HYPERALLERGIC

An Artist's Commentary on the Damages of Men

The most shocking thing about Sarah McCoubrey's paintings is their startling and deeply unfashionable, unapologetic beauty

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by Natasha Seaman

PHILADELPHIA — Sarah McCoubrey has always been exquisitely attuned to the impact of people on the landscape; one memorable series of paintings depicts minor ecological disasters in the scrub at the edge of suburbia. In Centennial, now on view at Locks Gallery in Philadelphia, the human has taken over and the world has been transformed, through paint, into lace. The effect is both ominous and beautiful, like trees enveloped in spiderwebs.

The title of the exhibition refers to the centennial anniversary of World War I (1914-1918), which coincided with a sabbatical the artist began in 2014 in Belgium. However, the paintings can be seen as an extended response to the artistic tradition of the Lowlands (especially to this specialist in Dutch art) as much as a meditation on the scars of war. Paintings in the show fall into three groups: two that pair lace with landscape and one that weds it with, of all things, butter wrappers. Like the lace they depict, the paintings operate on nodes of connection, weaving together threads of thought and imagery.

Sarah McCoubrey, "Untitled from Guns and Butter #5" (2015), gouache on butter wrapper, 5 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches (all images courtesy of Locks Gallery)

Before we go on, let me be clear: the lace patterns are painted, with thread-fine lines of gouache. It's difficult enough to understand how human beings make lace (and watching it happen does little to demystify the process), but it is baffling how McCoubrey has succeeded in replicating it in paint. (The gallery offers, gnomically, that she works "from the outside in.") The great Dutch and Flemish masters were obliged by the fashion of their patrons to contend with the challenge of depicting lace; while some of them rendered the intricate patterns in detail, others, like Hals and Rembrandt, suggested it with bravura brushwork and well placed dabs of black paint.

McCoubrey shares the sensibility of a different Dutch master, Vermeer. In his "Lacemaker" (1669-70), he depicts a woman working with threads as delicate streams of fluid paint, aligning his art with her careful craft. While nodding to Vermeer's "Lacemaker" in the facture of her threads, McCoubrey transcends the depiction of lace as a product or adornment, adopting its ornamental language and fusing it masterfully to the illusionistic tradition of painting. These paintings' appeal

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Sarah McCoubrey, "Kruisstraat Crater" (2015), gouache on paper mounted on panel, 11 3/4 x 11 3/4 inches

comes not just from the sense of manual control and effort, or even their intricate beauty, but from the synergistic interplay of lace and image. McCoubrey's lace not only frames or comments on the content that it surrounds, but invades it.

For instance, a group of works painted with white on tones of subtly mottled gray portray what appear to be small ponds, lined with grasses and trees, set into lace frames. The ponds turn out to be craters caused by the detonation of massive mines during the first World War. These have since filled with water and been reclaimed by nature — rewoven, if you will, into the landscape. In "Kruisstraat Crater" (2015), the frame creates a circular portal onto the ragged ellipse of the pond, rimmed with trees on the far side and grass on the near. The lace borders the scene, but refuses to obey its bounds, creeping into the image, turning the grass around the pond into knots and fine mesh. The leafless branches of trees, innately inescapably lacy, push into the sky. The transformation feels not necessarily like healing, but — especially given the visual affinity between frost and lace — an icing over of the painful past.

Another series reprises the lace frame around the ponds, but the interior image is now a three-masted Dutch ship at sea. The gray backgrounds of the crater series are replaced by an assortment of well-calculated colors that give their names to the paintings. For instance, "Turquoise Maritime" (2018) is painted a mottled green and blue, the hues organized beneath the image, with the bluer parts in the sky, the greener in the sea. The lace frame is primarily floral, but the middle register is deftly constructed to look like peaking waves, the reflection of light on the water suggested by tiny grids of paint strung between the threads making up the waves — a pattern within a pattern.

The ship is sailing away from us, towards towering clouds. The subject of the ship pushes us backward in history, in its pre-engine technology, as well as its evocation of 17th-century Dutch seascapes. Here the frame creates a novelistic sense of story — the woman is at home, occupied with weaving and maintaining the home, like Penelope, while her Dutch Odysseus plies the bounding mane to return with the plunder of trade. (I can't help thinking of Gabriël Metsu's "Woman Reading a Letter," ca. 1660s.) In contrast to the Crater series, here the lace is less about commenting on and healing from war and more about female subjectivity, the woman's craft constructing her world.

With the butter wrappers, the lace is again on the warpath. The origin of the conceit lies in the budgetary opposition between guns and butter in classic economics — the tension between spending on domestic programs or spending on war. The lace no longer frames, but embeds

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images within its patterns. In one of the most overt examples, “Untitled from Guns and Butter #5” (2015), a gun lurks among the threads, its lines nearly Hiberno-Saxon in their abstraction.

McCoubrey emphasizes the improbable surface of the wrapper by picking up some of the colors in the lettering, as if the waxy paper easily takes gouache, and its colors actually bleed into the paint. Despite the obvious artistic manipulation necessary to make this happen, there is nonetheless a sense of the lace as an image that has appeared rather than was crafted. This makes the gun-laden lace more menacing, an uncontrollable manifestation that hides beneath or perhaps has feasted on the butter.

Sarah McCoubrey, “Turquoise Maritime” (2018), gouache and acrylic on paper, 45 x 37 3/4 inches; image size, 39 1/2x 31 1/2 inches; framed dimensions, 47 3/8 x 39 1/2 inches

In the varied imagery of and in and transforming into lace, McCoubrey is activating a distinctly feminine voice to comment upon the damages inflicted by men, whether in gun violence, wars, or just colonial exploitation. The paintings remind me of a moment in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s utopian novella Herland (1915). When a pair of men crash land an airplane in a mythical all-female society, they are tended to by the inhabits. Nursed back to health, they return to their plane to find it scuttled — not by violence, but by being impenetrably sewn up in canvas.

Yet despite the layers of political and ethical commentary and art historical reference in these paintings, the most shocking thing about them is their startling and deeply unfashionable, unapologetic beauty. The incredible subtlety of these images, which confound reproduction and require close looking, oblige one to bear eye witness, not only to violence, but to artistic virtuosity.

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