

Sholto Blissett

Arboreal

July 19 – September 29, 2023

Opening reception Wednesday, July 19, 6 – 9 PM

“Landscape is not a genre of art but a medium.”
–W. J. T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, 1994

Peres Projects is pleased to present *Arboreal*, an exhibition of new paintings by Sholto Blissett (b. 1996 in Salisbury, UK), marking his solo debut with the gallery, as well as his first presentation in Milan.

In Blissett’s practice, the idea of “landscape” does not only describe a motif or genre. It also refers to a historically constructed concept to be dissected, and a visual tool through which to reflect on the relationship between humankind and nature. His work, at first glance imbued with a serene simplicity, stands at the crossroads between his love for landscape painting, his university training in geography, and his experience of nature while strolling or fishing in his native English countryside. These various lenses through which Blissett contemplates landscape give depth to his approach. Informed by both observation and research and executed in a simultaneously naturalistic, fantastic, and resolutely painterly way, his imaginary, uninhabited biomes investigate how societies perceive, construct, and mythologize the natural world.

In this new exhibition, Blissett revisits his signature composition. In the middle of the canvas stands an abandoned neoclassical building, viewed from a frontal perspective. Clear streams of water flow in the foreground, while far in the background, yet still present, a mountain range blocks the horizon like an inescapable obstacle looming over the scene. However, *Arboreal* shifts its focus onto a renegotiation of the power dynamics between nature and culture. As implied by the title, trees become the pivot of this new series in which vigorous oaks serve as counterparts to the ghostly architectural features. “Arboreal” derives from *arbor*, the Latin word for “tree,” and, by a coincidence unrelated to its etymology, also contains “boreal.” This term refers to an ecosystem of the Northern Hemisphere, contiguous with the tundra of which Blissett’s windswept, rocky landscapes covered with swathes of moss and lichen are reminiscent.

In *Arboreal*, ornamental follies and trees complete each other, thus forming a miniature ecosystem. Each tree seems to have been pruned to mirror the silhouette of the adjacent stonework; unless, conversely, an architect, inspired by the startling contours of the oak’s foliage, decided to replicate it. By confronting the viewer with this enigma, Blissett’s practice touches on the anthropocentric instincts that lead to favoring, spontaneously, the first scenario. In doing so, the works point to a propensity to try to understand nature by projecting human cultural behaviors onto it.

Between the manmade structure and its arboreal homolog, a breach persists, more or less flagrant from one canvas to another. It is again up to the viewer to perceive it either as an insurmountable gap or as a tear in the process of mending; to interpret these sceneries either as a symbol of competition between humans and nature or as a demonstration of mutualism—a reciprocally beneficial mode of interaction between species. Throughout the exhibition, Blissett explores this state of indecision, infusing his canvases with a certain discomfort.

Blissett’s seemingly smooth renderings require closer inspection to fully appreciate the adroitness of his brushwork, reminiscent of a painterly ecosystem in its own way. On his canvases, each element is treated with a different technique; each brush speaks its own language. The movement of water is captured through loose, gestural brushstrokes executed with large brushes, while the texture of each stone is rendered with meticulous dabs that emulate either the moss carpeting them or the light reflecting off their rough surfaces. Upon closer scrutiny, a certain turbulence emerges from behind the apparent calmness, just like in the landscapes to which Blissett’s brushwork gives shape.

For those who take the time to delve into the artist's work, there is much more to experience beyond the Arcadian veneer, for Blissett's paintings contain an encroaching eeriness. Sites of both contemplation and projection, his vistas are deeply rooted in the Western history of landscape painting he critically revisits, while simultaneously resonating with today's urgent need to rethink our real and fantasized place within the environment. Like a climbing vine spreading over a building, Blissett's paintings gradually penetrate; despite the absence of human figures, they serve as mirrors raised at the viewer. What we notice, or fail to notice, in these works whispers something about our own perception of nature and relationship with it.

This is Sholto Blissett's first solo exhibition with Peres Projects. Recent solo exhibitions include *Rubicon*, Alexander Berggruen, New York (2023), *New Masters*, Colnaghi, London (2022), and *Ship of Fools*, Hannah Barry Gallery, London (2022). Blissett's work has been presented in a number of group exhibitions, including *Manscaping*, The Hole, New York (2022), *Lost at Sea*, The Artist Room, London (2022), *Utopia*, Peres Projects, Berlin (2021), *Tree and Leaf*, Hannah Barry Gallery, London (2021), *The Earth, That Is Sufficient*, Nicola Vassell Gallery, New York (2021), *Rites of Passage*, Unit London, UK (2021), *London Grads Now*, Saatchi Gallery, London (2020), and *Tomorrow: London*, White Cube, London (2020).

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