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Constance Mallinson

Weekly reviews of Los Angeles art

October 16, 2022

A number of news videos of Florida during Hurricane Ian featured tragi-comic footage of wildlife that ended up in bathrooms, public places, and in one I particularly loved, recorded an otter swimming down a flooded city street. Concurrent with these images of animal displacements is Hilary Baker's exhibition of "Wildlife on the Edge" at the

Wilding Museum in Solvang (October 8, 2022 through March 6, 2023). Included are many of the works from her "Predator" series- indigenous animals portrayed in iconic Southern California landscapes, many of which are historical sites that have been erased due to the relentless push for new development. The atmosphere is noir—one can almost hear the mournful sax soundtrack over the backgrounds ranging from oil wells, car dealerships, drive-ins, bars, airports to sun soaked windfarms. The various creatures who co-habitate these settings are foregrounded at their own intimate levels—often larger than life, crouched, perched, flying, slithering or stalking at various times of the day or night. Their gazes are a unique blend of anthropomorphism and pure animal focused on the business at hand; paradoxically they seem both naturally at home and yet often perplexed at how they fit into this scheme. There's little attempt at realism with the textures of feathers and fur often expressed by a faux woodgrain technique she describes as ties to both the natural and human-made. Her graphic, highly accessible approach to painting is clearly influenced by the pioneering animation of Disney and Jules Engel from Baker's Southern California childhood. But the keen emphasis on the interdependencies and overlaps between the human and animal worlds connects her to the substantial art historical tradition of animal portraiture from George Stubbs to William Wegman. As climate change and urbanization blur the boundaries between our separate existences, Baker has us thinking beyond the strictly anthropocentric and our diehard toxic myths of progress and exceptionalism to a species spanning perspective. One cannot leave Baker's exhibition without considering how our future depends on such thinking.



Hilary Baker : "Palm Springs", Acrylic on linen, 24"X24", 2021