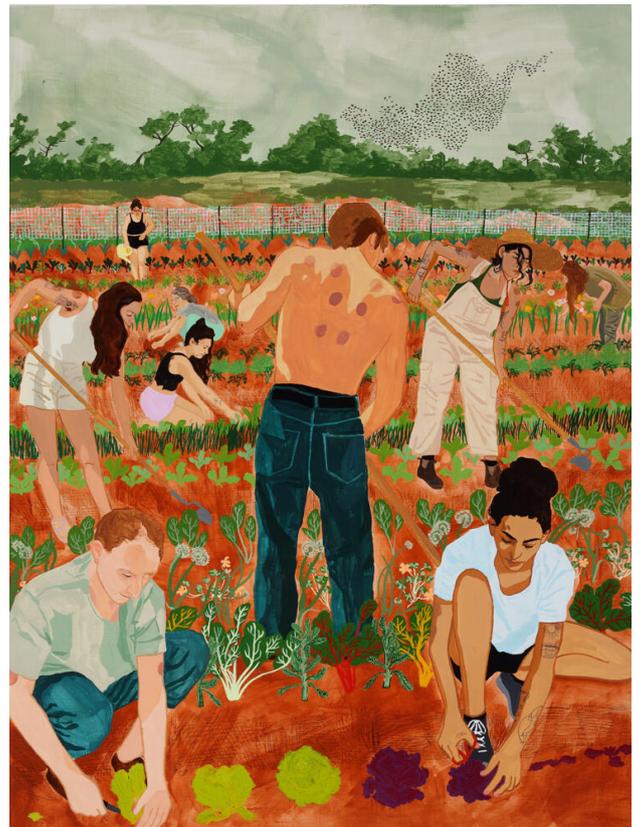


Review: Dianna Settles's Radical Systems of Care

By Madeleine Seidel

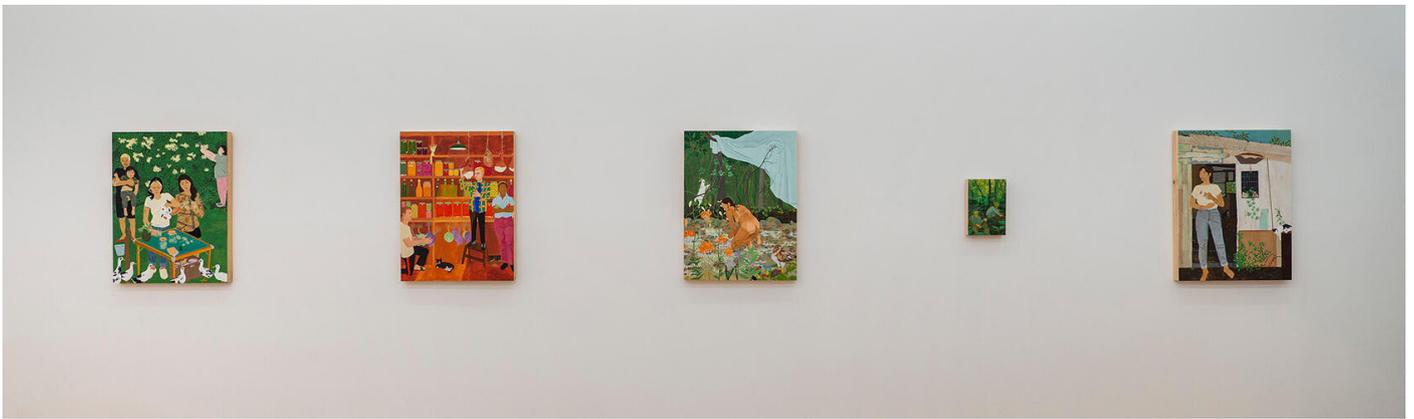
Rural living evokes a litany of ideals: solitude, regeneration, epiphanies about a simpler life in harmony with nature à la Henry Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). In her exhibition 'A Life Worth Living Would Be a Life Worth Living' at MARCH, Atlanta-based painter Dianna Settles imbues this pastoral fantasy with radical meaning, establishing community and systems of care as necessary to political revolution.

MARCH's presentation focuses on group portraits of an imagined rural community, illustrating the possibility of life outside of the strains of modern existence. The members of Settles's colony, which she portrays in lively shades of acrylic paint with coloured-pencil detailing, live amongst the land and tend to one another's needs in a veritable Eden. All are taken care of and protected: a clear rejection of the cutthroat individualism that marks our capitalist state. In *How do we follow after you? Cupping circles, culling rows* (all works 2022), one of the exhibition's larger pieces, a group of people tend a plot of land. There is a similarly



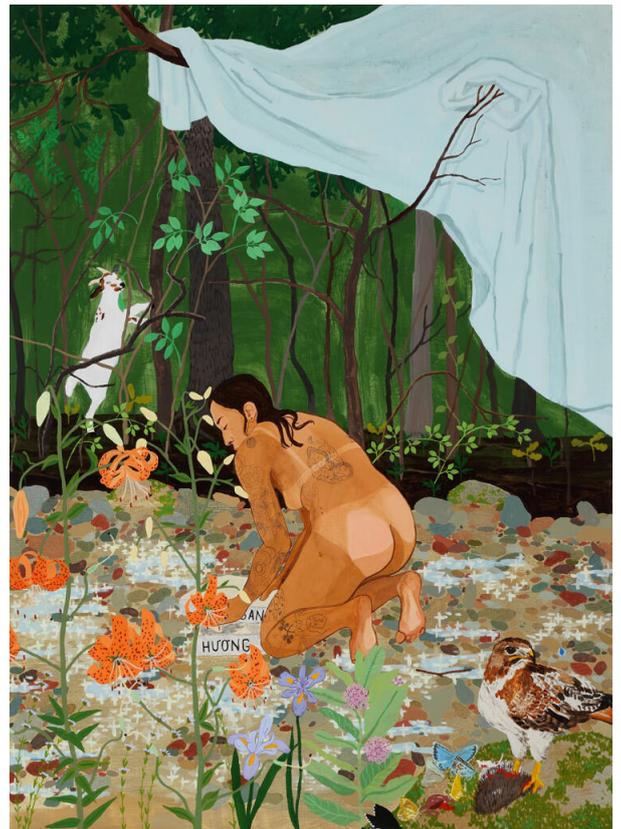
Dianna Settles, *How do we follow after you? Cupping circles, culling rows*, 2022, acrylic and coloured pencil on wood panel, 81 × 61 cm. Courtesy: the artist and MARCH, New York

utopian aura to *Making new alterations to the old calendar, bringing back the holidays that demand rest from our laboring, holidays for pleasure, holidays for praising the wind and the bees, for partaking in all of the ways that we are earthbound (we love our bread, we love our butter, but most of all we love each other), with its diverse and tattooed coalition relaxing in pick-up trucks retrofitted as wading pools. Despite the bucolic nature of many of Settles's scenes, however, not all is peaceful. One of the exhibition's standout works, *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.), shows black-clad figures looting a Tiffany & Co. storefront and tagging a bus. Composed like a history painting, the scene is reminiscent of demonstrations around the United States protesting deep socioeconomic inequalities, such as police violence and structural racism, while Settles's kinetic masked subjects bring the grinding wheels of capital to a halt. The use of force to deliver the means of production to the community*



abounds. Trawling through the scarred lands (us and the scotch broom) depicts young people at a shooting range, using bows and arrows and rifles in target practice. Violence, here, is generative: a demonstration of this colony's self-reliance. Yet, there is also an implied threat of defence against the forces that may threaten their way of life – be that from the natural world or those in charge of the economic and societal systems Settles's subjects reject. Even in paintings such as *Girl 1*, *Squirrel 0* – which depicts the sometimes-harsh reality of rural living through the image of a flayed squirrel – community-building is an act of defiance and righteous force. It is, as writer Emily Llamazales described Settles's work in a 2021 review for *Burnaway*, 'explicit place-making'.

These paintings of action make the quiet moments in 'A Life Worth Living Would Make a Life Worth Living' all the sweeter. I keep returning to *All things sing of a possible haven, is it not this? – it is.* In a glen in the woods, a nude woman forages in the brush, her tattoos and tan lines gleaming in the sun as she works. A hawk in the lower right hunts alongside her as a blue sheet dries in the branches; a goat bucks in the green expanse behind her. The elements of this painting, as in all of Settles's oeuvre, are in perfect harmony – a type of balanced solitude that is cultivated through a commitment to live not for one's own needs, but for the many.



Dianna Settles, *All things sing of a possible haven, is it not this? – it is.*, 2022, acrylic and colored pencil on panel, 81 × 61 cm. Courtesy: the artist and MARCH, New York