

DAVID B SMITH GALLERY

Regan Rosburg: The Understory
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Exhibition Essay by Leanne Haase Goebel

Regan Rosburg is inspired by the humble network of life that proliferates on the forest floor, in the shade, beneath the canopy of trees that sore above, blocking out the precious sunlight. The artist collects objects and insects from the deciduous forest of Northeastern Tennessee where she lives on a small farm with her fiancé. Regan left her native Colorado for Tennessee a little more than a year ago. She's inspired by her surroundings and the sound of her rooster talking to his hens. These recent works created for "Understory" reflect how those changes in her life are influencing her creative work.

"I think the clearest visual indication for me is the return of color," Regan said. "I kind of felt like when I lived in Denver that concrete started to infect my work. Things became more stark and white. I had a simplified and reduced palette. Now when I look at my work, I see this fog, the haze and humidity, this thick atmosphere that everything is filtered through. There's an overgrowth of things in the work, and there's more color now."

Regan grew up in the Black Forest near Monument, Colorado, where the evergreen trees are abundant, but the forest lacks deciduous foliage, rolling hills of grasses and naturally occurring flowers. For all its colorful slogans, Colorado is very brown compared to the thick, lush, greenness of Tennessee with its cycles, seasons and microcosms to be explored. Her parents were both teachers; her mom taught art at the Air Force Academy. Her father was a photographer on the side. She graduated from Lewis Palmer High School and switched her major from biology to art at the University of Colorado Boulder when she walked past the art studios and smelled the distinct scents of the materials. After earning her B.F.A. in painting and photography, she worked at several Boulder galleries before getting her first one-woman show.

Regan is motivated by trying to paint something that is highly detailed, while working with some of the most complex materials available to an artist — plastic resin and water-based oils. Her work incorporates elements of realism and surrealism. "I'm inspired by the challenge of blurring/merging the boundaries between the two using my materials," she said. The self-taught artist Damian Loeb, who mastered photorealism, kindles her interest. But she gets her resin inspiration from early Judy Pfaff wall compositions for "their simple, elegant combination of silhouettes and organic subject matter." Regan's work is an elegant combination of highly realistic subject matter produced in multi-layered, abstract settings. She collages nature together in plastic, and even hints at fantastical and surreal formal elements in her painting. She writes in her statement and on her website:

"The decision to utilize resin in my work is not only an aesthetic preference, but also a social commentary. Aesthetically, resin allows me to create a complex, 'false' environment. Reminiscent of ancient tree amber, my paintings are moments in time, halted in plastic. However, plastic is a highly over-produced, largely mismanaged material. Because of this, I have gone to great lengths to understand, responsibly manage, and respect this medium."

Natural resins — beeswax and tree sap — have been used in painting for centuries. But plastic resins can be highly toxic, are an imperfect medium and difficult to control. They were developed for use in the automotive industry, were used to craft surfboards and then adopted in the 1960s for use in fine art making. Tom Burrows creates abstract, color-field casts of resin. Damien Hirst uses resin to create his fly, butterfly and other paintings by embedding insect specimens in fine layers of resin. Sigmar Polke experimented with the chemical reactions of different materials with resin to create otherworldly abstractions. Fred Tomaselli and Rex Ray both utilize resin to collage together their highly involved and graphically detailed works.

Regan Rosburg's resin paintings represent the evolution of this high tech, plastic material, combined with traditional, Walton Ford-style wildlife illustration and embedded natural materials to create a dichotomy of meaning. The resin allows Regan to create an illusion of depth, atmosphere and light that hint at Maxfield Parrish's fantastical worlds, while the three-dimensional reality of the material actually captures light and color — the depth is real. Using something far from natural, Regan creates "natural" worlds in her works by strategically layering and building the world in resin like a diorama. Her focus is on "how the natural world keeps evolving, how beautiful and perfect it is," she said. "It has an intelligence to it that I think is so different from the human experience. We don't listen to ourselves and force things to happen — nature just does what it's supposed to do. This show speaks about how insects and animals relate to plants and have done so for thousands of years."

It's a romantic version of nature, characterized by dynamic links among all living things that ignores the theories of survival of the fittest and natural selection. And that is what one sees initially when viewing her current body of work: beautiful, lush paintings, hinting at romance and Victorian ideals of nature. There are subtle layers of lace, wallpaper, drawings, prints or transfers, blades of grass, birds, berries and insects. However, upon closer examination, embedded in the layers of resin and paint are bones, trash, scorpions and black widow spiders, wasp nests, turtle shells, skeletons and lady bugs. The dichotomy of life and death, of beauty and truth, of human fabricated topiaries and natural wild grasses present a far more complex idea of nature.

The titles of individual paintings, hint at the deeper meaning of each work. "Song of the Harbinger" is a large painting featuring a falcon with a mask on its head; a Harbinger foreshadows something that is coming. The painting is a blur of humanity, nature and trash. Something is coming, and perhaps we still have time to change, to make a difference, to adapt. The animals in this body of work are all doing something poetic, something meaningful. In "Sepulture," the blue bird is giving another bird skeleton a proper burial, utilizing a tortoise shell, bits of leaves and butterfly wings. These composite paintings hold within them complex ideas and meanings about human society, materialism and how we interact with nature. The focus is on the beauty of nature. But in the end, this is an exhibition about resilience.