

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Hot Mess

“No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied.”

Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*

Paige Perkins evokes the parallel power and vulnerability of the natural world in her vivid paintings. Throughout *Hot Mess*, nature gods and spirits are depicted in states of fury, despair, and play. Inspired by her move from London to the British countryside, working in a studio surrounded by wildlife and plants, Perkins reflects her own inner rage and anguish at humans’ destruction of the Earth. Taking an animistic world view, the artist channels her feelings into the creatures that fill her work, with many taking hybrid forms between person, plant, and beast.

These figures are energetically painted, as though viewers are capturing them in a moment of frenzied movement. Sometimes they lock eyes with the viewer, as in *Transistor*, in which a horned creature stares out from the canvas with a look that could just as easily be read as fear or hatred. In *Gathering*, multiple faces jostle for space on the canvas, a clamorous crowd all seeming to vie for attention. *Delusions of the Fury* pulses with neon pink light, with a vibrant face appearing in flamelike form alongside a leaping horned mammal and nebulous jellyfish – all inhabit the same space, as though the usual divisions of land, sea and air have broken down. Perkins’ compositions are rich and bustling, whether loaded with characters who appear difficult to contain within the four edges of each work or emitting auras into their surrounding space.

Hot Mess is not simply a warning for the damage we are currently doing to the planet, it is also an invitation to embrace a more connected relationship with the natural world. In her new location, the artist has a greater awareness of the human impact on the landscape, seeing plants wilting during dry spells, swathes of greenery turning brown, and a notably declining number of insects throughout the studio and its surrounding land. This has led her to explore ancient rituals that petitioned the gods for rain, and through her work she invites a renewed conversation with the life forms that inhabit and protect the natural world, both literal and mythological.

The paintings in *Hot Mess* are the result of an intuitive and tumultuous process. Perkins works to music, attempting to connect with her own subconscious and allowing forms and figures to emerge without pre-planning. The resulting, densely layered works of art often appear to radiate heat from their background layers. *Abyss* hums with electric energy, full of hot orange and yellow creatures that burst forth from a fiery landscape. The black outline of facial features can be made out in the moody red void, creatures either emerging from or being sucked into the depths.

Perkins’ interest in reforging a connection with the natural world mirrors a broader commitment to the subject in recent years as many artists and writers have found new ways of conveying humans’ role on the

planet. For writers such as Sharon Blackie and Merlin Sheldrake, this has involved looking at both the lost Pagan mythology of Britain's past – seeing the human body as inherently connected, even hybridised with the creatures and plants around it – and highlighting the inherently intertwined nature of everything in our world on a scientific level. Perkins embraces the enchantment that is present in so many historical mythologies, highlighting the magic of the natural world and our role as guardians of it.

The artist has also been inspired by the theories of Carl Jung and her own work with a Jungian analyst. The Swiss founder of psychoanalytic psychology famously drew inspiration from fairytales and myths in understanding the subconscious on both an individual and collective level. Perkins' exploration of her own subconscious in analysis is often reflected in her work and simultaneously, the paintings help her to understand her mind. The works in *Hot Mess* are flooded with masculine energy, with many brawny characters taking the form of men hybridised with animals. Perkins sees these as representing her animus: within Jung's framework, the masculine element of the female subconscious. The animus is also thought to convey deeply repressed emotions and feelings that may seem opposed to the individual's external expression of self.

The characters exuding a traditionally masculine physicality in *Hot Mess* often appear to be in a state of chaos: *Self-Portrait* depicts a furry horned creature with wide haunted eyes waving tentatively at the viewer; the determined, angular face that looms over *Blood Oath* appears to have his nose and cheeks streaked with gore, as though ready for battle; a twiggy, Ent-like creature with flailing limb branches in *Ooof!* looms over another figure cowering at its base. These characters are both protective and aggressive, turning their fury upon the human world. Conversely, the few characters exuding feminine energy bring a sense of serenity to their works. *Daughters of the Moon* shows a row of faces in cool purples watching calmly from a twinkling sky; *Incantations* depicts a similarly icy green figure with glowing blue eyes. She is perhaps the most akin to the crone archetype, the wise, mystical older women whose power has been diminished by the contemporary world.

While the works are deeply personal, they speak to the collective need for reconnection with and rediscovery of the world around us. The paintings show us what is missing: a masculine energy that is directed towards care for the natural world and a newfound respect for experienced feminine energy. *Hot Mess* ultimately communicates the complexity of the natural world, which holds extreme power but is also vulnerable to human interference and industry. Perkins' work is a call to forge a more symbiotic and caring relationship with the world around us, in which we see ourselves as part of nature rather than separate from it, and become a powerful advocate for its troubles, not a helping hand in its demise.

- Emily Steer, 2023