

ELLEN SIEBERS

*A DIVINITY THAT SHAPES OUR ENDS*

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“How one walks through the world, the endless small adjustments of balance, is affected by the shifting weights of beautiful things.”

—Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 2001

Philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell once explained that “the raw material out of which the world is built up is not of two sorts, one matter and the other mind; it is simply arranged in different patterns by its interrelations: some arrangements may be called mental, while others may be called physical.” Though humans experience the world through physically *being* and *doing* and mentally *thinking* and *imagining*, these seemingly separate experiences are born from one intricate web of interactions. Thus, histories we may only ponder can influence what we create, and these seemingly separate worlds of the cerebral and the physical are, in fact, indivisible.

Ellen Siebers’ paintings offer an eloquent language to such a conclusion, exploring dualities as symbiotic, inseparable entities in conversation with one another. Centered around loose renderings of natural life and landscapes, these works are rooted in the physical. Skillfully layered washes and strokes of paint record the sensuality of nature, weaving a sense of sentience into an immediate physicality. Such images invite immersion, asking what it means to live in the beauty of a thing—to sense it luxuriously and entirely. Yet simultaneously, Siebers demands focus, placing frames among the fronds and petals of organic scenes. Selected through viewfinders, these scenes operate in conversation with surrounding flora, nodding to a history of four-sided ways of seeing—paintings, drawings, photographs, film stills, books, and mirrors. Offering softened glimpses of historic works by artists including Hilma af Klint, Arthur Bowen Davies, and Felix Vallotton, these frames acknowledge the past while reimagining it, superpositioning the artist’s impression atop original artworks, and illuminating a never ending chain of reproductions and subjectivities. Siebers’ paintings serve as another kind of evidence for what mathematicians, neuroscientists, and poets know well: the perceived divisions between now and then, this and that, and you and me are illusory.

Though in recent years beauty has come to be mistaken for the limited ideal long defined and defended by patriarchal powers, Siebers is not afraid to depict it. Beauty is much broader and more mysterious than popular culture’s standards would suggest, and it may be revealed through explorations such as these. Siebers elaborates on historic scenes from her own position, reimagining ancient archetypes within her equanimous structure. She does not shy away from the soft or delicate—in fact, the artist embraces these elements, reminding us that works may possess intensity without being bullish. Bathers are recreated and framed within rich landscapes, alluding to rebirth and reflection. Reclined nudes are rendered in loose gestures, haloed by natural scenes, luxuriating in their softness. These works are orbited by images retrieved from Siebers’ immediate environment—impressions of the night sky, somber or lively bodies of water, grasses and vibrant florals. There is a constant exchange between the physical and the psychological, present and past, original and reproduction, yet it is difficult to ascertain exactly how these scenes should be defined. They are frameworks for Siebers’ studies of life and art, two things felt in equal measure.

Ellen Siebers was born in Madison, Wisconsin in 1986. She earned her BFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2008 and her MA & MFA from the University of Iowa in 2012. Siebers has exhibited at SEPTEMBER, Big Medium Gallery, FJORD, Quappi Projects, and Field Projects, among others. She has received Vermont Studio Center Grant, the University of Iowa Quarter-time Teaching Assistantship, the Mildred Pelzer Lynch Fellowship from the University of Iowa, and the Iowa Quarter time Fellowship. Siebers has taught at the University of Iowa, University of Wisconsin-Madison, College of Mount Saint Vincent, and has led workshops at Dia Art Foundation, Bard, and New York Edge. She currently lives and works in Hudson, New York.