

## Anna Conway

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Anna Conway is a very particular and instinctual inventor of images, as much a painter as a storyteller. If all writing is re-writing, for this obsessive visionary, all painting is re-painting. Conway never makes drawings in advance; a scene is imagined mentally and she proceeds directly to the canvas or panel. Worked and re-worked as she makes her way without a map, fine-tuning every element, modulating intensities and subtleties, her paintings take time to arrive, and when they finally appear they feel strangely inevitable. But where are we, and what's happening there? She knows the setting, which may only be vaguely identifiable to us, the characters—when the paintings are inhabited, which often they aren't—the time of day, the temperature, the weather. Although many scenes are nocturnal, Conway is clearly a painter of light, light and its absence. At their most mysterious, she, and we, seem to be navigating a vivid dream. This accounts for the predominance of nocturnes. Before her paintings, we are half asleep, eyes wide open.

Over the past three years, Anna Conway has explored the idea of re-wilding, the reintroduction of animals to nature, to their innate habits and their habitats. These paintings feature animals and their trainers, at times in spite of the fact that certain animals—an enormous albino whale, for example—are untrainable. In the fiction of painting, Conway knows that anything is possible because, like a writer, what is imagined can be accurately described and shared with the reader/viewer. We consider the visual realm in parallel to “if you build it, they will come.” If you paint it believably, and no matter how fantastic the scene, they will see what the artist has seen in her mind's eye. These newest paintings all feature a camera, or a drone being flown above, which films what's taking place. Every image before us is a painting, a story, and a scene in what will be a filmed document of the re-wilding efforts. It should go without saying that the artist has great empathy for animals, particularly in a period when nature is imperiled.

*Flight* (2024) presents a near-operatic scene. A huge scaffolding and illuminated curtain has been constructed in what appears to be the ocean, improbably. Large whitish blue rocky outcroppings rise to the left and right, creating an amphitheater. At

the very top of the scaffolding is a large screen on which we see projected the activity below: a trainer with a bird, wings spread wide, perched on its arm. The trainer wears an owl mask and a monk-like cowl, its hood pulled up, green, like the translucent curtain, so that they will disappear on film. On either side of the trainer are two hooded falcons. Towards the bottom of the rocks to the right, we see that a small boat has arrived with more falcons and their handlers, each wearing an orange life vest. Such a scene wouldn't need be set on such a grand scale, out at sea, and at night (unless it's covert, a secret operation, an X-file?), and just who is the large projection above the scaffolding meant to be viewed by? But because this is exactly how it appeared to the artist as she imagined and slowly discovered the image as it unfolded before her, this is what she shares with us—almost as if she's saying, *Can you believe what I saw?* Her pared down title may suggest more than the flight of the bird, its learning to fly again, but an idea of escape, to flee from imminent danger we may all inevitably confront.

*Alexa, Siri, Landscape* (2018) is also a nocturne, though an interior that plays with a highly dramatic image of the natural world. To view this painting is to be seated at a desk at night, a room suffused in blue-black light. There are two woodgrain covered speakers and a Newton's Cradle, the device that demonstrates the conservation and transferral of energy in physics, named for Sir Isaac Newton, as it allows us to visualize his laws of motion. In the eerie light, the small silver balls and metal structure, its diminutive scale, are in great contrast to the background, dominated by a painting of a wild sea at night. The colossal wave rising up, an ominous wall of water, is another demonstration of force and momentum entirely, the sublimity of nature and how small we are in relation to its power. Conway frequently includes an image within her images—a painting, a poster, a calendar, a wallpaper landscape—one that is more than meta-representation, a painting within another, and here we clearly see a gold frame at the very top of this one. For Conway, this is a means to introduce a palpable sense of dislocation from where we find ourselves, or to imply that whoever inhabits the environments she pictures would rather be somewhere else. She contrasts inside/outside, or the presence of the past,

distant points in time, monuments serving as markers within space-time, referencing other civilizations. (Some of the pictures within pictures refer to Easter Island, Stonehenge, the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, and the giant Sequoias of the Redwood Forest.) In this painting, the image of a menacing rogue wave is in stark contrast with the stillness of the home office with its “Executive desktop toy,” the uncluttered surface offering a glimpse of the absent figure as someone for whom control is preferred and maintained. And yet why was this painting chosen, this image of a total loss of control, a reminder of our mortality? The artist placed it there. This is her stage. Her story. And whoever sits at that desk is her character, present even in haunted absence. The uninhabited scene is further amplified by Conway’s title, implicitly referencing non-human intelligence, virtual assistant technology. What question might we imagine being asked of it? *Siri, what can I do when a forty-foot wave is about to come crashing down upon me?*

—Bob Nickas

### Anna Conway

Anna Conway is a painter, born in Durango, Colorado in 1973, and currently lives and works in New York. Conway received a BFA from The Cooper Union School of Art and a MFA from Columbia University and has been recognized with a Guggenheim Fellowship Award, two Pollock-Krasner Awards, and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, including at the 2024 Gwangju Biennale, MOMA PS1, American Academy of Arts and Letters, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, University Art Museum at Albany, Fralin Museum of Art and Collezione Maramotti in Italy.

*I believe that I probably “live” mostly in the imaginary spaces I produce in my mind, spaces I often translate into paintings. I spent my childhood around a lot of war veterans. I heard it said about one friend’s dad that he “was still in Vietnam”. This was meant to explain away the fact that he seemed to actually ignore all reality around him. I remember trying so hard to imagine what he was seeing, as he looked into vacant space, in an apparent trance. I made a painting of a man in a trance, after him. A friend described my paintings as looking like architectural models of a mind. I do not make drawings or studies, I just start painting. I invent my own perspective for each painting and my paintings actually tend to begin with a sound as their starting point. It sometimes feels as I start a painting, as if I am coming up over a hill, and only hear a distant sound of something I am about to see once I get to the top of this hill. I start with a vague sound- be it wind, or closed-in air, or an animal, or a person, or a group in public, or an individual alone.*

*I have spent hundreds of hours trapped in monotonous jobs, and hundreds more as a single parent, and imagined spaces have quite literally saved my sanity, buoying me along through fatigue and sometimes bleak reality. Translating these “hallucinations” in my work collapses my own distinction between interior (mental) and exterior (real) space. I guess this is where I choose to live, in that collapsed space. While there is maybe something almost childish about an adult working from imagination, I recall that when I was a child visiting a museum, all the adults around me were*

*almost entirely silent, and it felt like we were all meant to collectively facilitate a few moments of individual trance in front of a work of art. I was very aware of a level of organized intensity that surrounded the human shuffle in museums. You each took turns getting “carried away”. There were adults that seemed to be looking for something extremely important that could be found in the work, and I would wait my turn, then try to see if I could find what they may have been looking for. Some works felt lifeless, and I moved on quickly, but some seemed cellularly magnetic, and acted like mute messengers, providing vital information I needed to decode. I have thought so often about the fact that paintings make no sound, nor movement, but somehow this silent and still thing has the ability to whisper or even scream at you.*

-Anna Conway

#### **Bob Nickas**

A writer and curator based in New York, Bob Nickas has organized over 125 exhibitions and artist projects since 1984. As Curatorial Advisor at MoMA/P.S.1 in New York between 2004-07, he organized the first American museum retrospectives for Lee Lozano, Peter Hujar, Wolfgang Tillmans, and Tom Sandberg. He served on the teams for the 2003 Biennale de Lyon, Greater New York 2005 at MoMA/PS1, contributed a section to Aperto at the 1993 Venice Biennale, and collaborated with Cady Noland on her installation for Documenta IX in 1992. He was founding editor of *Index* magazine (1996-2000), with publisher Peter Halley. Among his many books and catalogs are five collections of writing and interviews: *Theft Is Vision, Live Free or Die, The Dept. of Corrections, Komplaint Dept., and Corrected Proofs*, as well as *Yesterworld: 2019 Diary*.