

Change agents: Beatrix Ost retrospective warns of a dystopian future



Artist, screenwriter, designer, and style icon Beatrix Ost has exhibitions at two galleries: “Illuminations & Illustrations” at Second Street Gallery through January 10, and “Beatrix Ost: Archaeology of the Omnivore—Paintings from the Garden Soil” at Chroma Projects through November 30. IMAGES courtesy of artist

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Walking into Beatrix Ost’s “Illuminations & Illustrations,” now on view at Second Street Gallery, I was immediately reminded of Hieronymus Bosch’s famous triptych “The Garden of Earthly Delights.” It wasn’t one particular painting that suggested this, but rather the cumulative effect of all the work. Like Bosch, Ost creates complicated, often fantastical tableaux of people, animals, and plants that are larded with enigmatic symbolism. And Ost’s work also serves as a warning, except here the impending doom is not eternal damnation, but cataclysmic climate change. And in both cases, the artist’s message is clear: We are the agents of our own doom.

The work, which dates from the 1970s to the present, reveals that nature, and our relationship to it, has been a longtime preoccupation of Ost’s. The earliest painting, “The Interpretation of Dreams” (right), a portrait of Sigmund Freud, reminds us quite emphatically that nature is ultimately in charge. In the painting, Freud reclines, gazing at the viewer with soulful, almost apologetic eyes. Trees sprout from his head, a gushing stream falls from his eyes, the folds of his clothing are topography. He is becoming nature, or being subsumed by it.

Ost wanted her show to be a multidimensional experience, and a lush score composed by Abel Okugawa fills the gallery space. There is also a faint smell of roses that subtly wafts through the air.

“Firstly, you see,” says Ost. “Secondly, you think, then you hear something, and then, there is this smell. The roses are in nearly every painting. They are symbols of love and beauty, and they are to remind us that something is not okay.”

Talking about her process, Ost says, “When I start a painting, I paint very swiftly because in those first moments, it’s thoughts, not technique. Once I’ve got the thoughts down, I go back in and make it more refined.”

“The Hunter Haunted” from 1984 is a conventional- style portrait depicting a seated man dressed in the traditional tracht wear of a Bavarian hunter. All is normal from the neck down. But he sports the skull and antlers of his quarry. The gaping eye holes are blank—we don’t see the man within—it’s not a mask; he has become the stag. It’s a disturbing image that acts as a potent warning about the consequence of our actions.

A large painting with bathing figures, “Illuminations and Illustrations” at first seems to depict a beachside idyll. But then we notice the water threatening to overtake the unaware bathers. Similarly, “The Edge of Our Silence” boasts an assortment of standing people oblivious to the water rising around them.

An apocalyptic vista of peaks rising above a glacier lake in “Omnivore’s Natural History” presents a bleak future. In the foreground, jagged trees appear dead or dying while fire, falling boulders, and melting ice mar the background. Looking closely, you notice clear indictments of society expressed through the woman huddling in the cave at the bottom of the painting. Her only possessions are her personal hashtag and a designer bag. And Ost herself isn’t exempt. The self-portrait in the phone screen at the end of the selfie stick implies her share of guilt. But her expression conveys unease and worry. She describes herself as “flabbergasted to be there and uncomprehending that we don’t see what is happening around us.”

“Nature Politely Declines—Metamorphosis of Order” is a stunning, richly hued painting. Within the confines of a painted gilt frame, birds flit among an assortment of eggs that seem to be sprouting from the tree’s scarlet branches. They have an anatomical feel, resembling veins within a human lung. At the center, a giant scarlet egg grabs our attention. Enriching the total effect is the ultramarine blue background. Beneath the frame, the tree trunk turns brown and the gorgeous blue looks slightly muddy. A human arm stretches out from beyond the edge of the picture plane proffering “help” in the form of a nest. Busy with a stalk, and not needing something it can make itself, the bird ignores the intervention.

Ost’s sculpture has elegance and emotional poignancy. “HearSeeScream” is a riff on the famous Shinto monkeys, replacing the simian triad with three women. Carved from stout tree trunks, the figures have heads cast from bronze. “You Stole My Future” was created over two decades ago, but Ost saw Greta Thunberg in its plaintive face and re-titled it.

A second Ost show, on view at Chroma Projects, is a series of dynamic paintings on paper. “Beatrix Ost: Archaeology of the Omnivore—Paintings from the Garden Soil” are works literally of the landscape, using earth from Ost’s garden as pigment. Deborah McLeod, Chroma Projects director, also contributed an essay to the “Illuminations & Illusions” catalog.

The catalog includes a powerful lament by Ost that echoes in words what we see at Second Street Gallery. “Indifference slunk in undetected beneath an umbrella of the information age,” she states, touching on the biggest hurdle we face. Through work that is both a paean and a warning, Ost endeavors to cast away the indifference, reigniting awe in nature and an awareness of just where we are headed.