

MORGAN LEHMAN

534 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011

Flaunt

**KIM MCCARTY | CAN'T START A FIRE WITHOUT A
FLAME; A PAINTING WITHOUT A MURMUR**

BY: VIVIAN GALEANA



KIM MCCARTY. "LOOKING OVER SHOULDER" (2017). WATERCOLOR ON PAPER. 30 X 22 INCHES. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MORGAN LEHMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

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KIM MCCARTY. "ORANGE FLOWERS" (2017). WATERCOLOR ON PAPER. 22 X 30 INCHES. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MORGAN LEHMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK.

It starts with a fire. As I write this, the news informs me that, yet again, California is burning. The Thomas fires are still not contained. I am once again reminded that we can live through the same crises repeatedly, because sometimes the Universe runs out of new material to screw us over with. Making the metaphorical claim here about flames, resurrection, and a phoenix seems prosaic, but it's hard to resist. I won't, though, because unlike the Universe, I still have new ideas.

Kim McCarty knows about loss, but she speaks about it with such positive acquiescence that you feel like you're talking to a Yogi about yin and yang, not an artist about a studio fire in '93. I ask about the story of the studio fire wondering if she is tired of telling it, but she indulges me: "The fire occurred during the huge Santa Ana winds in 1993. Two hundred houses were destroyed. We then moved into a small house where I began to paint on the side porch. With a lack of space and ventilation—and with small children—I began to rediscover watercolor on paper." She adds that at the time, "works on paper became an accepted art practice in the art world," and I begin to get the sense that for McCarty, life is a continuous process of overcoming—you acknowledge the obstacles ahead of you, and then you keep pushing forward.

McCarty has tapped into something both universal and mysterious. Her work captures the longing for something permanent in a world that's constantly in flux. With over 20 solo shows, multiple group exhibitions, and works in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art, UCLA's Hammer Museum, and the Honolulu Academy of Art, it's clear that she's saying something that society, and the art world, needs to hear right now.

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McCarty's recent solo exhibition at Morgan Lehman gallery showcased her at her best. Her paintings invoke human forms that are simultaneously as indefinite as water yet strikingly clear in their features, as if they are saying with their bodies: You can't define me, but I am here. She takes on Classical motifs like the reclining nude or the floral still-life and reinterprets them in a modern context. This reissuing of traditional modes seems curiously relevant, because it brings forward the subject of how we should be talking about the female form during a time that is calling for more inclusive, non-binary definitions. At the crux of these dialogues is the realization that the Classical tropes we've been given as descriptors are no longer enough.

This is one of the reasons why McCarty's watercolors are so appealing—they affirm and anticipate the tolerant, open, label-less future so many are reaching for, even as it remains under threat. When asked why she believes people have responded so positively to her characters, she attributes it to their having “strong emotional and visceral feelings in the poses, eye gazes, and figures,” which “creates a powerful connection between the viewer and the work, one of déjà vu or simply a bond.” They evoke a feeling, a cellular euphoria of recognizing something mystical, and rapturous recognition is not tied to gender—love never is.

One gets the sense that her watercolor figures, arresting in both scale and gaze, are characters swimming in our collective subconscious who have materialized on paper, apparitions of friends now gone, or merely a familiar someone who's name you can't recall. Whoever they are, McCarty brings them to vivid life in all their variety and significance.

It starts with a fire, but it ends with watercolors.