

ARTPULSE

ARTPULSE NO. 24 | VOL. 7 | 2015
WWW.ARTPULSEMAGAZINE.COM

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Melanie Daniel, *Patchwork Landing*, 2015, oil on canvas, 55" x 63." Courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles.

MELANIE DANIEL: PIECEMAKER

Shulamit Nazarian – Los Angeles

By Megan Abrahams

In her series of dreamlike landscapes characterized by a surreal palette and tantalizing symbolism, Melanie Daniel presents an alluring synthesis of divergent ideas, disparate cultural references, a confluence of forms and narrative clues. The title of the exhibit, “Piecemaker,” provides an overt insight into the evolution of the artist’s unique worldview. A North American term for quilter, the name refers obliquely to Daniel’s Canadian roots. Born in British Columbia, the artist moved to Israel 20 years ago and has lived in the culturally diverse city of Haifa for the last seven years.

Given its technical elegance and entrancing use of color, the work is compelling even without considering the depth of underlying meaning. Daniel’s background landscapes are infused with the sensibility and tradition of her Canadian forebears, bringing to mind artists such as A.Y. Jackson of the formative Group of Seven. Superimposed upon this foundational Canadian vernacular—vast expanses of land, towering forests, fields of snow—are a variety of unrelated motifs transposed from the artist’s life in Israel, which populate her vantage point and are adapted to her imagery. Curiously, in Daniel’s lexicon, the flower-like, eight-pointed Arabesque star, a recurring motif, derives from a traditional pattern on North American quilts rather than the iconic Islamic symbol.

It’s not surprising to observe a considerable undercurrent of ambiguity in these paintings. In *Woah Cowboy Pinky* (2015), the sky is a surreal, desert-like pink, but the figure could be envisioned camping out on the Gulf Islands of British Columbia. By profound contrast,

Moon Song (2015) implies the desert. The vertical trajectories of palm trees poke out in striking juxtaposition from a flat landscape in front of the yellow background sky. In place of the sun, an orb with an Arab motif is suspended above a green cloud.

Patchwork Landing (2015) evokes a landscape painted by Emily Carr on acid. Tree trunks—one painted like a totem pole—emerge from a mysterious desert setting. In the background, a blue striated sky features vertical green and yellow areas echoing the thrust of the tree trunks. A quilted eagle hovers in the sky.

Daniel’s paintings elude static modes of classification, comfortably straddling the boundary between figurative and abstract. The largest and most prominent, *The Drifting Patch Tree* (2015), is dominated by gorgeous violets strategically counterpointed with cerulean and phthalo blues. The composition gives the impression of abstraction until careful study reveals flowers, leaves, stems, a sky above a decapitated tree, and a female figure in a colorful cardigan and striped skirt looking upward from a foreground suggesting desert.

The work is layered with intriguing allusions to the artist’s make-up as a longtime expatriate in a foreign country rife with sociopolitical discord. Although perhaps unintended, “Piecemaker” could be construed as the subconscious vision of a utopian universe in which conflicting cultural worlds coexist in harmonious beauty, as they appear to in the artist’s mind. ■

(May 21 - July 9, 2015)

Megan Abrahams is a Los Angeles-based writer and artist. A contributing writer for WhiteHot Magazine of Contemporary Art since 2009, she also writes for Art Ltd. Megan studied fine art in Canada and France and received her M.A. from the University of Southern California School of Journalism. She is currently writing her first novel.



Noah Purifoy, *Ode to Frank Gehry*, 1999, installed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) for the exhibition "Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada," © Noah Purifoy Foundation. Photo © Museum Associates/LACMA.

NOAH PURIFOY: JUNK DADA

Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Curated by Franklin Sirmans and Yael Lipschutz

By Megan Abrahams

Two bicycles loom near the gallery ceiling from their daredevil perch high on a slanted ramp atop a large trapezoid. Suspended in time and space, the repurposed bicycles are standout components in one of Noah Purifoy's constructions, seen here after a momentous journey to Los Angeles from their desert home. Just as Purifoy recontextualized literal junk, using it as the medium for his inventive and idiosyncratic assemblage creations, this first monographic exhibition of the artist's extraordinary oeuvre transplants his work into a fresh context, reconfiguring our perceptions of his legacy. Mounted in an intriguing, mostly chronological sequence in the pristine setting of LACMA, the exhibit is a transformative tour de force. Among the most stunning features are eight, large-scale, outdoor assemblage sculptures created by the artist in the Mojave Desert, where he moved in 1989, drawn by the quality of the ambient light and opportunity to pursue his visionary work in solitude.

Created in the last 15 years of his life, the constructions, as Purifoy called them, became fixtures of the desert in which they were conceived. As exhibits in the Noah Purifoy Foundation's Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum, the pieces are rarely seen outside the desert, where they co-exist with the vast landscape, small in proportion to miles of terrain and endless sky, mutable with the variable weather and light. Seen in a museum setting, they assume a new gravitas,

framed by a finite background of walls and outdoor urban spaces, which they dominate in scale, grace, humor and eloquence.

Purifoy referred to these large-scale assemblage pieces as environmental sculptures. Comprised of seemingly random assorted found objects—burnt wood, scrap metal, computer components, tires, bicycles, discarded shoes and a miscellany of broken things—these and other pieces in the exhibit were assembled by the artist in such a way as to come together as wholly realized consummate compositions. He allowed the sculptures to remain exposed to the weather, intending them to naturally deteriorate in the elements. Largely thanks to this exhibit, Purifoy's works will remain indelibly imprinted in our consciousness.

The artist made an important statement for his time, one that continues to gather momentum, resounding with meaning in view of the prevailing racial dissonance confronting us today. It's illuminating to see these works in the current sociopolitical context. August was the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Watts riots, a pivotal catalyst in the artist's development as well as the source for much of the material he used in his groundbreaking 1966 exhibit, "66 Signs of Neon"—represented here through a number of assemblage works by Purifoy and other artists, including Judson Powell, Debby Brewer and Arthur Secunda. A founding director of the Watts Tower, Purifoy built his early body of sculpture out of the charred wreckage of the Watts rebellion. His work was about much more than simply repurposing found objects into art. Executed with vision and purpose, Purifoy's art was an instrument of social commentary, creating a profound organic beauty out of violence, calamity and the detritus of society. ■

(June 7, 2015 - January 3, 2016)