

Summer Wheat

“I made an entire sketchbook of preliminary drawings before these paintings came into being. It’s almost as if the visual language of the drawings gets amplified in the paintings”

Using techniques that she has developed herself, pushing thick paint through wire mesh, Summer Wheat creates tactile, highly detailed and expressive works. Drawing equal inspiration from outsider art and academic painting, her recent work asks the question: What if women weren’t merely gatherers, but hunters too?

Words: Ariela Gittlen

Summer Wheat (her name from birth), is something of an alchemist. Though years of trial and error, the Oklahoma-born, New York-based artist has developed a technique in which acrylic paint that is the consistency of wet clay is pressed through fine metal mesh, making the results look, from a distance, like the knotted fibres of a tapestry. Her large-scale paintings perform a pointillist magic, pixelating at close range, resolving at a distance.

How did you begin using mesh screens as a surface?
It started when I began asking these questions about paint. Like, how do you make paint into an object, how do you make paint into a tapestry?





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Portrait by Tim Smyth

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Heavy Lifting, 2018
Acrylic and aluminium on
mesh
365.8 x 172.8 cm

*Wrestling Alligator with Bare
Hands*, 2018
Acrylic on aluminium mesh
173 x 244 cm

Some artists might solve that problem by experimenting with textiles. Why was it important that your tapes-tries were made of paint? In 2006 I visited an exhibition of the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers' quilts [inventive geometric quilts made by female African American women in Gee's Bend, Alabama] at the High Museum in Atlanta, and it was this epic moment for me. Life was lived with those blankets—you could see the cigarette burns. They were never meant to be seen as pieces of art. I stayed in that exhibition forever—I couldn't bring myself to leave. When I finally did, I went to see the museum's permanent collection, where paintings by Jonathan Lasker, Peter Halley and Frank Stella were on view. These male white academic painters were working with geometric abstraction too, similar to the Gee's Bend quilts, but from a completely different point of view. When I left the museum that day, I realized that I wanted to find a way to make paint into thread.

What are the challenges of this approach? Everything I do works with a sense of blindness. I have to press the paint through the wire mesh from behind, so I'm not able to see the front.

And yet your sketches resemble your finished work very closely. I plan a lot. In the last few years I've become really rigorous about planning. I made an entire sketchbook of preliminary drawings before these paintings came into being. It's almost as if the visual language of the drawings gets amplified in the paintings.

Your recent show "Gamekeepers" at Andrew Edlin Gallery included large-scale painted scenes and towering tulipiere-style ceramic vases; the imagery of both focused on female hunters. What drew you to this subject? Our history has always been told through one very specific perspective in which women have often been marginalized, restricted to domestic settings or left out completely. I've been looking at a lot of images of male hunters in ancient tapestries and paintings and then replaced them with women to create an alternate history. I don't think of the hunters literally, they're really a metaphor for women taking on new roles today. I actually had a really hard time when I started to do the drawings for these pieces because their subjects are sort of violent. I had a hard time showing hunters grabbing an animal in a way that could be harmful.

Because hurting an animal is so painful for you to imagine? Yes, it was a visceral response. And on the other hand I didn't want to make it look too much like a cartoon, or dated, or too dainty. On the tulipieres I ended up adding little ice-cream cones, cell phones and things like that. I didn't want them to read too much like artifacts, because I'm really talking about a cultural shift that's happening today, using the past as a lens. It isn't that I woke up and decided I wanted to make work with a feminist slant, but it's the moment that we're in. I didn't even realize how bad things still were until a couple of years ago when I started looking at the statistics about under-representation of women in the art world. This major disparity is something we continue to grapple with.

Descriptions of hunter-gatherer societies often rely on the assumption that women naturally nurture and men naturally hunt, and those roles are understood to be scientific or biological, but you're saying it could have been another way. Or maybe that it is this way. Those are the kind of questions I'm asking. Maybe because I'm the first woman in my family to have a career.

The women in your family have all been homemakers? Right. I've had to remap my understanding of my own biology to find a way to imagine myself having a career as an artist. It took a really long time for me to re-programme myself. Although I wasn't really raised to be a homemaker; my grandfathers and my dad never treated me any differently because I was female.

What about your female relatives? It was a little confusing in that regard. My grandmother was very interested in knowledge. She used to read encyclopedias all day and was on *Jeopardy*. I was always envious of both her and my other grandmother who was very fortunate in her lifestyle. My other grandmother created these enormous blue-themed installations at Christmastime—blue environments with blue dishes, blue trees, blue lights, blue ornaments—everything was beautiful. She was very much an artist, but her artistry was only practiced and supported at home. It's only recently that I realized that they weren't free. I'd always seen my grandmothers as having these amazing opportunities to explore knowledge or artistry but actually they weren't able to fully develop who they were.