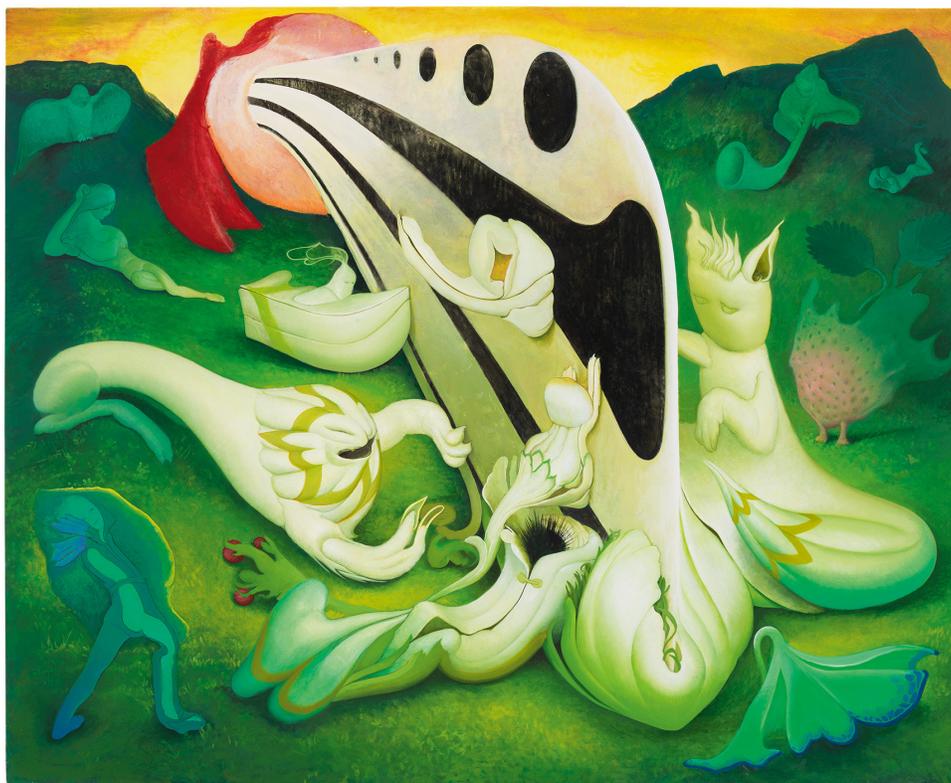


Idiosyncratic Nature: Donald Kuspit on Inka Essenhigh's Flowers and Patrice Charbonneau's Shoals

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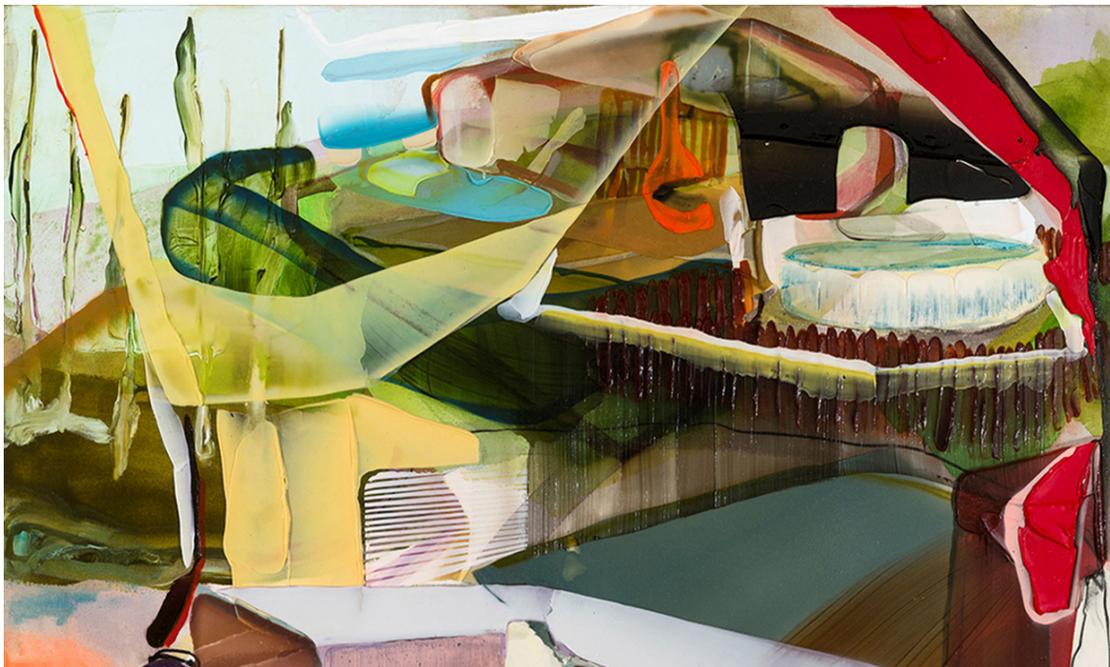


Inka Essenhigh, *Dawns Early Light*, 2019, Enamel on canvas, 40 x 50 inches. Courtesy Miles McEnery Gallery.

What draws us to Inka Essenhigh's flowers and Patrice Charbonneau shoals is their idiosyncrasy—the idiosyncrasy inherent to nature, as the art historian Max J. Friedländer writes, alluding to “the seeming anarchy of landscape-forms,” the “seemingly fortuitous disorder of landscape-forms,” for Friedländer first made explicitly evident in the “patchy, loose-knit” landscape paintings of the Impressionists. Charbonneau's paintings seem loose-knit—full of patchy, shifting forms, as shoals are, whether ambiguously a shoal of fish, that is, a number of fish swimming together, or a sandbank or sandbar creating a shallow. It is this ambiguity—the double meaning of shoal—that gives them their strange profundity, their evocative power, unconscious meaning, for the self-dramatizing forms are expressions of energy, inherent--seemingly “instinctive”--to nature. We are in the unconscious depths with Charbonneau's manic, overcharged painterly gestures, extravagantly elaborated often compact patches of force-filled colors,

with surges of black and white. Drips often call attention to the flatness of the canvas, and many of the gestures seem flattened on it, as though to mark and inform it with their momentum. There is an angry grandeur to the paintings, a sort of majestic intensity.

Is Charbonneau perhaps having a fantasy of mystical merger with Mother Nature, for life supposedly originated in and was mothered by the sea—aren't a shoal of fish her children?, weren't we all fish before some of us grew legs and climbed out of the sea onto land? Or perhaps of swimming in the depths of the unconscious, as Pollock did in such all-over paintings as *The Blue Unconscious*, 1947 and *The Deep*, 1953—but not drowning as Pollock did. There is a vigor to Charbonneau's gestures that suggest he is swimming for his life. Structure is implicit, however mangled—the often solid gestures read as shards of structure, suggesting that we are looking at some archaeological ruin of a building—perhaps alluding to the fact that Charbonneau is a professional architect as well as an expressionist painter—in his *Antonomase* series, 2018 and *Semaphore* series, 2019. Charbonneau's fragmentary gestures tend to hold together—they tend to be compact and stable however forceful—while Pollock's atmospheric gestures are unstable and tend to dissipate or collapse on impact with the canvas. Charbonneau's paintings may seem as anarchistic as Pollock's paintings—without a governing principle—but Charbonneau's gesturalism is subliminally geometrical. In none of these paintings, whether we read them as grandly (and ruthlessly) gestural or subliminally (and complexly) structured, is he lying *Full Fathom Five* at the bottom of the oceanic unconscious, to allude to Pollock's 1947 painting with that title, which alludes to Shakespeare's poem "Full fathom five thy father lies" in *The Tempest*. Pollock's paintings are finally memento mori, Charbonneau's paintings are recklessly alive. Charbonneau's nature is idiosyncratically vital, Pollock's paintings are idiosyncratically futile.



Patrice Charbonneau, *Foreign Domesticity*, 2020. Acrylic, charcoal, and aerosol on canvas, 47 x 63 inches. Courtesy Denise Bibro Fine Art.



Inka Essenhigh, *Purple Pods*, 2019, Enamel on canvas, 34 x 32 inches. Courtesy Miles McEnery Gallery.

There is an equally extravagant, idiosyncratic nature in Essenhigh's paintings. Her supersensual *Purple Pods*, 2019 remind me of Georgia O'Keeffe's vaginal flowers---all of her flowers are in *Full Bloom*, 2020, luscious with desire, and the bizarrely twisting green growths in *Orange Fall*, 2020 are surreal fantasies, suggesting that Essenhigh's paintings are dream pictures, often involving love, or at least a sexual encounter, as in *Predawn in Early Spring* and *The Last Party*, both 2020. As the wreath on the head of the male figure in *The Last Party* makes clear, Essenhigh is alluding to---making use--of classical myths to suggest a magical time when love was guiltless. But then the phallic *Blue Spruce*, 2020 in the mythical wonderland that appears in the work with that title seems to symbolize guilt, as its blackness suggests---or is it death, as the blackness also implies, for the work seems to allude to Poussin's *Et in Arcadia ego* paintings, ca. 1635 as the "golden age" figures in the left upper corner of Essenhigh's work suggests. The gold coins in the lower right corner of the painting seem to allude to the myth of Danae---the shower of gold is the form Zeus took when he seduced her (suggesting she was a prostitute paid in gold and the shower of coins symbolize a shower of sperm, one of them having gotten her pregnant, as the myth tells us).

For all their Surrealism—their surrealized, dream-like, oddly distorted idiosyncratically formed nature (not to say ingeniously deformed flowers, each a voluptuous nude in disguise)—Essenhigh’s paintings are indebted to, not to say inspired by, traditional art, not only because they make use of classical myth, however much her figures may be transformed into surreal mirages, but because of their meticulous, even exquisite execution, her mastery of *sprezzatura*, the art that conceals art, and their baroque-like character, not to say their idiosyncratic beauty. Hers is not so much a neo-traditionalism, as an idiosyncratic traditionalism, maybe a desperate traditionalism, like that of many modern artists, convinced that “there could be no future to the art of the past,” as the historian Eric Hobsbawm writes, yet “adored the traditionalism of Poussin, Ingres and Corot,” as the Cubists did.¹ Where Charbonneau idealizes avant-garde idiosyncrasy and incoherence by reifying it into a credo—the expressionist gesture becomes the imprimatur of an aesthetic ideology in his paintings—Essenhigh shows that traditional art has its own idiosyncrasy, in the form of myths, surreal dreams before Surrealism realized that art was nothing but a dream, turned art into a bad dream and nature into a nightmare, as Max Ernst’s *Europe After The Rain II*, 1941 shows.

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *Behind the Times: The Decline and Fall of the Twentieth-Century Avant-Gardes* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 25.