

SUMMER WHEAT: *Swamp Hunters* (2018)

by Alex A. Jones

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Summer Wheat, *Swamp Hunters*, 2018. Acrylic on aluminum mesh, 68 × 144 inches. Courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery.

This painting appeared in a solo show at Andrew Edlin Gallery called *Gamekeepers*, a title which refers to those who manage land to ensure proper conditions for hunting wildlife. It is a paradoxical stewardship, nurturing life to prepare for the hunt. The two women drawn here in rapid white outlines—scrawled larger than life against a patterned black ground—appear to be gamekeepers of sorts; they must know something of paradox. Between them they carry a net like a full-bellied python, engorged with animals—a massive white hare, some crudely drawn fishes, a few turtles, a scowling hog, and a magnificent limp tiger bulging heavily in the center. The hunters bend under the weight of their bounty, but do not appear burdened.

The most remarkable thing about this tableau, which images of it do not convey, is the artist's original technique of pushing acrylic paint through wire-mesh panels, so that the picture is extruded from the back. The paint hardens into distinct protrusions, making the surfaces of the five-foot-wide triptych panels appear tufted like fine rugs, or beaded like grandmother's Sunday best. Their resemblance to meticulous handiwork, however, is at odds with the organic messiness of Wheat's figure drawings. The womens' cut-out silhouettes allude to Greek black-figure vase painting—the rigid profile view, the angular positioning of one well-muscled leg—but they are a blackboard-doodle perversion of such. Wheat does not intend to place these women in a classical heroic tradition.

I see coarse archetypes of a much older model: Potnia Theron, mythic female protectors and hunters of the animals. They are kin to Artemis, but with their thumb-like faces and shapeless torsos, they carry no trace of the Greek hunting goddess's legendary beauty (which was supposedly so great and terrible, she killed any man who chanced upon her naked in the forest). Wheat's female bodies refuse idealized representation —they are ghostly figures who have gone the way of the forgotten gods, taking on daemonic shapes as they retreat ever farther into the groves of memory.

The erotic force of the painting is the terrier dog striding beneath the body of the tiger, tethered by a golden chain. If only in contrast to her lumpen keepers, the dog's outline suggests sensuality and grace, bearing fleshy thigh, arched spine, and a bullwhip tail. She wears a lewd grin full of teeth, leering proudly at the netted meat. The goddess Artemis pledged to remain a virgin for all time because she had so much work to do caring for the animals and neglected daughters, and women in childbirth—but the bitch on the golden chain is not so demure. She may be in heat.



Summer Wheat, *Swamp Hunters* (detail), 2018. Acrylic on aluminum mesh, 68 × 144 inches. Courtesy Andrew Edlin Gallery.

The game net itself is a honeycomb webwork of clear, golden beads, as is the fine chain-link leash. They look strong, unbreakable. The same golden beads of acrylic are found in the iris of the limp hare's half-open eye and in the tiger's hide, as if the women had learned to smelt their substance into precious metal thread.

During the half hour that I stood before this painting, spinning out its mythology, most viewers appeared so engrossed in its novel construction that they lingered close to its surface and did not engage with its narrative content. Indeed, one had to back away quite a distance before the innumerable worm-like projections of paint congealed definitively into a picture plane. But for me, it is only in light of Wheat's imagery that her unusual technique gains value beyond novelty. Strongly evoking textile-work, the painting exists at a distance from the heroic lineage of large-scale gestural abstraction. It is instead aligned with the tradition depicted in many of Wheat's recent works such as this one, in which women were the original hunters, technologists, and artists. Perhaps it is not surprising, with a name like Summer Wheat, that she has invented a method

and an imagery that together speak to the earth's nourishing cycles. Imaging wet acrylic squeezing forth from the holes of the mesh, we see an image of the gamekeeper as utterly feminine in her power, evoking *birth* as well as death.

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