

Lora Fosberg: Landscape Painting 2.0

The lacunae of landscape painters today tackling the plight of nature wrought by what we now refer to as the Anthropocene is rather astonishing. Perhaps the medium of painting is just too sensual, too gorgeous to accommodate such scenes of dystopia. But like Alexi Rockman or Hernan Bas, Lora Fosberg has stepped up to create paintings whose formal beauty only serves to undergird the sharp, poignant commentary on nature's near demise. Fosberg, an artist known for cheeky image and text work addressing the foibles of human nature, has turned to painting trees, but these are trees with stories to tell and wisdom to impart. And these are trees whose stoic iconicity against rich resplendent surfaces, all interlaced with plucky captions, offer viewers a stunning visual and conceptual ride.

Fosberg lives in a log cabin in the woods on the shores of Lake Michigan where she has started to see the effects of climate change up close. When Covid hit, she felt compelled to make work about techniques for survival in the wild, about old-fashioned navigation and mapping against what she feared would ultimately be technology's inability to get us through. "We are back to the great frontier," she submits. The tree paintings emerged in this moment, as historic markers for wayfinding, and as evidence of a cooperative system within nature's vast ecological network (we now know that trees communicate with each other). Indeed, some of the paintings feature various constellations of corresponding trees and text, quirky diagrams that reveal Fosberg's creative play with homemade taxonomies. Other canvases highlight a single tree, whose fulsome, rhythmic branches dominate the pictorial field, supported by a single caption and small vignette at the base: a fenced in horse in one, a figure on a bench in another. Fosberg is uninterested in trying to replicate nature, "good fucking luck with that" she avers. Instead, in her customarily highly stylized manner, she sets forth nature as so many delicious signs. Fosberg's wily representations produce an aesthetic punch with the objective of waking us all up.

Fosberg has always trafficked in a cartoony manner of rendering. Her pop sensibility learned from coming up in the 80s when Warhol was king, is now *de rigueur* with such artists as Sue Williams (who Fosberg really digs), Chris Ware (recent show at the Pompidou), Raymond Pettibon (from whom she occasionally appropriates), Rachel Harrison (the drawings), or Chris Johansson, Nicole Eisenman, and many more. Her exposure to the Chicago Imagists was also highly influential and their irreverent use of text and hot images drawn from vernacular culture was surely not lost on this Chicago native and School of the Art Institute graduate. But Fosberg describes her new body of work as less "humor-forward," (a strategy she consistently deployed before), and now one more based in scientific illustration. Yet it all still retains that Fosberg whimsy, while beckoning the awe of the beautiful.

In several of the paintings, Fosberg creates large matrices of trees connected by collaged strips of paper. Each picture holds a slightly different diagrammatic arrangement, lending the entire series a wonderful cadence of related but distinct formal gestalts. The works balance white forms of trees

(what she calls her “ghost images” rendered with gouache and India ink) against velvety black grounds. The dark surfaces are super lush as Fosberg uses the antique tradition of *stucco veneziano*, a plaster surface that is slick to paint on and provides great texture and resonant depth. She learned the technique twenty years ago from her brother who owned a specialty plaster shop in Los Angeles, and she has been using the technique ever since. *Near Misses*, for example, is a long horizontal picture that features an array of vignettes linked by paper strips against an inky black veneer. Each vignette depicts a tree, how old it is, and the story of how it came close to dying. In one case, a 3,000-year-old chestnut tree in Sicily was almost burned to the ground after someone tried grilling sausages in the hollow of one of its trunks. In another, one of the oldest specimens on earth, an ancient grove of bristle cone pines near a nuclear bomb test site in Nevada, would have been annihilated if the wind had blown in the other direction. Fosberg’s puckish humor written in hand-drawn block letters within white rectangles frame each image of the tree in question. The texts are lifted from wide ranging sources, from literature to history to various news platforms. “I’m a great thief,” she brags.

Two of the canvases here feature large trees filling the entirety of the painting field. Like the great landscape painter of the early 19th century, J.M.W. Turner, who sized his paintings to compete with the grandness of the reigning genre of history painting, Fosberg also deliberately goes big. She’s into making “contemporary masterpieces” as she puts it, for the subject demands such powerful scale. The single large trees were extrapolated from the pictures of diagrammatic groupings of trees that came first. And this experiment of choosing to isolate a tree proved a brilliant move, for these two canvases are glorious and provide an interesting foil to the other more atomized paintings of text and motif. In *The Willow* the trunk and main branches of the enormous tree appear like an x-ray revealing a gorgeously rendered white scaffolding of looping linework. All-over vertical patterns of cascading branches, punctuated by shimmering lance-shaped leaves, cloak the picture with a veil of striated marks. Like the Dutch artist Jacob von Ruisdael or the French painter Camille Corot, Fosberg exploits the tree’s quiet, yet monumental elegance, creating a compelling visual form rather than merely illustrating a natural scene. Below Fosberg’s tree is the prosaic depiction of a figure on a bench dwarfed by the enormity of the flora above. And anchoring the entire scene is the caption printed in her typical naive block lettering. The text and the figure interrupt the pure romanticism of the picture as they underscore the artifice of recording nature with pen or paint. Fosberg reminds us of how representational systems, the verbal and the visual, deeply inform our understanding of the world.

If the enterprise of the enlightenment was to compartmentalize and categorize nature’s type and variety in order to better harness its power, as its successors we have surely failed. But let us still make note of nature’s fleeting glory, and tell the tales of its historic endurance for now. Lora Fosberg does just this as she reiterates a transcendent experience of nature through the sublime craft of art.

Lisa Wainwright

Professor, Department of Art History, School of the Art Institute of Chicago