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STACY LYNN WADDELL

Stacy Lynn Waddell on finding home in the age of extinction

Donasia Tillery

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Stacy Lynn Waddell's gold and silverleaf works on paper embody a profound tension—dazzling on the surface and revealing unsettling truths of exploitation just beneath. In "light takes time to reach us," on view at Candice Madey through October 28, she further illuminates the beguiling majesty of these precious materials, presenting landscapes whose shimmering 22-karat gold and Japanese silver facades belie the dark histories they've endured. Drawing inspiration from three iconic artworks, the exhibition mines the contradictions between the cultural ideals we profess and the bitter realities we inhabit. Below, Waddell reflects on the genesis of the show, how the past irradiates the present, and the silver linings of working from uncertainty.

I GREW UP ON FAMILY LANDS. On a North Carolina farm that had been passed down through the generations, I always had a bit of *terra firma* under my feet. I know what it's like to live through the seasons on that land; it's a part of me. And so, for me, landscape's always at the core of my definition of home, the starting point for which I think about everything. In creating this exhibition, I was thinking about how we move through space to reach a sense of self—how we find home.



Stacy Lynn Waddell, *Untitled #9 (awakening after the Gulf Stream and the Hurricane)*, 2023, composition gold leaf, variegated metal leaf and Japanese colored silver leaf on handmade cotton/abaca paper, 29". All photos: Kunning Huang.

I always begin with a historical painting or photograph. "*light takes time to reach us*" starts from Winslow Homer's *After the Hurricane, Bahamas*, a painting where we see a Black sailor shipwrecked on a strange island. I'm interested in Homer as an important chronicler of early America when we were forming who we would be. This work fascinates me because it was painted in 1899, at the turn of the century. Just a couple of decades after this, the world would be a very different place, moving quickly toward the technological age of the twentieth century. I imagine this man waking up in

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a world that's completely different from what he's known, a strange place that he'll have to call home.

Our relationship to the island scene of Homer's travels and those in the show is super troubled. We know the ubiquitous posterized image. The sky is always a perfect blue, the water always crystal clear. There's nothing that you don't love and that you haven't imagined as a utopic space. But it's not really true. Islands in the tropical sphere and the waterways around those spaces—it's dark history, dotted by the transport of Black bodies.

You can look at the surface of one of my *Untitled* island works and think, *Oh my god*. It's shiny. It's eye candy. It's surface beauty. It pulls you in. But many actual tropical spaces that the scenes in the show represent are troubled and, in some cases, wiped out because of climate change. In the gold-leaf paintings, you can't make out the image until you get closer and stay within the gravitational pull. And within that, you go between enjoying color and seeing the landscape. And when you finally find those places where the two happen on the same plane, it's a lot to contend with.

Like Homer, John James Audubon is quintessential Americana. The silver birds in the front room are all from his nineteenth-century book *The Birds of America*, where we get the advent of the natural sciences, with its moral classifications and racist physiognomy. Passenger pigeons used to exist like clouds, there were so many in the sky. Now, those birds no longer exist. We know that they don't exist in part because of the work that Audubon and other naturalists did. So those engraved images exist as a historical record, a monument to those birds that were killed due to our disregard for the planet.

The exhibition culminates with Malick Sidibé, who is an icon of portraiture. This Sidibé photograph of a Black merengue dancer comes from 1964, when



Stacy Lynn Waddell, *No. 48 is most often discovered near the tops of tall trees*. Voice: several staccato buzzes, then a long buzz (after JJA), 2023, silver leaf on handmade paper, 35 x 26 1/2".

a generation of young Malians were listening to Motown and using their bodies to articulate the joy of the country gaining its independence. This is the image that I draw from for the goldleaf tondo *DANCER WALKING AND DANCING ABOVE & BELOW THE HORIZON LINE (for M.S.)*, 1964/2023. I thought, this merengue dancer is that marooned sailor from Homer's *After the Hurricane, Bahamas* once he wakes up. He doesn't quite know what to think of this new world that he finds himself in. He doesn't know what's coming next. And he brings

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vestiges of the nineteenth century with him. I thought it was a fitting way to answer the question, *What happens if you find yourself in a place that you can't quite make sense of?* It's like, okay, I've landed upon this place, and I don't fully know what my situation will entail. But as a people that have had to consistently endure challenges yet proceed on, I'm going to celebrate. I'm going to dance. There's autonomy in making the choice to do such a thing.

We're not far removed from any of these three artists. We're still trying to deal with issues of climate and extinction. We're still trying to figure out how to gain independence and celebrate it. But we get to choose how we spend this time. How many options are there? It's endless. For me, being an artist, I create my own. Even though it might be fictive or imagined, it's still a solution. It's power. It's agency. It's freedom.

—As told to Donasia Tillery



Stacy Lynn Waddell, *DANCER WALKING AND DANCING ABOVE & BELOW THE HORIZON LINE (for M.S.)*, 1964/2023, 22-karat gold leaf on canvas, 48".

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