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Wednesday, April 26th, 2017

Back Turned: The Romanticism of Susan Bee and Bill Jacobson

by Noah Dillon

Susan Bee: *Pow! New Paintings* at A.I.R. Gallery

March 16 to April 16, 2017

155 Plymouth Street (at Jay Street)

Brooklyn, NY, 212 255-6651

Bill Jacobson: *figure, ground* at Julie Saul

March 16 to May 26, 2017

535 W 22nd St #6F (between 10th and 11th)

New York, NY, 212 627-2410

Susan Bee, *Melancholy*, 2016. Oil on linen, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and A.I.R. Gallery.

Two current gallery shows in New York neatly draw upon the Romantic tradition in ways that raise questions about the place of Romanticism in contemporary culture. Soulful encounters of the individual with the immensity of the world is a theme explored variously by Susan Bee in “Pow! New Paintings” at A.I.R. Gallery, and Bill Jacobson in his show of new photographs, “figure, ground,” at Julie Saul. Each approaches, whether intentionally or contingently, and from different angles, aspects of the Romantic legacy. As the natural world, where encounters with the sublime were previously staged (and thus was, historically, one site for reverent awe at man’s place in the moral and material universe), comes under ever-greater threat, and as new ideological perspectives have come to dominate thinking about the self, one might wonder what Romanticism means today.

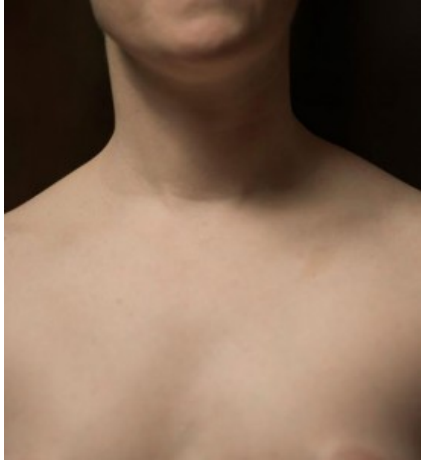
Susan Bee, *Dreamers*, 2014. Oil and enamel on canvas, 24 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and A.I.R. Gallery.

Bee’s exhibition at A.I.R., the non-profit cooperative gallery for art by women founded in 1972, refers explicitly to imagery in the early art of the Romantic canon, paying homage to paintings by Caspar David Friedrich and Edvard Munch. Works such as *Melancholy* and *Blooms Day* (both 2016) borrow directly from those artists — from Munch’s *Melancholy* (1894) and from Friedrich’s *Woman at a Window* (1822), respectively. Here, people lose themselves, wonder at powers larger than themselves. That adoration is further heightened by Bee’s use of emotive, expressionistic paint handling and high-intensity color.

Likewise, in paintings based loosely on film stills, couples kiss and cuddle. The brightly colorful patterning Bee applies to her appropriated images becomes, in this suite, cosmic and psychedelic, as if each person is fully becoming one with the other in a trippy union, fulgent with emotional outpouring radiating in colorful waves. Although elements of narrative remain encoded in the gestures and poses of those intimates, it largely gives way to deep absorption in their unifying admiration.

A formalist experimenter, Jacobson has previously constrained his pictures in blurred black-and-white portraits of lone men, and in pictures of large, colorful sheets of paper staged in various natural and man-made sites, resembling misplaced monochrome paintings or Suprematist compositions.

Like Bee, at Julie Saul, Jacobson produces images of people with their back to the viewer — another apparent reference to painters such as Friedrich, Thomas Fearnly, or John Constable. Staged in natural settings, they experience the landscape while tacitly inviting us to look at the same view. Unlike Friedrich, though, who often used this same device, Jacobson's shallow depth of field focuses on the figure and leaves the natural setting in which they stand blurred and hazy.



Bill Jacobson, Lines in my eyes #7219, 2017. pigment print, 15 1/2 x 14 inches. Edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery.

Another series, called Lines in My Eyes, also relays, obliquely, the interiority of his subjects in photos that closely isolate bare body parts: a collarbone and shoulder in *Lines in My Eyes #7219* (2017), for example. Like figure, ground, Jacobson switches between color and black-and-white photography as needed. Each model's full body is unrevealed, and often even their gender remains unknown. The viewer is invited to reckon with them intimately, scrutinizing skin and joints, as if familiar with the sitter.

One thing that Romanticism emphasized was individualism, the experience of being a small human in a large world. In contemporary America, individualism invariably verges upon the solipsism of self-improvement, self-affirmation, self-love, self-definition. Such values seem to be emphasized in every magazine, newspaper, and blog in the English-speaking world but they often overlook the need to universalize and think beyond one's own interests. The way such Romantics as Friedrich emphasized the emotional state of the individual was to paint them with their back turned, as here, too, Bee and Jacobson depict their subjects. The viewer's perspective is not preeminent, but neither is the subject's fully understood. Instead, both are left in a state of compromise, but in a way that opens up possibilities for community and, indeed, communion. One hopes that this facet of Romanticism might find greater purchase, as it would seem that deep and resonant empathic responses to the world may be essential, if mankind is to continue.

Note: A book of Jacobson's figure, ground series accompanies the exhibition, with texts by Bill Arning, Robert Glück, and Barbara Stehle, and another, 945 Madison Avenue, with photographs from the Breuer building cleared during the Whitney Museum's departure from the site, is due later in the spring.



Bill Jacobson, figure, ground #27, 2016. Pigment print, 45 1/8 x 36 5/8 inches. Edition of 4. Courtesy of the artist and Julie Saul Gallery.

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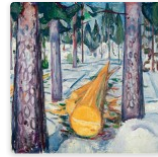
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