

Emily McDermott, "Emma Webster Is Reinventing Landscape Painting Using VR Technology,"
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Emma Webster Is Reinventing Landscape Painting Using VR Technology

BY EMILY MCDERMOTT  September 2, 2022 10:09am

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Emma Webster.
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Emma Webster is not a landscape painter but a painter of landscapes. The differentiation is slight yet significant, the nuance indicating that the British American artist's paintings are imaginative collages depicting her own ecosystems, separate from what we might see out a window.

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Though recognizable forms (trees, caves, flowers) abound, the final images are more akin to ethereal, haunting dreamscapes than realistic images of nature. Through her practice, she redefines painting as something that forges new relationships between artist and artwork, between artwork and viewer, between humans and their (un)natural surroundings.

A suite of 12 new paintings exemplifies the Los Angeles–based artist’s approach to the medium. Each of the works, currently on view in Webster’s solo exhibition “Illuminarium,” at Perrotin’s new Seoul gallery in Dosan Park, features a different fantastical scene, though together they might be read as progression charting a landscape’s creation to its doom and destruction.

Still in the Cradle (2022), for example, depicts a clearing in a forest. Cool blue light illuminates the tips of the trees nearby and a rock-like formation in the background, but the outskirts are left darkened. Meanwhile, a small opening in the ground emits a warm amber glow. Looking at the piece gives off the feeling of being in the womb, before exposure to the complexities of the shadowy world beyond. Later works puncture that sense of innocence.

Webster’s landscapes always toe the line between the real and the uncanny, reflecting the multistep process by which they are formed. The artist begins each piece with sketches, which she then scans into a virtual reality program. There, she manipulates, exaggerates, and transforms her images, rendering them 3D and developing what might be called digital landscape sculptures.

“I’m not interested in VR as an end, but as a means of explorative sculpture,” the young artist explained in an interview with *ARTnews*. “My sketches are composed from a collage of inspirations: set design, landscape painting, travel photography, fantasy, and the other worldliness of screen-space. VR becomes the place where I can fuse these unlike things into one solid thought.”

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Emma Webster, *Still in the Cradle*, 2022.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PERROTIN

Once satisfied, Webster prints the scenes, making the digital once again physical, and translates them onto large-scale canvases with oil paint. It's a process rooted in tradition but molded by technology, in a way not entirely dissimilar from how many go about their daily rituals right now.

The way the works in “*Illuminarium*” unfold seems to develop a vague narrative, almost in the way a playwright parcels out information in discrete scenes. Indeed, Webster is interested in theatre, and she sees parallels between lighting, set design, and painting. A previous show at Stems Gallery in Brussels, titled “*Ready the Lanterns*,” found its starting point in lighting design and investigated the concept of the nocturne, which is most commonly used to refer to musical compositions suggestive of nighttime. She asked herself: What if “night” simply implied a lack of sunlight? Her inquiry opened up the term to a more expansive meaning. Moreover, lighting design, like VR, imitates sunlight but never actually involves it. It's an artifice that's meant to enhance one's reality, just as a stage offers its audience a gateway into another world.

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Emma Webster, *Blue Moon*, 2022.
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“The stage is a proxy space—we are both in an auditorium and in the place of the play,” she said. “In these paintings, and in VR, we are in two places at once: like a videogame made to be populated by a player, spectatorship becomes interactive.”

To view Webster’s works is to immerse oneself within new worlds. Each is a space filled with natural yet distorted vistas, with wiry, Dr. Seuss–like trees and twisting orchids teeming with life, embellished supernatural phenomena, and landscapes defying the laws of gravity.

Her paintings are vividly haunting, pointing to both the beauty of the natural world as well as humankind’s destruction thereof. Ultimately, landscapes are not in stasis, a fact Webster’s work continually reminds us of.

As Webster noted, “There’s a built-in sadness [to] trying to capture wildlife, when these places are changing and disappearing. We pigeonhole landscape painting as pleasant and boring, but there is nothing pleasant about a climate in crisis.”

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