding of two places at once. An imaginative flight is sometimes known as a reverie. Does a reverie always hold an echo of reverie? Rhiannon Salisbury's paintings are largely taken from a wider body of work titled *Chthonia*: dwelling on the shadowy underworld of Greek myth, and the watery demise of Shakespeare's Ophelia. Poisonous and hallucinogenic plants feature throughout. These plants can kill and cure. They can transport the one who ingests them into a trance-state. In her paintings they blur and melt, foreground and background fusing. As the viewer we are also tilted into an unstable state, absorbed by the bloody colours and woozy lines. Salisbury describes painting itself as a sort of trance-state. You can begin with a photo or reference, but eventually intuition takes over. Everything around the canvas falls away, replaced by a world in a state of becoming. That canvas is a window. Peer through it and shapes start to stir. Dormant ideas erupt, memories rush to the surface, senses heighten. Something new is arriving. Something is unfurling in the dark.

- Rosalind Jana, 2023