

PRESS RELEASE

KATE BICKMORE

17 SEPTEMBER — 16 OCTOBER 2021

OPENING RECEPTION

THURSDAY, 16 SEPTEMBER, 6 — 8PM

Annka Kultys Gallery is pleased to present *In Season*, an exhibition of new work by the London-based artist Kate Bickmore. On show are seven of the artist's immersive oil paintings that seductively interweave the surfaces, depths and desires of the artist's experiences as a queer woman using Bickmore's chosen visual language of florascapes.

While simultaneously presenting as both hyperrealistic and fantastical, the artist uses her florascapes to explore new modes of perception, unconscious urges and systems of meaning. Says Bickmore of her process and preferred vernacular: "Within my paintings, I embrace the sensational pleasures, wonder, and enjoyment of plants as a powerful and elusive site of transformation. ... The flowers in my paintings are given a majestic and powerful status – depicted not as victims or specimens of the objective gaze, but instead as living, breathing agents that can build consciousness and create a sense of connectivity." Thus while Bickmore's paintings exhibit elements of classic feminist critique in their opposition to the objectification of the beautiful under the de trop male gaze, as well as queer theory in their celebration of the plant kingdom and the heteronormative-challenging multiplicity of sexual and reproductive permutations that abound in it, there resides a far more immediate and visceral air of carnality within the works. This atmosphere is reflected in the artist's mischievous choice of title for the exhibition. *In Season* is at once a reference to the cyclical nature of flowering plants and the successful growing periods for crops and yet is also synonymous with the period when a female (mammal usually) indicates it is ready to mate.

In the large work *Soon it Would Be Too Hot* (2021), two exotic and brightly coloured flowers resplendent in bright reds, purples and pinks with dashes of yellows and blues, familiar and yet otherworldly, appear to turn towards each other obliquely across the canvas. The backdrop is jungly; large-leaved foliage echoing the rich dark green leaves of the rubber plant (tapped industrially once for its milky, sticky latex fluid) is discernible underneath what must presumably be a darkened rainforest canopy, referencing an oppressively hot and humid environment, as per the painting's

ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY

472 HACKNEY ROAD, UNIT 9, LONDON E2 9EQ

T +44 (0)74 5556 1887, WWW.ANNKAKULTYS.COM

title. The diaphanous petals of the lower bloom almost anthropomorphically reach out across the canvas to its would-be partner flower. It should come as little surprise then that in creating *Soon it Would Be Too Hot* Bickmore wanted to capture the atmosphere and experience of a recent sexual encounter. Yet if the theme of the work is ultimately indebted to the artist's personal life, the composition of *Soon it Would Be Too Hot* is determinedly Baroque in its conception. In her choice of bold and vibrant colours for the flowers, particularly the close grouping of primary colours, the exuberant detail with which they are painted, their deep contrast to the darkened background and the creation of a diagonal, i.e. non-vertical or horizontal, axis for the flowers' dynamic, Bickmore enters into a dialogue across the centuries with the works of Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Rubens and Velazquez and other leading painters of the Baroque. *Soon it Would Be Too Hot* takes its title from J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (Harper Collins, London, 1962) which the artist was reading when the work was created, and describes a post-apocalyptic future where global warming has caused the world to become uninhabitable — returning it to a kind of Jurassic state with giant plants and hot, humid environments.

This thematic of an impending environmental Armageddon is also discernible in *In the Shadows of Infinity* (2021), a similarly large-scale work, featuring hyperrealistic dewy droplets clinging to lush salmon-pink petals, the impact of their glistening forms amplified by the artist's intelligent use of chiaroscuro to contrast the inky cluster of florets that dominate the centre of the canvas. The work feels dark, foreboding, tense and moist. Bickmore explains the motif of the dark in the work: "I finished this painting during the worst of this past winter, when everything was closed and felt quite dark and depressing. I think I wanted to make a dark painting that held a space for both fear and pleasure. I wanted to have some abstracted floral forms emerge from darkness like a Boschian hellscape, but also be protected by the flowers around it." In addition to the bravura technical accomplishment Bickmore displays in realising the droplets, droplets appearing on foliage evidence circumstances where there is an excess of water present in the soil, such as when an environment has become saturated à la Ballard's dystopia. In a process known as guttation, too much water penetrates the plant through its roots which creates pressure that forces the moisture to exude from the plant in the form of droplets. Yet, as with *Soon it Would Be Too Hot*, the work also permits a more personal, more erotic reading. The artist has confided that she was inspired to create *In the Shadows of Infinity* from a desire to capture the feelings of excitement and anticipation engendered while star-gazing at a night sky with her lover in an empty field on one of Scotland's sparsely populated western islands. It is not mere coincidence that the petals in the work appear wet and tongue-like.

Of course the eroticisation of the floral is not a recent phenomenon, as the poetry of Virgil and the myth of Sappho evince from classical times, through Shakespeare's Ophelia strewing Elsinore in flowers, to the more recent examples of the photography of Edward Weston's peppers and Robert Mapplethorpe's elevation of calla lilies to gay iconography can attest. And while not all artists' flowers are the same, as just a cursory review of Luc Tuymans' *Orchid*, Monet's *Water Lilies* and Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* demonstrates, probably no artist is more closely associated

ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY

472 HACKNEY ROAD, UNIT 9, LONDON E2 9EQ

T +44 (0)74 5556 1887 WWW.ANNKAKULTYS.COM

with the depiction of female sexuality through flowers as the American painter, Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986). During her lifetime O’Keeffe created many forms of abstract art, including close-ups of flowers, that were widely interpreted to represent female genitalia, although O’Keeffe consistently denied such an intention.

Bickmore’s punningly titled *Hibis Kiss in the Fourth Dimension* (2021), depicts six, possibly more, hibiscus flowers in typically rich hues of white, yellow and orange and darker blues and purples. Compositionally, the work evokes comparison with O’Keeffe’s 1939 work, *Hibiscus with Plumeria* (Smithsonian collection), however, the two paintings differ subtly yet substantively in their treatment of their respective themes. While O’Keeffe’s painting plays upon the visual similarities of the flower and the female organs, Bickmore’s hibiscuses appear to be entangled in an ethereal dance, the petals of each flower folding in and out of its companions, such that is unclear where one begins and one ends, as the bodies of lovers are of course wont to do. Moreover, *Hibis Kiss in the Fourth Dimension* can also be read as referring to cosmic portals, as the central hibiscus on the canvas’s space around its stigma disappears down into an unknowable darkness in much the same way as light fails to escape the gravitational pull of a black hole. The cosmological aspect of Bickmore’s work reflects O’Keeffe’s rationale for selecting flowers as a subject. O’Keeffe noted: “When you take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it’s your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else. Most people in the city rush around so, they have no time to look at a flower. I want them to see it whether they want to or not.” Sentiments echoed by Bickmore when she says of her practice, “The process of viewing, perceiving, and depicting these plants is a subjective and evolving experience, focused on immersive, cosmic feeling and sensory expansiveness. They are an entryway to the unknown, the sensual, and the sacred; continually challenging categorization and the traditional notions we use to define them.”

In Season represents the artist’s first solo show with a commercial gallery and Annka Kultys Gallery is delighted to have been able to offer Bickmore the opportunity to present her work in such a context.

ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY

472 HACKNEY ROAD, UNIT 9, LONDON E2 9EQ

T +44 (0)74 5556 1887 WWW.ANNKAKULTYS.COM

BIOGRAPHY

Kate Bickmore is an emerging artist (b. Albany, New York, 1993) presently living in London whose practice currently focuses on creating florascapes in oils.

Bickmore graduated from the MFA painting program at the Royal College of Art in London in 2019. She received her BA (honours, summa cum laude) in Studio Art from Hamilton College, Clinton, NY in 2015, following a semester studying abroad at the Slade School of Fine Art in London in 2014.

While at the Royal College of Art, Bickmore was honoured to receive the prestigious Chadwell Award, set up by Andrew Post and Mary Aylmer in 2010 in memory of Andrew's mother, and offered to students about to complete their post-graduate studies in fine art. Intended as a bridge to assist graduates in their transition from student to practising art professionals, the award supported Bickmore with a bursary and complimentary studio space. Bickmore has been artist-in-residence at the Sicily Artist Residence Program, Linguaglossa, Sicily (2019), at the Anderson Center at Tower View, The Jerome Foundation Emerging Artist Fellowship, Red Wing, MN (2017), and at the Byrdcliffe Art Colony, Pollock-Krasner Fellowship, Woodstock, NY (2017). She has also received numerous awards and grants in addition to the Chadwell Award.

For all press enquiries, please contact

Marta Chadzynska +44 74 555 61 887 press@annkakultys.com

Opening Hours: Wednesday through Saturday, 12 — 6pm

ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY

472 HACKNEY ROAD, UNIT 9, LONDON E2 9EQ

T +44 (0)74 5556 1887 WWW.ANNKAKULTYS.COM