

Dianna Settles: A Life Worth Living Would Be A Life Worth Living at MARCH

By Vittoria Benzine

Atlanta-based painter, printmaker, and organizer Dianna Settles had just finished harvesting chestnuts and weeding the beds of indigo when we connected over Zoom to discuss her latest solo show, *A Life Worth Living Would Be A Life Worth Living*. On view at MARCH through October 8, Settles is the first artist to sow work across both the gallery's glass-walled rooms.

These twenty works of acrylic and colored pencil on wood panel sprout indeed—from real life. Called “collective documents” in the show's release, they interpret potential utopias through (and as) the idyll - the artist actually finds surrounding her—populated by plants, pickup trucks, even police brutality, but most importantly, the people she loves. Titles like poems complement them.

“All of the plants, animals, minerals outside speak the same way too, or else we wouldn't be in the same world together, you know.”

Settles has been drawing her whole life, but at 18 a friend introduced her to printmaking. The structural nature of sketching and then lithography appealed to her. She studied the craft at the San Francisco Art Institute. Upon graduating in 2014, Settles traveled to Vietnam. She kept a notebook to document, in language, which color palettes from the culture struck her hardest.

This re-introduction to color made painting's endless potential feel playful—not intimidating. In the years since, her work has centered around scenes of home with hues turned all the way up.

Settles founded Hi Lo Press & Gallery in 2016. “For many years, I was very disassociated,” she said. The artist organizer found herself walking four hours a day, building relationships with each tree and plant on the path between her's and Hi Lo's then-homes.

“That helped pull me out of it,” Settles said. “Also, many moments of feeling the power that I



Dianna Settles, *Composition is nothing more than the fruits of an unexpected meeting between separate worlds and the promise contained in the becoming commune of that meeting (tree planters in the snow)*, 2022. Acrylic and colored pencil on panel, 32 x 48 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MARCH.

and other friends are capable of feeling when we do things together.”

In October 2020, Settles acquired her first formal studio, graduating from her bedroom floor, where pets and people prohibited her from properly spreading out or letting paintings sit, taking time to step away. Now she meditates before a work in progress at the end of each studio day, annotating a notebook with script and sketched thumbnails to guide tomorrow’s changes, if any.

Her paintings have blossomed accordingly—Olly Olly Oxen Free, Settles’s Summer 2021 solo at Institute 193 in Lexington, KY depicted a full life cycle, from living room jiu jitsu training to implementing those skills in revolution, followed by blissful recovery in a Korean spa. Each stage offered more aesthetic attention to detail than she’d had space to afford before.

Orange jumpsuits in the Himalayan salt room bridged disparate realities, since the cycle itself is a prison, albeit beautiful. I spent the loneliest month ever in the Hollywood Hills this summer and drifted towards a similar Korean spa on my birthday, weeping through the sauna and scrub while marveling at the magic of female vulnerability and caring touch—even from strangers.

Since Summer 2021, Settles has been inspired by Peter Bruegel’s paintings—the early rise of capital and the little ice age—alongside watercolors and sketches by Viet Cong artists, and paintings and prints by Chinese peasants who witnessed upheaval during the 1960s and 1970s.

The artist’s greatest inspirations, she emphasized, are her friends—farmers and writers and chefs and musicians, depicted with unprecedented detail across *A Life Worth Living Would Be a Life Worth Living*. Brief clashes between contemporary and classical influences belie the delicate but persistent balance between individuals and the collectives they necessarily inhabit.

Activities enjoy equal attention—farming and fighting, but also bumper stickers on makeshift hot tubs in “Making new alterations,” along with leg hair cowlicks and spell candles that are either accessory or centerpiece to this gathering, depending on your version of an ideal society.

“We are all trying to figure out means of having an affective relationship to the world,” Settles said of her circle. “We want to participate as fully and as joyfully as we can, and with as much autonomy as we can.” Settles estimated she paints over 45 hours now each week.

The non-linear utopia posed throughout *A Life Worth Living Would Be A Life Worth Living* unfolds without narrative—instead, it’s an environment of possibilities, which also proves working and wonderment aren’t mutually exclusive.

“In order to have these more leisurely, pleasant gatherings,” Settles said, “that requires a total restructuring of the way that we see ourselves as connected to the places that we live, and the people that we live amongst, and the other living beings that we live amongst—in a way that would necessitate putting yourself on the line in order to protect those things. It’s arguing for a total reassessment or restructuring of the ways that we move through the world in very small banal interactions, and also much bigger, intense moments.”

Even scenes that seem solitary teem with life beyond the picture plane, “histories of other people’s energies and contributions to different spaces and environments.”

“I don’t like having to choose between any things that feel arbitrary,” Settles added. “These are all potential arrangements for things that do or have or can exist.” There’s a difference between dwelling on outcomes we don’t want, versus the joyful difficulty it may take to get where we do.

A choice, in fact, does not exist.

So, pleasure is part of the pain—if you can still call it that. “Whether [it’s] the food I’m eating or the clothes I’m wearing or the paint I’m using,” Settles said, “it requires a great deal of study and labor and training. But being able to have that more meaningful connection to all of those things is, in my mind, a form of luxury and leisure.” Not just for the sake of achieving, but autonomy.

“Many people feel really stuck and disassociated and unhappy with how isolated we all are from so many different things, whether that’s meaningful friendships or what we create through our labor,” Settles concluded. “I want people to elaborate whatever a life worth living means to them.”



Dianna Settles, *All of the plants, animals, minerals outside speak the same way too, or else we wouldn't be in the same world together, you know.*, 2022. Acrylic and colored pencil on wood panel, 32 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist and MARCH.