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JUNE 2022

THE ARTFUL MIND



Artist Alex Kamaroff Glendale Brook Gallery Lenox MA Photograph by Edward Acker

THE ARTFUL MIND



JUNE 2022

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JACQUELINE SHATZ, SERIES OF CERAMICS: MIST, OTHER MINDS, EIDOLON, SMALL EVE



ASHLEY NORWOOD COOPER, 'BEES' SERIES, 2022, FOUND OBJECTS, PLASTER, ENCAUSTIC, TWINE

SUSAN ELEY FINE ART

EARTHEN ENERGIES ANCIENT ROOTS

Susan Eley Fine Art, Hudson presents *Earthen Energies, Ancient Roots*: a two-person exhibition featuring new work by Ashley Norwood Cooper and Jacqueline Shatz, on view June 23—July 31, 2022. Both artists will be present for an opening reception on Saturday, June 25 from 6-8PM.

Norwood Cooper and Shatz are grounded in nature for both their subjects and their materials. They produce ceramics, multi-media sculptures and oil paintings that reflect their surrounding environments and capture the lyrical movements of humans and animals residing within. Thematically, they confront fragility and anxiety, joy and rejuvenation. The artists often conjure ancient energies and mythologies in their visual motifs and contextual references.

Earthen Energies, Ancient Roots will highlight sculpture, dynamically arranged in SEFA's unique architecture: Norwood Cooper's wax bees suspended in the windows and Schatz's lyrical biomorphic figures as ceramics hung on the walls. Both artists are based in New York state, and this exhibition marks their first presentation with SEFA.

Susan Eley Fine Art - 433 Warren Street, Hudson, NY, 12534; Thursday—Monday, 11AM-5PM; susaneleyfineart.com



Ashley Norwood Cooper, *Swarm 1* (2022), Oil on panel, 24 x 18 inches Image courtesy the Artist and Susan Eley Fine Art

HONEY-DRUDGERS

Art by Ashley Norwood Cooper

Text by Liz Lorenz

At Susan Eley Fine Art this summer, a swarm of bees will float in the windows of our Hudson gallery. A series of mixed-media sculptures, the “Bees” will sway and dance for the pleasure of passersby as we open our doors to Warren Street visitors. Their textured black and yellow bodies, their web-like wings and their sinewy antennae are composed of found objects, then coated in pigmented wax, a technique known as encaustic. The creator—or perhaps the Queen—of this sculptural swarm is Ashley Norwood Cooper. The artist is known for her renderings of figures in outdoor settings, specifically the poignant moments of interaction between humans and their surrounding natural worlds. She is a painter and, newly, a sculptor who currently lives and works in Cooperstown, NY.

The exhibition *Earthen Energies, Ancient Roots* is on view at Susan Eley Fine Art, Hudson from June 23 to July 31, 2022. This two-person show features recent work by Ashley Norwood Cooper and Jacqueline Shatz and emphasizes three-dimensional sculpture—whether posed on pedestals and shelves, mounted on walls and columns, or suspended from above. The artists are grounded in nature, for their subjects and their materials. They produce ceramics, multi-media sculptures and oil paintings that reflect their immediate and imagined environments—as well as capture the lyrical movements of the humans and animals residing within. Thematically, Norwood Cooper and Shatz confront fragility and anxiety; then joy and rejuvenation. The artists often conjure ancient mythologies in their visual motifs and contextual references. This quality endows their artworks—rendered in wax and in clay—with a visceral, sometimes primordial, energy.

Ashley Norwood Cooper’s new encaustic sculptures depict roughly-hewn bees.

Suspended by twine in SEFA’s front windows, they are positioned at various heights to mimic the insects’ actual motion and frenetic flight patterns. Her “Bees” are imperfect, even disheveled, creatures. To the artist, they are “menopausal ballerinas whose physical appearance contrasts the Queen Bee’s beauty, fertility and social status.” Coated in colored beeswax, these sculptures embody an interconnectedness—a symbiotic use of material based on its initial source from the hive. Often considered frightening attackers, bees are actually pollinators that are essential for renewing plant and animal (thus human) life—another poetic tension. At SEFA, Norwood Cooper will also exhibit figurative paintings layered with thick, colorful swaths of oil paint. The canvases draw from her recent “Blackberry” series and her new “Bees” series, both of which depict human encounters with insects and flowers.

The debut of Norwood Cooper’s “Bees” series also marks SEFA Hudson’s first time working with the artist. Thus, I was pleased to dive into her practice in advance of the exhibition through the following interview. Additionally, the artist’s primary reference points for these latest works are two texts: Virgil’s *Georgics* and Sylvia Plath’s “Bee Poems.” The excerpts below help illustrate the nuanced layers within her thought process and intentions: the symbolism of the Queen versus the hive; the social structures, interactions and values that emerge within the colony; the significance of the swarm; the cycles of aging and death, fertility and rebirth. Thus, I continue by sharing these excerpted passages here for readers to refer back to, as foundations of my own understanding of what grounds Norwood Cooper’s practice.

Georgics, Book IV by Virgil

This law of life, too, by the bees obeyed,
Will move thy wonder, that nor sex with sex
Yoke they in marriage, nor yield their limbs to love,
Nor know the pangs of labour, but alone
From leaves and honied herbs, the mothers, each,
Gather their offspring in their mouths, alone
Supply new kings and pigmy commonwealth,
And their old court and waxen realm repair.

The victor's ponderous arm has turned to flight.
Such fiery passions and such fierce assaults
A little sprinkled dust controls and quells...

But when the swarms fly aimlessly abroad,
Disport themselves in heaven and spurn their cells,
Leaving the hive unwarmed, from such vain play
Must you refrain their volatile desires,
Nor hard the task: tear off the monarchs' wings;
While these prove loiterers, none beside will dare
Mount heaven, or pluck the standards from the camp.
Let gardens with the breath of saffron flowers
Allure them...

...things of wondrous birth,
Footless at first, anon with feet and wings,
Swarm there and buzz, a marvel to behold;
And more and more the fleeting breeze they take,
Till, like a shower that pours from summer-clouds,
Forth burst they, or like shafts from quivering string
When Parthia's flying hosts provoke the fray.
Say what was he, what God, that fashioned forth
This art for us, O Muses? of man's skill
Whence came the new adventure?¹

Stings by Sylvia Plath

Thinking 'Sweetness, sweetness.'
Brood cells gray as the fossils of shells
Terrify me, they seem so old.
What am I buying, wormy mahogany?
Is there any queen at all in it?

If there is, she is old,
Her wings torn shawls, her long body
Rubbed of its plush—
Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful.
I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,
Honey-drudgers.
I am no drudge
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.
...
It is almost over.
I am in control.
Here is my honey-machine,
It will work without thinking,
Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin
...
They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her—
The mausoleum, the wax house.²



Ashley Norwood Cooper, *Beekeeper with Swarm* (2021),
Oil on panel, 24 x 18 inches
Image courtesy the Artist and Susan Eley Fine Art

¹ Virgil, *Georgics*, Book IV, c. 29 BCE. Excerpts sourced from: <http://classics.mit.edu/Virgil/georgics.4.iv.html>

² Sylvia Plath, "Stings," *Ariel*, 1962. Excerpts sourced from:
<https://strongverse.blogspot.com/2013/01/sylvia-plaths-bee-poems.html>

Liz Lorenz: We are so excited for your show in Hudson, especially to have these new works on view during the summer months. Perhaps the imagery of bees and flowers in your paintings and sculptures may even attract some real bees into the Gallery when our doors are open...!

Ashley Norwood Cooper: Yes, I could see that happening! Bees are often attracted to other beings and objects by their color. Also, my studio smells like melted beeswax, so I am sure that the sculptures will retain that scent to a degree. I imagine this would be a recognizable and attractive quality for the insects themselves.

LL: You are primarily recognized as a painter. Are the "Bees" your first foray into sculpture? Could you outline your process? I see a layering and building in the wax sculptures that seems to reflect the style of your paintings.

ANC: Yes, this is my first time really getting into sculpture. The "Bees" are made of found objects, balled together—masks actually, used surgical masks that I have saved from the pandemic and did not want to simply throw away. Then, I clump on layers of plasters so that everything sticks together and the bee's bodies take shape. I have a hot plate in my studio, and for the encaustic process, I need pigmented wax. The colored wax is effectively paint. When dry, it can be buffed into this nice sheen that is characteristic of encaustics. Finally, they are hung from twine, which I see as part of the sculpture; it's another natural material that adds to the overall rough quality of the bees and, of course, allows them to move within the environment where they are hung.

LL: I feel like you *know* each bee so intimately, through the individualized

way that you shape and paint them. Then, there is something so beautiful about using beeswax to create bees—a kind of poetic or cyclical gesture that we also see within nature itself.

ANC: Totally. The encaustic medium is also a reference to how I paint, specifically how I enjoy the qualities of oil. In my canvases, there is a similar way of dripping and oozing that appears in the sculptures. I can find unexpected things in the paint. I can scrape the paint back, then clump on more. I can achieve all the same manipulations here that I do with oil paint on my canvases. Often I say that I paint because I am drawn to messiness. I revel in inconsistencies and can't make myself fix them or cover them up. Paint is ancient technology, a long discredited medium, but I take a brush to whatever vexes me. I am a middle-class mom, raising a family in a world I cannot understand or sooth. Paint is the form that accommodates my mess.

LL: I would love to talk about your initial interest in insects and how your work relates to the two texts that you recommended: Virgil's *Georgics* and Sylvia Plath's "Bee Poems." Do you see the beehive as a sort of microcosm of human interactions and relationships?

ANC: Yes, I do. I was a Classics major and Latin teacher, so Virgil's text is of particular interest to me. As Virgil outlines in his "how-to" guide for beekeeping, the Queen reigns but is then ousted when she is not able to reproduce. During her fertile years, all of the other bees in the colony work for her. Then, when there is a change of regime, if you will, they swarm. There is a power structure, then an upset. For Virgil, who was writing in Ancient
Continued on next page...



Ashley Norwood Cooper, *Black Squirrel* (2020), Oil on panel, 12 x 16 inches
Courtesy the Artist and Zinc Contemporary



Ashley Norwood Cooper, *Grackle* (2018), Oil on panel, 14 x 14 inches
Courtesy the Artist and First Street Gallery

Rome, this was also a metaphor for the civil wars during his lifetime. Next, the beekeeper needs to go and wrangle the swarm and lure it back to reunite the hive. This effort is the only way to restore the colony—to effectively “rebirth” the hive and continue its flourishing in the future. Bees have very complex social interactions, like we humans.

LL: While thinking about your work, I keep arriving at the term “poetic dualities.”

ANC: Of course. Initially, there is the fact that bees are feared because they sting. Yet, they are also pollinators whose actions are necessary to further plant life, thus all natural life on earth. While feared by some, we need them to exist. Then, I see an interconnected nature within the actual hive, which is echoed within its own visual structure (the honeycomb), and I find this to be another poetic circumstance. Most psychologically and personally—it’s the role of the Queen and the transitions within her life as she ages that captivate me.

LL: The idea of the Queen is what brings you to Sylvia Plath’s poetry, correct?

ANC: Yes, Plath would have read Virgil’s writings about beekeeping. Both authors begin with a seemingly simple factor in the natural world, and then make them highly metaphorical. In fact, Plath’s father was a beekeeper. Her series “Bee Poems” was published in the 1960’s—just before she ended her life—and they are some of her final creations. Poems like “Stings,” “Wintering,” and “The Swarm” are meditations on her own impending death and her role as a housewife and mother. They are much more intimate than Virgil’s writing and take on a distinctly female sensibility.

LL: How did her thoughts influence the conception of your bee sculptures and paintings?

ANC: There is a heaviness to the sculptures. They are struggling and soaring—falling and flying—at the same time. They are weighty and bedraggled, but still aloft. I kind of identify with them actually—the dying Queen Bee. I am this old lady bee now perhap. Plath calls them “honey-drudgers,” and I love this expression. I call my sculptures “menopausal ballerinas.” There is a choreography to them too, as they float with negative spaces between their shapes; that will be fun to play with while installing at SEFA.

LL: Let’s also discuss your paintings. Do you consider them the same “series” as the bee sculptures? There is certainly a shared imagery with nature and

insects. Yet, there are also studies of people within natural environments. Who are the figures in the paintings—are they specific people, or imagined “everyman” type of beings?

ANC: At SEFA, likely there will be some of the “Blackberry” series and the “Bees” series. They are not scientific studies of nature, in terms of the flora and fauna, nor are the human figures within portraits of specific individuals. They are meant to be accessible to many people who approach each work with their own unique background and experiences. Also, my paintings have followed the sense of my own life, from having kids and being a mother to my current journey into a different period. My previous painting series “The Edge of the Woods” best encapsulates what I strive to communicate in my canvases. They depict humans interacting with animals, butterflies and more—essentially the wild, the spaces beyond our control and immediate comprehension. Basically, our minds sometimes go to this irrational place—this scary psychological place that we all end up at at some point. It is a dangerous place—being at “the edge.” It is where snakes and scary things that bite live, but it is also where fear and struggle can transform into creativity. I am interested in these tensions and these liminal spaces. Creativity does not come from comfort. I want my paintings to embody these fraught mental and emotional spaces—the roots of artistic production. Then, relating this back to my current “Bees” canvases—their “swarming” is that same psychological unknown and chaos that can produce creative revelations.

LL: I’m so curious—have you ever done any beekeeping yourself? Outside with the smoker and wearing the protective suit, etcetera?

ANC: I have so many friends in the countryside near Cooperstown and in the Catskills that raise bees. It’s fun to see them on their little farms raising chickens and everything, and when they come visit, we always get the best honey. But I don’t do that; I joke with my friends that I can’t grow my own food. Especially if I’m going to make my paintings, it’s too much. I just had a painting show in Berlin at Galerie Thomas Fuchs, and now I am preparing for an upcoming exhibition at the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, NY that I am really excited about. So my practice and my family certainly keep me busy enough!

LL: And of course, the cliché but important question about your artistic inspirations—if you would like to share any of the artists that have significantly influenced your work.

ANC: For my painting practice, I would say that Joan Brown has been

influential, especially her mid-career turn to autobiographical and spiritual themes. She really goes back to “the goddess” figure both aesthetically and conceptually. Her works recognize that “the goddess” can also be disheveled. So for my “Bees” series, the dying queen is also “the crone.” She is still a goddess, even though her advanced age makes many perceive her differently now—yet, she is truly a wise old woman to be celebrated. Another notable inspiration for my painting is Alice Neel. Her application of pigment is intuitive and expressionistic, and her subject matter is treated with a psychological attention and intimacy that continually impresses me.

LL: I would love to speak further about the relationship between you and Jacqueline Shatz, who will exhibit with you at SEFA Hudson. To add some context about Shatz for our readers here: Shatz will present a number of recent earthenware artworks. Her ceramics, which she considers both paintings and sculptures, are intimately-scaled and will hang in lively configurations throughout SEFA’s space. Her works primarily depict human and humanoid forms that seemingly dance, twist and contort. Grouped together, the biomorphic shapes are leaning, reaching, bending, floating—as if engaged in an exuberant waltz. Often rendered in neutral tones, Shatz’s minimalistic figures evoke the earliest human creations: sculptures of women and fertility goddesses. The artist fully embraces the allure and energy of such ancient mythologies and symbologies. Ashley, you recommended that SEFA consider Shatz’s work as a potential pairing with your own for an exhibition, which has now materialized! Could you tell me more about the connections you see between your two practices?

ANC: In Jackie’s sculptures, I see the female goddess emerge from the earth—echoed in the ceramic medium, of course. She conjures the creative woman goddess that has existed since the beginning of human history. Her works often allude to a cultic, motherly figure that is the source of creation and of beauty. They are “lived-in” female bodies. This is important to my work too because I believe in the power of female creativity as essential. Basically, the model for what a god is and what an artist is has traditionally been seen as a male figure. Yet for me, and I think for Jackie too, we embrace creation as female-centric. But a “man” just happened to get put in charge throughout most of human history. However, our work helps us reclaim this agency.



Ashley Norwood Cooper, *Beekeeper with Swarm* (2022), Oil on panel, 24 x 18 inches
Image Courtesy the Artist and Susan Eley Fine Art



Ashley Norwood Cooper, “Bees” Series (2022), Found objects, plaster, encaustic, twine,
Dimensions Variable
Image Courtesy the Artist and Susan Eley Fine Art

LL: Are there any final thoughts that you would like to leave us with?

ANC: Two final thoughts. Our bees are our pollinators, and we are losing them! This cannot be accepted, and the ecological undertones are also important implications within my practice. Lastly, there is a quote by Samuel Beckett that has always been dear to me: “To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.” I think that my “Bees” are a manifestation of this sentiment—embracing the mess and the breakthrough.

Information

Earthen Energies, Ancient Roots

Ashley Norwood Cooper & Jacqueline Shatz

Exhibition On View: June 23—July 31, 2022

Opening Reception: Saturday, June 25th, 6-8PM

Susan Eley Fine Art

433 Warren Street

Hudson, NY, 12534

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Ashley Norwood Cooper lives and works in Cooperstown, NY. She holds her MFA from Indiana University and currently teaches in the art department at SUNY Oneonta. Ashley Norwood Cooper has exhibited her paintings in solo and group shows around the US. Exhibition venues include Zinc Contemporary, Seattle, WA; Art Garage, Cooperstown, NY; The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA; Bennington Museum of Art, Bennington, VT; SUNY Oneonta, NY; Santa Clara University, CA; First Street Gallery, New York, NY; Susan Eley Fine Art, Hudson, NY; and Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, NY (upcoming). Her work has been featured in “New American Paintings: Northeast Edition,” the podcast “I Like Your Work,” Art Spiel, and Arcade Project Zine at Columbia University, among other publications. www.ashleynorwoodcooper.com

Liz Lorenz is a curator and writer based in Upstate New York. She graduated from New York University in 2015 with a BA in Art History and French. In 2020, Lorenz received an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, NY. Currently, Lorenz is the Assistant Director of Susan Eley Fine Art, Hudson and has worked at the Gallery since its establishment in June 2020.