

INMAN GALLERY

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January 13, 2021

Inman Gallery is pleased to present

SHAUN O'DELL

A Foot Between the Screens of the Unforescene

January 15, 2021 –

February 26, 2022

Open house, Saturday, January 29

Artist will be present 2-4 pm

Inman Gallery is pleased to present the exhibition **Shaun O'Dell: *A Foot Between the Screens of the Unforescene*** on view from January 15 – February 26, 2022. The show will open concurrently with **Francesca Fuchs: *how a rock is all about surface*** on Saturday, January 29, with a reception for the artists from 2–4pm.

For over two decades, Shaun O'Dell's work has critically examined the destructive nature of the American myth of manifest destiny. From 2001–2010, O'Dell's early work was characterized by singular symbolic images signifying a lineage of what the artist calls "paternal destroyers" like George Washington, Daniel Boone, and Robert Oppenheimer. From 2010–2018, O'Dell deconstructed his cosmology into ruination through a process of formal abstraction. In 2018, two events of impact brought the two distinct formal chapters of his work together; O'Dell's hometown of Paradise, CA burned in The Camp Fire (the largest and deadliest wildfire in California history) and he began a series of visits to the Cumberland Plateau where his paternal ancestors started their respective journeys west through the Kentucky wilderness Daniel Boone had carved out in the 1800s.

After Paradise burned, the cascade of contemporary media images, personal memories, and tales of trauma passed on by the artist's friends and relatives re-activated a method of narrative figuration in O'Dell's earlier work that pointed to deconstructed histories of violence acted out on the American landscape. O'Dell began forensically imagining the phantasmal geography of origin for his settler ancestors as they pursued their passage west, while processing the loss of life and habitat in the Sierra Nevada where the artist grew up.



Shaun O'Dell, *Seeing Ghosts Between Ruins*, 2020
ink and gouache and acrylic ink on paper mounted on
canvas over panel
44 x 30 x 1 in (111.8 x 76.2 x 2.5 cm)

Created in the wake of these personal contexts, **Shaun O'Dell: A Foot Between the Screens of the Unforescene** harnesses the texts, images, and folklore characteristic of his early work with increased urgency and innovation. Continually compelled by the histories, ideologies and myths produced by the Puritans and other European colonizers, O'Dell leverages his personal history alongside two decades worth of committed experimentation in mark making to present this current suite of complex multipanel drawings.

The result – a surprising juxtaposition of representation, abstraction, and figuration – appear in various states of stasis and transformation. Ratchet candle sticks, horizon lines of the sun setting west, petrified woodpeckers, ghosts, and hair mimicking topographic representations of water are among the many signs within the paintings that point to what the artist sees as artifacts, relics, and ghosts, creating partitions or associative passageways transmitting between the artist and what he calls the “unforescenes.”

Recurring motifs throughout these large-scale works include the flora and fauna of the Cumberland terrain, Red River Gorge, and their subterranean environments. Leaves and blossoms from magnolia, poplar, chestnut, and oak trees, moonwort plants, large woodland ferns, pokeweed, and passages of thorny brambles organize the compositions, revealing, fragmenting and obstructing spirits, ancestors, and landscape features. Using this taxonomy of objects, plants, and animals, the artist conducted a meditative visual exercise in order to construct these works, trying to step into the eyes of his ancestors and see what they might have seen, and also what they had not seen arriving amid the colonial devastation of the people and forests of the region.

A passage from a text by contemporary environmental activist and author Wendell Berry guided him:

“Throughout their history here, most white men have moved across the North American continent following the fictive coordinates of their own self-affirming assumptions. They have followed maps, memories, dreams, plans, hopes, schemes, greeds. Seldom have they looked beyond the enclosure of preconception and desire to see where they were; and the few who have looked beyond have seldom been changed by what they saw. Blind to where they were, it was inevitable that they should become the destroyers of what was there.”

(Wendell Berry, “The Unforeseen Wilderness: Kentucky’s Red River Gorge,” 1971)

Among the most significant images in O'Dell's visual lexicon is that of the woodpecker. “I wondered if my Kentucky relatives living in what is now the Daniel Boone National Forest, ever saw the woodpeckers and what they thought...how they saw them, if they heard their loud and wild drumming,” O'Dell writes.

O'Dell continues: “It was striking...first seeing images of Pileated Woodpecker holes, how closely they resembled a kind of human-like carved and sculpted symbolic language. In this [body of] work I am looking back to Daniel Boone's mythic influence and often come across references to the carvings he made in trees that mark his killing of bears. I see Boone's carving of words claiming and marking a bear kill and the precise woodpecker holes as a parallel kind of sign production in the Kentucky forests. One human and arrogant, the other animal and mysterious.”

O'Dell's formal process combines fine and precise lines, layering flat forms in a diagrammatic manner that recalls natural history texts and atlases. Often comprising multiple sheets of paper, the drawings appear to have grown organically, with the artist actively responding to the growing composition. Formally and conceptually, O'Dell refers to the practice of early American surveyors claiming territory through map making in regions like Kentucky. However, the works map out historical and personal narratives that counter this consensus history in an act of subversive recuperation.

Against the backdrop of a contemporary United States where the ideologies of settler colonization continue to perpetuate Indigenous erasure and environmental degradation, O'Dell's works transparently acknowledge the artist's own proximity to these histories and offers a counter-narrative seen through a lens of dissensus that attempt to halt these cycles of violence for generations to come.

Shaun O'Dell received a BA from the New College of California, San Francisco, in 2002 and an MFA from Stanford University in 2004. His work has been exhibited widely in the US and internationally. He has won numerous awards and honors including the Tournesol Award (2009, Headlands Center for the Arts), Diebenkorn Teaching Fellowship (2006, SF Art Institute), Artadia Award (2005, San Francisco) and The Fleishhacker Foundation Award in 2002. His work is included in a number of permanent collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, NY, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Bronx Museum of Arts, the de Young Museum, Berkeley Art Museum and the DESTE Foundation of Contemporary Art in Athens, Greece. O'Dell lives and works in San Francisco.

Special program:

Saturday, January 29, 1:00pm

Conversation between Carter Foster and Shaun O'Dell, in person and Instagram Live.

Carter Foster, the Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs and Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas has known and admired Shaun O'Dell's work for many years, acquiring a large drawing for the Whitney Museum of American Art when he was their Prints and Drawings curator.