

And Roses Too

Mary Temple

In the early 20th century, American women's suffrage activist Helen Todd gave a speech that called for "bread for all, and roses too." The phrase came from a conversation that Todd had with a teenage farm-girl during her 1910 automobile tour of southern Illinois. Rebecca Solnit has spoken of the slogan as the distillation of a fierce argument that people need more than just survival and bodily well-being to be fully human. In her book, *Orwell's Roses*, she observes, "it is an argument against the idea that everything that human beings need can be reduced to quantifiable, tangible goods and conditions. Roses in these declarations stood for the way that human beings are complex, desires are irreducible, that what sustains us is often subtle and elusive...they constituted an argument not only for something more, but for something more nuanced and elusive. [The phrase] was an argument that what makes our lives worth living is to some degree incalculable and unpredictable, and varies from person to person. In that sense, roses also mean subjectivity, liberty, and self-determination".

As a political activist and artist, I find resonance in this credo. An important part of my day is a regenerative, early morning walk, usually in the city park near my home in Brooklyn. The paintings in this exhibition are cultivated from those walks—a visual diary informed by my practice of appreciating and indexing what's growing near me. These paintings of flowers, trees and gardens are made *alla prima* immediately following the outing—they develop from attentive observation and delight. In them, I try to spontaneously capture something of the awe that the perpetually changing visual arena delivers.

The paintings are installed in the gallery so that walking through the space reveals the unfolding of seasons—viewers first encounter the early budding of spring slipping into summer's lush green flowerscapes. On the gallery's front wall, the hanging is not so much salon-style as it is *meadow-style*. A vista is created with images of blossoming magnolia branches above and ground-covering perennials, like echinacea and bluebells below. As summer turns to autumn, the flowers and gardens shift to neutral palettes and on the back wall of the gallery, fall is represented by intrepid hellebores, and the last of the hydrangeas, which deliver their muted hues in reds, purples and green-greys. Continuing through the exhibit, visitors discover paintings of winter—ground and trees powdered with a February snowfall.

In this body of work, I absorb what the seasons deliver, and aim, with this most intimate of labor forms, to model a likeness of our world—something I can hold and contemplate. The images are, for me, small celebrations, little cracks of light in a world that can seem unknowable and impenetrable. The paintings have an impasto surface which I build through construction and constructive deconstruction, repeating, until I find the form. This framework allows me to locate the work between abstraction and depiction and to prioritize discovery through process.

"Painting is proof of love for the world" Maria Lassnig