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WEBEXCLUSIVE

JOHN McALLISTER: *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night*

by Alex A. Jones

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John McAllister, *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night*, 2018. Oil on canvas over panel, wood panels and burlap on the front only, 72 1/2 × 254 × 84 inches. Courtesy James Fuentes.

Since around 2008, when he began showing work at James Fuentes, John McAllister has been steadfastly painting gardens. In the current exhibition, trees, shrubs, and flowers gather in three mid-sized canvases; and in a 20-foot-long panorama comprised of eight hinged panels, a sunset unfolds across an early spring garden. Despite the humming palettes of pink, orange, violet, and indigo, it feels chilly in these paintings. Maybe it's because now, in late March, we enter the gallery from the frosty street with ever-more impatience for the turn of season that these images predict. In the

paneled piece, *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night* (2018), I see trillium and narcissus, early reanimators breaking the blank dirt. Buds cluster promisingly on spindly twigs. A few of the soft-looking white pods remind me of magnolias; though, maybe they're forsythias, ready to burst with sulfur-yellow blooms by morning.

The rich specificity of plant life that enables this dreamy taxonomy is mostly new for McAllister. Each subject is differentiated, such as the leafless river birch that bends languorously across one canvas. Much of the detail throughout lies in the colors. McAllister's earlier work in this vein was often limited in palette, dominated by just two or three electric hues that created a psychedelic, graphic effect. The nuance here speaks to the artist's maturing skill and is especially strong in the nocturnal scenes; *sings darksome silvery* (2018) appears uniformly inky from across the room, but close-up the night sky is actually lavender, the ground a clarified icy-blue; the snowdrops drooping over it are unadulterated magenta.

This wealth of color information means the paintings can't be savored in one shot. They ask for close-up examination, especially the largest one, which invites us to shuffle along it from left to right, following the passage of the sunset like 18th century gawkers of panoramic history paintings. This sweeping format, depicting not only a pan across space but the passage of time, has me thinking of the popular, pre-cinematic spectacles of pano- and diorama painting that once captivated crowds in Europe and America with scenes of historical battles, picturesque landscapes, and urban vistas. They offered an experience rooted in illusion, and were reviled by critics for their distasteful, even dangerous deceptiveness. Wordsworth objected that it cheapened the transportive qualities of the sublime, while handbills and press coverage of such exhibits asserted—with variously condescending and sensationalizing tones—how spectators might be so convinced by the illusion as to temporarily lose their grip on reality.

In McAllister's panorama, there is no sense of deception. I do not feel transported to these Technicolor landscapes. This has a lot to do with the decorative framing edges of the paintings that break off the scenery across one side. Their function here is distinct from his earlier works in which pattern has served as an illusionistic device, often resembling decorative wallpaper upon which scenes of nature appear to "hang," simulating paintings within paintings. Those works mostly evoke the belle époque of French post-impressionism from which the artist drew heavily; their stripes and dry-brushed patterns sometimes explicitly referencing Matisse and Vuillard. In the new paintings, aggressively perpendicular triangles and patchwork hatches are *anti-illusionistic*. They sit on top of the scenes themselves, emphasizing the border-zone between the painting and the gallery wall. They block an immersive view, beaming "*noli me tangere*."



John McAllister, *cymbals of sleep uncurtain the night*, installation view. Courtesy James Fuentes.

They reflect a contemporary reality in which painting has shed its illusionism. Today, the proposition that one might be legitimately disoriented by a painting to the point of questioning one's position in time and space is, at best, unlikely. In a present where the "painting-as-window" is a theoretical artifact, what purpose remains in painting a garden?

Here, the flora constitute a plane of immanence that fills up the canvases to the brim, saturating them with ample, buttery paint. It's all rendered flat, with no pretension of atmosphere or perspective, but the abundance of interlocked surfaces and planes creates an immanent sense of space like that found in some tapestries, or in some works by Matisse, to whom the artist has often been tethered by critics. But McAllister is no longer directly quoting from the teacher, which makes these paintings his strongest yet. Untied from their heavy references to post-impressionism, they exist fully in the present. Rather than feeling transported, I feel rooted in space with these reticent plants, anchored by the certain fade from day to night, winter to spring.

CONTRIBUTOR

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