

MADELEINE BIALKE, BRITTNEY LEEANNE WILLIAMS AND ALYINA ZAIDI

*Shivering Trees, Curling Flames*

April 23 — June 11, 2022

*Shivering Trees, Curling Flames* features three painters, **Madeleine Bialke**, **Brittney Leeanne Williams**, and **Alyina Zaidi**, who capture the natural world with vibrant palettes and uncanny compositions. Their superlative hues—acid yellow, brilliant blue, cadmium red—and soft-edged geometries suggest landscapes more psychological than real.

All three artists consider the connections between nature and the body: Anthropomorphized trees, leaves, roots, and branches shiver and shake throughout the canvases of both Bialke and Williams, while Zaidi develops a personal symbology featuring plant limbs, eggs, and tongue-like flames. Art historical and mystical traditions, climate science, and the artists' own identities also inform their work. Altogether, the canvases in *Shivering Trees, Curling Flames* ask us to reconsider the sentience of the natural world, the body's place within nature, and the ways in which paintings can cast their own transformative spells. Like colorful gardens and shadowy forests, they're alternately delightful and ominous, tended with both care and concern.

Bialke begins her process by taking phone photographs of forests and parks, mostly in the Adirondack mountains, where she spent time during the pandemic. She then transforms this source material with pen, ink, and coloured pencil drawings. The resulting compositions feature color gradients and smooth, elliptical volumes that evoke animation and the digital realm. Bialke also translates these studies onto canvas. Her lurid backgrounds reflect the strange, polluted sunsets she sees from Brooklyn, where she lives and works.

Two of Bialke's new canvases, *A Team* and *Mr. November*, depict skeletal trees and their long leaves, which blow against a bright orange sky. With their unnatural hues and looming shadows, the works suggest forest fires and impending climate crisis. "I want to make beautiful, loving images of our environment which also imbue a sense of foreboding," Bialke says. "I contextualize them within a climate that has become a 'second nature'—a kind of post-industry ecology with new, high-stakes environmental concerns." Her term also suggests ingrained habits, such as capitalism and waste, which have contributed to the deterioration of the planet.

While Bialke demonstrates empathy for an imperiled natural world, she notes that her figures are also resilient. The trees in *A Team* adapt to strong winds, living on in their post-apocalyptic landscapes. They make community, not the future, central to their idea of life. Similarly, *Mr. November* features a young tree watched over and protected by its elders. Bialke notes that landscape painters have concerned themselves with ecological crises since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. What's relatively new, however, is our understanding of plants as their own sentient beings. "Trees have as much character as humans and live just as varied lives," Bialke says. "They don't die like us, though—old stumps and logs become home to bugs and moss and fungi, and children play on driftwood when it washes ashore."

Williams similarly questions the border between nature and the human body. In her new canvases for *Shivering Trees, Curling Flames*, the painter renders fences, windows, and thresholds which suggest protective boundaries. Williams beautifies bars and barriers, underlining their ambivalent nature that both protects and restricts. These motifs, she says, reflect the time she's spent in lockdown throughout the pandemic, withdrawn from the rest of the world. The metaphor of a "guarded heart" undergirds her paintings, refusing to reveal too much, too soon.

In *Wandering / Wondering* and *Lemon Tree Imitating A Mountain*, the artist places totemic, contorted red female figures directly into her landscapes. She lets their edges blur into both color fields and earthly backgrounds; these figures are intimately entangled both with each other and with the exterior world. Williams also demonstrates a keen interest in the symbolic potential that landscape painting offers. Throughout her work, water is cleansing while mountain peaks rhyme with the shape of the female form.

Throughout Williams's drawings, her female figures inhabit dreamy, pointillist clearings. The artist notes that she's painting "portals" that examine the experience of the Black female body. Though her figures are faceless, they loom large. Even when hunched or obscured, they're mythic, strong, and ultimately unknowable—Williams's works seem to ask: Why should they unveil themselves to you? The legacies and landscapes of the artist's mother, grandmother, and other female family members inform the mysteries at the center of her work.

Of the three painters in the show, Zaidi embraces the most unequivocally joyful approach to nature. She grew up surrounded by two beautiful gardens, tended by her father and grandmother, and made summer trips to the Kashmir countryside as a child. "I think that's where my love for landscapes started," she says. "I absorbed my father's love for creating and shaping nature. Unlike him, I do it through my paintings."

Now based in London, Zaidi was raised in New Delhi and Srinagar. On a recent trip back home to Delhi, Zaidi found herself surrounded by magic: People around her were cursing each other and attempting to ward off the evil eye, immersing themselves in ritual. During the pandemic and its prosaic months of solitude, illness, and isolation, Zaidi has embraced this sense of mysticism, creating fantasy realms and elements of ritual across her canvases.

Zaidi's process starts with storytelling. Inspired by Persian and South Asian miniatures, as well as her own written narratives, she composes abstracted scenes of bright petals; winding, watery paths; curling flames, and tangling vines. For *Shivering Trees*, *Curling Flames*, Zaidi introduces frogs, chrysanthemums, and a hybrid "tomato-kale spirit" into her visual language. A sense of play pervades her compositions. Two new small works on wood, *Cradle Me* and *A Baptism of Sorts*, measure just 30 x 30 cm. With their exuberant hues and pulsing forms, they become tiny talismans of hope and good cheer: If Bialke and Williams offer opportunities to mourn the natural world and grieve within it, Zaidi offers viewers a moment, outside of time, to revel in magical, verdant delights.

Artists have always used landscape paintings to explore the human psyche. Where Caspar David Friedrich celebrated the (male) individual experience in nature, and J. M. W. Turner captured technology's potency within the landscape, the works in *Shivering Trees*, *Curling Flames* turn away from such focuses on the individual and the manmade. Instead, they celebrate community, femininity, and the inner life of nature itself. Bialke, Williams, and Zaidi embrace the unknowable and mystical elements of the landscape, suggesting infinite possibilities for the medium.

*words by Alina Cohen.*

**Madeleine Bialke** (b. 1991, Elmira, NY) received her MFA from Boston University (2016) and her BFA from Plattsburgh State University of New York (2013). Her work is part of the Boston Public Library Collection, Plattsburgh State Art Museum Permanent Collection, Zoe Damon Collection, and the Cortland State University of New York.

**Brittney Leeanne Williams** (b. 1990, Pasadena, CA) Her work has been exhibited in New York, L.A., San Francisco, Miami (Untitled Art Fair), London, Venice, Antwerp, Copenhagen, and Hong Kong. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture and The Art Institute Of Chicago. She is a Joan Mitchell Foundation grant recipient and a Luminarts Fellow.

**Alyina Zaidi** (b. 1995, New Dehli, India) lives and works in London, and her work has been included in Tomorrow 2021 White Cube, London, MAPA Fine Art, The Hague, and Bowes Parris in London, among others. She holds an MA Painting from the Royal College Of Art, London (2021). This is her first time exhibiting in Belgium.

The exhibition will run from April 23 to June 11, 2022. Opening hours are Thursday, Friday & Saturday from 13:00 to 18:00 hrs or by appointment.