



Sibylle Peretti: *Orpheus*, 2017. Carved, painted and mirrored acrylic glass, silver and gold leaf applications, paper and photograph 25.5" high. Callan Contemporary, New Orleans.

Enigmatic Narratives

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SIBYLLE PERETTI
"It Was Such a Beautiful Promise"
Callan Contemporary
New Orleans, LA

CORMAC MCCARTHY'S POST-APOCALYPTIC novel, *The Road*, recently came up in, surprisingly, a candid and warm conversation. It might seem an unlikely subject for casual banter, due to its morbid and graphic revelation of an ecologically and personally destroyed future. Its appearance in this context seems significant, in an era of disbelief regarding environmental change. The dark, ash streaked landscape that threads McCarthy's fictive

narrative could well become a reality, if alternative facts can be disregarded for research-based evidence. At this point such a future is a possibility, though not necessarily a certainty. Indeed, the novel ends on an ambiguous yet hopeful note.

In Sibylle Peretti's third solo exhibition at Callan Contemporary, "It Was Such a Beautiful Promise," the thread of landscape becomes visually apparent. The depth of space in several of her works on glass and acrylic panels situate McCarthy-like grayed horizon lines, dusty with atmospheric perspective, in the background plane of subject matter that depicts children and feral animals. The future of these subjects, who are common in her work, hovers in that plane, indistinct and fearful in its uncertainty.

Vague references to an ambiguous moment in time recall the content of photographs by Gregory Crewdson. These depict subjects within liminal moments between before and after, life and



Sibylle Peretti: *Coyotito*, 2017. Carved, painted and mirrored acrylic glass, silver and gold leaf applications, paper and photograph, 36" high. Callan Contemporary, New Orleans, LA.

death, motion and stillness. A promise is also something in limbo, something awaiting fulfillment, and something in flux. A promise of a future is not guaranteed, and this appears as a theme in Peretti's work.

Orpheus directly references this concept, via the mythology associated with the tragic character. Peretti depicts a moment in a version of the myth, wherein Orpheus' decapitated head, severed by the Maenads, moves toward open water after his body is pulled apart in the frenzy of the Dionysian nymphs. It's a fate he may have found less horrible than losing his wife, Eurydice, a second time to Hades when he could not fulfill his promise to avoid looking back at her before leaving the underworld. *Orpheus'* half closed eyes peer gently and coldly at the viewer from the planes of the acrylic, as though mulling over this fate.

Peretti incorporates mirroring, gold leaf, and pearls into the otherwise achromatic images, which are an amalgamation of sculpture and photography. As *Orpheus* peers out, the viewer is reflected within his world, as though looking down upon him in the water. The mirroring provides a decorative element, as does the gold leaf, but it also functions to implicate the viewer in the

narrative. If *Orpheus* can also serve as a metaphor for a dystopian future, in which all that has been lost, the mirrors may act as a way to make the viewer complicit in that future. The audience bears witness to this death and is a part of it at the same time.

Peretti claims the pearls as symbolic of "hope, healing, and resolution," according to her statement in the press release for the show. She says, "they're seductive and beautiful and symbolize something you deeply desire." In Orpheus' case, the desire to see his beloved was too strong to ignore. In this image, these symbols of desire string like entrails from his neck, the gruesome remnants of desire, indicating the trail of water in which he floats. They act as bubbles delicately touching the surface of this river, like last breaths, or as *vanitas* symbols: iconography regarding the fleeting and vulnerable nature of life.

The use of pearls in *Coyotito* has a similar effect: they pile next to the reclining form of a coyote, though they litter the landscape on which it lies like so much detritus. *Pearl River* pictures a fox at the bank of the water, retreating towards the right of the picture plane. Its back is burdened with the weight of the pearls. While this might suggest a desire for the animal to beautify



Sibylle Peretti: *Urban Foxes*, 2017. Kiln cast glass, pigments, crystal inlay, 9" high. Callan Contemporary, New Orleans, LA.

itself, in a fairy-tale way, with the decorative elements, the animal appears to hunch with the increased gravity, the way that animals are sometimes inadvertently trapped by human refuse.

Fields is more hopeful. Hawks symmetrically descend on a pile of beads as though to remove them to their nests, in order to house their young. Even in the uncertain landscape, the desire to procreate and protect appears persistent. In this instance, the pearls symbolically function in a way that Peretti seems to intend, as objects that serve as markers of time and of "an intrinsic longing for shared values, cherished and passed on from generation to generation," as stated in the press release. *Urban Foxes*, a sculptural coil of two sleeping animals, make a nest for crystals at their center. The delicate crystals grow from their embrace, suggesting that familial connectedness and youth are hopeful and have the potential to overcome the decline of the future.

Human children populate most of the works. Peretti regards them as vulnerable beings rich with potential, innocence, and hope. In a 2013 interview, "Uncovering Interior Dialogues," linked on her website, she describes finding her grandfather's medical books from the 1930s. The pages contained images of children as medical spectacle, and they drove her want to "endow

them with a higher dignity" than that ascribed to them as specimens. The children depicted in these works appear more catatonic than other two- and three-dimensional images in Peretti's oeuvre, which may be a more direct reference to Peretti's original source material. However, her use of a light-sensitive glass that changes under various conditions, from warm to cool, suggests gentle breathing. These children are emblematic of an ability to transform and adapt. Ever caught in a state of limbo, between one light and the next, under some light they find stability for a time. That potential stability indicates hope for some future.

Fairy tales and mythology underscore all of Peretti's work. The enigmatic narratives contained in the subjects blur time and allow for fantastic possibilities. Fairy tales carry a certain degree of realism regarding mortal danger, and lessons for growth. Realism regarding ongoing ecological changes, in whichever direction they may go, is necessary in our world, and perhaps also in Peretti's. Her materials, delicate and vulnerable as the children she depicts, evoke content regarding how disparately different growth may occur, for destruction or for construction, especially under uncertain relationships with the landscape. □