

Joshua Hagler's Exuberantly Sullen Paintings at Cris Worley Fine Arts Speak to Creation, Death



In Joshua Hagler's *Between Earth and Here* (2020), disorderly smears and swipes of paint create a nighttime landscape with hints of imagery. (Kevin Todora)

New Mexico-based artist Joshua Hagler's current show at Cris Worley Fine Arts is titled "Drawing in the Dark." Part of the title comes from Hagler's walkabouts in the evenings when the sky is turning black. In the dimness of evening, he generates ideas for his paintings by drawing the landscape as his eyes adjust to the waning light.

One can imagine the difficult process of trying to inscribe the world when the usual perceptual cues are lacking. Hagler's suite of archaeologically dense paintings also arise from repeated and layered markings on canvas and burlap, mostly depicting pregnancy ultrasound images of his young daughter.

The resulting amorphous and crusty surfaces evoke the subtle transformations of creation. Hagler's method seems to serve as a mechanism to subvert normal intellectual and aesthetic maneuvers, allowing something more direct and essential to emerge.

The title of the show is also a larger metaphor. To paint is to enact a kind of magic where one conjures an artwork from the spiritual and material world. Hagler purposefully lets his paintings dwell in this slippery darkness.

Unmoored, he grasps and fumbles through the painted debris until he can slowly delineate the stuff of our world.



In works like *The One Within Called the One Without*, artist Joshua Hagler envisions a painted ecosystem in the vein of Transcendental painting. (Nan Coulter/ Special Contributor)

As an example, the painting *Between Earth and Here* (2020) defines a landscape vista as a series of gestural markings. Disorderly smears and swipes of paint feel like pulled taffy animating a landscape both external and internal.

A night sky twinkles above a mist of form and color. Within the puzzling, intangible shapes are hints of imagery — note a church atop a hill in the right corner and the mostly camouflaged animal in the center of this large-scale painting.

We are in rapport with the creature but still foreigners trapped in each other's gaze. There is an interconnectedness that Hagler insinuates, if only seen through our limited human capacities. The painting, like many of his works, is

a feast for our eyes. With a vast range of dashes, dotting and painterly accumulations, Hagler envisions a painted ecosystem in the vein of Transcendental painting. Think of Agnes Pelton's imagined worlds crossbred with the thick coarseness of Gregory Amenoff's bravura paintings.

If Hagler's show is about the veiled secrecies of creation, it is equally about the inevitability of death. In *The Epistle of One Arriving From Among the Many Departed* (2020), we see the artist reckoning with the impending birth of his daughter as the lives of others are simultaneously and inevitably extinguished.



Joshua Hagler, *The Epistle of One Arriving from the Many Departed* (Kevin Todora)

The two-sided coin of existence seems always on Hagler's mind in these exuberantly sullen paintings. In this particular case, the dusty canvas is scattered with marks that nebulously represent a central head congealing slowly into personhood.

There is a physical gap between the sewn burlap, almost presaging the birth to come. One also senses a hint of science fiction as the paint warps and bends like some imagining of space and time in eternal flux. But this is not Carlos Castaneda mysticism; the deep browns and pale tans of the painting anchor our examination of the canvas in the baseness of soil and matter.

In *Cathedral* (2021), we again see Hagler mining the murky imagery of sonogram technology, but in this case the layers accumulate into a rich, bluish landscape set upon a drawn bed frame. A central form exerts itself as a ziggurat or a vaguely architectural shape — maybe the title's cathedral. Perhaps it's a nod to the spiritual home found in the womb before we enter the human construct that is culture.

Most startling are two small, fragmentary paintings that are irregular forms layered with nearly monochrome paint. The standout, *Out of Existence VII* (2021), appears like a reverse comma or floating scapula. Painted over a found object, the painting distills the substance of all the other works in the exhibition into an affecting and mysterious object.

The pitted and marred shape feels closer to the inherent beauty of nature. It feels preverbal, like an unearthed fossil that is unidentifiable, yet deeply familiar.

— Matthew Bourbon



Joshua Hagler's *Out of Existence VII*, 2021, is among the exhibition's standouts. Painted over a found object, the painting distills the substance of all the other works in the show into an affecting and mysterious object.