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Hannah Antalek at 5-50 Gallery: Where Dreams Come True



5-50: Hannah Antalek, *Superseed*, 2023, Installation View

By JAN DICKEY December 3, 2023

From the wreckage of old worlds, there is always a small sprout lying in wait—something perfectly evolved for a world yet to come. It searches for growth and hopes for the chance to become the ruler in a new atmosphere, borne amidst the fallout and ashes of the old. I was in Long Island City, Queens, when I realized there would be nothing left. The things I knew as a child, the verdant places I saw all through my misspent youth and into my increasingly more responsible, well-adjusted, and idealistically jaded adult years. The flowers in the spring and that bright shade of green turning deeper into summer. The sharp, fleeting wind of October blowing in and bringing warm ochre colors that fall into a hot cup of apple cider just in time for Christmas.

I indulged in this kind of romanticism as I stared down, imagining the shape and color of some intrepid new mycelium growing in shallow holes of the sidewalk outside 5-50 Gallery (<https://www.5-50gallery.com/>). When I finally looked back up, through the chasm of 5-50's garage door opening and into their white-walled space, all I could see – as before – was a persistent and vigorous alien light emitting from the nine paintings that comprise Hannah Antalek's first NYC solo exhibition: *Superseed*.

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The paintings shone primarily blue or red, but there were other colors too. A prism blazing somewhere between radioactivity and phosphorescence, emitting from Antalek's chemically engineered pigments. In my assessment, no sediment native to earth—without containing dangerous levels of mercury—can have such impossible brilliance. The gallery track lighting refracted through those chemical layers, beaming back color-drenched worlds, each in a dreamily hazy atmosphere, seen here at day and there at night. Was this just stardust or the flaming hills of North America? I had seen this sky before, all through the hot smoking summer of 2023, but not the weird life forms depicted growing in its midst. Antalek's hazy worlds filled and sparkled with a diamond crust, impregnated with flower-like mycological forms: unfamiliar to me, but soft, squishy, and dreamily beautiful.

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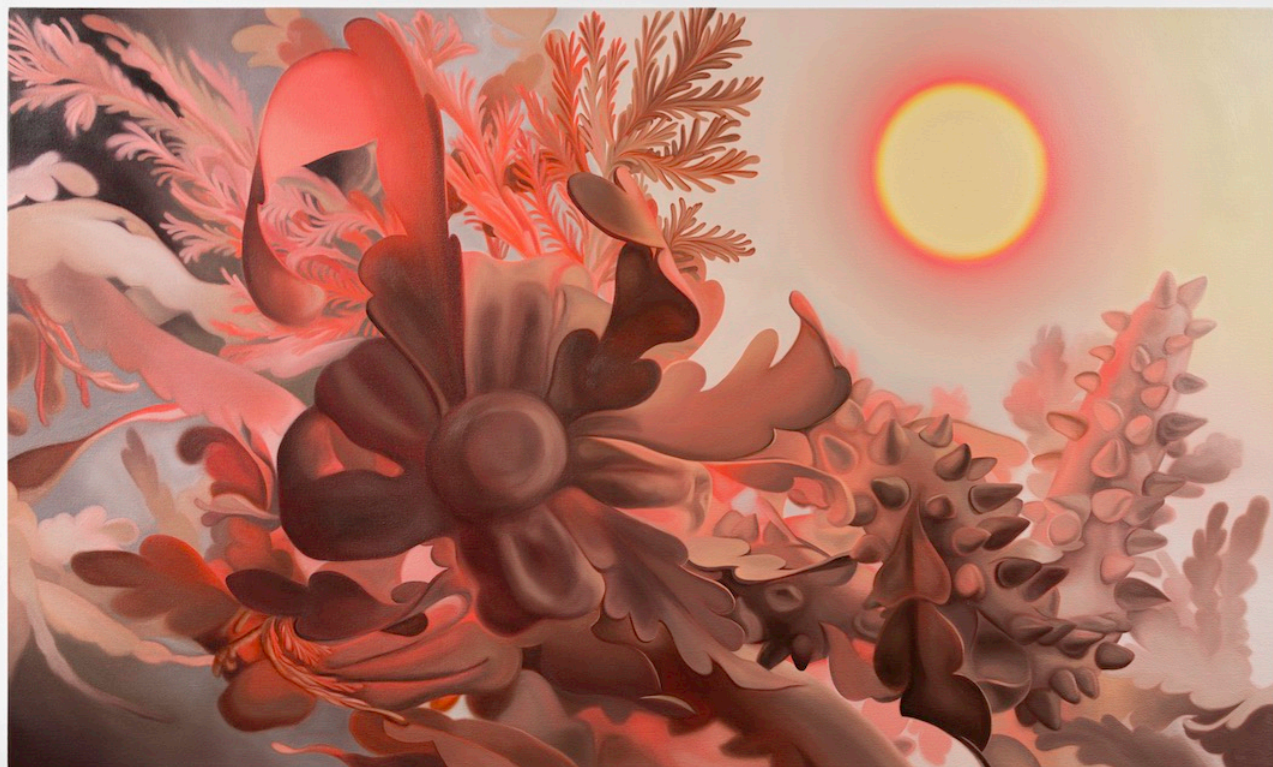
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Hannah Antalek, Final Form, Oil on canvas, 60"x22", 2023

A passing magical thought suddenly came to mind that the paintings of *Superseed* could very well be depicting not an apocalypse, but some present-day fungal infection growing in a little section of Disneyland. Although many of Antalek's works were quite sizable, the worlds they held, nevertheless, felt small – like miniature sets made for a fantasy film. But then again I was also small inside them, pressed into the synthetic cinematic gravel of the 70 x 60 inch *Seminal Landing*, or thrust under an eerie orange canopy of the 36 x 60 inch painting *Carbon Capture*. I felt small and out of place next to these works in particular, like a fool enticed into a roundtrip ticket to Mars or the Titan moon. A rational mind would consider the content of any of these paintings hazardous, a threat to the precious status quo here on Earth. But, in that second, the fool in me was all of the sudden in a place where childhood dreams really do come true. Pumpkins after midnight. Wishes in a lamp. Having a disposable camera photo taken with Mickey Mouse, that infamous November Scorpio, as fireworks explode in the Magic Kingdom.

This is the moment when I unlocked a quite different perspective on *Superseed*. In her laborious construction of these glittering, fungus worlds, maybe Antalek wasn't trying to show us the future, or even some rare new microorganism. Her chromatic display of virtuoso painting could simply be evidence of an artist in contemplation, a studious researcher of our present moment. This body of work can so be understood as Antalek's quiet, but active, imagination brought to bear on exactly where we are at this moment on planet Earth, a thought experiment developed slowly and carefully atop nine sheets of cotton canvas.

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Hannah Antalek, *Carbon Capture*, Oil on canvas, 36"x60", 2023

It is visible in the work, especially in paintings like *Perpetual Aurora* and *Seminal Landing*, that her representational compositions were painted from dioramas, perhaps something staged in a dark corner of her studio with Scotch tape and Elmer's glue. Her hands caked in that familiar white petroleum, the floor littered with its dried crumbles, the artist seems to have been channeling into these mutant stage sets the rumbling of demolition and the shaking of the New York City foundations felt through her walls. Later, resting at home, she may have seen the dust floating through the smoky sunbeams passing through her apartment window. And, naturally as a child of the 90s and a tween of the early 00s, these observations bent through the culture of a perfectly Millennial mind. Three decades of prismatic spectacle in IMAX, superheroes on billboards in colossal airports and VHS memories riotously recalling *Fantasia* and a *Land Before Time*. All the while, *Bombs over Baghdad* and huge gyres of plastic flotsam in the oceans, Al Gore and Leonardo DiCaprio - stage right - making their nagging pleas. The result is a shining example of how the construction of paintings, from mockup to finished canvas, persists as the most elegant solitary method of processing visual culture.

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Hannah Antalek, Perpetual Aurora, Oil on canvas, 32"x24", 2023

Even more amazing was the discovery that this body of work is Atalek’s first attempt at oil paint. She had until now been a dogmatically committed color pencilist. Yet these oily new worlds already read like a deft painter trained on museum visits to the Met’s European still life wing, her skillset tweaked during late nights spent watching double features of Cameron’s *Avatar* and Miyazaki’s *Nausicaä: Valley of the Wind*.

Here in the littered streets of New York City, through the sometimes flooded subway tunnels, the warmth and wonderful color of Antalek’s paintings transmutate cancer cells into sparkles inside the belly of our ongoing environmental collapse. Persistent horrors loom with every cell phone vibration, but a kingdom still lives for us here like a warm television screen programmed with every creature comfort we have left. Now at 5-50, through enchanted eyes we can see the mycelial strings tracing out, for this one brief time behind a garage door, that magic castle. Antalek, in the corner of her studio, has cultivated for us strange new sprouts and matured them into these nine dense fungal webs. They are oily like an Old Master, squishy like an animation and perhaps as delicious as the mushrooms in Wonderland—if only we could have a taste. We may not be able to truly taste the future, but for all us mouseketeers, a hazy dream of the new world is out there, right now, in Queens. It shines bright, for as long as dreams last. **WM**



JAN DICKEY

Jan Dickey is a painter based in Brooklyn, NY. He earned an MFA in Studio Art from the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa (Honolulu, HI) in 2017. He earned a BFA in 2009 from the University of Delaware (Newark, DE). Dickey has attended numerous artist residencies, including: The Sam and Adele Golden FoundationSM for the Arts in New Berlin, NY (2023), ARTnSHELTER in Tokyo, Japan (2019), the Kimmel Harding Nelson Art Center in Nebraska City, NE (2018), and the Vermont Studio Center in Johnson, VT (2017). His spring 2023 solo exhibition, "Passing Through," held at D.D.D.D. in NYC, was reviewed in "Two Coats of Paint" under the title "Jan Dickey: Both sides now."

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