

SUSI BRISTER

FABLES



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

NOVEMBER 13, 2014 – JANUARY 15, 2015

AUSTIN, TEXAS



Flora, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle photo rag, 32 x 32 inches, edition 1/5, 2014.

Cover Panel: *013 Silky Straight in Swamp*, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle photo rag, 44 x 44 inches, edition 1/5, 2013.

SUSI BRISTER *FABLES*

It's not what you look at that matters,
it's what you see.

-Henry David Thoreau

In this solo exhibition at Women & Their Work, Susi Brister uses a language of anonymous portraiture to explore isolation and exhibitionism alongside quieter themes of idealized nature and the shortcomings of manufactured simulacrum. Instead of setting up these relationships as dualistic or conflicting, Brister manages to blur the lines between one and its apparent opposite, thus creating a convincing image of human desire and impulse; convoluted, uncategorized, messy.

Much of Brister's previous work depicts spaces that share two primary qualities; they are both genuine and vacant. Primarily through a focus on texture and perspective, Brister makes it easy, as a viewer, to project oneself into the scene, whether that be a cheap hotel's half lit hallway, or an unmown lawn. In these works, the idea of the genuine was exalted. By depicting it, Brister denumbed the viewer to their own realities—valiant, but quite different from her approach in recent years. Her present work takes two great deviations from her former. Firstly, Brister introduces the human figure. The intangible us-shaped voids of her previous work are replaced by defined volumes, actors made anonymous by wrappings of bulky manufactured textiles and other synthetic props. Secondly, through these costumes, coverings, and the environment in which they are depicted, Brister strips away the moral and hierarchical attributes associated with the genuine. Instead, she places the real and the fake side by side and gives them flexible value variables. From this arises unexpected dynamics, one of the most compelling being the relation

between the frighteningly genuine and the comforting disingenuous.

Brister betrays physical boundaries as much as cognitive ones, and in this, camouflage serves an important purpose. The artist has an eye for unintentional formal similarities between synthetic (at times tacky) textiles and raw natural environments. She carefully constructs photographs of these patterns hiding the figures they cover in their corresponding settings—odd pairings of tessellated wolf heads on cloth mimicking the exact texture of a boulder, or a repeating winter pastoral pattern which, rather than hiding the figure in a snowy landscape as one might expect, conceals her with remarkable accuracy against a mossy green cliff side. Both these pairings in turn expose the manufactured wolves of the first and the bare trees and icy boulders of the second as ridiculously small and shoddy in comparison to the natural environment. It's stagecraft at its best, and the humor inherent within it is a necessary balance for the more intense realities underneath.

Those realities begin to unfold as the viewer lingers with the work. There's something not quite right about that camouflage. Aside from the strange thought that these are posed willing portraits (exhibitionism) of those seemingly wishing to remain hidden from society and from being identified (anonymity), there are other peculiar clues that suggest the subterfuge is not as earnest as it first appears. In *Limestone Bed* for example, the viewer finds one of the most well hidden subjects. In a setting outside of this Brister exhibition, the work could be passed over for a typical nature photo. On closer inspection though, one finds a hand poking out of the patterned blanket disguising its figure as a rock. Similarly, in *Wolf Heads, Rock Formations* one can see the subject's hair.

In others, the human form is more obvious simply through landmarks of shoulders, hips, and head. It's as though the subjects don't actually want to be hidden; rather, they want to be seen as wanting to be hidden.

These intentions, oddly, are not a new construct, but something passed down through American nature romanticizers from the beginning.

Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, has become a near-religious text of rugged individualism promoting a romanticized notion of natural living as ideal despite the irony of his hosting dinner parties for 25+ guests in his "isolated" cabin and his incapability to do his own laundry during his years at Walden pond (his mother would instead).

One thinks of Thoreau as returning to a more natural state, but he could not give up his creature comforts in his attempts.

This mixed up idealization, not that idealism of *Walden*, but the idealism of Thoreau, is at the heart of Susi Brister's recent work. To put it in other words, the desire to swear off your cake...and eat it too.



Limestone Bed, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle photo rag, 16 x 16 inches, edition 1/5, 2014.



Zebra Duet, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle photo rag, 22 x 22 inches, edition 1/5, 2013.

Using the tropes of pastoral and portrait painting and photography, Brister does not picture nature, but rather the draw nature has, and the impossibility of the fulfillment of that desire in the context of contemporary life. The artist adds to that dynamic an equally conflicted desire for anonymity and dark solitude paired with its antithesis: a desire to be put on display, to be exhibited. Thoreau publishing to main-stream society his experience of self-separating from main stream society is not too far removed from Brister's anti-portraits of figures submerged under blanket and camouflage, though Brister's irony is more intentional and self-aware than Thoreau's.

Nature has been romanticized for centuries, and so idealization of nature and desire to be part of nature is now both prolific and deeply rooted. In this way, what one escapes to has not changed, but what one escapes *from* has. Alongside conflicting blurry desires for isolation and exposure, Brister explores what we are escaping from (and simultaneously

clinging to) specifically through her choice of photographed materials. In each of these camouflage materials, processes of manufacturing, digitization, chemical synthesis, and contemporary material science are exposed. Brister conscripts neon shag, fake flora, brightly colored tape, digitally printed fabrics, even synthetic hair extensions as reminders of industrialized, commercialized, and extraordinarily plastic contemporary life. Through these the human impulse to replicate nature and the general shortcomings in doing so are also exposed. This couldn't be more direct than in *Beach Scene and Idyllic Landscape* in which products that implement digital productions of classical-ish paintings (a beach on an umbrella, a landscape on a large towel or blanket) are placed in the environments that they depict. Strangely, Brister manages to blur lines here again as these products paradoxically shield the implied figures from exposure but also expose the products' insufficiency as accurate reflections of the habitats in which they are staged. At once the viewer holds the hidden forms as volumetric shapes distinct from the environment, and, strangely, feels that the form is dissolving into the background despite its covering's ineffectualness.

Through all of this, the viewer is brought back to those convoluted impulses, a shared messy idealism, those mixed up desires to escape life, society, chintzy fabrication, etc., and yet cling to it, be comforted and protected by it even in this escapism. Rather than depicting this complex relationship in the same way photo to photo, Brister explores varying facets of the theme. Unique examples like *Zebra Duet* and *Spring Bloom* stretch the scope of her work. *Zebra Duet's* fabrics do little to hide the subject in its environment, but the title and form suggest the subject is not attempting to hide in this way, instead taking on the

protection of blending in with another. The single mass becomes two figures, two textures, the divisions between them lost in their zebra stripes. *Spring Bloom*, with its pixelated covering, brings one of today's most pressing realities into the mix, the escape and repulsion of digital worlds. Others, like *Hi-Lo Rabbit on Country Road* and *Silky Straight in Swamp*, dampen the heady concepts found in other works in exchange for welcome whimsy, humor, and the escape of fantasy.

Together, these works make for a cohesive and complex exhibition. Each work is unique, but builds with its counterparts to create an expansive experience allowing the viewer to access the themes Brister addresses in a palpable way. One can feel the tangled desires Brister references as though they are one's own. All the while, the artist maintains rigorous quality in terms of composition and craft, eliminating any possible distraction from this near-immersive experience. That engagement with the viewer's empathy is hard won in any field of art—thankfully, Brister follows through with emotional complexities that, unlike her subject's camouflage, feel true and genuine to the core.



Sargassum Mound, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle photo rag, 34 x 44 inches, edition 1/5, 2014.

Seth Orion Schwaiger is a writer and artist living in Austin, Texas.

SUSI BRISTER

EDUCATION:

- 2005-2008 Concordia University, Montréal, QC, Canada
Master of Fine Arts, Studio Art, Department of Photography
- 1997-2001 The University of Texas at Austin
Bachelor of Arts in Art, with Honors,
Concentration in Photography, College of Fine Arts
Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology, with Honors,
Minor in Art History, College of Liberal Arts

SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

- 2014 *Fables, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX
- 2013 *Fantastic Habitat*, Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX
- 2011 *Menagerie*, Parisian Laundry, Montréal, QC

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS:

- 2015 *Death by Committee*, Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center, Austin, TX
People's Gallery Exhibition, Austin City Hall, Austin, TX
- 2013 *Wish You Were Here: Interventions into Landscape*, Union Gallery, Queen's University, Kingston, ON
New and Greatest Hits: Selected Work by Texas Biennial Artists 2005 - 2011, Big Medium, Austin, TX
MOVING/STILL: Recent Photography by Texas Artists, Fotofest and Houston Center for Photography, Houston, TX (catalogue)
- 2012 *City Zoo*, Brand 10 Artspace, Fort Worth, TX
Texas National 2012, The Cole Art Center, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX
- 2011 *Texas Biennial 2011, Women & Their Work*, Austin, TX (catalogue)
Assistance League of Houston Celebrates Texas Art, Williams Tower Gallery, Houston, TX
- 2009 *Sidebeside*, Gallery T, Denver, CO
- 2008 *Figure/Ground as part of Collision 4*, Parisian Laundry, Montréal, QC
- 2007 *Compression*, Art Mûr, Montréal, QC (catalogue)
- 2006 *White Cube on the Move*, Bourget Gallery, Concordia University, Montréal, QC
Lucid, Faculty of Fine Arts Gallery, Concordia University, Montréal, QC
- 2004 *Photography Now*, South Shore Art Center, Cohasset, MA
III Biennale d'Arte Fotografica del Mediterraneo, Mediterranean Foundation for Art, Cagliari, Italy
February Gathering, Nowlin Gallery, Austin, TX
- 2002 *Beyond the Tower*, Dean of Liberal Arts Gallery, University of Texas at Austin
- 2001 *Art Department Scholarship Show*, Flood Gallery, University of Texas at Austin
Texas Elements, New Gallery, University of Texas at Austin
University of Texas Student Art Show, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX

RESIDENCIES:

- 2010 *K2 Press Artist-in-Residence*, Austin, TX
- 2007 *Vermont Studio Center Artist-in-Residence*, Johnson, VT

PROJECTS AND AWARDS:

- 2014 Artist lecture, Georgetown Art Center, Georgetown, TX
- 2013 Cover art for Austin-based band Black Books' self-titled album
- 2012 *Art From the Ashes Texas Benefit Exhibition*, Austin, TX
- 2011 *Papier 11*, Contemporary Art Fair of Works on Paper, Montréal, QC
- 2009 Cover image for novel *La Veuve*, published by Les Éditions du Boréal, Montréal, QC
- 2005 Campaign for Concordia Award, Concordia University, Montréal, QC
- 2004 Award of Merit, *Photography Now*, South Shore Art Center, Cohasset, MA
- 2001 Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst Edu.de Short-Term Prize Award, Berlin, Germany
University of Texas Undergraduate Research Fellowship, Austin, TX

REVIEWS, PUBLICATIONS, AND MEDIA APPEARANCES:

- 2013 *Looking Back on the Texas Biennial's Greatest Hits*, Benjamin Sutton, Artinfo.com, September 23
Radio interview with Troy Schulze on The Front Row, Classical 91.7, thefrontrow.org, September 16
"Fantastic Habitat" Challenges the Perception of Nature, Altamese Osborne, Houston Press, September 4
Minimalism with some Substance, Sam Koebrich, Queen's University Journal, July 30
- 2012 *350 Words: "City Zoo" at Brand 10 Art Space*, And X Art Space, Colette Copeland, Glasstire.com, June 7
- 2011 *Texas Biennial Artists - Susi Brister and Carin Rodenborn*, Sean Ripple, Austinist.com, April 27
Art Agenda, Midnight Poutine, midnightpoutine.ca, February 14
A Texan's Tribute to Bundled Montrealeers, Veronica Redgrave, The Montreal Buzz, tourisme-montreal.org, January
Lady Arts, Robyn Fadden, The Hour, hour.ca, January 13
- 2007 *Trespass: From Pictured Space to Public Place*, text by Tammer El-Sheikh, published by Concordia University, MFA Studio Arts, Montréal, QC; catalogue for exhibition *Compression*.
- 2006 *Art Movers Decide to Shake it Up*, Allison Martens, Concordia Journal, Vol. 1, No. 12, April 20
Lucid Images Reflect Student Preoccupations, Concordia Journal, Vol. 1, No. 9, March 6

TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

- 2013 - Photocommunications and Visual Studies Faculty,
Present St. Edward's University, Austin, TX



Beach Scene, archival pigment print on Hahnemühle photo rag, 16 x 16 inches, edition 1/5, 2014.

Women & Their Work

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Quincy Adams Erickson

Virginia Fleck

Lindsey Hanna

Melanie Harris de Maycotte

Karen Hawkins

Judy Jensen

Elisa Sumner

Betty Trent

Emily Walker

Liz Young

STAFF

Chris Cowden, Executive Director

Rachel Koper, Program Director

Liberty Lloyd, Gallery Director

Debe Bentley, Gallery Shop Manager

Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 36th anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,879 artists in 291 visual art exhibitions, 121 music, dance and theater events, 15 film festivals, 25 literary readings and 522 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, the New York Times, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 950 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



women and
their work

1710 Lavaca St.
Austin, Texas 78701
(512) 477-1064
info@womenandtheirwork.org
www.womenandtheirwork.org

Additional support is provided by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Art Works. Thanks to BAH! Design.

