

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

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Melanie Daniel – “No Man’s Land” at Asya Geisberg Gallery



Melanie Daniel, No Man’s Land, Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery, New York.

Melanie Daniel’s fifth solo exhibition at Asya Geisberg Gallery, *No Man’s Land*, continues the artist’s fascination with creating post-disaster environments, radiating with neon vibrancy and highly dense compositions. Her non-place surroundings are reminiscent of jungle clearings and scorched forests, where the trees are scarred and chopped, the water is acidic and the backgrounds swirl around the central protagonists, whether people or objects, with a restless tempo that leaves no room for the imagined tranquility.

The figures in Daniel’s mise-en-scenes are ghostly, their flesh is often transparent, and it feels as if they are composed in a patch-like manner, echoing the abstract shapes floating above and around them, almost leaving no air to breathe. Horror vacui is dominating these illusive glades, the beautifully luring landscapes draw the viewers into a honey trap of fictional yet highly imaginable situations, where sci-fi movies meet global warming realities in a saccharine tonality of toxic candies.



Melanie Daniel, Mighty Real, 2021, Oil on canvas, 35 x 35 in, 89 x 89 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery, New York.

The universe Daniel creates seems to be governed by feminine dominance, where mainly women, young girls and a boy survive the aftermath. Their presence anchors and enhances potential narratives of overcoming and survival, perhaps as symbols of quiet resistance to the damaging actions that led to a state where there are no men in the land. The main reminder of an age when men ruled the world, is central in the painting *Icon*, in which a stone head lays on the ground, embraced by three young teenagers. It may allude to eras of monumental public sculptures glorifying rulers as divinities. The youth that is hugging this beheaded relic may not be familiar with the actual identity of the man, seeing him as an anonymous survivor of a past culture, absolved of deeds and existing now as a handsome remain of ancient times.



Melanie Daniel, Icon, 2022, Oil on canvas, 54 x 54 in, 137 x 137 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery, New York.

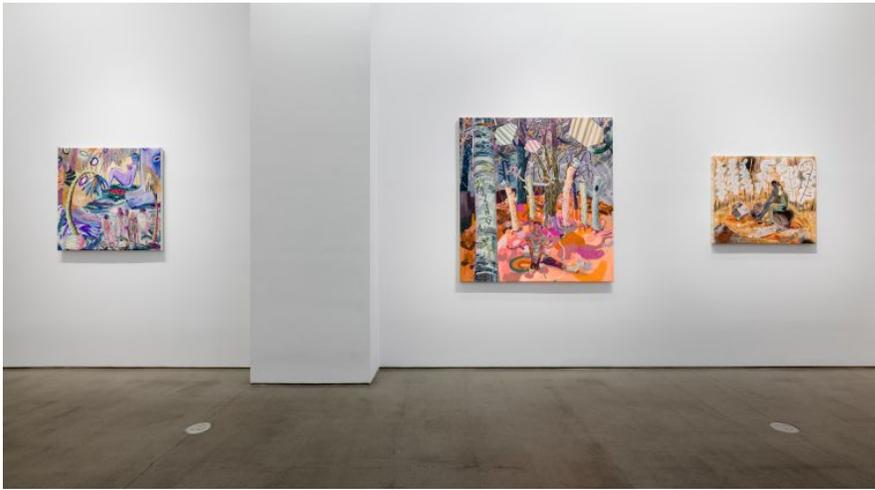
A matriarchal alternative for adoration may be suggested in *Twins*, where a double-figured statue faces opposite directions. By employing 360-degree vision, the female figures are like sentries, standing vigil. Yet, their head-covering gowns suggest a condition of religious confinement, or perhaps a cloak to humanize them, keeping the carved figures warm at night. By continuing the idea of female dominance, these potential fertility icons, may suggest an option of admiration and powerful presence. But once we realize that their base is a wood stump too small to permanently balance their weight, the danger of being taken down revokes the question of power, leadership, and control.



Melanie Daniel, Twins, 2021 Oil on canvas 54 x 54 in, 137 x 137 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery, New York.

Daniel is employing various painterly techniques that coexist together to enhance the feel of parallel times. The thinly washed backgrounds function as an unstable first layer of origin, reminding us that the earth is moving underneath our feet, like a muddy swamp that can swallow us with no trace. The watery nature at the core of the paintings, is overlaid with stains of spray paint and graffiti, deliberately vandalizing universal allegories with specific marks of rebel origins, turned and appropriated by corporate culture.

Daniel's tectonic plates are rooted in her nomadic life as a Canadian-Israeli artist, balancing the aggression of the small middle-eastern country where she lived for many years with quiet vast forests of British Columbia where she was born and now resides.



Melanie Daniel, No Man's Land, Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Asya Geisberg Gallery, New York.

All photos by Etienne Frossard

No Man's Land, Melanie Daniel at Asya Giesberg Gallery through June 26th.

Sagi Refael is an art historian and advisor, based in Los Angeles. He was also the curator of "Melanie Daniel: Evergreen" at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, 2010.