

GALERIE ONRUST AMSTERDAM



Starhawk's Backyard

Gijs Frieling, Emma Talbot and Derk Thijs

22 November – 28 December 2019

Nature is no longer the background against which our history takes place; now it has taken its own command of the stage. This idea, expressed by the French philosopher Bruno Latour, plays a key role in the surprising exhibition *Starhawk's Backyard*, where Gijs Frieling, Emma Talbot and Derk Thijs investigate the equality of man and nature via their work. It started with an examination of the spirit of the times; issues concerning nature have rarely been more urgent, after all, now that we are being faced with the climate crisis and a dark view of the future every day. But gradually the artists began to reflect mainly on what nature actually is, since it is being experienced increasingly as something separate from us, but within our control. It's as though we aim to experience what we ourselves don't seem to be part of.

Departing from their shared view of the urgency of this theme and a common fondness for meandering lines and organic shapes, the artists entered into a dialogue. While remaining true to their individual perspectives, they gave inspiration and definition to each other's ideas. As such the works produced within this context, specially for this exhibition, can be seen independently, but they also make up one big installation in which all sorts of issues are raised without the suggestion of clear answers.

In *The Age of the Reaper*, for instance – a series of paintings on silk that wind elegantly about the space – Emma Talbot sees the future as a post-technological era. Not a futuristic doom scenario,

but a dream-like vision in which we survive by reverting to and relying on our inner, primal strength and inventiveness. Appearing in her line drawings that tend toward symbolism and surrealism is an elderly self-sufficient woman who is at one with nature in her instinct to survive. She kindles fires, weaves baskets, goes foraging and is in contact with other dimensions of existence via black holes. An elderly woman, therefore, who symbolizes knowledge and wisdom – in contrast to her frequent portrayal as a fragile and forgotten one. For the colorful and rocky enchanted landscape, Talbot took inspiration from a Minoan fresco from the twelfth century B.C, which – coincidentally – also serves as the basis for Gijs Frieling's murals. He was captivated by a vertical articulation of the ground, which creates the impression of a cross-section. The bulbous shapes and growths that appear in Frieling's murals as primal forces in the earth can be traced directly back to this. Frieling transforms the gallery space into a wooded landscape and, in doing so, suggests a boundless and exciting world beyond. Yes, these are scenes in nature, but ones based on the idea that the world of plants is a world unto itself. In nocturnal colors – from ultramarine and chalky blue to purple oxide and sea green, an inversion of the original fresco's red spectrum – he paints nimbly fluttering bats, hovering eyes and luminous plants: this forest is alive. It is inhabited by natural spirits, unknown to us, and is both ominous and reassuring.

The sculptures of Derk Thijs – made from wood that came from a forester in the Kennermerduinen – could be called a dialogue with nature, since the forms were partly determined by the knots and irregularities in the material. It could be a metaphor for how to deal with the surroundings, this unique place with its own life and history to which we must relate. But before Thijs was able to work with the wood, he first had to take a destructive approach. The wood spent days in cold storage, so that the worms and insects in it would be killed. For that reason he decided to have them return in bizarre, cheerful and graceful sculptures: a transformation and an ode in one.

In Starhawk's Backyard, a title both futuristic and combative – Starhawk being the pseudonym of an American environmental activist – the artists fantasize about the future, about nature as a primal autonomous force, in the chain of which we are only a small link. But also about nature being closer than we think. Our own backyard, after all, can be both a private enclosure and a shadowy place not meant for peering eyes; in that sense, it can stand for our own responsibility. Starhawk's Backyard is an ode to growth, to non-rational mysticism and to the power of the earth and the imagination – but especially to creation, which is where all life begins.

Esther Darley (*translation: Beth O'Brien*)

Gijs Frieling, Emma Talbot and Derk Thijs each wrote a piece about their position in Starhawk's Backyard. These are available in the exhibition.