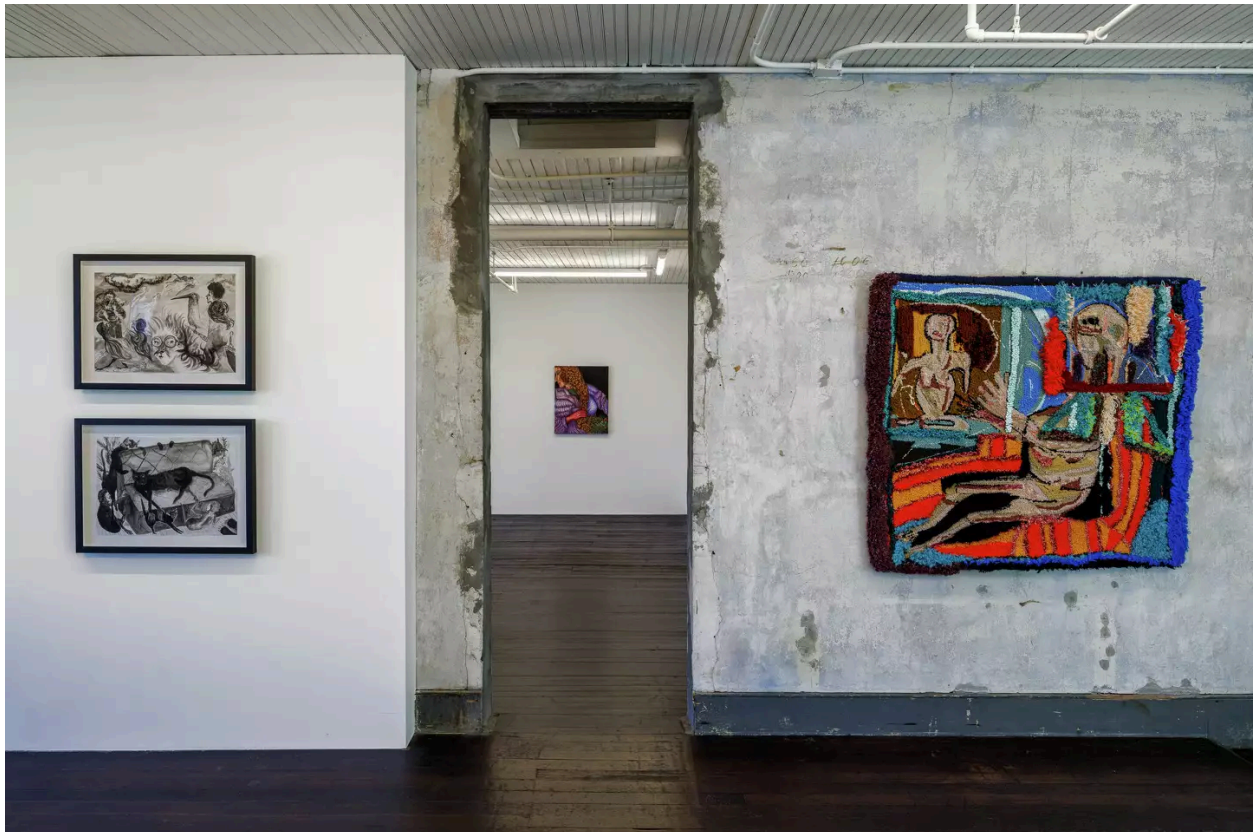




Three exhibits at Kinderhook Knitting Mill explore transcendence, materiality

Caitlin MacBride has new paintings at the Shaker Museum pop-up, while SEPTEMBER Gallery features Nell Brookfield's mixed-media works alongside a group show



Work from "In the Pale Moonlight," a group show at SEPTEMBER Gallery in Kinderhook.
Alon Koppel Photography

By [Matt Moment](#)

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Under one roof at the Kinderhook Knitting Mill, three distinct exhibitions at two art spaces bridge the gap between materiality and transcendence with an emphasis on the female figure.

At SEPTEMBER Gallery, the United Kingdom-based artist Nell Brookfield presents seven mixed-media paintings with a concurrent group exhibition of 10 artists. Downstairs, the Shaker Museum has installed a pop-up exhibition of works by local painter Caitlin MacBride, whose practice is largely influenced by the material culture of the Shakers.

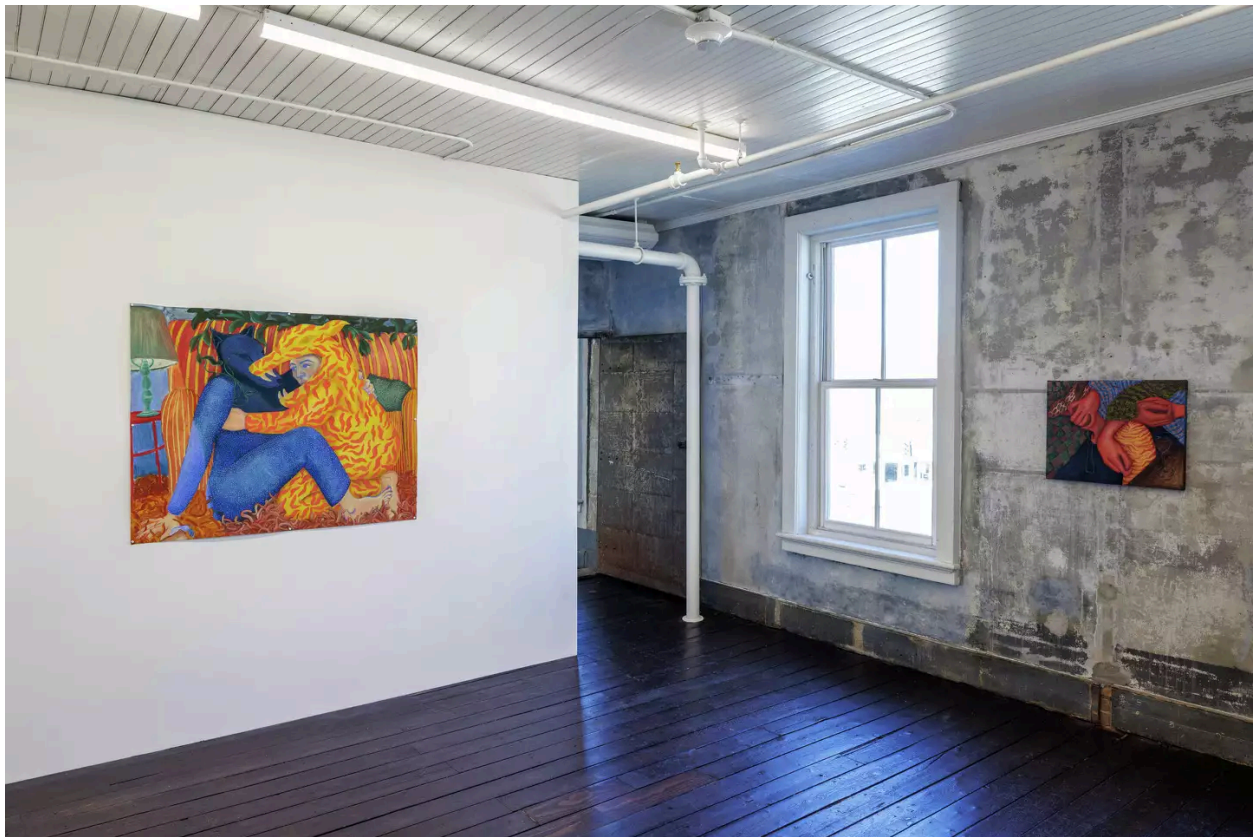
Nell Brookfield, “Humans Are Of Course Animals”

If her compositional tendencies are any indication, the U.K.-based artist [Nell Brookfield](#) is engrossed in how the body exchanges touch with its environment, with objects and with other bodies, human and not. Closely cropped and drenched in detail, the seven mixed-media paintings in “Humans Of Course Are Animals,” Brookfield’s solo show at [SEPTEMBER Gallery](#), centralize limbs and hands engaged in intimate activity.

Although Brookfield’s subject of choice is most definitely the figure, it would be misleading to refer to her works as portraits. Every painting in the exhibition features at least one person, but there are, collectively, only one-and-a-half human faces throughout (“Brushing,” “Codependent” and “Spill” contribute half a face each). Elsewhere, expressions are obfuscated or left out entirely. This choice feels less like an omission than a distillation; in other words, the artist offers her viewer the most crucial information — nothing more, nothing less. After all, you can tell a lot about a person by looking at their hands.

Instead of showing us what her characters look like, Brookfield describes how they feel, in the literal sense. Tactility is the essential graphic ingredient in each of her paintings, even in the rare case when it is not somehow part of their narrative as well. Take “Brushing,” for instance, wherein a woman

grips a cascade of her chestnut hair as she teases out knots using a puffer fish as her comb. Both her hands are gloved in crimson; one grips buoyant, silky, well-conditioned locks as the other wields the barbed puffer fish. Hers is the only communicative expression in the entire show, and for good reason — as swiftly as Brookfield establishes a tangible tension (again, in the literal sense), she dispels it via the woman's tranquil countenance. No harm, no foul. On the contrary, it seems she and the fish enjoy something of a surrealistic symbiosis.



Seven mixed-media paintings by Nell Brookfield are on display in the SEPTEMBER Gallery solo show "Humans Are Of Course Animals."

Alon Koppel Photography

Displayed side-by-side are two vertical canvases, titled "Pulling up the taproot" and "Pull the plug," that employ the same visual architecture, albeit with different particulars. The latter relies on chromatic connotation — blue means water, brown means earth — to invoke a mind-bending reversal: Two arms, presumably attached to a person, have just dislodged a plug, but it is soil rather than water that drains downward in a dramatic whirlpool along with plant matter, an itty-bitty blue house, and two unsuspecting goldfish.

("Or is it that the water is very, very dirty?" posits the rubber ducky floating cheerily at the picture's top left.)

While Brookfield freeze-frames the incitement of chaos in that painting, she illustrates a communion between person and plant in "Pulling up the taproot." Less trippy than its counterpart, but no less dynamic, one can imagine the stolid resistance of a stalk so deeply rooted as to outgrow the picture plane.

The most straightforward painting in "Humans Of Course Are Animals," which also happens to be the most recent, shows a woman embracing her dog. Though just as touch-centric as the others, "Codependent" is the only image of an ordinary circumstance, and it is this conceptual modesty that allowed me to focus on how skillfully Brookfield paints pictures. The image is intricate yet simple, and it is beautiful. It is the singular painting absent of conspicuous magic, and so we with our pattern-seeking brains readily project a little onto it anyway.

Group show, "In the Pale Moonlight"

In the adjacent room at SEPTEMBER Gallery, "In the Pale Moonlight" — a group show featuring Eve Ackroyd, Maria Korol, Sarah Lee, Melissa Monroe, Sarah Alice Moran, Taylor Morgan, Liliana Porter, Sonia Corina Ruscoe, Allyson Melberg Taylor and Brittany Tucker — sustains the atmosphere of unreality conjured by Brookfield's paintings. A kaleidoscopic amalgam of drawing, painting, photography, textiles and video, the exhibition markedly mirrors several of Brookfield's motifs — female figures, companionship and the animalness inherent to humanness, to name but a few — albeit through a wider range of formal expression.

Owing to their scale, population and placement in space, Moran's "Moon Over Manhattan (Free Fall)" can be imagined as a direct transition from Brookfield's "Spill." But in Moran's painting, the two bodies are allotted a bit of breathing room as they hover like constellations above a sleeping city. As we reluctantly exit Brookfield's microcosm of perpetual entanglement, "Moon Over Manhattan" assures that bodies may remain connected when physically separated, if only by way of a gravitational pull.



Sarah Alice Moran's "Moon Over Manhattan (Free Fall)" (center-right) is a highlight of a group show at SEPTEMBER Gallery in Kinderhook.

Alon Koppel Photography

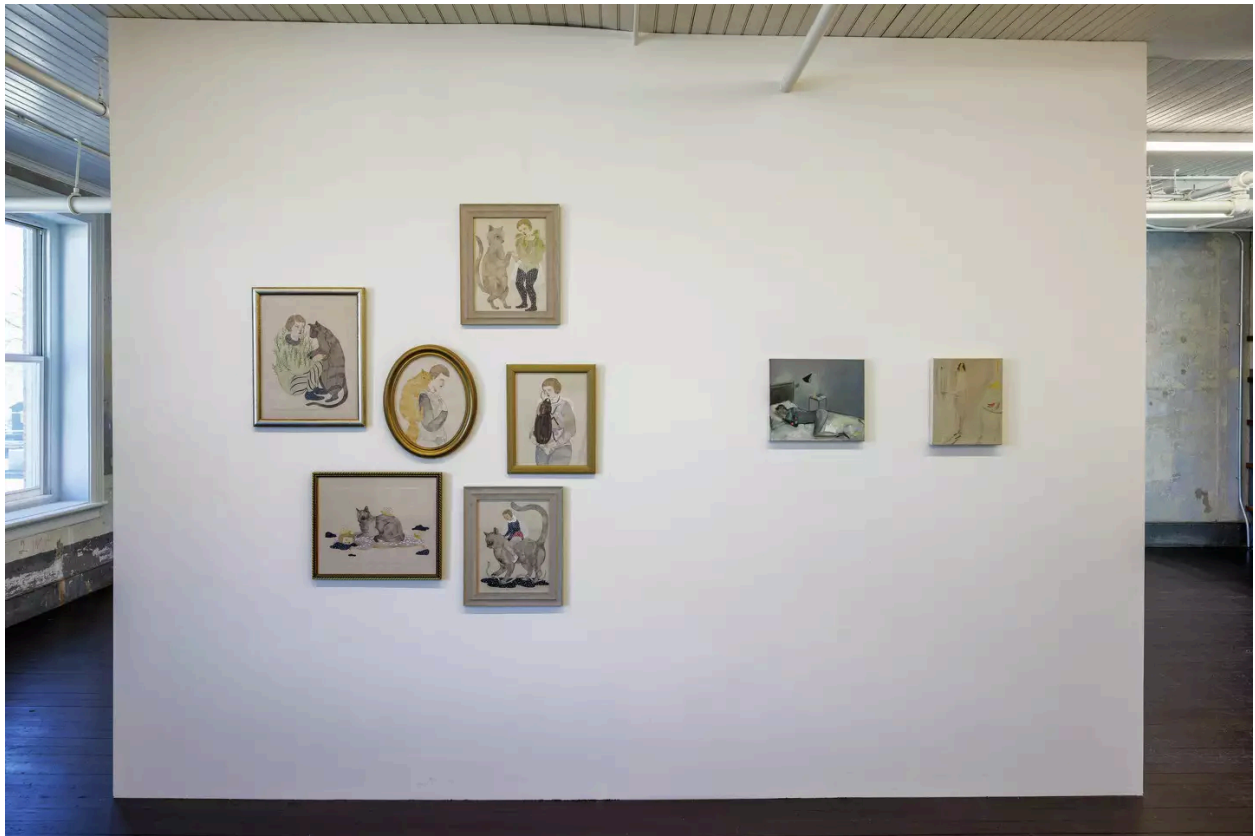


Brittany Tucker's untitled portrait radiates an unshakable majesty.
Alon Koppel Photography

This is not to imply that "In the Pale Moonlight" is all about interconnectivity — indeed, several of the most impactful works in the show pay tribute to solitude. Brittany Tucker's tremendous untitled portrait delivers on far more than size alone; painted lushly in monochrome, its seated figure radiates so unshakable a majesty that one might momentarily overlook the fact she has sprouted a set of insect wings. Sonia Corina Ruscoe's "You Can't Be Lonely if You Aren't Alone" is an ecstatic portrayal of self-touch; scrawled in semi-neon hues, it proves that crudeness and beauty are not mutually exclusive. (The same goes for her other contribution to the show, dubbed "Tongue in a Basket Full of Worms," which is, admittedly, easier to digest before reading the title.)

Eve Ackroyd's "Red Gloves" is, for me, the crown jewel of the group exhibition. Its pallid palette and stoic protagonist ("depressed but funny," to borrow Ackroyd's description of the women she paints) work in tandem to

suggest a mood of consuming numbness, perhaps even dissociation, making for a painting that quite literally took my breath away.



Work from "In the Pale Moonlight," a group show at SEPTEMBER Gallery in Kinderhook.
Alon Koppel Photography

According to the curatorial text, an ambition of "In the Pale Moonlight" is to articulate "interior worlds existing beyond the restriction of what our bodies experience as real." It is refreshing that the exhibition comprises not only the extremities of inward experience — the most primordial of pleasures, the deepest of despair — but also the quiet in-betweens we too often neglect to mention. I found such quiet in what I can only assume is the eponym of the exhibition: "The Moon," Moran's all-red portrait of a woman submerged to the bridge of her nose, her gaze lit by moonlight that dances across the water's surface. At once, she is alone and enchantingly surrounded.