

:: GRANT WAHLQUIST GALLERY

Leon Benn: Gardening Techniques

6/3/20 – 8/22/20

Grant Wahlquist Gallery is pleased to announce “Gardening Techniques,” Leon Benn’s first solo exhibition at the gallery. The show will run from **June 3 through August 22, 2020**. A Q&A with the artist will be announced at a later date. **Please note that the gallery will be open by appointment only July 1 – 4.**

“Gardening Techniques” presents a suite of new paintings of plants, trees, shrubs, mushrooms, and fossils. Rather than treat his subjects with scientific or naturalistic detachment, Benn portrays them in lush, extravagant colors such that each painting becomes an ornamental portrait. Extending the artist’s longstanding interest in representations of locations where quotidian human activities occur against a backdrop of “the natural world,” the majority of the works in “Gardening Techniques” begin with embellished drawings of flora in the yards, parks, and parking lots of Portland, Maine, and surrounding areas. Benn frequently begins transforming these drawings into paintings by dying linen supports in a Batik-like process or with acrylic washes, sometimes adding a secondary, fuzzy layer of oilstick. He then builds out the picture in oil paint through a mixture of fluid marks, loose geometric forms, and an accumulation of impasto lines and curves. The resulting works recall Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s post-WWI Swiss landscapes and Max Pechstein’s pre-WWI river scenes by way of Abstract Expressionism and the complicated, post-Photoshop figure-ground relationships of Laura Owens, all in Benn’s singular and ravishing fashion.

It goes without saying that gardens and the act of gardening are almost unbearably weighted with metaphor, from the Biblical Eden to Voltaire’s “Candide” to the writings and paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites and Victorians. As the empiricist English philosopher Francis Bacon once wrote, “God Almighty first planted a garden. And, indeed, it is the purest of human pleasure. It is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man, without which, buildings and palaces are but gross handiworks.” Consequently, it is no small feat that Benn’s paintings model an experience of nature that does not succumb to anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism or the dualisms opposing nature to culture, reason, art, and the human. He does so not through didactic messaging but by careful composition and style.

For example, in *West End Weeping Willow*, *Dense Form Weeping Alaskan*, and *South Portland Arborvitae*, the titular plants occupy roughly the center of each picture, pushing towards the edges of the canvas as though their growth cannot be contained. Benn paints them in such vibrant, unnatural hues that they almost suggest models wearing opulent gowns in repose—yet for all their embellishment they remain fully what they are, inhuman though not any less valuable for being so. The artist tucks the manmade structures in the background of each image into the corners of the frame, often depicting them with marks that nearly give way to geometric abstraction. Nature and culture are not opposed—these are not the gardens of Bacon or Victorian England but

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the open or neglected spaces of yards and curbside plantings—but materialize along a painterly continuum denoting not a simplistic “oneness” but a mode of contemplative kinship. This distant familiarity is also apparent in *Protoflora Forms* and *Paleozoic Plants*, which interpret illustrations of fossilized plants from old scientific textbooks and field guides, nods to the evolutionary process that generated both microbes and mankind.

“Gardening Techniques” is thus mindful not only of art history but also natural history, each painting compressing the latter’s epic scale into scenes of quiet observation of the overlooked pockets of life in a rapidly changing city. Forgoing the usual tropes of landscape painting—the Pastoral, the Picturesque, the Sublime—he paints portraits of the seemingly silent witnesses to our daily activities. Without presuming to speak for them, he posits that the pines and weeds we hurry by might nonetheless have something to say, should we slow down enough to listen.

Leon Benn lives in Portland, Maine. He studied at the Rhode Island School of Design (BFA) and the University of California, Los Angeles (MFA). He has had solo exhibitions at David B. Smith Gallery, Denver; Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles; Stems Gallery, Brussels; and Carter & Citizen, Los Angeles. His work has been featured in group exhibitions at Able Baker Contemporary, Portland; Space Gallery, Portland; Brand New Gallery, Milan; the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis; James Harris Gallery, Seattle; and Lisa Cooley, New York, amongst others.

The gallery is located at 30 City Center, Portland, Maine. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Saturday, 11 am to 6 pm, and by appointment. For more information, visit <http://grantwahlquist.com>, call 207.245.5732, or email info@grantwahlquist.com.