

Florae Animalia: New work by Claire Burbridge, Matthew Dennison, Marjorie Taylor, and Olga Volchkova

May 1 - June 22, 2024

Opening reception: Friday, May 3rd, 5:30 - 7:30 pm

First Friday, June 7th, 5:30 - 7:30 pm

Karin Clarke Gallery is pleased to present an invitational exhibit featuring four outstanding artists living in Oregon, whose work is inspired by the Northwest flora and fauna. While diverging widely in terms of medium, technique, and approach, they share keen observational skills, an utmost attention to detail combined with imagination and inventiveness, and a willingness to question and investigate through art how we relate to nature.

Featured Artists:

Claire Burbridge's large, intricate, drawings begin with close observation of nature – notably the trees, plants and fungi of the Southern Oregon forest. Yet these are not purely botanical drawings. While we easily recognize the organisms that inspire them, the artist's imagination is also at work, transmuting them and their environment into a new and often magical ecosystem. Some drawings tend toward abstraction, as when the minutiae of lichens turn into a universe of dense nebulae, blurring the distinctions between the cosmic and the microscopic. In other works, the relationship between trees and polypores acquires a playful, yet symbolic, dimension. At night, forest landscapes become alive with bioluminescence. All the while, Burbridge's worlds are held together by an underlying geometric structure that provides a sense of balance and harmony. Born in London, raised between the west coast of Scotland and rural Somerset, Burbridge studied Fine Art and History of Art at Oxford University and earned an MA in printmaking from the Camberwell College of Arts. She then turned to sculpture for a number of years. However, her relocation in 2010 to Ashland, Oregon, marked a radical break and a return to her early love of drawing, using graphite, pigment pencils, ink, and watercolor. Burbridge's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is in many corporate, museum, and private collections. She recently received two Oregon Percent for Art commissions.

Matthew Dennison is a lifelong animal lover who spends as much time in nature as he can. While animals appear in his paintings of human scenes, part of his work is also devoted to portraits of animals alone. In these paintings, familiar forest mammals and birds are sometimes pictured in full, within their natural environment. More often, only their heads are represented, frequently in profile, against a monochrome background, thereby emphasizing the flat plane of the canvas. Somewhat stylized, these portraits are not strictly naturalistic. However, whether of a quadruped or bird, each succeeds in suggesting an individuality and, especially through the rendering of the animal's gaze, in expressing an emotion, a mood, or a personality trait that we also recognize as human. Dennison's medium is oil, and his primary tools are not brushes but his gloved hands, rags, masking tape, and even paper, used to manipulate the oil paint and score the surface. Born and raised in Portland, he began drawing, painting, and carving at an early age. He briefly studied at the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland. Besides painting and carving, he maintains a daily ritual that involves both drawing and poetry writing, in order to document what he experiences. His work has been exhibited nationally and is in numerous Northwest collections.

Marjorie Taylor defines vegan taxidermy as an artform that celebrates animals without using actual animal parts in the construction. Her one-of-a-kind animal replicas, realistic in form and often life-size, also involve a great deal of fantasy and playfulness, as well as ingenuity and exquisite workmanship. She creates armatures either by shaping taxidermy forms or by wrapping wire with layers of *papier mâché*. Next, she covers these armatures with a wide range of materials: faux fur, chenille, tapestry fabrics, velvet, and her favorite, vintage needlepoint. As a final touch, she may add lace, ribbon, beads, or even watch parts. Taylor's animals have an extraordinary presence. Their body language and posture feel utterly lifelike yet delightfully whimsical. In this show, many of the pieces deliberately echo the titles of Olga Volchkova's paintings of plants with animal names. Also included is a clever (and much enlarged) paper-clay version of Albrecht Dürer's small woodcut, *Rhinoceros* (1515), which she embedded with beads and mirrors, another instance of the unexpected directions Taylor's humor and creativity can take. Now an emerita professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, Taylor is a self-taught artist, whose work includes fabric brain art (neuroscience imagery in hooked rugs, beadwork and quilting), wearable art, and dresses made of recycled materials that were finalists in the *World of Wearable Art International Design Competition* (New Zealand) and worn at the Nobel Prize Ceremony in Sweden. Her work has been exhibited internationally.

Olga Volchkova has been for several years renewing the highly codified genre of Russian Orthodox icon painting, in effect subverting and reappropriating its iconography in order to canonize plants and nature's living creatures, while remaining mostly true to the style and techniques of this religious artform, which she studied formally. The passion for plants and botany that inspires her work is rooted in the concrete experience of rural life, her own gardening, and in the precise observation of the bounties of the Oregonian nature during hikes. Volchkova isn't just moved by the beauty of plants, but also fascinated by their uses and properties, their benefits and dangers, their history, the mythologies we weave around them and how we relate to them – in short, by the ways in which plants are part of a natural as well as a cultural ecosystem. Each painting comes with its own story, and each is a visual narrative that combines erudition and humor. Every detail has been thoroughly researched and meticulously executed. Her vibrant colors are the result of much delicate layering, and retaining balance and harmony is crucial at each stage of the painting. The collection in this show revolves around plants with animal names and lends its title to the entire exhibit. Volchkova has created a whole new performative genre in painting, whereby she says: "I'm canonizing plants," and does. This is something, she notes, no one had dared before. As with traditional images of saints, this expansion of the concept of sainthood and personification of plants is meant to rekindle our sense of awe and wonder, but here it's our spiritual bond with the natural world that is at stake. It is also a reminder, at once playful and earnest, that plants and their natural environment need more than ever to be respected and protected. Volchkova grew up in Tver, in the former Soviet Union. She studied chemistry and art, and was trained in art restoration as well as icon painting. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, most recently at the Museum of Russian Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

– Sylvie Pederson