



19 December 2022

Inhabit: Territories

Recomposing the Social Body: Dianna Settles at MARCH

By Matt Peterson, Inhabit



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

For the last dozen years Italian theorist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi has been declaring our collective and deep-seeded need to reactivate and recompose the erotic, poetic, and social body. This, for him, would be the beginning of a new revolutionary politics—a new movement, ethics, and culture.

This summer MARCH hosted the first New York solo show of Atlanta-based, Vietnamese-American artist Dianna Settles, “A Life Worth Living Would Be a Life Worth Living.”

In Settles’ work, which exists somewhere between group portraiture and still life, we see scenes of land defense occupations, urban revolt, and target shooting practice, set alongside images of people hanging newly dyed garments, harvesting vegetables on a farm, and producing apple cider. Across eighteen paintings we’re shown a world of masked and armed militants sharing communal space with naked gardeners and wood choppers; not to counterpose but to aggregate the shared possibilities of radical collectivity today.

The strength of Settles’ work is in its being fully experiential, rather than merely observational.

It's a vision of the contemporary where the artist's gift is not just being able to see, but to be present with—to experience, to share time. Settles' paintings place her in community, in context, in lived solidarity with friends—neighbors, comrades, lovers, animals, plants, the earth. In this world it's in the smallest moments and gestures of daily life where relationships truly gain their shared strength.

Described to me by the artist as “collages of imagined arrangements, poses, and crafts,” to do this kind of documentation in painting breaks from the representation of counter-cultural youth movements we've seen in photography, cinema, or text. The work has a warmth not felt in the frigid nihilism of Larry Clark, a self-implication not present in the maternal documentaries of Penelope Spheeris, and an unpretentious seductiveness not readable in the analytic ethnography of David Graeber. The closest affective references might be Jonas Mekas' 1968 diary film *Walden*, or in the spirit and immediacy felt while reading Diane di Prima's *Revolutionary Letters* series (first published by the Diggers in 1968, and re-released last year in a posthumous edition by City Lights).

Previously working as a printmaker and tattooist, Settles' paintings carry something of the familiarity and intimacy of hand-drawn zine illustrations, but their staying power comes from the decisive permanence and commitment to large canvas, and the added depth of her vibrant acrylic color-scapes and scale. The paintings are never just studies of the individual or the body, nor are they removed conceptual narratives of some distant epic. They are a shared diary with an invitation to enter, learn, and participate, featuring titles like, “How do we follow after you?,” “How to make it last,” “Gentle, insistent, we remember the way,” and “All we ever wanted was everything.”



All we ever wanted was everything (looting — immediate communication — 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.), 2022