



Empire of Light
Ben Wolf Noam
February 5 - March 19, 2022

Southern California deserts occupy an uncanny space where social and natural extremes collide against a delicate yet unquestionably raw ecology. For some, it is just a blank canvas. The small community of California City in the Mojave Desert was intended to rival the burgeoning sprawl of Los Angeles, and then fell into relative obscurity. Bombay Beach by the Salton Sea houses the remains of another lost paradise. The desert is both geographical reality and poetic terrain; where people go to find themselves spiritually or escape to Las Vegas, seeking out enlightenment or any number of seductions and distortions. At the periphery of both psyche and sprawl, it throws into relief the absurdity of a runaway civilization edging ever closer to the limits of sustaining itself.

Ben Noam's exhibition *Empire of Light* is the artist's first solo show with The Pit, opening February 5 at the gallery's Palm Springs location and on view through March 19, 2022. Drawing its name from the iconic series of paintings by René Magritte, the show consists of works that take the desert as a site of revelation, engaging light and perception as ecstatic experience. The paintings on view use a highly detailed and labor-intensive application of oil paint, which is the result of the artist's sustained explorations across varying mediums over the past six years. Noam interprets the classical genre of landscape painting through a surrealist collapse of time and space, material and illusionism, with a nod towards contemporary sensory experience.

In the gallery, six paintings and one aluminum sculpture take as their subject the yucca palms commonly associated with Joshua Tree National Park and the high deserts of the American Southwest. In these hybrid photorealistic works, Noam depicts trees, cacti, and rock formations inside the outline of a Joshua Tree, beyond which a rich darkness blankets the surrounding landscape. The works operate like a memory, with refined moments of precision breaking down into diffuse, gestural strokes in other areas of the canvas. A blurry smear of tree limb embraces a pointillist rock, while blue midnight hues are set against a shining midday brilliance. The life size sculpture of a yucca palm mimics this contrast, with exacting organic details of veins in its leaves, which then break down in other areas to raw unpolished metal, as if caught in time flowing and pooling between mineral form.

As a body of work, these paintings intentionally quote from Magritte's *L'empire des lumières* series that the artist began in the 1940s and developed through the end of his life in 1967. For Magritte, depicting the simultaneity of day and night on canvas was a poetry of symbols achieved through the tonal qualities of paint. Noam builds on this precedent in these works, where the articulated limbs of the Joshua Trees become portals to the desert by day, gesturing to a world bound within its own encoded rhythms that remains impenetrable to objective representation.

These landscapes echo the thoughts of Jean Baudrillard in his cross-country travels throughout the Western United States, where he analyzed the American condition as he traversed its deserts. In his 1988 book *America*, he wrote: "The inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic form here, its ecstatic form. For the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance." By removing the landscape to reemphasize its own serene presence, Noam's works share in the sentiment that the desert—as a condition of extraordinary emptiness—offers a natural extension of a profound inner subjectivity. As René Magritte himself commented on the *Empire of Light* series: "It is still true poetic density, the search for a certain mental substance that is necessary to a man living in these times."

-- Darius Sabbaghzadeh

Ben Wolf Noam was born in Cambridge, MA, in 1987, and received a B.F.A. from Rhode Island School of Design in 2009. He has exhibited internationally throughout America, Europe and the Middle East. Exhibitions include The Breeder Gallery (Athens), Suzanne Geiss Co. (New York), Museo di Capodimonte (Naples, Italy), Mascota Galeria (Mexico City/Aspen, CO), Metropolitan Art Society/Aishii Foundation (Beirut, Lebanon), C-L-E-A-R-I-N-G (New York), and others. He has had performances commissioned by Night Gallery and MoMA P1. Noam's visual, curatorial, and performative work has been presented in *The Observer*, *Vice*, *T Magazine*, *ArtFCity*, *Art in America*, *Artforum*, *L.A. Magazine*, *Nylon*, *Purple Magazine* and many others. This is the artist's first solo exhibition with The Pit.