

# BROOKLYN RAIL

## Isca Greenfield-Sanders: Wildflower Path

By Raphy Sarkissian | June 2024

When viewed from the street through the storefront glass of the gallery, the peaceful and harmonious landscapes of Isca Greenfield-Sanders may momentarily register as peculiar revivals of a bygone era or strange adaptations of photorealist painting. In *Seven Trees* (2024), credible perspectival illusionism prevails, revealing a depiction of scenery where light and animated branches convey the lure of the natural world. *Wildflowers and Distant Lake* (2024), mounted adjacent to *Seven Trees*, imparts the thrilling vastness and limitlessness of nature.

*Bend in the Road* (2023) is an equally illusionistic vista, though shades of pastel pink covering the road and the mountainside suggest the palette of Fauvism. In *Step Hike* (2024), a painting of a bucolic scenery, tranquility and calmness permeate a landscape articulated in vivid pistachio and rose-pink, along with shades of muted blue and stark white underneath a pale azure sky. The painting's pictorial clarity and vast sense of depth have been realized with a chromatic richness that captivates the onlooker, emphasizing the sublimity of nature.



*Seven Trees*, 2024, Mixed media oil on canvas, 68 x 68 inches

Examining these paintings of beguiling vistas up close, however, reveals unmediated brushmarks and the raw materiality of oil, overturning the initial perceptual effect of an offbeat photorealism. As if a simultaneous tribute to and revision of Claude Monet's 1873 *Poppy Field* at the Musée d'Orsay, Greenfield-Sanders's *Pink Wildflowers* (2024) recalls Impressionism's *plein air* technique, through which painting was reframed to encapsulate the instantaneity of visual perception, the fleeting appearance of color, and the evanescent effects of light in the natural world. In *Pink Wildflowers*, the figurative depiction of white flowers in the immediate foreground is offset by an abstracted rural hill rendered primarily in pale and intense shades of pink and green.

Yet unlike Monet, who planted his easel in the outdoors itself, these paintings are executed within the studio of the artist and are derived from 35-millimeter slides taken by casual photographers on such occasions as family vacations and explorations of nature. Greenfield-Sanders transforms a slide from the 1950s or 1960s into a mixed media landscape through a lengthy and elaborate process that incorporates both digital and manual techniques. This procedure entails the use of various digital devices such as a computer, scanner, and printer, along with conventional mediums like watercolor and oil paint. As Linda Yablonsky concisely explains in one of the exhibition catalog essays, a given vintage slide is selected, scanned, printed, modified, enlarged, reprinted,

pasted, and ultimately covered with oil paint. Indeed, the visible structure of the grid within a given painting by Greenfield-Sanders paradoxically maps representation and abstraction onto one another, making use of both visual regimes while at the same time implicitly undermining them.

As multilayered combinations of photography and painting, Greenfield-Sanders's technically complex pictures tap into the rich history of pictorial representation itself, bringing to mind a host of associations, both contemporary and historical. In her insightful 2020 essay "Open Window: On Isca Greenfield-Sanders's Grids," Kris Paulsen notes the importance of reference points as diverse as the use of the grid in Renaissance perspective, the camera obscura, the invention of photography, the grid structure of twentieth-century abstraction, mid-century slide photography, and the digital mediums of our time.



*Pine Beach*, 2023, Mixed media oil on canvas, 68 x 68 inches

Thematically and compositionally, Greenfield-Sanders's *Pine Beach* (2023) brings to mind *The Tribute Money* of Masaccio (c. 1425), Filippo Brunelleschi's technique of Renaissance perspective, and Leon Battista Alberti's famous theorization of this visual structure in his book *On Painting*. The presence of the grid within *Pine Beach* also recalls the grids utilized by the draftsman in Albrecht Dürer's woodcut *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman* (c. 1600). At the same time, the grid's status as a kind of compositional apparition within the paintings of Greenfield-Sanders evokes the abstract pictorial languages of artists like Piet Mondrian, Agnes Martin, and Ellsworth Kelly.

The simultaneous absence and presence of photography in the paintings of Greenfield-Sanders takes us back to photography's historical trajectory as an art form, as if to challenge the ambivalent stance of Charles Baudelaire of 1859: "If photography is allowed to help complete art in a few of its functions, then art will be as quickly ruined and cast out by it, thanks to the natural alliance which will grow up between photography and the crowd." As Greenfield-Sanders combines conventional methods of painting with photography and digital processes, her output evokes more thoroughly the thoughts of Paul Valéry in his 1928 "The Conquest of Ubiquity": "We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art." In this sense, Greenfield-Sanders probes visual representation through various mediums, arriving at imagery whose allure is owed as much to their visual charm as their interrogation of the culturally fabricated realities of picture-making.