

Press release
May 2021

Shara Hughes
Return of Light

May 29 to July 22, 2021
Opening on Saturday, May 29, 11 am to 6 pm
Maag Areal, Zahnradstr. 21, CH-8005 Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present *Return of Light*, the gallery's fourth solo exhibition with the New York-based artist Shara Hughes.

Shara Hughes' landscape paintings possess an unnerving beauty. Bright, vividly colored, and teeming with plant life, a sun presiding over the sky like some threatening planet, bringing to mind the menacing star in Lars von Trier's apocalyptic *Melancholia*. Simultaneously seductive and demonic, it draws our gaze in. Not a single spot on these paintings is left blank—we dive into a botanical horror vacui, its intensity reminiscent of the expressive psychedelic landscapes of Vincent van Gogh, Charles Burchfield, and Peter Doig, as well as the color-soaked images of nature by the artists group Der Blaue Reiter.

In the history of art, landscape as a genre has traditionally been dominated by men. Hughes, however, paints like those predecessors never existed. The intoxicating romanticism of her work has no immediate references: neither the Expressionists' industrialization-driven flight to the countryside, Burchfield's transcendental occultism, nor Doig's pop-culture allusions. Though Hughes plays with the age-old clichés of wall calendars and Sunday painters—sunsets and flowers, forests and blossoms—her paintings do not add any ironic distance. Instead, her compositions somehow classically yet clandestinely turn landscapes into portraits of the soul, images blending light and shadow. Her colors' intensity, which at first glance could suggest these paintings are altogether harmless, is deceptive. What grows and jostles here—almost bursting out of the frame—are metaphors for inner states that reveal more about ourselves than the landscapes, which, after all, are only imagined. The paintings' elements clash and clash again, never exactly fitting together, sometimes sharply contoured, other times almost collaged, so that the whole tends towards abstraction and at times radiates a hippie airbrush aesthetic: abstract brushstrokes encircle a waterfall; dark-colored dots transform into stormy skies; broad-contoured beams enfold a sun and clouds as if we were suddenly leafing through a picture book. It is unnerving moments such as these that reveal the stylistic range of Hughes' painting—at the same time showing how this versatility helps her create compositions that completely cohere, moods that leave a mark.

By combining historical styles and familiar associations, Hughes takes landscape painting to a new level, creating immersive wholes in which pain and beauty merge. Going beyond kitsch and cliché, she plays with precisely those parameters and draws our gaze into the darkness behind fireballs and sunbeams, behind tree trunks, flower petals, and bodies of water, right into the apocalypse transpiring amidst this magnificent natural spectacle. Hughes' paintings have an air of the end of days. As alluring auguries of death, they capture our gaze and become symbols of a time in which landscapes are never harmless, the sun never just beautiful, and water never simply clean. What we see are scenarios that mirror our utmost desires and at the same time blot them out. There is something sinister in Hughes' pictures—they sing like a seductive abyss. Whether we fall in or not remains unknown.

Shara Hughes was born in 1981 in Atlanta, GA, US, and lives and works in Brooklyn, NY, US. She graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design and later attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Hughes is currently the subject of a solo exhibition at The Garden Museum, London, UK, and a major solo presentation at the Yuz Museum, Shanghai, CN, is planned for November this year. Recent solo exhibitions include Le Consortium, Dijon, FR (2020 – 2021); The Arts Club, London, UK (2018); the Newport Art Museum, Newport, RI, US (2018); Gallery Met at the Metropolitan Opera, New York, NY, US (2018); and the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta, GA, US (2014). Hughes has participated in numerous group exhibitions at venues including Dallas Art Museum, Dallas, TX, US; Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, NY, US; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ, US; MASS MoCA, North Adams, MA, US; and the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, US. Hughes was also included in the 2017 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY, US.

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Hughes' work belongs to many prominent museum collections including the Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX, US; the Denver Museum of Art, Denver, CO, US; Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, FR; the High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, US; the Jorge M. Perez Collection, Miami, FL, US; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY, US; the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, Atlanta, GA, US; the M Woods Museum, Beijing, CN; the Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, AZ, US; the Rachofsky Collection, Dallas, TX, US; Saint Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, US; the Si Shang Art Museum, Beijing, CN; the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., US; the Whitney Museum of Art, New York, NY, US; and the Yuz Museum, Shanghai, CN.

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