

Jaclyn Conley

Castles In The Air

MARUANI MERCIER

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Avenue Louise 430, Brussels

*If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost;
that is where they should be.
Now put the foundations under them.
- Henry David Thoreau, Walden*

In her new body of work, Jaclyn Conley stages visions of life in landscape, which are at once vast and intimate. Known for her masterful portrayals of the figure, the artist here bends the depth and scale in the composition, giving the setting comparable deliberation and prominence. In each painting, Conley layers references to iconic images from art history with archival photographs documenting the back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s and 70s in America, to consider the notion of social progress, and the possibilities of turning to the landscape as a strategy of resistance.

Influenced by the writings of Henry David Thoreau, the back-to-the-land movement garnered particular momentum in the late 1960s in Vermont against the backdrop of the ongoing war in Vietnam, escalating consumerism and perceived urban deterioration. Striving for self-sufficiency and independence from the corporate system, numerous enthusiasts of the movement sought a refuge in the land, leaving behind extensive accounts and photographs of communal life at the time. Unearthing the histories of the movement from relative invisibility, Conley ponders the efficacy of individual ambitions for a different way of life. She explains, "the early protests for environmental causes and movements towards autonomy were not going to be an easy or necessarily rational path, and yet, at least from our vantage point, it seems like there was the courage to do it anyway. I think it could be useful today to have that humility to strive for big things, even though they seem very unlikely." Referencing a quote from Thoreau's landmark treatise *Walden*, the title of the exhibition considers the importance of following one's earnest and even idealist beliefs.

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Similar to the paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which Conley often references in this series, her protagonists are rarely united by a single narrative. Instead, there is a sense of multiplicity in the figures and the composition, as if mimicking the evolving order of natural change and seasons. In *Summer*, the figures are enveloped by impasto brushstrokes, which seem to have their own acoustics. Almost evoking the sound of rustling leaves or beating birds' wings, Conley's handling of paint here and use of colour emphasises the connection of people with their surroundings.

Intermingling fluid marks with the hard edges of the figures, the works in the series reference the language of collage, in part alluding to Conley's diverse visual sources. In *Soldiers at Rest*, which pays homage to Bruegel's eponymous work, the image of passage in the landscape is complicated by superimposed pictorial planes cutting across the composition. Some of the figures advancing towards the horizon appear cut out from the image, as if resisting being bound to a single time and place, suggesting questions about the universality of human aspirations.

Jaclyn Conley (b. 1979) was born in Ontario, Canada, and is now based in New Haven, CT. Conley has exhibited nationally and internationally at venues including The Painting Center, NY, NurtureArt, NY, Projective City, Paris, Wynick-Tuck Gallery, Toronto, and the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield CT. Conley has been an artist in residence at NXTHVN, the Vermont Studio Center and The Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver Canada. She was the recipient of a Connecticut Office of the Arts Fellowship, Canada Council for the Arts Visual Arts Project Grants, an Elizabeth Greenshields Award and a Fellowship from the Sam and Adele Golden Foundation.

Conley's work is featured in a number of prominent collections including Ann and Mel Schaffer Family Collection, South Orange, NJ; Barack and Michelle Obama Family Collection, USA; Burger Collection; Ellen and Stephen Susman Collection, TX; Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Italy; High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA; ICA Miami, FL; Jesse Williams Collection, Woodland Hills, CA; Kistefos Collection, Norway; Maloney Collection, IL; Marian Collection, Belgium; Vanhaerents Collection, Belgium; Vanthournout Collection, Belgium.