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ART REVIEW

‘Edyta Hul: Density of the Spell’ Review: A Mini Vacation in Chelsea

The Warsaw-based painter’s tropical scenes at New York’s SLAG&RX gallery provide a welcome break from winter doldrums.



‘Untitled’ (2024) PHOTO: SLAG&RX

By Brian P. Kelly

It's that time of year when the short days and icy temperatures make it seem like winter will never release us from her rimy grasp. For a respite, some flee to equatorial outposts where sun, sand and umbrella drinks are plentiful. For those of us with less money and fewer vacation days, a trip to Chelsea might do the trick. There you'll find Edyta Hul's fecund, flora-rich paintings.

Though based in Warsaw, Ms. Hul creates oil and enamel works that are deliciously subtropical. Stand in front of one of her canvases at SLAG&RX long enough and you start to hear the cries of colorful birds, the screech of howler monkeys and the crunch of fallen palm fronds under your feet.

Her intensely cropped images offer tightly framed masses of billowing leaves, curling vines and grasping tendrils, embodying the chaos of survival that plants in wild parts engage in as they grapple for light, water and better real estate in which to spread their limbs. But these works wind themselves just to the edge of conflict, offering not stress but relaxation as they pull us into their carefully balanced compositions.



'Serpentine Sisters' (2024) PHOTO: SLAG&RX

At first, Ms. Hul's technique is disarmingly simple, with ultra-thinned pigment being brushed on, leaf-by-leaf, to build out her subjects. Less generous—and less observant—visitors might even be tempted toward an “I could do that” reaction. But the longer you look, the deeper her paintings and stylings go. Layers upon layers of industrial enamels—buffed, polished, partially removed—are built up onto these canvases, leaving haloed and spotted fields peeking out amid her bushes. Where you might expect thick, nearly impastoed surfaces from this approach, the result is the

exact opposite, yet the works' dimensionality is striking thanks to her keen handling of her materials.

“Density of the Spell” is a curious title for this show, the artist’s first solo exhibition in New York, because heaviness couldn’t be further from one’s mind while looking at these tantalizingly gossamer paintings. “Serpentine Sisters” threatens to float off the wall as a light breeze tickles the plants’ plumage, a sea of green rooted to the ground by a few sturdy rainbow stalks. The flapping fronds in various hues of phthalo blue in an untitled work, surrounded by cool, hazy grays, suggest a storm that’s been whipped up, threatening to uproot the scene in front of us if it weren’t for a few heftier branches.



‘Sunrise’ (2024) PHOTO: SLAG&RX

The packed vines and limbs of another untitled piece are more imposing, but a slant of negative space running across the work’s diagonal welcomes us in, encouraging us to push through the brush and see what lies beyond. And a central plant in “Bouquet” is almost anthropomorphized: Surrounded by slighter leaves it seems to interrogate us, asking why and how we’ve found ourselves in this lush setting.

While green in its many guises—from earthy and ochre-tinged to richly olive-kissed—is the central player here, Ms. Hul isn’t afraid to push the bounds of a “natural” palette. Flashes of red and orange in “Sunrise” have us searching for the eastern horizon, while vivacious pinks crop up in works like “Rose-Tinted Shaman” and “Mirage.” A trip to SLAG&RX might not be St. Barts, but it is a refreshing break from the winter doldrums.

Edyta Hul: Density of the Spell

SLAG&RX, through Feb. 8

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