

Chronogram

"Humans of Course Are Animals" and "In the Pale Moonlight" at September Gallery

By Taliesin Thomas



"Spill," 2020, Nell Brookfield
pastel and pigment on paper, 50 x 37 inches

In the over-saturated “me, me, me” culture of today, one tends to bypass images without pause until a hint of curiosity arrests our attention. Two concurrent exhibitions at September in Kinderhook through April 7, “Humans of Course Are Animals” and “In the Pale Moonlight,” prove that the thrill of peeking into someone’s “me” is among the greatest adventures of our shared humanness, especially when encountered through exuberant painterly methods.

The glee of these two shows begins with “Humans of Course Are Animals,” a series of paintings and lush works on paper by Nell Brookfield, a UK-based artist who studied at Pratt Institute and the Royal Drawing School in London. This is her third show with September (her first solo) and the grouping of work demonstrates her strength and sensitivity as a painter who captures familiar moments laced with a touch of surrealist magic and cheery taboo.

Using slightly garish colors, Brookfield explores the emotional states of her subjects as she conjures them into realms of atypical intimacy. In *Brushing* (2022), for example, a woman looks toward the outside of the frame of the painting while attending to her thick brown hair with a prickly puffer fish as her comb. Her right hand is raw and fiery red, suggesting a heightened susceptibility in this otherwise private scene of self-care.

“Humans are bizarre and amusing” Brookfield commented as we perused the works together in advance of the opening. “I am always thinking about these emotional states.” In another work, *Pulling up the taproot* (2023), Brookfield’s sinuous shapes and tonality are reminiscent of Judy Chicago’s and the foundational power of the sacred feminine. A shadowy crow and tiny pink worm are witnesses as a small, mystical sphere hovers just above while womanly arms tug at a

magnificent blue root that spreads across the bottom of the painting. The gesture is futile, the root is deeply grounded, yet the hands hold the stalk lovingly in an act of determined empathy. The divided mood of Brookfield's practice—slightly pretty and highly esoteric—seduces us into the warmth of her world.

The curious ethos of Brookfield's show sets the stage for a playful, lighthearted group exhibition in the adjacent gallery, "In the Pale Moonlight." Featuring paintings, photographs, and works on paper by 10 women—Eve Ackroyd, Maria Korol, Sarah Lee, Melissa Monroe, Sarah Alice Moran, Taylor Morgan, Liliana Porter, Sonia Corina Ruscoe, Allyson Melberg Taylor, and Brittany Tucker—the mood is pure amusement.

Among the intriguing scenes of women's freedom and bliss is Sonia Corina Ruscoe's *You Can't Be Lonely if You Aren't Alone* (2023) featuring a brazen female hiker masturbating in a wildly colorful forest. In *Yolo* (2021) by Sarah Alice Moran, a woman lounges against a gravestone with a dog resting at her feet while smoking a cigarette as the exhale materializes into a screeching midnight ghost.



Allyson Melberg Taylor



Taylor Morgan



Sarah Lee

A series of fun works on paper by Allyson Melberg Taylor detail a pale female figure in various stages of cuddling with kitties and an oversized bug. A memorable work by Taylor Morgan, *Are you looking for secrets?* (2023) details a group of youth skylarking in a park and reading the Tarot while a buried skeleton rests quietly in the concrete below. *At the end of everything and nothing, they knew the storm was coming so they held each other close* (2021) by Sarah Lee is a fantastically strange image of two masked naked women riding a white horse after a dancing demon in some unknown land.

Nearly 50 years ago theorist Laura Mulvey declared: "It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it." Given the flourishing energy of these two shows, I would have to disagree. Analyzing—and overanalyzing—these wacky scenes of female fantasy and genuine "me-ness" inspires a revised definition of what it means to "destroy" in contemporary parlance: "Humans of Course Are Animals" and "In the Pale Moonlight" provide pleasure without pretense and beauty without boundaries.

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