

# Theodora Allen

SELECTED PRESS

# READER

## Searching for enlightenment

*Artist Theodora Allen merges the physical world with the metaphysical one.*

ANNETTE LEPIQUE

APRIL 21, 2023



Theodora Allen's paintings, both intimate and grand, are worlds ripe with hidden meanings.  
Credit: Guanyu Xu.

Artist Theodora Allen's work has long reminded me of the Major Arcana tarot or a deck of playing cards; her paintings, both intimate and grand, are worlds ripe with hidden meanings. This merge of the physical with the metaphysical produces an uncanny sensation in the viewer. One might reasonably expect The Lovers, The Queen of Hearts, or Fortune itself to emerge from Allen's picture planes. Her exhibition "Solitaire," up at Soccer Club Club, continues the exploration of the frictions between the known and unknown, the esoteric and the everyday, that she began in "Saturnine," her first museum exhibition in Chicago, which occurred last year at the Driehaus Museum.

The exhibition traces the idea of “solitaire” through social history, linguistics, and popular culture. Using the word’s Latin origins (“solitarius”) as a springboard, the show’s written materials consider how the word has transformed throughout history; it once named a military tactical maneuver, a jewelry setting for a single stone, and the well-known card game. The exhibition’s epigraph is from Chrétien de Troyes’s tales of King Arthur’s court and describes the solitude of a knight’s quest for honor, enlightenment, and redemption.



In four of the six pieces on view, Allen details the heart, the club, the spade, and the diamond of playing card suits in a heraldic crest. Credit: Guanyu Xu.

In four of the six pieces that compose the show, Allen’s highly mannered compositions detail the heart, the club, the spade, and the diamond of playing card suits in a heraldic crest. The two remaining works are framed scenes of an arctic landscape; one bears a hand holding an orb, the other a drill bit bearing down on a lone heart. There’s a searching quality inherent to each work; through Allen’s exercises with light and tone, her luminescent white against shaded blue, viewers are given cause to wander and search themselves. Heed Allen’s call: See “Solitaire”—seek, quest, and find yourself.

# CULTURED

## With Botanicals and Celestial Bodies, Theodora Allen Examines Our Scientific Journey

At the Driehaus Museum in Chicago, “Saturnine” presents new paintings by Allen that place our relationship with botany at the center of contemporary conversation.

PIA SINGH  
MAY 11, 2022



*“Sit and drink pennyroyal tea, Distill the life that’s inside of me.” —Nirvana, In Utero, 1991*

Recently, a leaked document exposed a majority of The Supreme Court of the United States justices are willing to overturn the landmark *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision, threatening to turn back the clock on reproductive health justice in America. Historically, plant-based abortifacients were used by women throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Eventually religious ignorance deemed these as practices of “witchcraft,” leading to the loss of botanic knowledge across cultures. In this context, Los Angeles-based artist Theodora Allen presents her solo exhibition “Saturnine” at the Driehaus Museum in Chicago, as a leitmotif of the scientific journey of man and nature through time.

Curated by Stephanie Cristello, the exhibition is located on the second floor of the exquisitely restored Nickerson Mansion. Pairing a selection of Allen’s cyan-hued paintings with a remarkable selection of Art Nouveau artifacts from the museum’s collection, Cristello conjures a conversation on the interconnectivity of time, space and the potency of ancient herbal-lore, akin to a whispering a chain of secrets between generations.

“Saturnine” begins in the Nickerson bedroom with *Syzygy (Narcissus)*, 2021, placed directly above the former Maher Trophy room. Cristello draws a celestial line between Allen’s most recent triptych and Vittorio Caradossi’s *Shooting Stars* (c.1900) where two spiraling, elysian bodies ascend. In Allen’s left and right panel, anthropomorphic narcissi in flaming diamond portals lower their heads to gaze at their own reflections in a lake of fire. In the center, the portal is

stabilized by a knowing hand, cradling a scorpion from the blaze. Hallucinogenic florals and venom appear throughout Allen's imagery. "Jekyll and Hyde plants that can be used for good or for ill. Killer or curer, sinner or saint," the artist explains.



Theodora Allen, *Shield (Jimsonweed)*, 2018. From the collection of Yanyan Huang. Photography by Brian Griffin / Griffin Imaging Studios, courtesy of The Richard H. Driehaus Museum, 2022.

Celestial bodies surface as apparitions between thinly pulled layers of oil on linen. Cristello parallels Allen's phosphorescent blues of night at the edge of day to the feeling of melancholia in the *Fin de Siècle*. "The origins of melancholia, that feeling we call 'blueness,' is often described in terms of dependency with a language of addiction." writes Cristello in the artist's mid-career monograph, linking the mythical influence of the planet Saturn to the production of Black bile, once believed to be the cause of melancholy of the body.

Allen's *The Snake, No.3*, 2014, and *Shield (Jimsonweed)*, 2018, hover above wainscoted sycamore and recessed oak in Adelaide Nickerson's bedroom. Phantomlike forms of a coiled snake and an overexposed moonflower twisting toward the light emerge from two levitating canvases. Threatening yet impregnable, the artist's simple forms contemplate the poisons of passion and fate. "They were medicine, sacraments, poisons of the old world; uppers, downers and narcotics in the new one," she says of the florals selected in her *Shield* series. The striking incertitude of time in Allen's washed-out cyan palettes point to the historic interconnectedness of artist and naturalist, seen in Anna Atkins early cyanotypes. A large canvas titled *Calendar, No.4*, 2019, depicts a sandless-hourglass flanked by 12 paper-cut butterfly-shaped prison-like gates.



Installation view, *The Cosmic Garden I*, 2016, Theodora Allen. Photograph by Brian Griffin / Griffin Imaging Studios, Courtesy of The Richard H. Driehaus Museum, 2022. Photography by Brian Griffin / Griffin Imaging Studios, courtesy of The Richard H. Driehaus Museum, 2022.

In Mrs. Nickerson's bedroom, the aura of an image of Saturn emanates from Allen's *The Cosmic Garden, 1*, 2016. The room's forest green and gold wall tapestry contains the tempestuous flames of Allen's *Wildfire, No. 4*, 2016, as moths sing their wings at the top edge of the canvas. Lapping at the question of what will survive this climate crisis, Allen's out-of-this-world oeuvre has a grounding effect: returning the viewer from the celestial bodies to the Earth's wildflowers and the pathologies of a society in ruin.

A quiet pairing of pieces from the Driehaus collection are placed in a neighboring room. Here, *Anxiété*, 1897, by Eugène Grasset portrays the psychosis of a young woman surrounded by winter rose or Hellebore. Her glassy, distant stare against a distorted sky, outstretched fingers grasping at the grass, augment the symbology of Allen's luminous scenes. Women have historically been at the center of patronage, policy and moral imperatives that continue to shape the scientific evolution of the 21st century. Amidst ominous threats to our cosmic journey, "Saturnine" is an inlay of beauty and poetry in a world subsumed by chaos and degeneration. "In times of great uncertainty, certain symbols emerge as something to confide in," writes Cristello. Perhaps, it's a whisper network turning into a collective scream.

# Galerie

## EXPO Chicago Opens Its Most Internationally Diverse Edition to Date

The fair's ninth chapter comes after a two-year hiatus and boasts an ambitious programming throughout the city

OSMAN CAN YEREBAKAN  
APRIL 8, 2022



The opening day of Expo Chicago 2022. Photo: Faith Kelsey/EXPO Chicago

The Windy City's infamous gust could not keep the fairgoers from attending EXPO Chicago's vernissage Thursday evening. The Midwesterner fair's ninth edition opened its door at Navy Pier's Lake Michigan-viewed Festival Hall with 140 exhibitors hailing from the U.S. and abroad. Positioned across the spacious 170,000 square feet venue, the show's preview attracted collectors from east and west coasts, in addition celebrities such as Chance the Rapper and Matthew Macfadyen of Succession.

The four-day affair is the anchoring event to a week-long programming sprawled across Chicago to prove the city's gallery boom. Local fixtures in recent years like Kavi Gupta and Patron Gallery have expanded their footing on the city's west side while others have ventured internationally, most prominently Mariane Ibrahim Gallery which opened its Paris outpost on Avenue Matignon last year.



A work by Theodora Allen. Photo: Courtesy Of Kasmin

[EXTRACT]

A block away, Driehaus Museum unveiled its Theodora Allen exhibition, “Saturnine,” which takes over the historic Gilded Era house’s second floor with the artist’s process-driven paintings. Between the walnut wainscoting with marquetry panels and the dark blue Low Art tiles, the curator Stephanie Cristello has orchestrated Allen’s powdery lexicon as a subtle painterly accent that dances between abstraction and hints to life-like references.

The expansion of Allen’s paintings to the fair at Kasmin Gallery’s booth alongside works by Ali Banisadr and Diana Al-Hadid is only one of many connections that EXPO offers with art around the city.





# EXPO CHICAGO Announces April EXPO ART WEEK Alignments And Events

Highlights the vast cultural opportunities Chicago offers collectors, dealers, art enthusiasts and visitors through select aligned programming.

A. A. CRISTI  
MARCH 21, 2022

[EXTRACT]

EXPO CHICAGO, the international exposition of contemporary and modern art, today announced the ninth edition of EXPO ART WEEK, April 4 - 10, 2022.

With the exposition as its centerpiece (April 7 - 10), EXPO ART WEEK - presented in conjunction with Choose Chicago, the city's tourism and marketing organization and Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) - highlights the vast cultural opportunities Chicago offers collectors, dealers, art enthusiasts and visitors through select aligned programming, including museum exhibitions, gallery openings and more. As part of EXPO ART WEEK, Art After Hours invites EXPO CHICAGO visitors and Chicago community members to visit exhibitions at participating galleries during extended hours on Friday, April 8 from 6:00 - 9:00pm.

EXPO ART WEEK alignment highlights include The Peninsula Chicago's historic presentation of groundbreaking AFRICOBRA artists, a preview of Nick Cave's new projection for Art on theMART, the group exhibition Skin in the Game at 400 N. Peoria and Barely Fair, the international miniature art fair from artist-run space Julius Caesar. Notable Southside openings and events taking place during EXPO ART WEEK include curatorial remarks at The Renaissance Society for the exhibition Meriem Bennani: Life on the CAPS, a performance by renowned Blues musician Katherine Davis and others on the occasion of Bob Thompson: This House Is Mine at The Smart Museum and a guided tour of Art at the David Rubenstein Forum, a new program showcasing works from the collection of University of Chicago Trustee Kenneth C. Griffin in tandem with historical documents from the collection of David M. Rubenstein.

"At its core, the goal of the fair has always been to galvanize the City of Chicago's creative community and provide an infrastructure that brings global curators, collectors, and art enthusiasts to experience all that the city has to offer," said Tony Karman, President | Director. "The diverse roster of events and programs at this year's EXPO ART WEEK speaks to Chicago's uniquely collaborative approach, and it is incredibly heartening to see such a robust welcome back for the fair and the city."

Featured 2022 EXPO ART WEEK alignments include:

**Theodora Allen: Saturnine**

The Richard H. Driehaus Museum | March 29 - July 10, 2022

The Driehaus Museum presents *Theodora Allen: Saturnine* as part of their 2022 contemporary exhibition program, A Tale of Today. Drawing upon the museum's focus on ornamentation and exquisite craft, the exhibition-previously on view at the Kunsthall Aarhus (Denmark), curated by Stephanie Cristello-resonates with specific histories and motifs within the Nickerson Mansion and Driehaus collection, and installed within select period rooms of the Gilded Age mansion. An opening reception will take place April 6 from 7:00 - 9:00pm. A monograph published by Motto Books in Berlin accompanies the traveling exhibition.

# Los Angeles Times

## Review: Paintings by Theodora Allen trippy but not trite

LEAH OLLMAN  
MARCH 12, 2022

Theodora Allen paints in thin layers of oil, wiping away each addition before applying the next. The images that result are more visions than views. They have the consistency of meditations or memories, at once persuasive and elusive.

Her affecting work, at Blum & Poe, features snakes, moths and thistles, a spiderwebbed hourglass and a stringless guitar. All are presented within schematic internal frames of interlocking rectangles, diamonds and hearts.

The symbols come pre-loaded with mystical import, and Allen ups the charge substantially through her painting method, which sinks the slate grays, blues and violets deep into the linen surface, while bringing out the weave. The images appear faded, temporally and spatially remote, yet alive with the exposed linen's delicate, celestial sprinkling of white.

Allen paints a wildfire whose fuel remains unconsumed by the sinuous flames. She paints rising triangles, akin to the spiritually ascendant forms of Kandinsky. Blake comes to mind, as does the hallucinatory radiance of Sharon Ellis, the wonderment of fairy tale illustration and the trippy designs of '70s album covers.

Allen is just one year past her MFA from UCLA, and this is her first solo show in Los Angeles. While the work flirts with triteness, it doesn't succumb; its soft, hypnotic beauty is ultimately enchanting.

# The Comet and The Hourglass

Theodora Allen at Blum & Poe

LEAH OLLMAN  
FEBRUARY 25, 2022

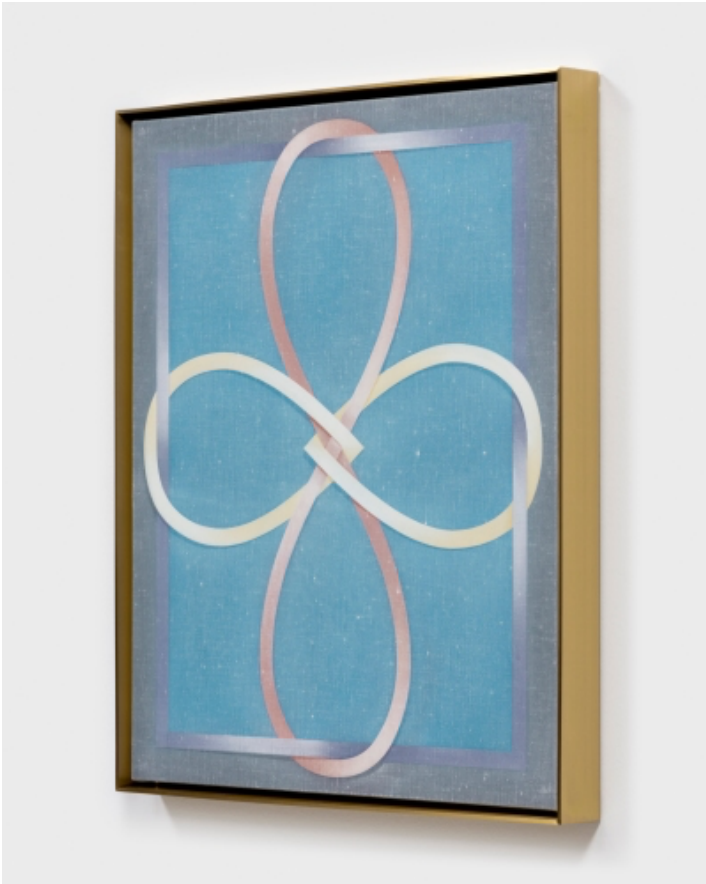


Theodora Allen, *Syzygy (Narcissus)*, 2021, oil on linen, three parts, 78 by 36 inches each.  
Photo Josh Schaedel/© Theodora Allen Courtesy the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

Moments after I stepped into Blum & Poe, where Theodora Allen’s recent paintings are hanging, a woman entered and declared to her companion, “These are so pleasing.” Allen’s works do, indeed, give immediately and generously of their visual splendor. They deftly marry ostensibly opposing formal qualities—flatness and depth, extravagance and restraint, presence and absence—eliciting not only sensual pleasure but also an intellectual rush.

“Syzygy” is modest in scale compared to “Vigil,” her last show here in 2017, which sprawled brilliantly through a sequence of capacious galleries. This show feels appropriately-sized for the moment, however. Its assembly of five paintings, all made during the pandemic year of 2021, transforms its single room into an intimate, meditative chamber.

Born and based in Los Angeles, Allen uses a lexicon of familiar, legible symbols that come preloaded with resonance from their established roles in art history, mythology, alchemy, and heraldry. She combines and repurposes these elements—candle, serpent, sword, moon, moth, and more—with a twenty-first-century sense of entitlement and yet a refreshing lack of irony. Her symmetrical compositions and mirrored figures propose a harmonious visual order above or within the vast disorder we know as life. When Allen uses a symbol, it is an homage of sorts to the scholars, believers, and seekers across time who conceived schematic narratives to help us account for ourselves, our histories, our origins. Her paintings embody that same eternal hunger for ultimate knowledge and reflect back to us the archetypal tools of the search. She draws with earnest savvy upon everything from the visionary drive of William Blake to the romanticized retrospection of the Pre-Raphaelites and the spiritual modernism of Agnes Pelton, each source offering a distinct model for fusing the sensuous and the heady.



Theodora Allen. *The Amulet*, 2021, oil on linen, 20  $\frac{3}{4}$  by 16  $\frac{3}{4}$  by 1  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches.  
Photo Josh Schaedel/©Theodora Allen/Courtesy The Artist And Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo

In three small works here (measuring roughly two feet tall), Allen paints a narrow band around the perimeter, a frame within the frame that serves as a boundary between the purplish-gray plane of the canvas's outer rim and an indeterminate blue interior, dilute as faded denim. She gracefully incorporates the emblems of arrow, heart, star, and infinity sign into and around that slim, framing line so they perform as both ornaments and icons. The format of the paintings, with their shallow, decorative border, recalls early Renaissance illuminated manuscripts, an association that nudges the works—*Struck*, *Origin*, and *The Amulet*—toward the realm of sacred texts. The frontality and distilled clarity of these compositions further link them to the pictographic symbols of alchemy and tarot. By combining and recontextualizing emblems, Allen creates a general ambience of mystical significance; the terms of her shuffled glossary are largely uncoupled from their native grammars.

In the triptych *Syzygy (Narcissus)* and related painting *Falling Star (Memento Mori)*, ravishingly sublime vertical panels more than six feet tall present stylized scenes of the cosmos in monochromatic indigo. Within each alluring field, a large diamond shape with a comet's tail of luxuriant flame rises, falls, or hovers. Each fiery form contains, in the manner of a crystal ball, a pale, hazy image: an hourglass, sifting seconds; a scorpion resting on an upturned palm; a narcissus blossom bending, like its namesake, toward its own watery double.

Painted in thin layers of oil and wiped away between additions, these surfaces conjure atmospheres saturated with fog. The white weave of the prepared linen substrate remains conspicuous; it registers as a textural flickering, a luminosity from within. This insistent materiality coexists with a vaporous metaphysicality—a compelling enactment of one of many definitions of syzygy, a union of contradicting forces.

# Mousse Magazine

## Images of Irretrievable Sound: Theodora Allen

STEPHANIE CRISTELLO



Theodora Allen, *From Dark Into Light and Back Again I*, 2019  
Courtesy: the artist; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo;  
Kasmin, New York



Theodora Allen, *The Snake No. 4*, 2015  
Courtesy: the artist; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo; Kasmin, New  
York

In the exhibitions of the Salon de la Rose + Croix in Paris in the 1890s, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice garnered close consideration in works such as Pierre Amédée Marcel-Béronneau's *Orpheus in Hades (Orphée)* (1897), Jean Delville's *The Death of Orpheus (Orphée Mort)* (1893), and Alexandre Séon's *The Lament of Orpheus (Lamentation d'Orphée)* (ca. 1896), among others. In all accounts, Eurydice is absent. Contrastingly, the depiction of the lyre is a prominent, if not central, subject. No image of Orpheus exists without the instrument. Regardless of whether Orpheus's music ever existed—a melody so beautiful it charmed the gods, allowing him passage into Hades to

retrieve his lost lover, killed by a snakebite—what is fascinating is the sheer number of visual representations that endure in the canon of Western painting. An almost obsessive desire to give image to an extinct, perhaps even invented, but nonetheless irretrievable sound.

Los Angeles-based contemporary artist Theodora Allen's paintings contribute to this history of mute images—similarly soundless compositions that evoke the atmosphere surrounding the emanation of a melody that has never been and will never be heard. For Allen, the lyre imports two other symbols within the ancient Greek myth: the serpent (whose bite caused Eurydice to die) and the Moon (whose light is ever-present in the narrative itself). Upon descending into the underworld, Orpheus was given one condition; as he led Eurydice toward the land of the living, he was not to doubt the gods by looking back. Failing this instruction, he sets his eyes on her, and she vanishes forever.



Theodora Allen, *The Snake No. 1*, 2014  
Courtesy: the artist; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo;  
Kasmin, New York



Theodora Allen, *The Cosmic Garden IV*, 2017  
Courtesy: the artist; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo;  
Kasmin, New York

In Allen's *From Dark into Light, and Back Again I* (2019), the outline of a diamond-shaped frame opens into the portrait of a woman, framed by waxen hair, whose soft jawline is turned upward from a bare elongated neck. The visage, whose features are barely articulated in hues of warm sepia, appears melded into the image of a full Moon, obscured by the texture of passing clouds. Surrounding the frame, moonflower vines and a coiled serpent are bathed in a desaturated emerald-blue glow. Is she looking away or looking back? As Sarah Lippert writes of French Symbolist Gustav Moreau's *Salomé Dancing before Herod* (1874-1876), "She need not look, given that she is the object that is viewed."<sup>1</sup> Two similar portraits are inverted in Allen's *Refraction (One Million Dead Soldiers)* (2019), a



diptych whose source is a 1974 performance by Todd Rundgren of *A Dream Goes On Forever*. In a video accessible online, we see him at a piano, long multicolored hair center parted, adorned in a silver halter top, with blue eyeshadow in the shape of a robber's mask across his gaze. Yet the reference in the portrait could just as easily be to a work by Dutch Symbolist Antoon van Welie, *La Douleur* (1895), whose paradoxical expression exists somewhere between suffering and ecstasy. Rundgren sings, "All is silent within my dream / a thousand true loves will live and die / but a dream lives on forever." As Allen proposes, perhaps this is the fate of Eurydice: in the regeneration of dreams, she is eternal.

Many elements of Allen's paintings establish the collapse of a Symbolist tradition in the history of Western painting and literature, which took classical mythology and idealism among its key subjects, with folk and glam music aesthetics of the 1970s, which similarly borrowed attributes of Pre-Raphaelite and medieval imagery to develop the spectacle of stage personas. From the 1870s to the 1970s, the desire for a renewed centrality in faith was replaced with the desire for disguise. From the depiction of mythic beings and visionaries in painting to the self-aware performance of androgyny like that of Rundgren's, Allen's figures are often portrayed as genderless transmutations—"ideals" in the Symbolist sense.



(From left to right) Theodora Allen, *Refraction (A Million Old Soldiers)*, 2019; *The Lyre*, 2019  
 Courtesy: the artist; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo;  
 Kasmin, New York



Theodora Allen, *Infinitude*, 2019  
 Courtesy: the artist; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo;  
 Kasmin, New York

In *The Lyre* (2019), a pale golden instrument wraps around what appears to be an iron support. The gray metal circle nearly touches the four edges of the square canvas, as if depicting a cropped shield or a crest. Lily pads, softly painted in hues of powder jade, surround the base of the musical stand-in like an inverted wreath. The registration of the iconic instrument is, in every sense, a distillation; the painting asserts its presence as a symbol. Yet, while seemingly of another century, Allen's works belong to current discourses in painting: for instance, how the technique used in *The Lyre* and other works references day-light passing through either a stained-glass window or a backlit screen.



Theodora Allen, *Calendar No.4*, 2019  
 Courtesy: the artist; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo;  
 Kasmin, New York



Theodora Allen, *From the Watchtower (Double Moth No.4)*, 2020  
 Courtesy: the artist; Blum & Poe, Los Angeles / New York / Tokyo;  
 Kasmin, New York

Lilith, who tempted Eve. Medusa, who turned men into stone. The serpent is a female archetype. If Orpheus was the savior, the snake that killed Eurydice was the villain. Though it was Orpheus who transgressed by looking back, it is Eurydice who vanishes, who is denied representation. In the twenty-first-century in the United States—which has seen Women's Marches and the rise of the #metoo movement—the same anti-feminine sentiments that reigned in the *fin de siècle* West are very much relevant today.<sup>2</sup> It was, after all, the spread of these concerns that invented the figure of the femme fatale in the 1890s: a sexualizing of newly seized power as a means to diminish and control.

Through the Orphic lens, Allen's paintings engage with the femme fatale in the face of contemporary visual culture—to weave, to snake, a serpentine structure all her own.

[1] Sarah Lippert, "Salomé to Medusa by Way of Narcissus: Moreau and Typological Conflation," *Artibus Et Historiae* 35, no. 69 (2014): 238.

[2] A rule set out by Joséphin Péladan, founder of the Salon de la Rose + Croix, strictly stated that under no condition were works by women to be exhibited.

The paintings of Los Angeles-based artist Theodora Allen (b. 1985, Los Angeles) are quiet, restrained, and at times unsettling. Drawing from music, literature, myth, and nature, Allen's meditative compositions investigate themes of temporality and eternity, exploring a space between the physical world and an interior mindscape. Solo exhibitions include *Weald*, Kasmin Gallery, New York (2019); *Vigil*, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (2017); and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (2015). Among her recent group shows are *American Women*, *The Infinite Journey*, La Patinoire Royale, Brussels (2020); *Pineal Eye Infection*, Seasons, Los Angeles (2020); *Deeper Than Inside*, High Art, Paris (2019); *Saturnine*, Chicago Manual Style, Chicago (2019); and *Self-preservation (with or without applause)*, Primary, Miami (2019). Allen holds an MFA in painting from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a BFA in painting from ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena, and has completed a residency at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, in Maine.

Stephanie Cristello is a critic and curator living and working in Chicago. She was previously the U.S. senior editor for *ArtSlant* and is the founding editor in chief of *THE SEEN*, *Chicago's International Journal of Contemporary and Modern Art*. Her writing has been published in *ArtReview*, *Elephant Magazine*, *frieze*, *BOMB*, *OSMOS*, *Portable Gray*, and numerous exhibition catalogues nationally and internationally. She holds a bachelor's degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is currently the artistic director at EXPO CHICAGO and the director and curator at Chicago Manual Style. Her forthcoming books are *Theodora Allen: Saturnine* (Motto, 2020) and *Barbara Kasten: Architecture and Film*, with contributors including Hans Ulrich Obrist (Skira, 2021).

# FLAUNT

## Theodora Allen's 'Saturnine' | A Conversation with Curator Stephanie Cristello

CONSTANZA FALCO RAEZ  
JULY 21, 2021



Theodora Allen, *The Cosmic Garden I*, 2016. Oil on linen, 78x 60 inches (198.1 x 152.4 cm).  
Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

I connect with Stephanie Cristello from Canada, where she is quarantining for 2 weeks before being able to come back to the US. She was in Denmark before, overlooking her most recent curatorial job: *Saturnine* at Kunsthall Aarhus. This was Cristello's first singular painter exhibition, showcasing works by Los Angeles-based artist Theodora Allen.

The exhibition is accompanied by a book of the same name, *Theodora Allen: Saturnine*. A catalogue published by Motto Books made up of fictional texts and critical essays. The book and exhibit alike investigate the use of symbols

in art, literature, music, film, and history, reflecting on the history of Saturn, which has become the symbol for melancholy, from ancient myth and the Middle Ages through to the present. Although they go hand in hand, they are not one and the same, explains Cristello, “the exhibition is not a carbon copy of the book, and the book is not an exhibition catalog that way.”

The exhibition ran from May 14 to July 18, but she is not hesitant to walk *Flaunt* through the exhibit, going in-depth about the book, Theodora’s works, and her curatorial process.



Theodora Allen, *Shield (Opium Poppy)*, 2018. Oil and watercolor on linen, 26 x 20 inches (66 x 50.8 cm).  
Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

**You recently curated the solo show by Theodora Allen at Kunsthall Aarhus, Titled Saturnine, how did the exhibition come about?**

I am a writer and a curator, but I would say I am a writer first and foremost, so each of the exhibitions I would do came with a publication, either a journal or a book, so the exhibitions would serve as beginnings for writing. I started on an essay of [Theodora’s] work about this painting that she had called “The Cosmic Garden I” (2017), which featured this fallen Saturn, which is on the cover of the book, and is the main piece in the exhibition in Denmark. I started writing about this idea of emblems, basically reading her works as a painterly language of history of symbols and motifs that have been generative throughout her practice but also throughout art history. And that essay turned into this very large text, but ended up being the first chapter of the book. So while that was happening I was also invited to curate at the Kunsthall Aarhus for a year in Denmark, and when they asked me to propose an artist that’s when I proposed doing a much larger exhibition that could result from the book. That was really the conception of how the show got started, and then in the process of doing the research for the book and putting everything

together, I did multiple studio visits with Theodora writing about all of the facets of her practice over the last 5 years and the end result is this institutional solo exhibition that she had in Europe, in Denmark

### **What can you tell us about the exhibition?**

The way we organized the exhibition is that we sort of built a wall, and the first room when you enter is for symbols of the natural world, so you'll see planets, hallucinogenic plants, snakes, hourglasses, candles...and in the second room, which is just divided by a wall on the opposite side of that Saturn painting that is really imposing in the space, there is this sort of machine room, which is where the new paintings of the bolts are [the "Life Thread" series], and it has elements of the natural world, like the Datura plant, which is also known as devil's snare or jimson weed. It's this type of wildflower that also used to be used in the middle ages as a hallucinogenic for medicine but still grows throughout Los Angeles today, so it's sort of this space where old meets new.

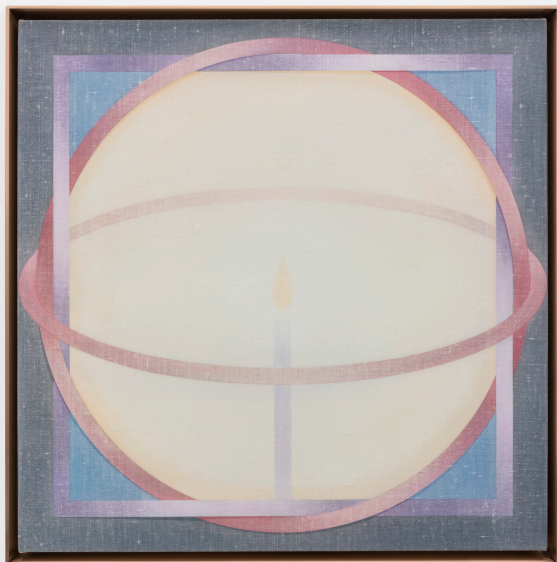
Theodora made 4 new works. There were 13 paintings in the exhibition in total, 9 of them were loans and borrowed from different collections. We basically wanted to represent one or two works for every body of work that she has, she works very serially but also will come back to certain subjects over the course of a few years to give the audience a certain sense of these recurring motifs.

### **How did you discover Theodora Allen's work?**

I had actually discovered Theodora's work in 2019, at an exhibition that was in New York. I wasn't familiar with her practice before, but she had a solo exhibition at Kasmin in NY, and I saw the show and I was actually working in a group exhibition by the same name of this exhibition that we did in Denmark, which was called Saturnine, and it was about the history and relationship between melancholy and the planet Saturn, and that group exhibition had a number of artists, and I was looking for one more artist to join the show and I discovered Theodora's work. And so she actually made a painting that went into that exhibition at my space in Chicago, called Chicago Manual Style.

### **Why did Theodora's work stand out to you so much?**

It was a really interesting research to embark on with an artist like Theodora that engages in this sort of timeless, eternal symbols and I don't think she is necessarily a representational painter. I think she makes image paintings, which was really interesting for me, that they are figurative in some ways but they are also these sort of imagined landscapes and proposed images and ideas that seem familiar but no one has ever really seen all together in these sorts of compositions. That was what I found really special about her work. It's this sort of icon painting that we haven't really seen since the renaissance, but also fueled with contemporary symbols as well, so they could only really exist now, but they do have this familiarity and history to them, that when you see them they bring up all of these other interests and subjects throughout not only art history but histories of medicine, or perception, or psychology. They transport you into these other realms. They have a special quality that I don't think many other contemporary paintings have at the moment.



Theodora Allen, *The Planet, No.3*, 2020. Oil on linen, 16x 16 inches (50.8 x 40.6 cm).  
Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

### **Tell us a little bit about the book.**

The first chapter was about this idea of Saturn, and introducing it as what was the symbol for melancholy for the ancients, establishing this idea of the four humors that Aristotle had come up with, which is that each of the temperaments of humankind can basically be related to four planets, but also an element of your body. So for Saturn it was melancholy and the spleen, if somebody had apathy it was caused by the moon and it had to do with your throat, if somebody had a happy nature it was linked to Jupiter and the blood, and then for Mars, it was aggression. That history goes unchanged for about 2000 years, until the Middle Ages, where all of the others sort of die out in common practice, but Saturn remains. And so you'll start having the word 'saturnine' to mean sadness, and it enters language and enters our consciousness in a different way.

The second chapter is one of my favorites. That's where we go into the history of the color blue, and how blueness is an emotion but also this incredibly seductive color that artists have engaged with. It goes through music and film and the history of using the color blue. One of the things that Theodora and I both loved is that blue is this color in nature that doesn't really exist, there are very few things in nature that are blue, except for atmosphere, that basically denotes distance. It's a color that you can never reach.

And then there is a chapter all about representations of music in painting, which was really based on her inclusion of guitars, which is a more contemporary instrument, but also ancient instruments like the lyre, which is a harp that was played by a lot of figures in Greek mythology, so it sort of puts the ancient greek myth next to the zeitgeist of 1960s and 70s California, where all of those aesthetics come back to life. It's this aesthetic that comes back every 200 years or so, in popular music, and it gets closer the closer that we get to the present. This idea of aesthetics coming in and out of cultural consciousness.

And then the last chapter looks at the history of symbols that we use on a daily basis. It goes into the history of how the heart has become popular, and goes through the first time that it was written and how it was the result of a

mistake while describing what the heart looked like and goes into the history of love, cupid, all of the representations of the extremities of human experience in a single little heart symbol.

### **How do the book and the exhibition relate? How are they different?**

Not every single one of the chapters is worked into the exhibition, it's more a companion piece to the exhibition more than anything else. But I would say a lot of those histories and symbols that we cover in the book do make their way into the solo exhibition as a full picture of her practice. Because we were working on this book over the course of a year, I would say they go pretty hand in hand, but the exhibition is not a carbon copy of the book, and the book is not an exhibition catalog that way. I think they both do different things. In the exhibition we wanted the paintings to have space and tell their stories too.



Theodora Allen, *Wildfire, No. 4*, 2016. Oil on linen, 56x 42 inches (142.2 x 106.7 cm). Courtesy of Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

### **Where do you draw inspiration from for your texts and exhibits?**

Inspiration for me is mostly through the lens of classics and the humanities. So I often write about Greek mythology or ancient narratives, but I only write about contemporary art. I think Greek mythology basically gave us the blueprint for any type of situation that could exist, so I like to often use these frameworks in order to apply them to present issues or phenomena in ways that basically import those old histories into the present while helping us learn about art and the human condition a little more closely. But it's very much based in myth, legend, and the phenomenon that surrounds us going deeper into why that specific thing exists.

I'm also incredibly interested in language, and why words have the meaning that they do, so a lot of the texts that I write are often poetic, but also I try to take the concept or the form that an artist will have in their work and adopt that same form within my writing practice, so the text will take the form that the artist dictates. I guess it's a bit like method acting, where you take on what their ideas are and how they go through the world, and how they come up with images, and I want to give the experience of reading a text that is as close to the work as possible. So essentially translating visual art into text that can give an image into somebody's mind, or that their experience of reading is as similar as it can be to seeing a show or seeing a work of art.

### **What is your favorite fact about Saturn that you found while writing the book?**

I think it would be that even though Saturn in ancient times (in Roman myth, or also known as the Greek God *Kronos*, which means time) was male, the personification of Melancholy (a curse that the planet caused) in literature and art were all female. An anti-feminine sentiment remains very much relevant today...



# Galerie

## Six Must-See Figurative Painting Shows in New York

Highlights include soulful collages by Erik Parker and paintings of celebrated women by Carlos Vega

Paul Laster

February 28, 2019



Theodora Allen, *Monument, No. 3*, 2018. Oil and watercolor on linen. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

[EXTRACT]

While figuration in painting is nothing new (the first instances appeared tens of thousands of years ago on cave walls), the way artists use it is constantly evolving. And at the moment, it's definitely in the air. Rounding up New York gallery shows by a group of living painters who prefer representation to abstraction, we take you around town—from Midtown and Chelsea to the Flower District and the Lower East Side—to catch six of the best practitioners of figurative painting working today.

Theodora Allen approaches plant life somewhat more slyly by softly weaving it into her symbolic still lifes. Blurring the boundary between landscapes and mindscapes, Allen untangles the medieval histories of Norse and English cultures to create sublime paintings of flora-filled shields and monuments. The shields envelop such psychoactive and medical plants as belladonna, marijuana and opium poppies, while the monuments depict the symbology of medieval Tarot cards—the cup, the coin, the branch, and the sword—in arched window-like forms surrounded by the same type of mentally destabilizing plants and weeds. Painted with a luminous, misty-blue, monochromatic palette, Allen’s enchanting canvases share the aesthetic appeal of early cyanotype pictures made by the first photographers during the Romantic era—thankfully resurrecting that poetic style for these uncertain times.



eazel featured

# Magic in the Making: Theodora Allen's *weald* at Kasmin Gallery, New York

Nina Blumberg

February 26, 2019



Detail of Theodora Allen, *Monument, No. 1*, 2018, Oil paint and watercolor on linen, 67 x 57 inches (170.2 x 144.8 cm).  
Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

Theodora Allen first began showing her otherworldly, ethereal paintings at Blum & Poe, the gallery that represents her in Los Angeles, where she lives and works. From her debut show in Los Angeles in 2015, to her first solo show in New York currently on view at Kasmin Gallery (Theodora Allen, *weald*, Kasmin Gallery, New York (January 24 - March 9, 2019), Allen's work is consistently enchanting and worthy of deeper discussion.

Allen has set herself apart from contemporaries by establishing a symbolic language wholly unique to her artistic practice, inspired by the artist's fascination with philosophy, mysticism, Medieval iconography and more. The plants and other objects comprising the paintings in *weald* serve as analogues for deeper ideas of transcendence and introspection. For example, the moth is a motif that Allen uses to represent time and its inherent fleeting nature; additionally, moths have an internal navigation system that drives them to light that often ends in their demise. The

hourglass, on the other hand, is a complementary emblem of time to the moth, as it is both measured and reversible and thus holds a more positive, hopeful significance for the artist.



Installation view: Theodora Allen, *weald*, Kasmin Gallery, New York. Jan 24 - Mar 9, 2019. Photography by Diego Flores.

Allen has revealed that there is a decisively humanist undertone to her paintings, an exploration of the idea that humans have control over their decisions in life rather than simply following predetermined, unchangeable trajectories. The symbols she chooses convey the universal concept of the search and desire of human beings to know what lies ahead rather than simply living in the present.

The Kasmin exhibition *weald* is divided into two groups of alluring, blue-hued paintings. They are split both in a physical sense (literally in separate rooms), and figuratively in terms of the iconography depicted. The first room of the gallery holds a group of smaller works, each composed of a shield or crest-like shape with a different plant species inside of it. Allen calls this group the 'dwale' paintings, given that 'dwale' is a medieval term for a common anaesthetic drink used to induce sleep. It would have been made of opium, poppy, henbane and nightshade-- the very same plants the artist has chosen to feature in these works.

According to Allen, she is "inspired by weeds and wildflowers, things that aren't necessarily rarefied plants... There's an accessibility and a sense of the ordinary in a lot of these plants." The chosen plants are survivalist species that thrive regardless of limited access to water and nutrients. In these particular paintings, Allen homes in particularly on species from around the world that are valued for their uses in natural remedies-- narcotics, destabilizers, medicinal or otherwise-- as in the medieval 'dwale' potion.



Theodora Allen, *Shield (Belladonna)*, 2018, Oil and watercolor on linen, 26 x 20 inches (66 x 50.8 cm).  
Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

The second room of the gallery holds a group of four paintings, the 'weald' group, that still embody the same medieval aesthetic as the 'dwale' paintings, almost as if they were illustrations taken from an ancient illuminated manuscript. It is important to note that the term 'weald' is an Old English word referring to a heavily-wooded area, or wild and uncultivated region. This meaning is again very fitting, as the scenes of each painting are that of a hand raising a goblet, a hand holding a branch under a full moon, a hand wielding a sword, and a hand cupping a star coin, all set against thick woodland backgrounds. These icons derive from 15th century Tarot card symbology; the shield defends, the cup nourishes, the weapon confronts.

Taken together, the two groups of paintings lend a duality in meaning to the exhibition as a whole. The connotations of 'dwale' pertaining to a wooded landscape and 'weald' relating to sleeping/dreaming create a fascinating juxtaposition between the concepts of a physical landscape versus a "mindscape," or scene from one's dreams. 'Dwale' is also an anagram for 'weald,' underscoring the push and pull between the show's two interconnected halves.



Theodora Allen, *Monument, No. 1*, 2018, Oil paint and watercolor on linen, 67 x 57 inches (170.2 x 144.8 cm).  
Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York.

In addition to being symbolically layered in meaning, Allen's works are layered in regards to the artistic techniques that she employs to create them. They are executed with the scientific precision with which one would illustrate botanical specimens in a textbook, yet still somehow maintain an ephemeral, otherworldly quality. Allen painstakingly creates this effect through a multi-part process: first, she pools watercolor onto the canvas, letting the paint run freely to the edges of the canvas. This initial step leaves an organic, watery stain when it dries, upon which she then applies oil paint. The resistance of material between the oil paint and the watercolor creates the dreamy, atmospheric quality that is so characteristic of Allen's paintings. After adding more fine layers of oil paint on top of the original dried watercolor layer, she wipes away some of the oil pigment before it fully dries. This technique brings out a faint impression of the texture of the linen canvas underneath the paint, diversifying the painting's surface even further.

The paintings on view in *weald* are not only technically excellent and captivating, but Allen has also eloquently crafted a deeper narrative for the exhibition that gives the show substance that isn't easily paralleled.

# CULTURED

## ARTIST THEODORA ALLEN EMBRACES THE ELEMENTS AT KASMIN GALLERY

A. G. WOLLEN

February 7, 2019



Installation view of Theodora Allen *weald* at Kasmin, January 24 – March 9, 2019. Photography by Diego Flores.

In Theodora Allen's paintings, weeds grow, translucent but stubborn. The plants themselves are drawn with scientific precision, specimen-like. While so many paintings these days announce themselves as artworks, bellowing their contemporaneity, her works seem almost like artifacts, remnants of something simultaneously here and not here—like a glassy Xerox of an ancient illuminated manuscript. They are what I imagine I'd find inside Hildegard von Bingen's dream journal, if she were born in California in 1985.

In the first room of her show "weald" at Kasmin Gallery, seven plants look sun-bleached onto diaphanous blue shields, crests for the invisible. These plants, in Allen's words, are all "narcotics, or destabilizers, or medicinal"—there's your now iconographic marijuana leaf, next to your stinking nightshade, your wild poppy—but also "they are all survivalist plants. They thrive in poor soil, they don't need a lot of water." I respond, "The kind of plants that take over old castles." Allen quickly jokes: "Or freeway overpasses."

The fortress of long-fallen monarchies on a misty moor, or the intersection where the 134 freeway meets the 2, concrete woven like lace. That is where Allen’s work lives, in the barely-there distinction between the ruined and the waiting to be. The second room holds four large paintings that depict the four central symbols of the original tarot from the 15th century, suspended within a classical window motif: half portal, half bell jar. But the objects are discarded, disembodied, overgrown by the same ecosystem of plants she previously catalogued. Tendrils curl around the edges of the image; petals fall from frame.



Allen’s *Shield (Marijuana)*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery.

Allen’s process, too, mirrors this liminal space. First, she describes how she leaves “a pool of watercolor which I let evaporate on the canvas. Dependent on climate and weather conditions, the water evaporates at different rates.” The watercolor marks the time of making and is incorporated into the drawing itself: a crack in the stone, a vein of a leaf. Then, Allen builds her hyper-detailed image with layers of oil paint, simultaneously stripping what she has put down as she goes along: “I just add and remove, essentially making and unmaking. It’s like coaxing the image into this place, in between forming and disappearing.” Eventually, the fabric of the canvas starts to wear, resisting the tide-pull of rhythmic application and erasure.

Allen embraces what she calls “the un-wieldiness of the materials,” but usually, when an artist commits to letting organic conditions dictate the shape of the work, they end up in deep abstraction, not the realm of botanical illustration. But Allen is persistently figurative, however evanescent. The references of the show—the medieval iconography, Pre-Raphaelite mythos, fin de siècle filigree, 1970s psychedelia—are all historical moments where artists pulled the past up to meet them, as the end of the world seemed newly within reach. But here, each apocalypse blurs in the blue of twilight. The world continues. Her haunting pharmakon blooms, no matter the soil.



# ELEPHANT

## Theodora Allen's Ghostly Paintings Hark Back to the Middle Ages

Margaret Andersen

January 30, 2019



Viewing myths and fairytales from a Humanist perspective, the American painter's latest body of ethereal works reference the plants that contributed to the first widely used anaesthetics, as well as weeds and wildflowers in her native LA. Margaret Andersen visits her in the sunny Pasadena studio where she lives and works. A shield for protection; a cup to replenish; a weapon to fight. These allegorical symbols are at the centre of artist Theodora Allen's recent work and debut New York solo exhibition, *weald*, on show now at Kasmin Gallery. Part landscape, part mind-scape, Allen's otherworldly oil paintings evoke that twilight state of consciousness between waking and dreaming with her use of archetypal imagery and lush, psychotropic plant life. I visit Allen at her studio tucked away

against the sunny hillsides of northeast Los Angeles, where we talk about her creative process and why the white noise that comes from living by the freeway actually sounds like the ocean, when you think about it.

You were born and raised in LA. Has that environment impacted the way you approach your work? I think definitely the quality of light has a major influence that runs through my work, since my paintings focus on revealing that light source through layers of sheer colour without the use of applied white. But I feel like the California sunshine affects everybody's experience of this city: even just in the sun-bleached quality of posters and books that you see in the windows of shops, or in the way the city's been recorded through photography, there's a certain light that's in everything.



Botanical elements are a recurring theme in your work. Is access to nature important to you for inspiration, or are these purely imagined landscapes of the mind?

I think it's both. One of the amazing things about living in LA is that you can be in a city and then in ten minutes be in a canyon or be by the ocean. A lot of the imagery for these paintings came out of the research I was doing at the Arboretum's Botanical Library. There's always a period before I start working where I just spend time gathering information and imagery and mapping everything out. I'm inspired by weeds and wildflowers, things that aren't necessarily rarefied plants. You'll see them growing in your backyard or on the side of a freeway overpass. There's an accessibility and a sense of the ordinary in a lot of these plants; however, for this upcoming show I chose to focus on plants from around the world that transcend the commonplace in their use as remedies and aphrodisiacs and sacraments.



Tell us a little bit about your studio space and neighbourhood—how do your physical surroundings influence your process?

I found a very industrial space to work in right out of grad school but it never really felt like the right environment for me. So after a year of being there I started looking for a more domestic space where I could live and work. I found a small mid-century home here in Pasadena. It's tiny but it has a lower level with an open floor plan and a lot of natural light. There's not a lot of wall space though, so right before a show it becomes an extremely dense, salon-style workspace.

What is it like living and working in such a suburban part of the city?

It's a very peaceful place to call home. My street is very quiet, and my neighbours are mostly older retired people. The house is situated at the top of the hill so I can sit out on my balcony and get an amazing view of the city. Pasadena is strange in that it feels far away from things but also still part of the world. Maybe it's the fact that the freeway is so nearby. At first it really bothered me but I actually feel like I've come to appreciate it being there; it feels quintessentially LA that within all its disparate communities the freeways are what connects to the rest of the city. When I first moved in I was complaining about the constant white noise of the cars to a friend, but she said "Just pretend it's the ocean." That really changed my perspective!



What's the physical process of achieving that ethereal quality in your paintings like?

For this show I took a slightly different approach from my usual process. I started with pools of watercolour and just left the pigments where they naturally wanted to run to the edges of the canvas, so when they dried it would leave this organic, watery stain. When applying oil to watercolour there's a material resistance, which isn't easy to control and it brings an elemental quality to the work. The linen that I paint on then becomes very atmospheric, almost like a twinkling, celestial sky.



Another part of the process involved putting down very fine layers of oil paint and then wiping it away before it dried and so you get almost a ghost image in the texture of the linen. It's something that I developed just through trial and error but it started out because I was making a lot of painting experiments and not wanting to ever just leave things as is, so there was a lot of wiping away and painting into previous layers, allowing traces of those former images to get left behind. And then I just found that it really resonated with a lot of the themes I was exploring, and it was interesting to see the physical evidence of making and removing and the process of time.



What was the inspiration for the new series in your current show?

The show is divided into two bodies of work: *Shields (dwale)* and *Monuments (weald)*. In terms of research, I came across the term “dwale”, which in old Norse means sleep or trance, and in the Middle Ages it was the term given to one of the first widely used anaesthetics, which is made out of opium, poppy, henbane and devilry nightshade, all of which are the plants that I feature in these paintings.



*Dwale* is also an anagram for *weald*, an Old English term for forest. I've always been interested in archaic terms. So these two words seemed to perfectly locate the work in dual form, one as landscape the other as mind-scape. But I think there's an essential or timeless feeling to the work that transcends that notion of archaic. While the language is of the past, these symbols are still relevant to us today. They were actually taken from a card game that was used in the Middle Ages, one that would develop into the Tarot. It was used less as a form of divination and more as a way for describing the various aspects of earthly existence and the human condition. So much of my work draws from myth and fairytales, and often the struggle in these stories is that you're fighting against a sort of predetermined course for yourself, similarly with the Tarot. I approach it from a much more of a Humanist perspective, that it's more of a belief in your own choices rather than these predetermined trajectories. However, the position that I want to convey in my work is that it still supports this almost universal idea of the search and our desire as human beings to know what lies ahead.

Photography by Max Knight

# ***office***

## Landscape / Mindscape

John Martin Tilley

January 27, 2019



Plants have an enduring power over their onlookers. They seduce us with their silent stillness. They fascinate us with their ability to thrive. They entice us with their potential flavor. They ensnare us with their abilities to soothe the body and alter the mind. They are reminders of our mortality.

Theodora Allen has tapped into the myriad ways that plants intoxicate us with their latest exhibition, *weald*, at Paul Kasmin in New York. Her paintings are like Wedgwood china with a mystical twist—luminous and symbolic, these are pictures from a world between worlds. Archways lead us into the misty blue of her restrained palette, objects held by disembodied hands are archaic symbols lifted from The Tarot. These are still lifes with active inner lives, landscapes that are gateways into a lucid dream.

What world lies on the other side? *office* spoke with Theodora to find out.



**I love that the exhibition title is an anagram—it's so cool. How did you come up with that?**

In doing research for these paintings, which involved looking into the histories of various psychoactive and medicinal plants, I came across the term *dwale*—an Old Norse word that translates to 'trance' or 'sleep.' *Dwale*, also the given name for a widely used anesthetic in the middle ages; a heady tincture comprised of various narcotic herbage. Through *dwale*, I came across the anagram *weald*—another archaic term, this one from the Old English meaning 'forest.' With *weald* and *dwale*, and the linguistic play between them, we have two words that locate the imagery in the show to a misty space, somewhere at the cross section of landscape and mindscape.

**There is something very Medieval about the pictures—do you have any favorite hits from Medieval or Renaissance art?**

I'm endlessly inspired by the stained glass windows and woven tapestries of the Medieval period. The Unicorn Tapestries at the Cloisters are among my favorites.

**I'm a fan of the Tarot card-like imagery—do you read cards? Have you ever visited a psychic?**

The emblems in the *Monument (weald)* paintings are based on a suite of symbols from early Tarot card games from the middle ages—the cup, coin, branch, and sword—motifs that have historically stood for the various planes and experiences of earthly existence, essentially what is known as the human condition. My interest in these symbols is rooted in an inquiry that is decidedly humanist, but the avenues that we take to define and discover meaning and purpose in life are endlessly fascinating to me, and for some that includes divination. I'm interested in these histories, but I don't personally subscribe to any such mystical belief system. I believe in the transcendent power of art.

**Do you grow any plants or herbs? What kind of power do plants have over humans? How do you channel this power?**

I do have an area on my hillside where I've cultivated a few of the plants that appear in this body of work. Most of the imagery of the *Jimsonweed* were gleaned from this source. The *Jimsonweed* plant is ubiquitous in Los Angeles—they grow wild and widespread, cropping up in wastelands and off of freeway on-ramps. In the spring, they populate the Arroyo River path near my home and studio in Pasadena, where I often walk in the evenings. From there, I borrowed a few seeds and planted them on my hillside. All of the plants in these paintings belong to a world of remedies, poisons, sacraments and aphrodisiacs that alter, enhance, or destabilize the human experience in one way or another—for better or worse.

**There is a lovely sense of restraint in your work—what would happen if you totally let go?**

My painting process is slow and precise. The light source in the work comes from the white ground (the gesso), so there's a certain amount of preservation that takes place in order to maintain that purity and glow from underneath. That said, I always leave some room in the work for aberration, and for changing course along the way. Sometimes, that happens quite dramatically, and other times those decisions are subtle—faint marks and ghost images visible through the layers; a record of how they were made. If I totally let go... well, there might not be any paintings—they might take a different form entirely.



Monument No. 1 & 3. Images courtesy Kasmin Gallery.



Shield (Belladonna, Opium Poppy & Marijuana) Images courtesy Kasmin Gallery.



## THE ART NEWSPAPER

# Three exhibitions to see in New York this weekend

*Two venues of Andy Warhol, and young painter Theodora Allen's ancient symbolism*

Linda Yablonsky, Victoria Stapley-Brown and Margaret Carrigan

January 24, 2019



Installation view of the exhibition Andy Warhol—From A to B and Back Again Photo: Ron Amstutz.

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Looking at Theodora Allen's delicate, muted watercolour and oil-on-linen paintings that are filled with mystical symbology, psychotropic plants, full moons and other various celestial bodies is like falling into a Pre-Raphaelite-tinged hippie fever dream. The 33-year-old Los Angeles-based artist toes the line between transcendental and twee in her debut solo show in New York at Kasmin Gallery (until 9 March) with a slew of new paintings featuring ancient symbols, tarot tropes and floral imagery that are part surreal, part kitsch. While some of her previous paintings have smacked of a Stevie Nicks album cover—particularly one of guitar ringed by a floral wreath—her newest works at Kasmin are spellbindingly sincere in their quest for meaning through beauty.