

Take This Fire

When Colleen Barry was a child, her father would tell her and her sisters, “Be women of fire.”

“Perhaps some of that is coming through,” the Brooklyn-based Barry offers, somewhat cheekily, leaving the prompt up for casual interpretation. For the 10-year anniversary of the always well-referenced and irreverent SPRING/BREAK Art Show, cleverly titled “Naked Lunch,” the hip, humble, and classically trained artist will be teaming once more with actor and curator Joanne Tucker for a solo booth of entirely new paintings, which they’re calling, *Take This Fire*.

Earlier this year, Barry and her husband Will St. John, also a painter, enlisted the hosting duties of their friends, Adam Driver and the aforementioned Tucker, for a successful dual exhibition at Caelum Gallery in Manhattan called *Ride the Tiger*. The phrase alludes to an ancient mystical adage compelling brave humans to transform destructive processes and behaviors into inner liberation. For that show, Barry showcased several paintings that feature a bold, almost sculptural approach to human figuration, including several self-portraits, rendered beautifully, which in late 2022 means *honestly* (sans affectation), but as though Van Gogh were experimenting with an almost commercial, confessional brutalism. Some of these works leaned into the Madonna and Child trope of the great Renaissance masters, while intimately recalling the industrial, light-infused coolness of infamous Brooklyn studio-warehouses. In these works, Barry, seemingly without ego or polemics, invites the viewer into both the artist’s studio and her home.

It was the large scale, 2022 painting and clear *Ride the Tiger* standout, “The Feet Washers,” however, that clued art lovers, critics and collectors, as well as Barry herself, perhaps, that the artist was onto something special; that being a unique, increasingly signature language-using form, composition, color, and perfectly unceremonious detailing-which has carried entirely into *Take This Fire*. It’s fitting then, that *Ride the Tiger*, which in title teases out the possibility of positive transformation by recognizing the potential for creation via destruction, that Barry would segue into the outwardly Promethean, equally clear but fierce directive, *Take This Fire*.

In the age of well-past “late-stage” capitalism, it’s also fitting that SPRING/BREAK would prompt artists to strip down to the foundational human form-the perennial birthday suit-the nude, while evoking the rollicking, cynical beat-druggie madness of writer William S. Burroughs. Living artists, drowning in new tech and the detritus of the old, the pollution, the rapid, slow drip of destruction, would invite a return to the enduring primordial subject, turning attention away from the fast fashion of flesh fetishism inevitably burned off in a charnel plume like last year’s Burberry runoff, or outdated corporate-sabotaged iPhone models; avatars of forced obsolescence.

“Neon” could be the word while gazing at Barry’s new collection, though many artists run from it; too jarring for the overly trained fine art cog perhaps, or too “blue collar,” but not for Barry. Glowing, radiating yellows (protest), ominous oranges (warning) and fluorescent pinks (sex) mingle and frame various human forms, seemingly carved or *relieved* rather, into some ancient granite cliff-face, packing a very much present but untold spiritual significance from a time long faded, but now returning. “Mythological” is the next word, as Romulus and Remus, the children of nature herself at its most raw and motherly, suckle as the Big Bang eros babies of an Empire fast-approaching eschaton. Barry, a young, optimistic Millennial mother, guards her children from our compounding hyper-object anxieties:

war, climate change, inflation, disease, internal strife, fascism, gun violence, food shortages, artificial intelligence, and political degeneration.

Nowhere is this protective instinct more clear than in “LUPA,” which managed the feat of surpassing “The Feet Washers” in fantastical, expertly rendered, crystal clear iconography. It is an anthropomorphic fairy-meets-cautionary tale, rendered with oil sticks and pigment on linen.

It’s tragic, but serendipitous in some sense, that while executing these paintings, Barry, like many parents-like many mothers-had to remotely (thankfully), yet viscerally entertain the horror of the Uvalde, TX school shooting (recall the young Texan mother pumping with fear, adrenaline, and instinct, who defied paralytic police orders to rescue her child) or the overturning of Roe v Wade. Where other contemporary artists will serve these headlines up in their work far too didactically, in search of their own press, quite likely, Barry’s work is Romantic as opposed to journalistic.

Barry is not divorced from the cannon, or pop culture, for that matter. Allusions to Basquiat’s gators, featured in his solo offerings but perhaps more prominently in his Warhol collaborations, live and breathe alongside works that reference both *The Black Stallion*, the 1979 Carroll Ballard film produced by Francis Ford Coppola, and equally in the same work, the rare bronze statue from ancient Greece, the far too contemporary-looking, *The Jockey of Artemision*. Barry’s works can and do thrive on Instagram, where she has a sizable following, but it may take a second to unpack the presence of German artist, sculptor and illustrator Käthe Kollwitz, whose most famous art cycles, including *The Weavers* and *The Peasant War*, depict the effects of poverty, hunger and war on the working class, themes relevant to this current socio-economic moment.

Tougher to discern are elements of the late (died 1973) “outsider” artist Joseph Yoakum, whose works contain the same childlike radiance and human-meets landscape composition, which can shift from Trompe-l’œil to a deliberately crushing non-dimensional, zero-horizon flatness. Ditto for the Swedish artist Mamma Andersson for the strange vectors, neons juxtaposed with opaque whites and cold grays, or the late (died 2009), once reclusive Antiguan artist Frank Walter. For a contemporary mentor, look to Bo Bartlett, who renders dreams and people with little pretension.

“I always loved the French film, *Quest for Fire* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 1981), about these Neanderthals trying to survive and compete with early humans, protecting this little flame,” says Barry, who notes that at least three of her works in *Take This Fire*, feature, well, fire. “Yeah, I actually have no idea how to paint fire,” she adds with a chuckle. But like Basquiat, who could probably paint a photo realistic alligator if he needed to, Barry’s fire, especially in one smaller work, almost looks like a crown. It’s rendered in Jean-Michel’s playful hand, though deliberately removed from his own iconic crown, now as ubiquitous as the Golden Arches, for better or worse. Barry’s fire crown, which includes the full spectrum of her neons, a representation of her own inner light, one might speculate, is fitting for a “woman of fire” as her father likes to say, a passionate woman, mother, and artist, ascending now into a new, rarified echelon of immediately essential, timeless painting.

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