Emma WEBSTER

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In the Studio With Emma Webster, the Artist Propelling Landscape Painting Into the Future

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STUDIO VISIT
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Shaped by VR simulations and references as diverse as Baroque Masters and Walt Disney, Webster's complex tableaux question our perception of reality.

by **Michael Slenske**
Photography by **Stephanie Noritz**
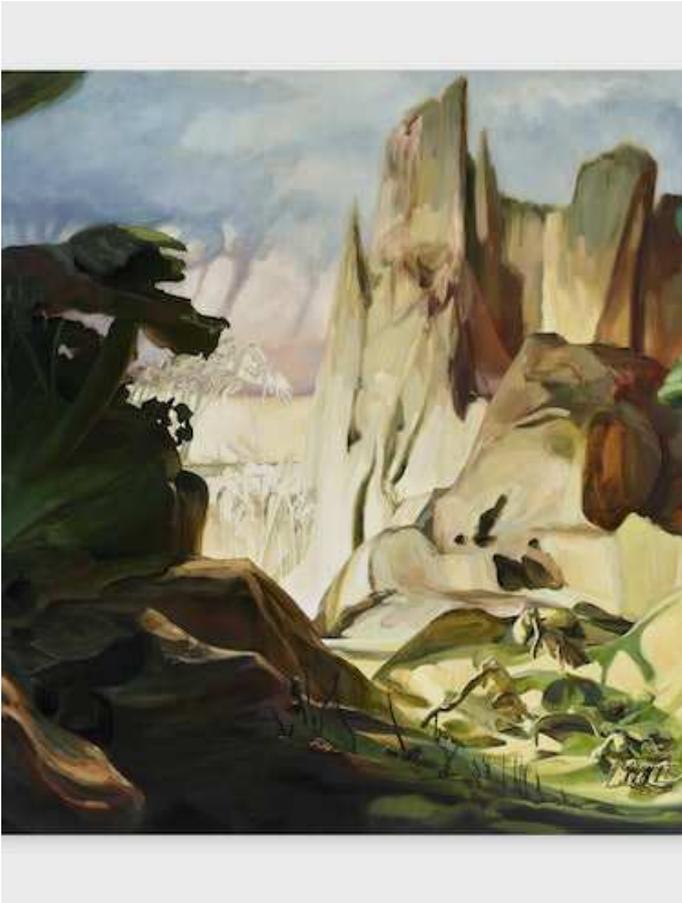*08.23.22*

Directly across from a roller skate shop in an East L.A. industrial park, through a poster-filled vestibule kitchen and a makeshift lounge flanked by racks of paintings, you'll find the two-story studio of Emma Webster. The 33-year-old Encinitas, California-born artist's off-kilter landscapes have drawn comparisons, in just a few years, to the compositions of Albert Bierstadt and John Singer Sargent, the Hudson River School, and Walt Disney's animations. Since the start of the pandemic, Webster's increasingly complex tableaux—shaped as much by avant-garde virtual reality simulations as classical set design and theatrical illumination—have been acquired by the Perez Museum, ICA Miami, and MOCA San Diego. In that time, Webster has also mounted solo shows at taste-making galleries like Carl Kostyál (London), Alexander Berggruen (New York), and Stems Gallery (Brussels). The Stanford and Yale alum is currently debuting her most monumental works to date in an exhibition titled *Illuminarium* (up from August 27 through October 1) at Perrotin in Seoul.

At a moment in history when social systems are collapsing, the natural world is upending itself, and people are constantly checking out of a reality that is often too surreal to comprehend, Webster's paintings—created from digital studies of simulated environments—feel unsettlingly relevant. In a way, they might be seen as deep fakes that shine a light on our current landscape of ever-shifting perceptions.

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"We always associate light and illumination with a certain level of clarity, but here it's almost like this tease," says Webster, who, during a July visit to her studio, is dressed in Crocs, gym shorts, and a magenta Guerilla Girls t-shirt that lists "The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist" (*Not having to be in shows with men…Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty…Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make, it will be labeled feminine.*) She points to an 8-foot-long canvas foregrounded with a dark, haunting glen behind which exists a bone white valley, cotton candy sky, and vertiginous razor-edged peaks. "You want to get to the source of the light but that doesn't necessarily strike me as a good place to be in," she says. "It's sort of a baiting light."

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Emma Webster, *Paramount* (detail).
Courtesy of the artist.

Emma Webster, *Nightingale Theater* (detail).
Courtesy of the artist.

The artist first envisioned these baiting illuminations five years ago while studying for her MFA at Yale, where she created maquettes—puppet theater-sized dioramas that she filled with clay creatures and illuminated via flashlight. Those three-dimensional works informed the paintings in her acclaimed 2019 solo debut, *Arcadia*, at the Hollywood-based gallery Diane Rosenstein. Webster's trippy vignettes featured all types of Wonka-esque wildlife that enlivened "a malleable, multidimensional world where memories and fantasies intermingle and time and space expand and contract," according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

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Before she went to Yale, Webster studied art practice at Stanford, then spent a few years between the Bay Area and San Diego working on interactive advertising installations via apps, bus wraps, and billboards for companies like YouTube and Google, and designing theater sets for La Jolla Playhouse. During a production about Hurricane Katrina, where

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actors were forced to navigate between an actual body of water and a shifting backdrop, she got her first idea for the "mini-set" process she would realize at Yale. She had another breakthrough after the virtual reality artist Wyatt Roy, a former Stanford classmate, came to stay with her at Yale in 2018. He scanned the maquettes in her New Haven studio and made an exploratory video game from them, which allowed users to interact with her work. Then, in 2020, Roy mailed Webster his Oculus goggles. With the help of some YouTube videos, she learned how to digitally model her maquettes in the VR program Blender. During the pandemic she perfected her skills, digitally recreating everything from a diorama of a Claude Lorraine painting to a photo she took at a Beach in Encinitas. That manipulated beachscape ended up as part of a pain ended up as part of a painting currently on view in Seoul.

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"When I switched from the tangible maquettes and started making things in the computer, the physics were completely different," says Webster. Indeed, by giving us glimpses of stylized vantage points in her semi-fictionalized worlds, Webster is challenging the very foundations of landscape painting. With each work she's posing the question: how do we— or should we—capture the natural world, circa 2022?

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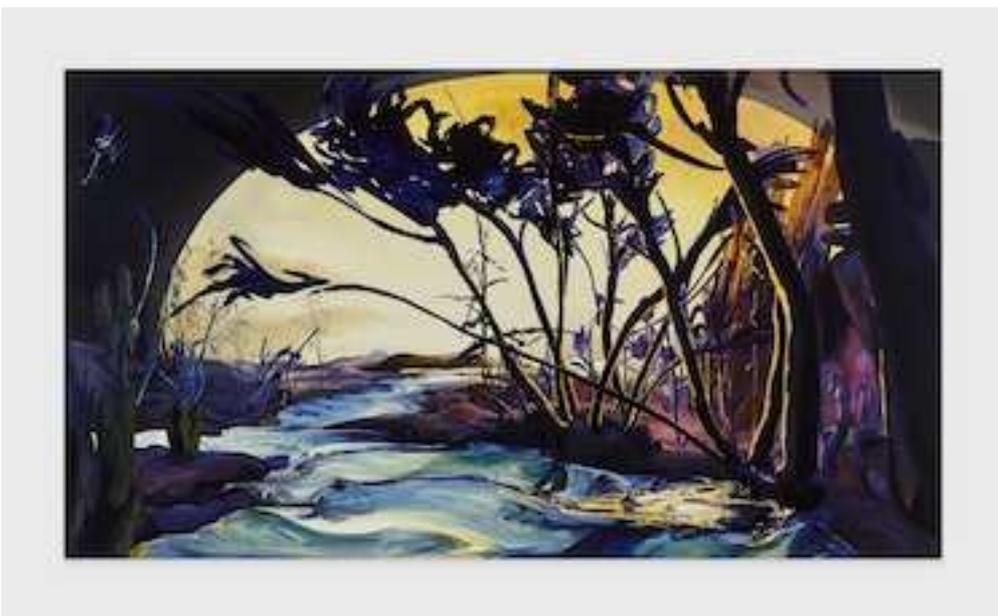Michael Slenske
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Emma Webster, *Blue Moon.* Courtesy of the artist.

"Landscape painting is really a history of space and how we perceive it and where things are against a horizon," she says. "What I'm interested in is the ways in which we're used to being lied to and the ways in which we're not." For her show at Perrotin, Webster removed all references and representations of humans and animals from her canvases, further blurring the divide between reality and virtual reality. But during our visit, I'm certain I recognize faces and forms. When I point out two humans embracing in a willowy ramble, Webster just laughs and wonders about the origins of my projections.

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"To me, trying to find things that we recognize means that we're not in a stable place, which I think is the most important part of all of this," she says. Webster is trying to replicate in her work what she describes as "places that are not places," such as Griffith Park's planetarium, the Long Beach Aquarium, and the digital worlds in gaming apps. She points out the painterly flourishes that aren't creatures but part of a living landscape in a purple thicket surrounding a floodlit waterway in a painting called *Griffith*, after the popular L.A. park.

Emma Webster, *Griffith*. Courtesy of the artist.

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"Sometimes I feel like I'm just banging on the glass screaming like a little kid," says Webster of her artistic process. There's always an opening in her paintings where "you can step into this weird natural history museum." But after that, the experience is anything but straightforward. "The paintings always feel like there's a lack of oxygen," Webster says. "Like if you step through, you're gonna be in outer space and explode."