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WHITNEY BEDFORD: THE SINISTER SUBLIME

There are the trees, dark forms rising imperiously, and that's ok though, right?, a trick of the light, ombre over eyes, the natural failures of rods and cones—except they are *so fucking black*, atrous, really, black as coal, carbon, the remnants of fire, a sharp melange of serrations, selachian arcs, brachial bunches of alveoli, histological stains of striated muscle, pied abrasions, a forest seared into a wall, ashen memory, holocaustic photograph of a nuclear flash-lamp—and there is the sky, brilliant orange, *too* orange, unnaturally orange, not the color of monarch butterflies or poison dart frogs or innumerable other toxic lifeforms, not the color of citrus or lantanas or marigolds—dreadfully close to poppies, however—but *safety* orange, menacing safety orange, the kind commercial fishermen wear to be plucked from the black maw of the sea or hunter's place like a cuirass to protect against the accidental rending of human flesh, orange like the apocalypse, like literal and burning heat death, like the first and last glow of an existential risk, Nacarat Extinction, and it is apparent that *East of Eden* lies a place alien, fearful, *sublime*, hot and vibrating like catgut, verdant shoots even now erupting from the carbon and man-overboard-orange, and in the curve of the trees against the sky there is something pareidolic, a ghost in the nature, the SunSetter brow of an emaciated gorilla, perhaps, or, chest towards us, stereoscopic eyes thankfully looking away in majestic profile, the lean form of an ancient, savage, leopard, soft-gummed and eyeteeth innervate with pain, the kind which drags us, supposed Apex Animals, Fauna-cum-Gods, screaming into the impenetrable Cimmerian night, Jim Corbett save us!, sacred heart and sacred gun, the snuffing out of the flashes in the pan that turned the trees to cinder and the sky to fear. –

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Whitney Bedford | *The I do - I will, 2016*, ink and oil on canvas on panel, 5 x 8 feet. Photo by Evan Bedford, courtesy of Carrie Secrist Gallery

Consider the landscape: Superannuated, fustian, most classic of subjects with most classic of goals—mimesis! make your painting *look* like what it's meant to *look* like, for fuck's sake!—and an august form in its sick-dog days, camera lenses pushed into the back of its thinning

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the interplay of light, the technical proficiency, the Centuries of Canon, the very noble and correct and traditional reasons for the landscape's existence still hold sway, but doesn't anyone stop to notice that the painted snapshots—oof, sorry—of nature appear staid, as if Paradise is truly salted Carthage?

Whitney Bedford's [NAP #121] landscapes in *East of Eden*, her solo showing at Carrie Secrist Gallery (open through June 25th), in turn team with ... if not natural *life*, per se, then *energy*. Her brilliant palettes—the aforementioned carbon and hunter orange, clinquant silvers and golds, sharkskin grey, bone ecru, Crayola peach flesh, Miami pink—hum, imbuing the fever-dream landscapes with an alien urgency, making her desert vistas paradoxically both impossible to believe and, in their vibrancy, arrestment, beauty, and horror, more ekphrastic of nature's dizzying ipseity than any number of mimesis infected depictions could ever hope to be. There is, in the ad hoc placement of her meticulously rendered plants, something of the Divine, corpses standing like sentinels or obelisks of a world purposefully pushed aside.

Bedford, based in LA, would know what from curated nature; Los Angeles is a place, after all, where the titular river is famously unfluid, and most anything verdant is, in essence, fake, the Left Coast having a particularly sinister relationship with the natural world. The desert is all that is real, and it is from this hot cradle Bedford plucks her fauna. But while LA itself—and Phoenix [golf courses!? yards!?!] and Vegas and other Dry Metropolises—is essentially among the world's most impressive and extensive sets masquerading as life, Bedford's blatantly staged and artificially colored sets seem more animate than, say, TPC Scottsdale, more *sublime*.

Said sublimity is at the core of *East of Eden*; inspired by Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Bedford's landscapes mean to plumb the violin-string tensions between the calm and sturdy pulchritude of nature and its sublime, awesome, horrifying power. Even the exhibition's most traditionally rendered paintings, namely the small-scale suite of *The Stage*, *The Desert Dance Floor*, and *Summer Spring Winter* contain, in their rapid brush-strokes versus intricate lines and washed out dovetailing of sky and soil, a kind of dried-out delirium tremor reminiscent of what both Georgia O'Keefe and Ralph Steadman found out there.



Whitney Bedford | *The Desert Dance Floor*, 2016, ink and oil on panel. 18 x 24 inches. Photo by Evan Bedford, courtesy of Carrie Secrist Gallery

In her large scale paintings, which steal breath like a vacuum, then tension between the beautiful and sublime is thick enough for an oxygen lance. Bedford paints nature on a full spectrum worthy of the eyes of the earth's ultimate predators: In the gold ink paint-pen lines of the flora are intricate detail and great technical skill, the most mimetic aspects of the work capturing the essence of nature-as-beauty, complex and eternal, immaculate design; in the slashes of rough paint shooting up in the foreground, she speaks to nature-as-force, violent and playful, sharp and soft, chaotic, i.e., sublime; and in the harsh, flat backgrounds—even flatter and crueler than the brutal oppression of the desert sun—and composition, in the unnatural palette, she captures nature-as-finite, all we have ever known as doomed. *Temperamental* most powerfully evokes this most sublime and

winter off-white, disappears into line, stabs back into existence, shimmers like a *Fata Morgana* with the viewer's position; the painting, along with the Nacarat Extinction of *The I do – I will*, are the most powerful on display, tapping the dark, atavistic nerve which shivers in darkened skies, opaque seas, and open plains.



Whitney Bedford | *Tomorrowland*, 2016, ink and oil on canvas on panel. 5 x 8 feet. Photo courtesy of Carrie Secrist Gallery

Bedford's final great trick is to terraform Carrie Secrist Gallery itself, painting the dominant wall of the show a green which makes the most obvious artifice the most naturally colored surface in the show; it is a minimalist landscape of the most extreme form, on which her alien visions of our world can sit like jewels, the terrible, beautiful remnants of the estate sale of the sinister, sublime environment.



Installation view of *East of Eden*. Photo by Clare Britt, courtesy of Carrie Secrist Gallery.

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