In Visible Grounds

Jennifer Simms

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Jenni Simms Artist Statement

In my studio I make art that is closely inspired by natural forms though it does not rest entirely on appearing representational. The organic forms I am drawn to relate to me a vulnerability and an innocence, but also a hugeness, mystery, reverence and desire. These traits then speak to me ambiguously of humankind and indeed all of creation. Alongside this, I have begun to incorporate nonorganic, entirely manmade items into my subject matter, as well as the question of time. With these additions I search for a certain kind of opaque tension. I mostly make paintings and I often highlight the inherent or perceived nonspecific in the forms I choose, in the light I cast them in, and in my choice of color or application. A mysterious quality arises with these decisions that I find best expresses my attention to these infatuations. I have recently become interested in creating a slightly higher sense of tangible materiality which has begun to allow for even more of this cryptic feeling, perhaps by simply helping to create a larger seat for the eyes to sit down and yet continue to wander. I am drawn to luscious subject matter which has the potential for multiple interpretations. For instance, it is an interesting thing when one person will see birth or life while another will see disease or death in the same exact piece.

I use oil paint and refined linseed oil for the most part. A blender at heart, I am experimenting with multiple styles to add to this method. I aim to become looser in many respects while still holding true to some of the representationalism I find important in conveying my ideas. New approaches I have been working with recently are the use of cold wax medium, oil pastels, spray paint, working with the palette knife, painting on panel as my substrate in addition
to canvas, and carving away at the edges of the panels. I am not shy with my use of color. I make use of the entire color wheel—tints, shades, tones, and sometimes neons or metallics. I regularly take liberty in amping up the saturation of color or dulling it down, and sometimes use a filter or five on a reference photo to help keep it real, if just a little strange. Earth tones and sometimes large amounts of black consistently appear. There must be light woven into the piece as well, as I find it necessary to impart a sense of believability, or, accordingly, unbelievability. Photography is an important process in my work, as often it is a photograph that I have taken that will inspire a work. My process also sometimes begins with sketches of an idea that are either all very similar with a few slight changes from one to the next, or they may make the original idea disappear and inspire something completely different altogether. In these sketches I work out the size, shape, composition, colors, mediums, and processes I may need to experiment with before attempting the final piece. The meaning behind the work can also change during this phase as new interpretations of my original concept are drawn out, although this can happen at any stage of the artwork. The repeating themes in my work are the landscape, organic material under close scrutiny or how it interacts with the nonorganic, the role that light plays in each of these and the final presentation of the work.

Painting from photos that I take is itself a complicated process. First, there is the incessant pull to capture subject matter all around me. I never look for just one type of environment or object to excite me but have multiple potential series occurring in my mind at any given moment. While I am always on the lookout to snap up this inspiration around me, I also sometimes set up small scale lighting studios to hone in on one idea. Once my photos are gathered, the process of choosing and sorting is a whole different task. I prefer to have many options to choose from and
would describe my selection as intuitive yet methodical. I closely monitor how I feel when I look at the photo, but am also thinking about contrast, subtlety of color, composition and an overall harmony. I have found that I can trust in the photograph. In the practice of doing so I believe that I have learned a lot about color, light and shadow. I can draw from that when I am not using a photograph as a reference for a piece of art. I enjoy using filters too; they help me impart more mystery in the final outcome, and I need that more for some pieces than others. However, I do not always use photographs. I also truly enjoy the feeling of just seeing where the marks themselves lead me.

Sometimes my painted landscapes are inspired by an actual place, sometimes they are “discovered” in a flower or a slab of concrete, and other times they are purely imaginary. I enjoy the sense of space that the landscape provides. Where this space exists is usually up to the viewer to decide. Landscapes provide so much to work with: the atmosphere can be up high in the sky or underwater (or both), distance is often intrinsic, there is so much opportunity for ground, I can play with scale, and it can work either as the entire story or a setting in which a story can take place. The landscape speaks not only of plain reverence for nature, but can also be symbolic of larger environmental concepts.

As I consider organic material to inspire my art, I indulge in its inherent beauty. I find myself in a constant state of awe (sometimes shock) of its evolution, its effortless sustenance, its hugeness. All this I can hold in the palm of my hand, or just between my fingertips to ponder. I therefore find it not an effort on my part to investigate these legions of gems; I do it quite involuntarily. Time itself is of great interest to me and it naturally finds its place in my art most especially when I am working with organic materials. I have been studying the various effects of time
and outside factors on flowers and the leaves and fruits of plants. I have frozen, thawed, refrozen. I have covered in concrete, and dehydrated in the oven. I have made time-based flower sculptures for extended periods of time that I have watched die and have wondered at the allure that persists even in life long past. I also simply observe natural time on flowers, as if waiting for some kind of revelation to become apparent. Alongside this are the inherent and underlying principles of math and science such as the spectrum of light (color), the fibonacci sequence (growth), and in the fact that energy is always transforming (decay/re-birth). I am increasingly interested in the push and pull of organic material and the effects of humankind on it, or vice versa, and am exploring this idea both in symbolic and literal terms. One way I have been trying to highlight this is the introduction of nonorganic items or forms that can indicate this such as a string or geometric lines.

The light factor is a critical component. It translates itself into the perfect color or the absence of it moves into quiet corners. It vignettes and frames, illuminates and beholds, denies information. Natural light is always changing and carries in itself a wide range of sight. While I try to capture and memorize these natural impressions around me, I also work to push light into unnatural territories to see what other types of information or emotions I can elicit. Setting up the final presentation of my work is important to me as well, although this component can be quite subtle. I have been working on framing styles for my paintings done on wood panel because I think that it not only creates a sense of finality to the pieces, but also because it can add a sense of nostalgia or time. In these frames I have been washing the wood with thin layers of acrylic or spray paint leaving some of the wood grain slightly visible, and I have also been figuring out
how to carve the edges of the panel to act as a kind of framing device. I might also create one
shelf for multiple pieces, indicating that they are one as a group.

I think that illusion or the suspension of disbelief can be just plain fun, but they truly are
a tool for me to exit this world and my conscious mind, if only briefly. I am here in this realm
enough and my art allows me to drift; it seems to me that it allows others to do the same. In my
practice to escape reality the largest sense of wonder I can find is already all around me. I highly
value a sense of mystery in art. The mix of representationalism with just enough of the unknown
creates a space that I can wander around in and yet remain grounded. For me, if it is believable
enough but also unbelievable I am able to stay longer. The enduring presence of life in my work
(though usually not figurative), as well as the presence of death (though usually peaceful), speak
to me of a value placed on life in general. A kind of quiet reconciliation, communication or ex-
change between the natural world and human presence is what I am interested in. I often ask the
viewers to sort out the scale, decide for themselves what the subject matter is, and offer as few
clues as I feel I can get away with. I do not want to create a complete scene with my paintings
but rather an idea of one for the viewer to feel their way through, positioning them between ad-
vocation and negation, or possession and estrangement with the natural world and human pres-
ence.
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9. The Lost City of Altinium (Infrared + R + G) - Oil on Panel
10. River Positive & River Negative - Oil & Acrylic on Canvas
11. Rivers (closeup)
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13. Violet - Oil on Canvas
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21. Simulated Bee Vision (Ultraviolet + B + G) - Oil on Panel