

RIOT MATERIAL

Summer Wheat: Catch and Release

October 15, 2018 By Emily Nimptsch

at Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles (Through October 27, 2018)

Considering the disheartening, divisive nature of our current political reality, the mind often drifts, yearning for some feminist utopia teeming with independent, iron-willed women. This mythical matriarchy is precisely the type of society Oklahoma-born, Brooklyn-based figurative painter Summer Wheat presents in her delightful current Shulamit Nazarian exhibition, *Catch and Release*. Bathed in the age-old aesthetics of Ancient Egyptian relief sculptures and Native American textiles, Wheat's idyllic, vibrant visions depict groups of modern women performing the traditionally male task of fishing. Through these ornate, arcadian paintings, the artist not only subverts traditional gender roles, but also rejects the male gaze, and elevates historically ignored "women's crafts" to a position of power and prestige.

Her name was initially supposed to be Angela. However, upon witnessing a soap opera actress named Summer on television, Wheat's mother soon changed her mind and selected this nature-themed moniker for her newborn daughter instead. Aptly, this verdurous title perfectly fits with the pastoral themes of the artist's paintings. Pointing to the divine harmony of the natural world, these effervescent images also rely on sacred geometric patterns inspired by Navajo quilts. Through this merging of the earthly and the spiritual realms with Western abstraction à la Frank Stella and Piet Mondrian, here Wheat shatters the archaic division between fine and folk art.



Catch and Release

All images courtesy of the artist and Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles

To achieve this embroidered, semi-sculptural effect, the artist pushes thick, impasto acrylics through a fine aluminum screen. The paint then separates into patches, granting the canvas a thoroughly modern, pixelated look. In adopting both futuristic and ancient elements in her work, she straddles these two temporal realities, resulting in a somewhat jarring yet timeless ambiance. As Wheat's Los Angeles debut, *Catch and Release* begs the viewer to imagine a world where women are the archetypal breadwinners. Instead of men dominating, conquering, killing, and consuming the natural world, here we witness women living in harmony with it. In nearly every painting presented here, the women liberate whatever fish they catch, therefore surrendering to the ebb and flow of the universe and the subconscious mind.



Biting Nails

In the exhibition's titular centerpiece, *Catch and Release* (2018), the subjects cavort and carouse on a fertile shore. They swim, dive, pluck fish fresh from the river, and tend to their paradisiacal gardens. Although a loose structure of ripple-like lines connects the women present, they all appear happy to focus on their individual tasks and activities. In fact, the women look so absorbed in their pursuits that do not even seem to realize they are being watched. In a reversal of traditional bathing scenes like Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* (1556-1559), the artist does not sexualize her subjects here. The viewer is not a voyeur in this scenario, objectifying the subjects through the lens of the desire. Instead, Wheat allows these ladies to simply be themselves. Despite this veneer of safety, the viewer can still spot traces of male influence and violence scattered throughout the image, including drawings of phalluses, feet resembling male genitalia, slithering snakes, and daggers.

This latent aggression continues in 2018's *Biting Nails*. Instead of signaling tension and anxiety through the act of biting one's own nails, here we see ten salmon-hued minnows chomping down on a woman's fingertips. While some nail salons do offer pedicures via the *Garra rufa* or "doctor fish" nibbling the dead skin off the customer's feet, this same procedure performed on the hands seems far more disturbing, painful, and courageous. Additionally, this painting also draws the connection between nails and teeth, strength and femininity.



Eel

Wheat expands on this theme in *Eel* (2018) as another woman bravely pulls a live eel out of the water as she inserts her hand in its open mouth. Her pointed fingernails mix and merge with the creature's terrifying teeth, proving that they are equals in this great tapestry of life.

Meanwhile, both *Daily Release* and *Eternal Release* depict two women releasing countless jarred minnows back into a stream. While these images likely represent respect for nature, mental unburdening, and forgiveness, they also resemble the male release of sperm. As these tadpole-like organisms disperse, they give off an ethereal glow. They swirl and expand, just like nebulas and galaxies. Through this arresting visual parallel, Wheat allows these women to step into divine roles as creators of the cosmos.



Daily Release

However, this tremendous power also involves the potential for both creation and destruction. Just like men, Wheat's subjects are not purely virtuous or evil beings. In 2018's *Heavy Lifting*, we see a balance of the ancient and the modern, as well as cooperation and vanity. In this lush frieze scene, a myriad of different ladies all haul their daily catch in nets resembling handbags. Also in these purses, we see contemporary, commonplace items such as hamburgers and mobile phones alongside hammers and chisels. These two artistic tools signal the brutality involved with the act of making something. In the background of this painting, Wheat includes a series of vertical lines resembling ancient loom weaving as well as shoreline reeds. With this archaic tone, the artist's incongruous insertion of hairdryers, boomboxes, and high heels here all point to this sense of equilibrium.



Heavy Lifting

While it can be tempting to dream of some idealized civilization, Wheat's realistic vision is far more interesting, as it reveals the divine harmony between both sexes and all of creation. Even in the artist's two-dimensional paintings, her female subjects are clearly multi-dimensional beings. They ooze with complexity as the viewer bathes in their elusive, entangled stream of consciousness.

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