

# MARCH

Dianna Settles

## *A Life Worth Living Would Be A Life Worth Living*

Dianna Settles' paintings are collective documents.

They are collective documents in that they pay homage to the collective life—the real people, plants, animals, activities and struggles—that ground, surround and inform Settles' artistic practice. They are also materials, blueprints, and notes on the living matter of collectivity: the work of cooperation, the being and doing in the world, together. This body of work, *A Life Worth Living Would Be A Life Worth Living*—comprising twenty paintings tracing relationships to nature, autonomy, self-sufficiency, protest, work, and the solitude necessary for being amongst others—illustrates potential arrangements and necessary conditions towards a life that *would be worth living*. It imagines and gives image to structures we can build, occupy and repurpose toward the would-be commune, communal, or even communist world. These paintings have the qualities of both lived moments and future ones, illuminating provisional fragments of a real life ever becoming, a life that can and does flourish in spite of industrial farming, the carceral state, and capitalism.

In these paintings, diverse communal, cooperative, and collective efforts are put into conversation with one another. In *How do we follow after you...*, small groups work together, carefully planting vegetables and tending to the land. In *How to make it last...*, people prepare cider for fermentation, each person focused on individual tasks that will eventually come together. The figures do not necessarily need to look at each other—we understand that their friendships are run through the doing-together of the shared activity, we understand that their shared activity is run through by friendship. No value judgment is made of the relative worth of each task; each is carefully composed and considered. These are diverse, careful activities—the hand dyeing of sheets of cloth in *Colorfast/fugitives...* or the collecting of elderflowers for soda in *Gentle, insistent, we remember the way...* is no longer drudgery, domestic labor required to reproduce capital, but a pleasurable and slow activity, done together. Each figure is valued, yet not alienated, by wage labor. They are close to their product. We know that they'll eat the dinner, taste the spicy pak choi, sip the cordial themselves.

The paintings are not call for a partial escape, a return to nature as if it was an outside of society. The frame of the painting cuts off the activity; there is more life outside of the frame. This is not a retreat or a leaving of the world as there is always more beyond it. If we understand these as present images, they exist as fragments: sprouts and shoots of vitality which live and persist despite, and at odds with capitalist totality, industrial farming, whatever other nightmares we live in, have our lives mediated through, and cannot escape. If we understand these works as future images, we see that they are integrated within a larger collectivity, just beyond the frame. These are therefore not 'outsides' or temporary escapes, but ambitious sketches for what the materials and social relations needed for the life worth living could look like.

In an urban scene reminiscent of the George Floyd uprisings, the ambitiousness of this demand is echoed in the title. A Bauhaus lyric is followed by a firm clarification: *All we ever wanted was everything (looting — immediate communization — shares no common ground with the world of the commodity. And yet, it expresses something abyssal within that world: the possibility that everything could be free.)* In the painting, looters' bodies converse with each other in a beautiful arc, echoing the bodies of those farming in *How do we follow after you?...*, all forming the moving, living parts of the collective appropriation of luxury goods. We understand all of these activities as having the shared quality of people working together, a communal activity. Once again, the figures do not look at one another for us to understand their manifestation as a collective. They are connected in their activity, in the forms and the motions of their bodies, in their intention. A slogan sprayed on a halted bus, "Long live the ZAD," gestures beyond the immediate city scene to a shared history, lending the painting an international dimension through reference to the French ecological struggle in which squatters and farmers occupy farmland to prevent the building of an airport. A knocked over tree has been liberated from its municipal planter, and makes for a new sprout of life. The looters' bodies are wonderfully alive, in dynamic shades of black bloc and bright orange gloves, alive through the infinite variety of their movement against the drab shopfront. No life can live there, at Tiffany's, the luxury shop in question, yet it becomes the stage for the 'common ground' and for the promise—momentarily illuminated in the moment of looting—*that everything and everyone could be free*.

— Rona Lorimer, August, 2022.

Dianna Settles was born in 1989 in Los Alamitos, California, and grew up in Blue Ridge, Georgia. She received her BFA from San Francisco Art Institute in 2014 and has exhibited at Institute 193 (Lexington, KY) in 2021, High Museum (Atlanta, GA), San Francisco Art Institute (San Francisco, CA), among others. In addition to her own art practice, Settles co-runs Hi-Lo Press, a print studio and art gallery in Atlanta, Georgia.