

Various Small Fires (VSF) is pleased to present Julie Curtiss' West Coast debut and first solo exhibition with VSF, *Altered States*. Curtiss, whose painting and sculpture practice is informed by the playful yet radical figurations of the Chicago Imagists, the graphic precision of Japanese "Ukiyo-e" painting and the psychoanalytic symbology of Surrealism, investigates sexuality through the lens of the collective unconscious, indexing the collective memory of universal animalia, objects and food as they relate to evolving human behavior.

Depicting mostly female subjects in her works, Curtiss creates an undulating dreamscape where the depths of a woman's psyche are as important and palpable as her body. Rife with swirling curvatures and oscillating lines that convey both physical movement as well as cognitive dissonance, Curtiss' subjects are secretive and faceless, inhabiting uncanny narratives driven by the logic of dreams. Teetering between dichotomies of seduction and repulsion, feral and domestic, their countenances are strategically concealed with thick mounds of serpentine hair, clawed hands and razor-sharp nails that conjure the anatomy of cold-blooded beasts. For Curtiss' latest series of paintings and gouaches on paper, marine imagery permeates the narratives: koi, lotuses, fishtails in lieu of feet, a lobster claw clasping a glossy manicured finger ... a nod to the 1980s science-fiction film *Altered States*, whose protagonist descends into a bottomless search for the self by way of floatation tanks – sensory deprivation chambers filled with body-temperature saltwater (water being the Jungian dream symbol for the unconscious). While Curtiss invites us to dive deeper into the layered, mercurial mind of her subjects, we are inevitably faced with a reflection of our own subconscious.

As though conjured from her paintings, Curtiss reveals three new "hat sculptures", each meticulously combed, woven and braided from sumptuous cuts of synthetic hair. Reminiscent of Méret Oppenheim's *Le Déjeuner en fourrure*, a completely fur-lined teacup sculpture, Curtiss' hypnotic mandalas of hair are both synecdoche and shield for her female protagonists.

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