

Katherine Sherwood

Pandemic Madonnas and Other Views from the Garden

September 9 - October 29

The George Adams Gallery is pleased to present our second exhibition of paintings by Bay Area artist Katherine Sherwood titled, *Pandemic Madonnas and Other Views from the Garden*. Building on two on-going bodies of work, her *Venuses* and *Brain Flowers*, the exhibition will show the evolution of both series while also introducing Sherwood's *Pandemic Madonnas*, completed within the past year. Accompanying the exhibition is an extensively illustrated catalogue, *In the Garden of the Yelling Clinic*, surveying the development of all three, ongoing bodies of work, with scholarly essays by Ginny Treanor and Farley Gwazda, along with a personal reflection by the artist.

Sherwood has long used her artwork to engage with concerns around disability and feminism, by considering how both ableism and gender play a role in our understanding of art from both a historical and contemporary perspective. Herself disabled following a debilitating cerebral hemorrhage at forty-four, in the decades since, such concerns have only become more urgent and visible in Sherwood's work. In these recent paintings, she continues with her strategy of making revisionist additions to art historical images, collaging in scans of her own brain or depicting her subjects with assistive medical devices – particularly those she uses herself. Simultaneously, she has deepened her exploration of the historical precedent of female artists, notably in a major self-portrait after an altarpiece by the 17th century Portuguese painter, Josefa de Óbidos. While the original painting combines elements from devotional paintings and still-lives, a hallmark of de Óbidos's oeuvre, Sherwood replaces the central Christ child with her own disabled body, offering a two-fold critique: of the limitations in subject matter female painters historically faced and the liberating potential of the self-portrait.

The duality present in *Venus (after de Óbidos)* reflects two broader, inter-related aspects of Sherwood's work. She addresses the concept of the male gaze and preconceived notions of beauty in her *Venus* paintings, modeled after classical odalisques, while the *Brain Flower* series flips the script, re-inserting the female gaze by considering the work of Renaissance female painters, who were often limited in their subject matter to still-lives. As art historian Ginny Treanor points out in her contribution to the catalogue, for the women whose paintings Sherwood appropriates, the floral arrangements they painted were as much a scientific enterprise as an artistic one. Following in this tradition, by replacing select flowers with collaged scans of her own brain; Sherwood draws a parallel between the beauty and complexity within both structures.

Another commonality across these series is the use of art historical reproductions as a substrate, where Sherwood is literally working on the back of historical paintings or, as in the case of her *Pandemic Madonnas*, on the front. Working from examples of the *Madonna and Child* by Dürer, Botticelli, Raphael and others, she directly alters the image, adding in prosthetics, braces, crutches and other devices to the subjects as a commentary on the immaculate, idealized body. Pointedly, Sherwood intentionally models these interventions after antiquated, outdated medical devices, further drawing attention to our preconceptions around the visible markers of disability. A seated Madonna may be placed in a wheelchair, the baby Jesus given a prosthetic limb or brace, however the effect is not to undermine, but rather transcend. As these paintings were intended to reveal the divine as more perfect beings, Sherwood's manipulations offer a more nuanced understanding of our inherent humanity.

As Sherwood discusses the trajectory of her work over the last ten years in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, she elaborates on her understanding of the "Garden" as a conceptual extension of the imaginary "Yelling Clinic:" a space for healing that has served as the inspiration for her paintings since 2010. The Yelling Clinic is also a disability collective Sherwood co-founded in 2008, which among its goals, combines art and activism to move conversations around disability outside a medical context. For Sherwood, the interventions and re-contextualizing she manifests within her paintings are in themselves acts of healing and therefore an extension of her activism. Her "Garden" is home to the *Brain Flowers*, where the blooms she paints are equally reminders of mortality and objects of beauty in their own right.