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Cosmic Attractor: On Antone Könst's "Cuttings"

出處 | Gabriel Kruis , January 2022

Painting flowers is a cliché raised to the level of taboo. The bouquets which comprise Antone Könst's new show at the Marianne Boesky Gallery not only defy this taboo, but in their abundance and generosity, they flout it. If this is a review, it honors the paintings in that it hews closer to an ecstatic recitation of a garden catalog than a critical act. There's the red blurred cup of a ranunculus the size of a satellite dish; the foppishly lazy, undulating, grey-blue daisies; the anemones quivering like Jell-O fresh out of the mold; the fleshy, tissuey, begonias are like wads of crepe; the lush almost flat carnations, peaked with pink tips like a well-beaten meringue; and even the noxious seeming blooms are redolent of texture and depth, the black orchids flush with aubergines and blues that more deeply blacken the blacks.



Cuttings (Installation View), Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, 2022 Photo credit: Peter Kaiser

But to say they are mere flowers would be a category mistake. When my wife Emily saw them she said, "They're not just flowers. They're whole worlds." Maybe this comes down to their dimensions, at 78"x60" they are magnanimous in size and composition; the array of textures and hues, commodious rather than imposing. And if these paintings include art historical varietals, these resonances appear as much as any flower does, as

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accidents of nature. As if cut into the surface, sketchy drab Dubuffet pochoirs are declaratively absent, while matte Warholian pansies, mute as ever, nestle among candystriped primroses and nearly venereal Kusama polka-dotted tiger lillies.

Plainly erotic, incidental anatomic counterpoints proliferate in the same way these "art historical" accidents appear. Here, an anemone's fuschia aureola pricked by an alert, pollen-yellow nipple; there a bumptious purple lily, round, plush and chalic, opening its pink inner lips to a butterfly who's ready to nestle into its folds.



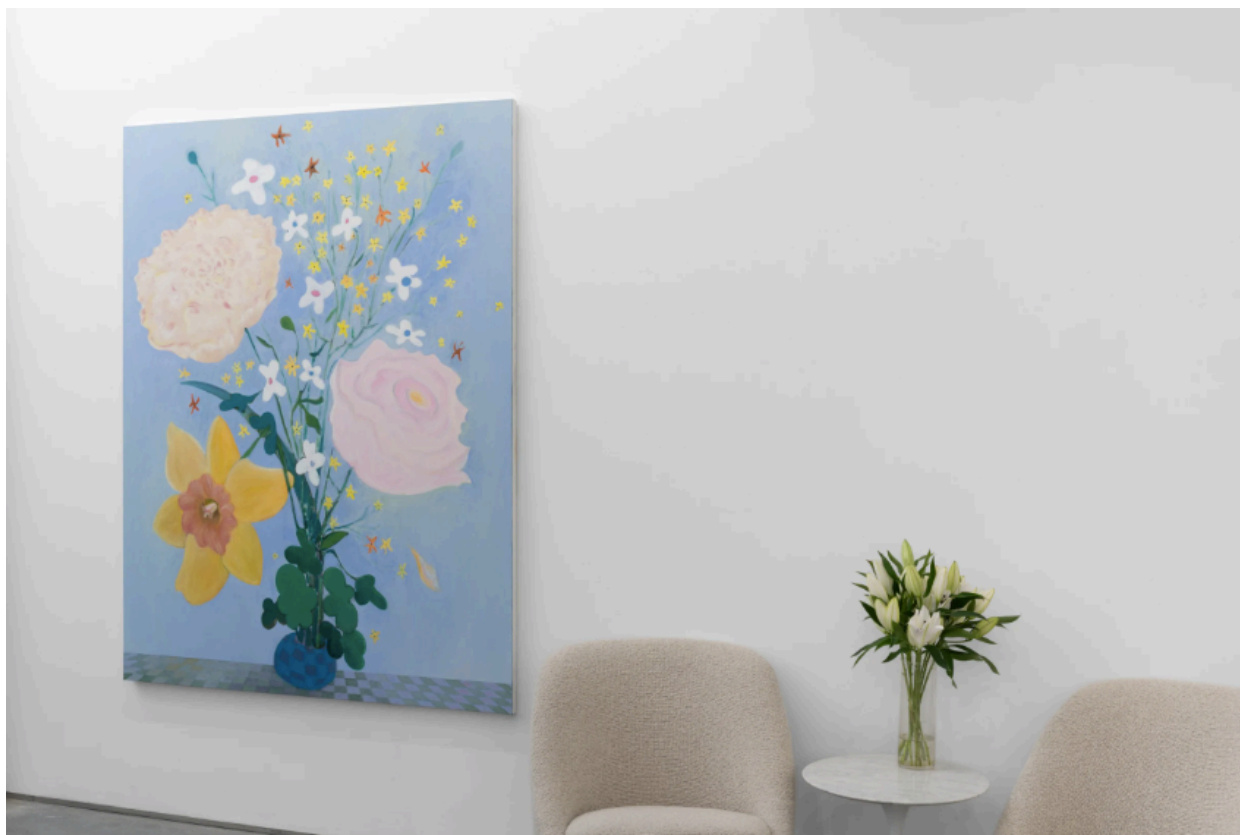
Cuttings (Installation View), Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York, 2022 Photo credit: Peter Kaiser

Könst's father was a flower grower in the Netherlands who still cuts 3,000 peonies a year and the painter grew up helping him in the flower fields. Yet his paintings are unlike those of his forebears, the Dutch "masters," who's gorgeous, photoreal images nearly plasticize or embalm their subjects with control. Conversely, Könst approaches his subjects with the same, participatory awe of a pollinating insect: they loom with intimacy, love, and even awe. They leap out at you, brush you back, then invite you in, mimicking a flowers' innate creative impulses—the profusion of color and form, the impulse to attract. But amid such demonstrative bursts of color and form-- like any flower-- they equally display, in anther and pistil, subtlety and delicacy. A brushed aura of blue surrounding drifting pollen. And where there is energy in every brushstroke, there remain traces of melancholy, rot. They are evocatively pungent, stinking of Lillies at Easter and Easter pastels; a nostalgia for the frustrated, adolescent sex-drive; the sundrenched heat of a lazy late-spring day.

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Sopping with moontones, the backdrops, meanwhile, appear otherworldly. The aforementioned black orchids set off, for instance, by twilight periwinkles, cheese-greens, and mildly phosphorescent yellows. Recalling Morris Louis's color veils, each moves through carefully composed gradation to set off or subdue the florabunda that jet from the face-shaped vases that contain them.

With so much energy to draw the focus elsewhere, nearly at knee level, these vases are the last thing you see. Like Aryobolos embellished with humanizing details they are the only evidence of our species' complex and fragile emotions in these exuberant paintings. Inanimate and paradoxically lifelike, they are lonely, perplexed, dour; a few, bearing Janus-faces, are nonetheless downcast, lonely, or alarmed.

The term "sessile," a botanical term for immobile species, describes these vases best. It's a word I take from the chapter on Flowers in "The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture," which Könst cites as an inspiration for the paintings. For obvious reasons, this idea of immobility, of stasis, is timely. Könst may or may not have been thinking of this, but like any of us he was likely feeling the arrested nature of pandemic life.

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Of this condition, the author Emanuele Coccia writes: “Where no movement, no action, no choice are possible, meeting someone or something is possible exclusively through a metamorphosis of the self. It is only within itself that a being without motion can encounter the world.” This series, begun in the midst of the pandemic, is a testament to the idea that a surabundance of desire—ordinary as it is— can result in passive emanations of great beauty.

Coccia says things like: plants are not the garden, they are the gardeners themselves; that seeds contain a mechanism within them, a technician waiting to manifest the design. They are the artist, imminent in the material of their own becoming. And he makes the argument that flowers are rational and aesthetic, “cosmic attractors.” One might even say plants are paradigmatic, or supra rational. He calls them “cosmogonic.” Creators. By creating through their very being the conditions for all life on earth, plants set the rubric for life, which is one of rational fecundity, intraspecies intimacy, and co-being. In contrast to former beliefs about evolution, all is not war in nature, not simply survival of the fittest, but principled on symbiosis, companionability, a confraternity of softness.

Könst, via Coccia, seems to imply that flowers are life and death itself, not just emblems of it; not just something you cast upon a grave. As the reproductive organs of the beings that sustain our planet as we know it, they in a sense make possible our every breath. We are the barbarians in their world, living in irrecognition, in the irrationality of our anthropocentrism; the Narcissi for whose cursory ideas about plants and planthood conscribes them to the role of scenery, a backdrop to our own image in the pool.

If Coccia makes an argument for a more floracentric worldview, Könst’s paintings are an encomium to what plants have to teach us.