

FRESTONIAN GALLERY



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ANNA WOODWARD TOXIC TRAITS

Private View: **Thursday 25th January, 6-8pm**
Show Dates: **26th January – 2nd March 2024**

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Toxic Traits – Essay by Ella Slater

As shoots grow to trees, and pigments turn to paintings, stories are spun into lives. First, there is Clotho, the ‘spinner’, a beautiful young woman from whose silky yarn a foetus is woven: she is the Ancient Greek Fate of birth. Secondly, Lachesis, translated as ‘the allotter’: the embroiderer, as such, of experience. And finally, Atropos, the ‘unturnable’, the haggard old woman: she who decides when to cut the final thread, or, to end mortal life.

Atropa Belladonna– the ‘deadly nightshade’– is, then, a plant of contradiction, ‘belladonna’ meaning ‘beautiful woman’ in Italian. She is the *femme fatale* of the natural world: the poison used in the myth of Odysseus, before Circe turned her victims to pigs; Livia’s weapon in the death of her husband, the Emperor Augustus. Her purply fruits are flush with psychoactive drugs, psychedelic agents of arousal and delirium– she is called the “flying ointment” of witchcraft and the sorcerer’s giver of wings. In this sense, she forms what could be seen as a juxtaposition (or suitable pairing, depending on who you ask): of mythology and mortality. It is the same as that which lies at the crux of Anna Woodward’s solo exhibition ‘Toxic Traits’.

As a hallucination can slip from a knife edge into darkness, upon close viewing Woodward’s paintings reveal a whisper of foreboding beneath their brilliant exteriors. *The Leaves of Belladonna II* bears little resemblance to its titular plant, but its mossy surface– faded to foggy greys and blues, and fractured by pipe-like structures– shares the same sinister beauty. It is the second iteration of a painting earlier presented in 2022, an acidic imagining of botanical invasion rendered in rainforest greens and blues. The newer work takes on a moodier quality. There is something disquieting in this progression; something terminal about the *Belladonna*’s evolution. What exactly do these paintings trace a timeline of? Woodward’s painterly evolution, or something more ominous?

As is the title of Timothy Morton’s 2021 book, *All Art is Ecological*, and Woodward’s practice is no exception, as much an exercise of her imagination as it is concerned with the Anthropocene. Her worlds are formed of autonomous plant-life which seems to overwhelm her canvases in a reversal of earthly power dynamics. As delicate roots and flowers intertwine with metallic structures, the natural world and the manufactured become indistinguishable. This is nature-artificial: the confluence of the natural world and the material abstraction of culture, ecology, economics and politics. Woodward’s attempts to capture the ambiguity and abstraction which define the contemporary condition– to represent that which eludes representation– materialise as alternative realities. As the science fiction author Octavia E. Butler once wrote: “There is nothing new under the sun. But there are new suns”. Fantasy is a breeding ground for regenerative potential. Its essential value lies in its invitation to seek beyond what we think we know, to speak to our contemporary condition in new and resonant ways.

Search ‘utopia’ online and you will be met with impeccably groomed grasses, impossible skyscrapers and sickly blue skies. Search ‘dystopia’ and images will appear which invariably depict fog-drowned cityscapes, buildings lit with half-hearted embers and an overwhelming *greyness*. Woodward’s worlds sit between the two but bear resemblance to neither. They are overgrown and commanding; wild landscapes built up through the relentless layering of oil paint, nodding both to Bosch’s disturbing compositions and the biomorphic sculptures of Marguerite Humeau. In the complexity of the artist’s visions she resists that transient internet culture suggested by her show’s title, ‘Toxic Traits’; that which is so temporal to be devoid of substance.

The ephemerality of internet activism which 'Toxic Traits' refers to is bound up in ecological and climate crisis discourse: a clickbait headline, an Instagram story on Earth Day, or a reposted listicle of deforestation statistics. This feels particularly poignant alongside the patience required by Woodward's process— each canvas takes her months to complete. Barthes talked of the "anchorage" of art: the use of text to guide interpretation of an image. Woodward's titles sometimes provide narrative framework (*The Eruption from Gaia*, 2023) or philosophical musings (*With no purpose or meaning to anything*, 2023). Through this meticulous consideration of words alongside image, the artist guides us through her works as if we are embarking on a journey.

The sense of journeying is present throughout the exhibition, whether to alternate realms or between them. Subjects are repeated across canvases; Woodward's studio is scattered with sketches of fictional flowers; a botanical dictionary of her own imagination. Look closely at her work and you will find that what looks to be a complex network of shrubbery is in fact made up of endless singular plants, bursting forth from their pictorial setting like fireworks. They are meticulous and layered, they weave through one another as if they are alive.

Woodward's paintings seem to burst and grab visually; there is a palpable physicality embedded in the brightness of her colours, the scale of her canvases and the urgency of her mark making— yet references can be discerned from amongst the chaos. *The Rebirth of Narcissism and the Seeding of Sin* depicts what is discernibly an allusion to Dalí's *Metamorphosis of Narcissus* (1937)— the artist, despite her futuristic subject matter, has an affinity to Greek myth. Dalí's painting is a 'double image'; a hallucinatory vision of Narcissus transforming into the spindly, cracked hand. Woodward reimagines the hand as a gaudily coral, biomorphic form, shadowed by blue, solitary mountains, its 'egg' a strangled sun. Once again, past is transposed to future; fantasy resonates boldly with reality.

The Rebirth of Narcissism is reminiscent of the social media-fuelled individualism which pervades modern society. In *The Burning of the Tree of Life*, plant forms appear like insects, evoking a warning as pronounced by Oliver Milman in *The Insect Crisis* (2022): that of an impending environmental disaster catalysed by the decline of the insect population. In all of Woodward's work, we are reminded of the Earth's autonomy, and our mistake in attempting to curtail it. The artist's biomorphic landscapes may be imagined, but they are far from escapist daydreams. Like the *Atropa Belladonna*, they speak to myth and magic, but ultimately embody stark reminders of mortality. They tell us that it is within the power of Earth— she who granted us life— to take it away from us again.

Ella Slater, London, January 2024

Notes on the artist

Anna Woodward (b.1998, London) is an artist living and working in London. She holds an MA and BA in Fine Arts from City and Guilds of London. She also runs and is the co-Founder of the Good Eye Projects Residency. In 2020 she was awarded the Freelands Painting Prize.

Recent group exhibitions include Lupo Gallery, Milan; Flowers and Thorns, Eve Leibe Gallery, Turin; Sherbert Green, London & Kristin Hjellegjerde, London. Her first major solo show – 'A Cloned Realm' – was presented at Duarte Sequiera, Braga, Portugal in 2023. 'Toxic Traits' marks her first major solo show in London, and her first with Frestonian Gallery.

For further information on the exhibition and the artist please contact gallery@frestoniangallery.com