

Molly Segal: To the Bone

You are a poem written with flesh and bones and tiny particles of glittery stars and everything beautiful I am fated to love. --Anita Krizzan

In the works of painter Molly Segal, the battle between dystopian entropy and optimistic desire rages, quiet and bloody, across the landscape and between our souls. At every turn, nature and civilization appear in both symbiosis and conflict, begrudgingly sharing the atmosphere at great existential peril each to the other. Her most surrealist compositions make this dynamic the most explicit, discord jarring the pictorial space. Viscously decomposing marine, insect or avian life does not belong in oilfields or waste sites, and romantic embraces ought not to provoke anxious recoiling, but here we are. There are finite resources in this world, both natural and emotional, and everyone needs more than anyone can give.

According to Segal, regarding the title of this suite of visceral, poetic laments on our mistreatment of nature and each other, "there is something both decadent and desperate about sucking the marrow. It's squeezing every pleasure out of life while literally picking at bones, sucking them dry." All throughout Segal's work such dualities play themselves out -- indulgence and decay, the energy of loneliness and anxiety, the choreography of intimacy and boundaries. Her special gift is generating the coherence of dream logic, holding the paradoxes together with the thinnest veil of corporeal pigment. In her marvelous and elusive watercolors on oil paper these flickering dynamics animate the compositions, illuminating Segal's intentional relationship to her materials.

Water-based medium is notoriously unforgiving, and Segal's paper grounds are not all that absorptive. Thus materiality asserts itself, willfully demands to be reckoned with; its pooling clots and washes retain the gesture and immediacy of the artist's hand, even as they gather themselves into metonymies of withering forms. The fractal, intuitive imperfectness of her painting technique does not depict the dire state of the situation, it embodies it. Slightly rotten flesh, rancid breezes, fleeing birds and bees, retreating tides, toxic litter, disaster porn, deep secrets, acid-washed silhouettes, compromised soil -- these and other allegorical elements are not so much rendered as conjured, and for her particular painting process to work, she has to be willing to destroy them. The whole thing is an allegory.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Segal's paintings is their apparent timeliness. In the new context of pandemic life, the desire for companions spurs with the fear of others, fear of the outside, fear of a vengeful nature. But the broader generational context of climate change, resource scarcity, and societal dysfunction has been with us a long time. As profoundly resonant as they are with today, the realization that interconnectedness is both beautiful and terrifying, and that we are most vulnerable at our seams, at the places where boundaries bleed, has haunted Segal for a long time already. "I need poetic distance," she says with empathy. "My paintings do violence to things I love."

-- Shana Nys Dambrot
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