

Room to Dream

Jordan Baumgarten
Patrick Carroll
Ted Gahl
KLN Studio
Helen Shu
Virginia Stroh
Dier Zhang
Rhys Ziemba

November 11, 2023
–February 10, 2024



“Room to Dream,” includes works by Jordan Baumgarten, Patrick Carroll, Ted Gahl, KLN Studio, Helen Shu, Virginia Stroh, Dier Zhang, and Rhys Ziemba. The show, the first for Swanson Kuball in Long Island City, is named after David Lynch’s 2018 memoir. The exhibition gathers works with variously unfolding layers of beauty, darkness, mystery, and light, connected by a sensibility that dreams and nightmares may not oppose each other so much as they reflect the same concerns from either side of the red curtain.

The show opens in the entry hallway with Virginia Stroh’s *Untitled* (2021), a large photograph of an ethereally soft, droopy, and fecund camellia bush. Its lush pink flowers, dense green leaves, and dark shadows are simultaneously inviting and unsettling. Her photograph becomes a literal and figurative chiaroscuro, introducing light and dark as recurring motifs throughout the show.

The three paintings that follow on the opposite wall, Helen Shu’s *Shanghai* (2023), *Code* (2022), and *Theft Amongst Tulips* (2022), are disquieting investigations into the mysterious logic of the subconscious. A mosquito’s sharply-outlined silhouette against a tawny ground in *Shanghai* and a distorted elevator wall panel in *Code* flank *Theft Amongst Tulips*, where the flashlights of a roving search party dart about two enormous flowers incongruously trapped in a boxing ring.

In the living room hangs Rhys Ziemba’s large painting of a bony day at the beach, *The Law That There Is No Law* (2023). At the water’s edge, a skeleton couple is amorously, perhaps eternally enrapt with one another under the perfect sky of a summer day, surrounded by the camping gear and detritus of the (previously) living. Like a post-apocalyptic *The Luncheon on the Grass*, Ziemba’s work is laden with humorous personal and art-historical references.

Three ceramics by Dier Zhang are mysterious, otherworldly objects, placed where visitors can encounter, touch, and hold them. There are two boxes with surfaces covered with delicate patterns and just-legible ciphers, the ivory colored *Music continues to play, the fog does not return* (2023) and the soil-toned *Now we bond over our mutations* (2023). Small stars patterned with a colorful quilt, *Coming to meet* (2023), feels like fidget spinners unearthed from an archaeological dig.

KLN Studio’s sheepy, cloudlike *Violette* stools (2023) pull up to a low hatched *Palmetto* coffee table (2022). Together with their magic bean *Sarpa* mirror (2023) hanging nearby, the work, exquisitely crafted from ash and cherry, inspires celestial reminiscence. While their work is the heaviest in material, KLN’s furniture brings a lightness to the room’s shifting dreamscape.

Two works, Ted Gahl's painting *Figure Dozing* (2023) and Patrick Carroll's knit panel *Sleep* (2023), form an uncanny juxtaposition. *Sleep* features a small, mattress-shaped aperture in the brown silk ground, while the word "SLEEP" in lavender below is comfortably tucked in, suspended between the stretcher bars visible behind the knit. The woman in *Figure Dozing* drifts across the canvas on a colorful field of marks and forms, an expressionist Ophelia whose presence here reminds us that "to sleep" is "perchance to dream."

Patrick Carroll's second work in the exhibition, *Permanence* (2023), shows a family tree of permanence and its descendents, forming a cryptic hierarchy or a playoff bracket of signifiers in his own poetic language. Water and air, paired, had twins: being. These beings coupled and gave birth to "chorus" and its kin, the rapturous, luminous "effulgence." So composed, this ludic diagram invites viewers to trace an epistemological lineage whose simplicity is inscrutable. Like a dream from the night whose esoteric message is forgotten by morning, the sensation that remains is delight: in language, form, and material.

Jordan Baumgarten's photograph of his next-door neighbors, *Bernice & Scout* (2014), preserves his memory of cherished friends in a neighborhood that has undergone tremendous gentrification and change. Baumgarten captured Bernice's coy and mischievous personality and her innocence along with Scout's inquisitive and playful nature in an image whose space is organized by and framed with almost set-like details that reveal themselves on closer inspection.

Swanson Kuball is an art gallery in Laura Swanson and Greg Kuball's apartment. It's a space where they live and work with the art they show. The space is thoughtfully configured to show the art in the best possible light. The artists are friends of the gallery, and the works are integrated into Laura and Greg's lives and living space for the duration of the exhibition.

Written by Tyler Coulton