

ARTFORUM

McFadden Jane. "Laurie Nye," *Artforum*, December Best of the Year, Nov. 12 2021.



Laurie Nye
"Aureolin Dream," 2021
Oil on linen
44 x 34 inches

"Landscapes are culture before they are nature," art historian Simon Schama reminds us, but the relationship can be tangled, blending sign and referent, making both new meanings and new worlds. Laurie Nye's oil-on-linen landscapes reside here, between the quotidian and the fantastical, creating a lush commentary on the ways in which we see, imagine, and experience an idea of nature. Her visual references are wide ranging: Echoes of Art Nouveau permeated the show, and we were reminded of the long-lost dreams of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where pattern and form were meant to build a better future. Nye's brilliant palette refuses any adherence to reality and brings to mind Fauvism's reconfiguration of painting's relationship to color. Birds emerge from and morph into their environments as if they were hallucinations from Surrealism's back halls. Across the exhibition, Nye foregrounded the material play of medium with surface, as in *Aureolin Dream* (all works 2021), in which a central vivid tree rendered in the titular hue seems to pour down the left side of the canvas. By contrast, the pinks, golds, greens, and blues of *Horus Forest* are more contained, alluding to ancient Egyptian symbology and form. Nye treats history as a toolbox, making the genre of landscape her own.

It Wasn't a Dream, It Was a Flood, the title of both a single painting and the exhibition as a whole, pushed us further into Nye's swampy psychedelic scenes. In this particular canvas, we are mirrored by two figures in the background, who simultaneously observe and melt into the flow of terrain surrounding them. Water here, as elsewhere in the show, is image and reflection, the doubling resonating out to the viewer. *Floating Opera*, a picture bathed in expressionistic color, features a fisherman far afield—a figure who might echo Nye's childhood experiences on the rivers of the American South. In *The Fountain*, water becomes both curvaceous figure and orifice, reminding us of the world's mythological origins.

Throughout the exhibition, we floated but also drowned: Lemuria, a fabled continent lost under the sea, is the reference for *Lemuria Tree*, a work dominated by its massive subject, rendered in acid pink. The radiant tableau is filled with flowers, which glow beneath a pale moon. Trees figure prominently in this presentation, as they did in the artist's last show at the gallery. Interest in this life-form's existence has exploded in the culture as it steadily disappears from the face of the Earth—think, for instance, of Richard Powers's 2018 novel *The Overstory* and Annie Proulx's 2016 epic *Barkskins*. Nye has mentioned her affinity for Ursula K. Le Guin's tale *The Word for World Is Forest* (1972), in which the consciousness of nature itself is pitted against extractive colonial forces. We also began to sense this conflict while taking in the show—it unfolded between the realm outside and the one within.

Nye borrowed her exhibition title from a 1974 autobiographical film by poet Frank Stanford. A fellow Southerner, he was deeply attuned to death and had a fondness for liquid metaphors. (Take "The coffin was like a boat in the pocket of the watery harbor of sleep," a line out of Stanford's epic poem from 1977, *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You*.) And even in a particularly parched Los Angeles landscape, we know a flood of some sort is coming. *Sunflower with Sturm and Drang*, containing more geometric forms and a darkened backdrop, hearkens back to Emil Nolde's haunting use of the same flower in works made under the shadows of two World Wars. The singular bloom of *Iris at Huntington Gardens* grounds us differently, as it promises no longer the world, but rather a small moment. Perhaps in the end, after the deluge, we will be left only with such snippets, interspersed with the vistas of our memories—no more real than Nye's own sherbet-like clouds.

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