

Inka Essenhigh

Exhibition 6 November–11 December 2021

Victoria Miro Venice, Il Capricorno, San Marco 1994, 30124 Venice, Italy



Inka Essenhigh, *Blue Moss*, 2021, enamel on canvas, 114.3 x 190.5 cm, 45 x 75 in., © Inka Essenhigh, courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro

Victoria Miro is delighted to present an exhibition in Venice of new flower paintings by Inka Essenhigh.

The New York-based artist's fifth solo exhibition with the gallery and first at Victoria Miro Venice features new paintings from her ongoing series of botanical works in enamel paint, a medium the artist first worked with two decades ago.

These works meld an exuberant exterior world with an energetic interior consciousness. Whether painting human or other organisms, Essenhigh builds finely wrought narratives that, at times tinged with symbolism, can be read as spirited visions of the here and now. In these new paintings, flowers step forward, uprooted from landscape or still life traditions to become outlandish and feisty protagonists in their own right.

Exact and delicate in their execution, the motifs in these works depict a spectacular vision of nature and are complete forms in themselves. Eliciting a strange and compelling beauty, as critic Barry Schwabsky comments, they 'might be growing on another planet.' And yet, as the artist says, 'they are based on real flowers because, no matter what I might come up with in my imagination, a real flower always tops it.'

We might think of nature's more outré moments, of accentuations aligned with the ways in which plants and animals put forward their best selves in pursuit of status or procreation. In Essenhigh's paintings such formal, decorative, erotic and hierarchical considerations are given dramatic emphasis by her choice of her medium – the qualities of flatness, viscosity and luminosity (the sense of things being dramatically lit and yet almost never from an identifiable source) particular to enamel that in turn lend a rich emotional tenor to the work, an impression of things being both of this world and not.

Beauty and disquiet co-exist, not only in works such as the panoramic *Blue Field*, 2021, and *Blue Moss*, 2021, which foreground a colour rarely found in nature, but also in paintings where a more naturalistic palette is employed. Essenhigh's virtuoso line – sinuous and suggestive but always economical and considered – creates a fluid dance within and between her motifs that accentuates a psychological aspect. Matthew Weinstein, writing the catalogue that accompanied Essenhigh's 2018 survey exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, notes that 'her paintings are not just plant-like in their nature. They are plant-like in actuality. Their attenuated lines follow twists and turns that seem to know where they are going, like vines. We know that vines have a plan, and the plan has urgency. Essenhigh's stubborn line pushes through blocks of colour and illusionistic elements. It has a vitality with secret rules. It will not be denied.'

The artist has described wanting to paint 'what is unseen, to find the life within things and animate them.' This force, these 'secret rules' in her flower paintings might in part be thought of as the actions of phototropism and transpiration, natural occurrences that, in the past, would have been explained through stories linked to divinity or spirit. Today, whether we think of them as esoteric or ecological, the invisible energies that pulse through our surroundings remain potent, tied up with vexed issues of what the natural world means to us, what we have done to it, how it will adapt and what will arise. These considerations are of a piece with Essenhigh's desire to create 'a contemporary and historic feeling at the same time... where you can sense that a world you're walking into is primordial but that it also has the feeling of something contemporary and futuristic.' They speak to painting's enduring role as a conduit between past, present and future and its singularity in asking fundamental questions about the world while reflecting aspects of it back at us.

About the artist

Born in 1969, Inka Essenhigh lives and works in New York. Recently, she has exhibited at international institutional venues including the Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockland, Maine, USA (2020); American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York, USA (2019); Fondazione Stelline, Milan, Italy (2018); the Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville (2016 and 2012).

Her work is in the collections of major museums including Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY; Denver Art Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; Museum of Modern Art / P.S.1 Center for Contemporary Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Seattle Art Museum; Tate, London; Virginia Museum of Fine Art, Richmond and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Recent solo exhibitions include Miles McEnery Gallery, New York (2020); Susquehanna Art Museum, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, USA (2019); *Uchronia*, Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago, USA (2019); Inka Essenhigh: *A Fine Line*, MOCA Virginia, Virginia Beach, USA (2018) travelling to Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, Michigan, USA (2019); alongside Inka Essenhigh: *Manhattanhenge*, Drawing Centre, New York, USA (2018).

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