



MATT BAHEN

THERE IS SOMETHING HAPPENING IN THE VALLEY

GLENHYRST ART GALLERY



The Spice Must Flow (2021), oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in.

THE READER, THE ARTIST, AND THE THIEF

Matthew Ryan Smith

*The map had been the first form of misdirection,
for what is a map but a way of emphasizing some things
and making other things invisible?*

—Jeff Vandermeer, *Annihilation*

In the exhibition “There is Something in the Valley,” Matt Bahen pulls from a variety of devices and tropes found in literature and film. Jeff Vandermeer’s series *Southern Reach* plays a big part. In the novels, the Southern Reach is a covert agency that investigates Area X, a region of land shrouded in mysterious flora and freak happenings. Vandermeer’s writings articulate how land can be uncanny, an absorbing site of mystery and wonder.

Bahen translates these ideas into a series of landscape paintings, yet he regards such work as a type of glorified thievery. “Everything about my life as an artist is about stealing,” he says, “with literature, I can take ideas, and I can take structure, and put it into a completely different medium, and ideally be a successful thief.” It’s a tough thing to do, but an incredibly difficult thing to do well, and I don’t think he gives himself enough credit. There’re

many reasons to look to literature for guidance, especially since concepts around landscape painting are dead, stagnant, or unfulfilling. However, concepts surrounding climate change and resource extraction are more than topical and hum in the background of all his work. So, then, Bahen turns to literature to examine the peculiarities of landscape’s relationship to space, time, and being. In this liminal space, he attempts to visualize the metaphysics of land itself, to express what is knowable and unknowable in two dimensions.

For example, in *The Uncanny Valley* (2022), Bahen pictures marshland set against an idyllic background of spruce and pine trees. Resting in the middle of the marsh is a pink flower. Bahen’s flowers are composite images in that he takes multiple flora and combines them to create a singular flower. The petals taken away on the breeze are meant to be spores or pollen drifting from the blossom. Around the time of painting, Bahen watched the post-apocalyptic anime film *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984). In it, the princess of The Valley of the Wind explores the toxic yet lush countryside to befriend its creatures and prevent robotic intruders from colonizing it. If Bahen’s painting

shares a relationship to the film, then it is how something beautiful can also be destructive, even deadly. Like radiation, its dangers cannot be seen or heard—its harmfulness exists out in the ether. Like Area X, it is both pristinely beautiful and potentially sinister.

This concept is remarkably similar to the literary trope “enchanted forest” found in novels and folktales, from Dante’s *Inferno* to Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. Even Harry Potter found himself in one. There, amongst the flora and fauna, those mired homes of monsters and mystery, usually the protagonist embarks on a path of self-discovery or becomes lost forever. For Bahen, the trope is explored throughout the exhibition, not so much in what is represented in the forest or wood but through what is expected and not pictured. The viewer is left to imagine who or what lives in these mythical spaces, what events occur there. Of course, it is where Snow White encountered the Seven Dwarfs but also where Harry Potter stumbled upon Voldemort. The enchanted forest or forbidden wood that Bahen points to is a synthesis of all that is good and evil.

Following this logic, in the painting *The Message from the Prophet* (2022), Bahen depicts the remnants of a forest fire framed by potent waterfalls. In the foreground, a flame rages in a bush. Its splinters and ashes dot the ground in orange and red nearby. In the *Book of Exodus*, the burning bush appears to Moses on Mount Horeb and God himself appears in the flames: “And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.” Scholars have interpreted the burning bush as representing God’s intention to destroy sin and offer grace.¹ Taken broadly, paintings like *The Message from the Prophet* and others such as *Prophesy* (2022), which is sourced from a photograph of the Grand River, might grapple with our current era of the Anthropocene. Geologists describe it as the detrimental effects of human beings on the natural environment, which signals the beginning of the end of the world.



The Violet Unspooling (2022), oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in.



The Message From the Prophet (2022), oil on canvas, 60 x 60 in.



Prophesy (2022), oil on canvas, 78 x 108 in.

Here, the burning bush could be perceived as a metaphor representing humanity’s sins against nature. Though, in Bahen’s way, the metaphor is a subtle inference rather than a loud truth.

Bahen’s spooky hinterlands appear to find beauty in the sublime power of the natural world. But it goes much further. Edmund Burke argues that beautiful paintings produce feelings of love and warmth while sublime paintings trigger feelings of horror. I think Bahen’s paintings exist somewhere in the middle, somewhere between the beauty and horror, between good and evil. And this is precisely where their underlying tension comes from. They do not rest easy on the canvas. “The landscape of devastation is still a landscape,” writes Susan Sontag, “There is beauty in ruins.”²

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Toronto based painter Matt Bahen's primary influence is literature. He strives to interpret the power of metaphor and allegory with paint. Bahen listens to audiobooks while working and is an avid reader of fiction, particularly Cormac McCarthy, TS Eliot, and Joseph Campbell. His impastoed surfaces and stark compositions are at once unsettling and highly engaging. Using various motifs including water, fire, and animals, Bahen constructs individual narratives that remain in a state of perpetual tension.

Matt Bahen was born in 1979 and raised in Schomberg Ontario. He received his BFA from the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2002. In 2013, his solo exhibition, "Gravity's Faith," was held at the MaLaren Art Centre in Barrie, Ontario. Bahen is represented by galleries in Edmonton, Toronto, and New York.



Works Cited

1. David T. Adamo, "The Burning Bush (Ex 3:1-6): A study of natural phenomena as manifestation of divine presence in the Old Testament and in African context," *HTS Theological Studies*, 73.3 (2017), 3.
2. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York, NY: Picador, 2003), 76.

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