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Sanam Khatibi

The Murders of the Green River

12.01 > 23.02.2019

Green River, in Washington State, USA, flows south-eastward from Seattle-Tacoma International airport toward Mt. Rainier National Park. Its trajectory snakes the interstitial annals of human industry into edenic nature, a seductive evergreen idyll. 15 years ago, Gary Ridgway, the most prolific serial killer in American history, was sentenced to life imprisonment without parole for the brutal murders of up to 90 women, many of whom were involved in sex work, a profession that Ridgway both abhorred and fetishized. Ridgway strangled his victims then dumped their bodies in forested areas, mostly around Green River, thus earning him the moniker 'the Green River Killer'. He often returned to this landscape to have sexual intercourse with the decaying bodies of his victims.

For her second solo exhibition at rodolphe janssen, Sanam Khatibi takes the name of this sordid story as the title of her exhibition, "The Murders of the Green River." Khatibi is an avid follower of the burgeoning true crime genre, fascinated by depictions of the most odious human impulses amongst seemingly everyday circumstances. Her painterly world may be swathed in bygone nature and bathed in radiant dawn light, but held within this beauty is the basest of human violence: merciless, reckless refusals of any social contract.

Pink bodies—mostly male—wage war, claim space. Desperate, they hunt, they kill, they copulate, they pee, they pray, they hide. Defeated, they hang by the neck from trees, are found drowned in the river, ass up.

Ours is a society in acceleration: human desire is enacted through abstract processes, ahaptic, distant. And so there exists, perhaps, trepidatious longing for more brutal times: battle, death, and sex unfolded rawly in public. Pieter Bruegel, Hieronymus Bosch, Lucas Cranach the Elder, and other masters of the northern Early Renaissance observed this chaos into public consciousness, exalting and warning against its grotesque beauty. The emergence of humanism and of the pursuit of beauty was thus mirrored in the stark violence of everyday life: the persistence of human existence amongst abjection and subjugation.

Khatibi explores her paintings in this vein, with settings that bely the violence of our worst primal impulses: our loss of control when faced with the spectre of survival. Her narratives unfold around crystalline lakes and streams, amongst verdant backgrounds on raw wood board enacting a pinkened sky. However idyllic, Khatibi confronts us with the depths of human destruction, our need to expand territory, but also our basic animality, at any human cost, and in the name of human advancement.

Her figures, the animals they hunt, and the mythological creatures they grapple with are puny against this winding landscape, rendered all the more vulnerable by their rough figural approximations. These sketches of rampant activity lend the sense that—like Khatibi herself, perhaps—we too are perched in a tree nearby, fervently trying to digest the chaos unfolding before our eyes. A haunting parable for our times.

About the artist :

Sanam Khatibi (born 1979 in Tehran, Iran) has recently had solo exhibitions at Artlead, Brussels, Belgium; rodolphe janssen, Brussels, Belgium; The Cabin LA, Los Angeles, CA USA; Super Dakota, Brussels, Belgium; NICC, Brussels, Belgium; trampoline, Antwerp, Belgium; Island, Brussels, Belgium; and has participated in group shows at Mendes Wood, Brussels, Belgium; CRAC Occitanie, Sète, France; MAC, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Marseille, France; Paul Kasmin Gallery; New York, NY USA; Lyles &

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King, New York, NY USA Royal, Brussels, Belgium; Christine König Gallery, Vienna, Austria; Museum of Deinze, Deinze, Belgium and rodolphe janssen, Brussels, Belgium. In the summer of 2019 she will have her first institutional solo exhibition at BPS22 in Charleroi, Belgium and her first US solo exhibition at P.P.O.W. the following Fall.