

Susan Eley
— Hudson —
Fine Art

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

September 25, 2021

Jim Denney
Bearing Witness



Susan Eley Fine Art, Hudson
433 Warren Street, Hudson, NY 12534



October 7 - November 21, 2021
Artist Reception: Saturday, October 9, 6-8 PM

*“From my rotting body, flowers shall grow
and I am in them, and that is eternity.”
--Edvard Munch*

To begin its Fall 2021 season, Susan Eley Fine Art, Hudson presents a solo exhibition of new and recent works by Jim Denney. The painter—a resident of downtown Hudson, NY and a fixture in the local creative community—has resided in Upstate New York since 2017. Yet, the content of Denney’s works draws heavily on his experiences on the West Coast, where he spent his formative years in his native Oregon. His primary source of inspiration is the natural landscape of the American Northwest—the lush foliage that dominates its sprawling forests, tempered by the wildfires that ritually engulf these vast acreages. *Bearing Witness* is Denney’s first exhibition with Susan Eley Fine Art.

Denney’s solo presentation at SEFA Hudson features a number of paintings primarily produced in 2021, rendered in oil on canvas or panel. The scale of the works ranges from regal, imposing portraits of Bristlecone Pine and Douglas Fir trees, to intimate roundells adorned with golden flora and fluorescent flames, completed specifically for this exhibition. Indeed, the artist’s poignant exterior scenes transform the Gallery—evoking both the beautiful and the grotesque in the natural world, as well as the harsh, destructive forces that ultimately produce new life. In

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Denney's bold compositions, red and purple skies loom above ashy, hazen atmospheres. Barren trees stand proudly—perhaps definitely—against the stark, hued backgrounds. Although burnt and stripped of what one traditionally considers the charms of bucolic visions, the paintings exude a palpable—even visceral—allure: existing between chaos and harmony, between loss and rebirth.

Turning to Denney's biography for an initial context in which to interpret his rich imagery—the artist served as a wildland firefighter in the Pacific Northwest for many years. Denney returns to his home in Oregon each summer to continue this work, specifically working on the restoration of an important forest services historic site at Fish Lake. For the artist, wildfires represent the necessary and productive natural cycles of destruction that generate new life. In fact, the artist notes, certain species of trees can only produce new cones when they are exposed to this extreme heat. Thus, these infernos transform with their sheer power, nuancing their seeming devastation with the promise of meaningful growth: the Phoenix that rises from the ashes, the immortal bird that represents cyclical regeneration.

Alternative to these symbiotic natural occurrences—the recent influx of dangerous immolations, witnessed globally, reveals the negative effects of humanity on the planet. Climate change and its serious repercussions are responsible for the unmerited demise of the planet, symbolized by these recent, deadly conflagrations. Denney's paintings fearlessly acknowledge both forces—the destruction and the rebirth—within the flames.

The recent works presented at SEFA Hudson are hyperrealistic in style, yet feel surrealistic in content—approaching tones found in the literary genre of Magical Realism. They could capture the present or an unknown time in the future, alluding to the potentials of a new (perhaps even post-human) world order. Within Denney's tableaux, the hand of humanity is ever-present in the dramatic landscapes. However, actual human figures remain conspicuously absent from his forlorn vistas—whether a lone, wild tree or a constructed man-made memorial, such as a graveyard. Through his precise formal approach, Denney depicts the longstanding dichotomies of grotesque and beautiful, of fear and pleasure, of death and rebirth. As such, his paintings live within these liminal spaces—rooted in the humble soil, yet manifesting glimpses of the sublime.

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The artist maintains an acute aesthetic control in terms of style and touch, rendering branches and blazes in crisp lines and saturated colors. His forms are well-delineated and precisely studied. Yet, Denney also succeeds in transcending our surrounding physical conditions. Straddling the natural and the ethereal, he presents realities—and imagined realities—that exist in the “beyond,” pushing further than the tangible world currently apparent before us. Denney embraces profound dualities—those seemingly opposing poles and perspectives—that abound within his subject matter and its broader consequences. Indeed, his work is fraught with poetic tensions.

Denney uses his paintings to find the truth within the world around him. He hints at what we as humans once were, and what we will become again with the passing of time and the natural cycles of existence; he records our effects on the surrounding world, while affirming that this world will one day overtake us and reign supreme; he highlights the significance of our daily actions on the landscape, while revealing the far greater significance of an abstracted cosmic realm: humans are a mere terrestrial, corporeal instance within multifaceted scientific and spiritual systems that have existed long before and will flourish long after what we even begin to know and understand. In his creative practice, Denney searches for a sense of purpose within the world that we are progressively destroying—recognizing the constant building and breaking to which we subject the planet. To the artist, his paintings allow him to bear witness—to find truth—and they enable his audiences to be witnesses to the meanings that he distills.

Abounding with simultaneously haunting and idyllic natural imagery, Denney’s works contemplate both terrestrial demise and subsequent sublime transfigurations. Flush with poetic dualities, their musings pose fundamental, existential questions about the future of the earth and our place within it: What is the difference between “that which remains” and “that which is to come”? What do we humans do—individually and collectively—when we “can’t go on, but must go on”? How can a single image depict a seemingly post-apocalyptic realm (literally, after the end) while also holding hopeful promises of regeneration? Perhaps through the truths of an adept and passionate witness of our world.

Text by Liz Lorenz, Assistant Director, Susan Eley Fine Art, Hudson

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BIOGRAPHY

Artist Jim Denney was born in Oregon and currently lives and works in Hudson, NY. Primarily a painter with precise hyperrealistic abilities, Denney has created potent environmental scenes since the mid-1980s. He studied studio art at the University of Oregon and received his MFA from the University of Kansas. His canvases range in scale, yet continually focus on the landscape and foliage of the Pacific Northwest as a primary subject. Denney's experience working as a firefighter in the forests of Oregon highly informs his works—complicating the aesthetic beauty of the nature that he depicts by contextualizing it with the truths of both natural cycles and man-made climate changes—essential forces in shaping his sprawling, raw and honest scenery.

Jim Denney's artwork has been exhibited nationally and internationally at venues including Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC; The Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC; The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, PA; The Alternative Museum, New York, NY; the Tacoma Art Museum's 1997 Northwest Biennial, WA; Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, OR; and Laforet Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Notable solo exhibitions of Denney's work were hosted at Pamela Salisbury Gallery, Hudson, NY in 2020; DIVA (Downtown Initiative for the Visual Arts), Eugene, OR; Temple Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, PA; Hult Center for the Arts, Eugene, OR; Center for Western Studies, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO; Mokotoff Gallery, New York, NY; and Hewlett Gallery, Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA.

www.jimdenney.net