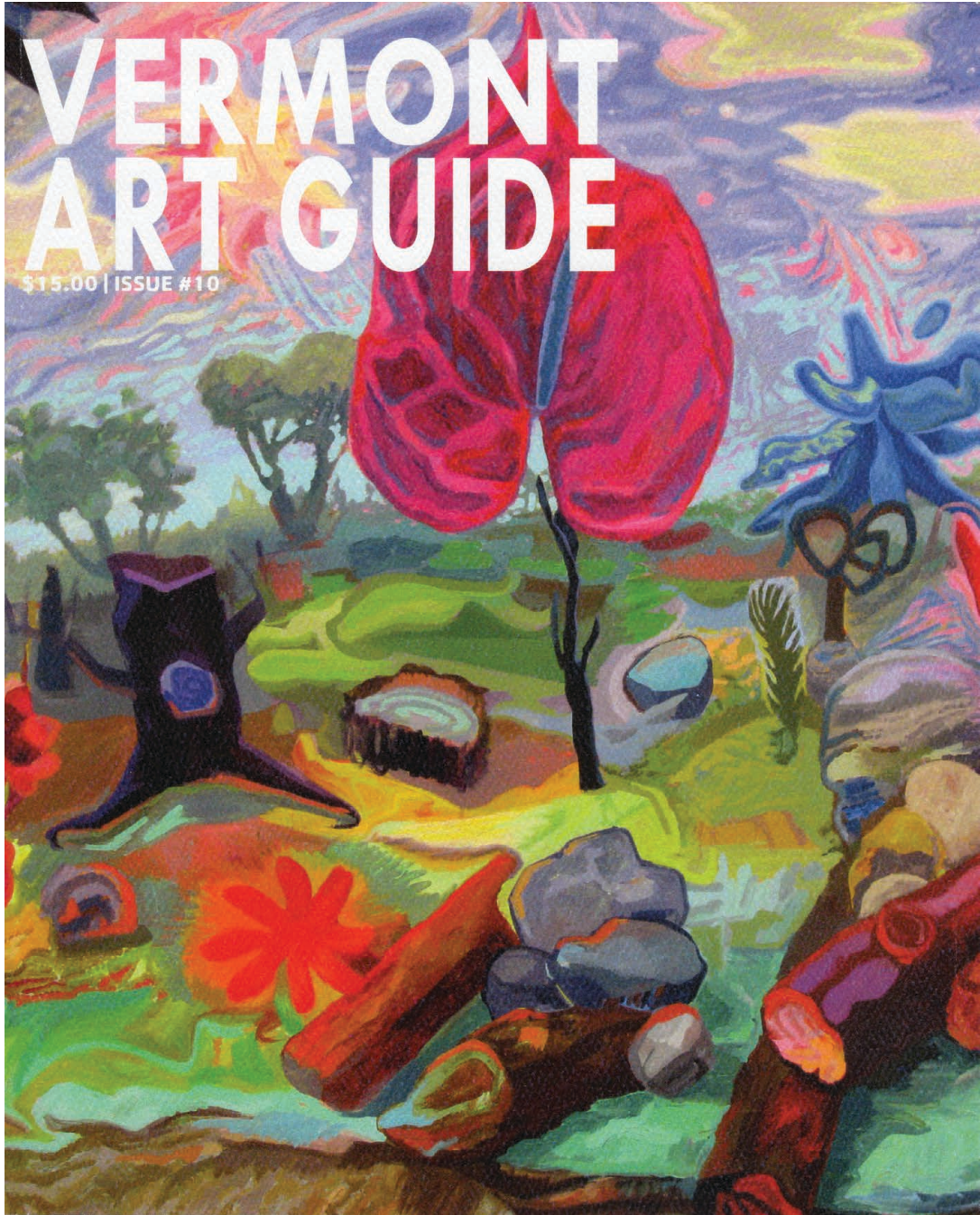


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Hyperflora

The Synthetic Landscapes of JoAnne Carson

By Ric Kasini Kadour

*With consideration for
humankind's desire
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artistic fetish for nature.*

JoAnne Carson was born in New York City and currently splits her time between Brooklyn, New York and Shoreham, Vermont. Carson holds an MFA from the University of Chicago and received her undergraduate degree from the University of Illinois. Her work is in the collections of several major institutions, including the Brooklyn Museum of Art, The Fort Worth Art Museum, Joslyn Art Museum, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, and the Frederick Weisman Art Foundation in Los Angeles. Carson is a recipient of several prestigious awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Louise Bourgeois Residency from Yaddo, among others. "Hyper Flora" was at BigTown Gallery in Rochester, July 4-August 28, 2018. Learn more about the artist and her work at www.joannecarson.com and www.bigtowngallery.com.

If Dr. Seuss planted a garden, it might look like Joanne Carson's place in Shoreham. Low lying purple flowers line a path of slate stones. Topiaries shaped as tapering spirals pose like living sculptures. A hydrangea bush is trimmed to form a puffy cloud. Dense purple gayfeather blooms in a pond of juniper as the landscape climbs behind it with a purposely rough-hewn manicure. Carson's gardens are not unlike her paintings: Seriocomic purple trees stand on a drippy snow-covered landscape under a hot sky of burning oranges and reds.

With consideration for humankind's desire for sublimity, Carson takes direct aim at a centuries old artistic fetish for nature that dates back to John Constable and the Hudson River School Painters, who saw nature as the ineffable manifestation of God and the source of authentic truth. She observes, "the tradition of spiritual wonder as seen through the lens of nature appears to be an exhausted model. The shift from 'organic' to 'synthetic' nature is a defining factor of our age...The work is meant to express and reflect on our culture's seemingly paradoxical wish to believe simultaneously in alchemy and science."

Carson came of age in New York City. Her early work involved making large-scale assemblages that used everyday objects as if things were flying out of a painting. These constructions got her noticed. A Prix de Rome and two solo museum shows later and she found herself in the 1985 Whitney Biennial. She moved to pure sculpture in 2000s and recently moved back to painting. In 2016, she was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in Visual Art.

Carson's observations about the natural world are particularly relevant to Vermont. Vermonters relish nature. In 1970, the Vermont legislature passed Act 250, Vermont's Land Use and Development Act, in an attempt to prevent development from having "an undue adverse effect on aesthetics, scenic beauty, historic sites or natural areas." When one looks out at the Vermont landscape, it is easy to forget that what one sees is humankind's third manifestation of the land. The state was largely clear-cut and treeless by the end of the 19th century. Sheep grazing land was turned into corn fields and cow pastures in the first part of the 20th century. As the dairy industry wanes, the land is slowly being reclaimed by a mix of native





and invasive plants. Two hundred years of aggressive land use and management makes Vermont's natural wonder one of the most human expressions of nature. Rather than shy away from this reality, Carson's paintings ask the viewer to consider the implications of this fact on how we think about the land. She works with a deep appreciation for "the 21st Century's anxiety of nature's fragility and an uncertainty of what is 'natural' in an age of cloning and genetic engineering."

KADOUR: Is there a difference for you between "synthetic" and "artificial"?

CARSON: Until fairly recently, "natural" and "artificial" were thought of as two opposite and immutable categories. It was binary: there were two sides to things and that was that. But at a time when it is possible to make plastic from maize and

human proteins have been produced in genetically modified rubber plants, there appears to be a sort of hybrid or synthetic nature that is neither artificial nor natural. The way that I think about the difference between artificial and synthetic is: the synthetic impersonates the real, while the artificial embodies that which is not real or authentic.

KADOUR: Your work embodies a theme in modern thinking where humanity realizes the world is theirs to make of it what they may. Often, that is expressed as dismay over mankind's treatment of the planet or as the struggle (through assertion or resistance) to relocate the divine from nature to humanity. You seem to be taking a different tactic. You write, "the lens of nature appears to be an exhausted model", and suggest the divine can be found in the synthetic. Is that accurate? And if so, what informs this thinking for you?



CARSON: How nature is viewed by humanity is constantly evolving and changing. So when I say “the lens of nature appears to be an exhausted model”, I am referring to the 19th century view that nature was a solace to humans and had very definable attributes such as the Sublime, the Beautiful or the Picturesque. We still look to nature for solace, but with the understanding that the world is both imperiled and not “pure” as we once thought nature to be.

I am not sure if one can find something divine in this new concept of nature. However, we are in a period where human activity has been the dominant influence of this era—some call it the Anthropocene Era—and there are many different movements and philosophies that redefine both our sense of wonder in and stewardship of the natural world. There is a new ecological movement known as Rewilding that asserts that wildness that is lost cannot be reclaimed, only new nature can be created. This environmental theory, part ecological movement, part Jurassic Park, is a plan to restore animals and megafauna that disappeared 13,000 years ago from Pleistocene North America.

I am fascinated by what this concept of new nature suggests and how it ignites my imagination in considering new artistic creatures to conjure.

My own creative work has been deeply influenced by the science of climate change and developments in environmental conservation. The invented creatures that inhabit my paintings and sculptures are intermingled hybrids of plants and animals, imbued with a sense of human agency. Like horticulture that has run amok or grafting on steroids, plants are outsized or malformed, with sprays of recognizable cultivars infested with completely fictitious species. These works are meant to express our culture’s paradoxical wish to believe in science as the new alchemy.

KADOUR: In light of this, Vermont is a funny place for you to end up. For all its natural beauty, very little of the state has gone untouched by humans. By the 1870s, seventy percent of the state’s forests were cleared. Vermont actively, aggressively manages its natural environment. How did you end up in Shoreham?

CARSON: In 2011, my husband, Jim Butler who teaches art at Middlebury College, and I bought a house in a rural area of Shoreham. I became transfixed by the landscape in Vermont and living a country life. As you say, much of Vermont landscape is of managed land and that is the view from our house: farmland with the Green Mountains behind. But Ver-

mont is not alone in this respect, since the entire natural world has been impacted by human life, with the possible exception of the Bialowieza Forest in Poland, that last remaining primeval forest on the globe.

Fortunately for me, I am not seeking a pure, undisturbed, or wild sort of nature. I am more of the mindset: How do you get an English lawn? You get a piece of land and you mow it for 300 years. I love artifice in nature: gardens, farmlands and golf courses each have a kind of beauty that is completely manicured for different purposes. All appeal to me.

KADOUR: Your gardens are an interesting hybrid of the domesticated and wild. Grasses and flowers sprawl and bloom freely next to formally shaped topiaries. They are reminiscent of the seriocomic style of your more recent paintings. Which came first and how has building and maintaining the gardens informed your art making?

CARSON: The most dramatic development in my recent creative practice has been the creation of a large, terraced, sculptural garden in rural Vermont. Since purchasing the property seven years ago, my summers have been largely spent cultivating a steep slope with stone terraces, fruit trees, evergreen topiaries, and an extensive variety of perennials. I have done all this work myself and so the experience has been very hands on and quite similar to my experience making sculpture. My goal is to have the site function as a living, dimensional, landscape painting and now that the plants are coming into maturity, this vision is being realized.

My garden has definitely influenced my paintings and vice versa. When I first saw the Shoreham property, I looked through the kitchen window at the weedy slope and saw it was a perfect, hay-colored rectangle; a perfect blank canvas. My early garden efforts were to make a dimensional painting in that space and, for the first two years, the view from that window was the only view I cared about. Now the gardens are more extensive and park-like and I frequently draw and photograph the gardens for ideas for paintings. As you aptly noted, in my hands both media have a seriocomic style. My paintings mix the high and low (cartoon language and Cubism) and the gardens mix the highly stylized topiaries with wild grasses.

KADOUR: Your earlier work used oil. Since that time, you did a deep dive into sculpture and have since returned to painting. While some artists embrace synthetic paints as a way of lessening the visible presence of the artist’s hand, you’re new paintings increasingly remind the viewer of the



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artist. (I'm thinking of how you rendered the sky in *Big Snow* compared to the polished quality of *Cabin Fever*.) What informed your decision to use acrylics when you returned to painting?

CARSON: I believe there are two camps of artists: those who plan and those who improvise. I am in the latter camp and always have been. Acrylic paint has qualities that suit my approach: fast drying for quick changes, and a brilliant color palette that has a snappiness that oil paint doesn't have. Oil paint is beautiful, but too serious for what I am after. I want an excited world that appears to have just emerged out of a lava lamp: hot, malleable color and form.

KADOUR: Compared to your older work, your newer paintings have an electric palette. Has your relationship to color changed over the years or is it another way of conveying synthetic-ness?

CARSON: My paintings in this series image a world of animated and abstracted flower forms, equal parts Cubism and Looney Tunes, that suggest narrative dramas in which plants take on the role of a human manqué. The paintings offer the viewer a portal into a universe of alternative biology and psychological spectacle. They serve as a testament to the belief that, in spite of the fearsome decline of our environment, life continues on and often with exuberance—albeit in new forms.

The electric color palette underscores a love of the seriocomic, an exuberant, over-the-top form sensibility, and a surrealist hybridity that happily mixes sources and categories. I've increasingly aspired to make work that conveys and celebrates the wild spirit of a burgeoning life force, and heightened color is an amped up way to do this.

KADOUR: What art do you like these days?

CARSON: I am interested in art that takes time to digest. In the Instagram era, so much contemporary work is slick, fast and glamorous. What holds me these days is art that has complexity and reminds me that we live in a physical world. My favorite exhibition recently was "Marsden Hartley's Maine" at the Metropolitan Breuer. The paintings have a kind of ham-handed beauty, and a completely original, physical way of being painted that is gorgeous without being flashy.

KADOUR: What are you working on next?

CARSON: That's always the exciting question that keeps an artist up at night. I am considering making my paintings in ways that will be more physical and variably constructed. To do this, I'll combine elements of sculpture into the two-dimensional works, trying for an even more heightened viewing presence. Also, I've long wanted to make public sculpture or mosaics and intend to pursue some opportunities in that arena.



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