

Katherine Sherwood
Cajal's Revenge: Paintings, 1998-2008

September 8 - October 28, 2023

During September and October, the George Adams Gallery is pleased to present our third exhibition of paintings by Bay Area artist Katherine Sherwood. *Cajal's Revenge: Paintings, 1998-2008* showcases a selection of large-scale abstract paintings that explore Sherwood's experience with disability, incorporating magical seals and collaged medical images of her own brain.

Active in the East Village art scene in the 1980s, Sherwood decamped to California for a faculty position at UC Berkeley in 1990. During this period, she was cast as a new wave painter, creating deliberately roughhewn figurative paintings that explored themes of religion, gender, and technology. Her work at the time featured images of the brain and healing seals from *The Lemegeton*, a medieval grimoire attributed to King Solomon.

In 1997, at the age of 44, Sherwood had a massive stroke—a cerebral hemorrhage that paralyzed the right half of her body—including her dominant painting hand—and left her temporarily unable to speak. She would later describe this event as her life catching up to her art. During a follow-up appointment, Sherwood caught sight of an angiogram of the blood vessels in her brain and convinced a radiologist to give her copies of the images.

Upon returning to the studio, Sherwood reinvented her process. She began by collaging blown up cerebral angiograms of her brain onto large canvases. Then, laying the work flat, she poured loose, gestural passages of non-toxic latex paint, which cracked and pitted as it dried, accentuated with a dark green patina. Although these works may at first appear abstract, they are fluid renderings of Solomon's magical seals—*Foras, Valefor, Gremory, Sallos, Balam*—each of which is ascribed specific healing powers.

While the critical response was positive, praising Sherwood's freer, more intuitive approach to painting, there was a tendency to impose an "overcoming narrative," an ableist trope that insisted she created this work *despite* her physical limitations. Sherwood sees her disability as an integral part of her creative process and a positive part of her identity, and the work, consequently, is a celebration of difference and the inevitable changes that happen to our bodies and minds.

The exhibition encompasses a range of work from this period, including colorful gestural abstract paintings which feature collaged elements. *Valefor I* (1998) is one of Sherwood's earliest post-stroke prototypes. Here, a figure portrayed in loosely applied baby blue paint is juxtaposed on a grid composition comprising stark, monochromatic medical images of Sherwood's own brain. Notably, the figure's bodily form is based on the emblematic seal known as "Valefor", an entity reputed for its capacity to cure all ills. The monumental *Sephora* (2001), is a prime example of Sherwood's abstract style. Fluidic loops and pools of pain rendered in blue, gray, and ivory traverse the collaged cerebral vasculature with patterns of craquelure. These gestures collectively portray the seal "Balam", which confers wit, humor, and mental ability on its recipient.

Katherine Sherwood was born in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1952. She received a BA from the University of California, Davis, in 1975, and an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1979. She taught at UC Berkeley for over thirty years until retiring in 2011. Sherwood has exhibited internationally and has been the recipient of several awards, including an NEA Artist Fellowship in 1989, a Pollock-Krasner Grant in 1998, a Guggenheim Fellowship Award in 2005, and a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant in 2006. She continues to be an activist for disability rights and social justice, founding and teaching the course Art, Medicine and Disability at UC Berkeley for over a decade, as well as playing an active role at the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, CA, which supports art created by adults that have physical or intellectual disabilities. Her work is in public collections including the Ford Foundation, New York; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, California. Sherwood lives and works in Rodeo, California.