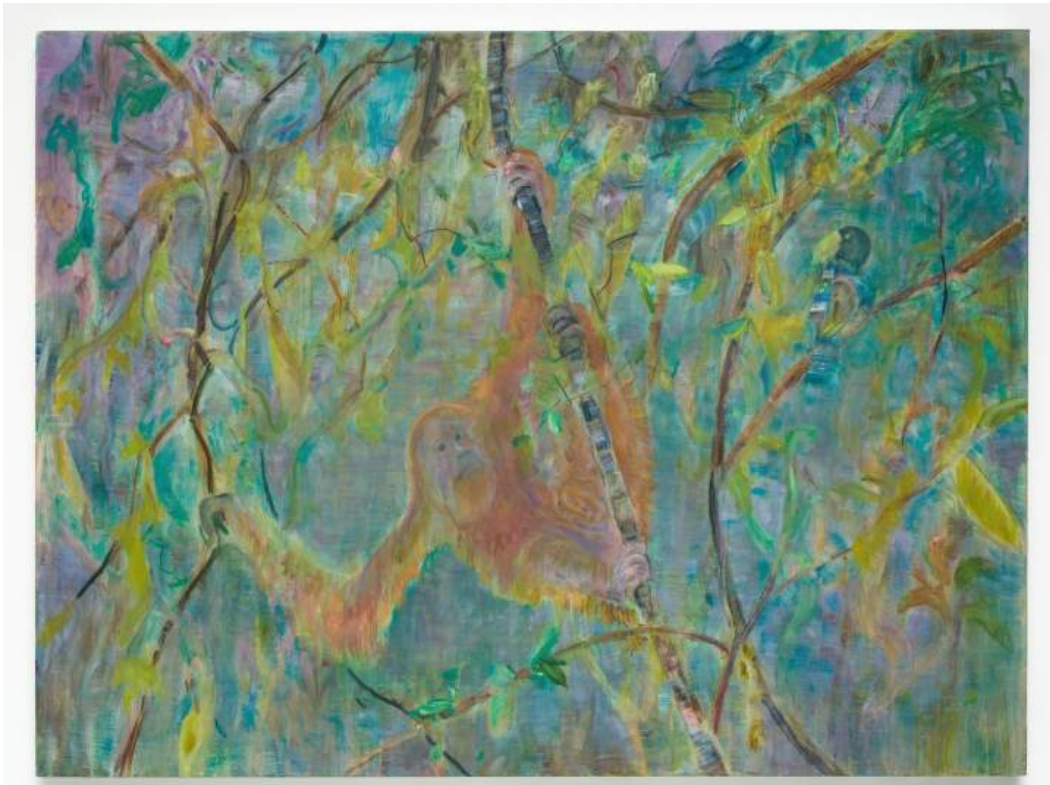


# HYPERALLERGIC

## Nature Painting as Rorschach Test

Colin Brant paints a peaceable kingdom of leopards, orangutans, owls, and parrots.

Stephen Maine



Colin Brant, “Canopy” (2018) oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

(all images courtesy Jeff Bailey Gallery)

HUDSON, New York — Startlingly engaging, the dozen paintings in *Colin Brant: People of the Forest* are peopled not by humans but by a variety of birds, marsupials, orangutans, and a lazy leopard, and the teeming density

of these canvases is often downright jungle-like. Decoding the competing modes of meaning can feel like a hunting expedition. But as the saying goes, it's the journey that matters, not the destination, and the sheer pleasure of peering into and poring over these pictures ultimately eclipses any interpretive imperative.

Brant's restless, fidgety touch and notational approach to description yield a flecked, flickering surface that doesn't allow the viewer's eyes anywhere to rest. That's just as well, because the paintings are loaded with anecdotal detail far beyond initial appearances. The lake in "Owl Lake" (2017, 42 x 60 inches; all works oil on canvas) is clear enough; seen through a stand of trees, it stretches to a much leafier, sun-dappled wood on the far shore. Look long enough and you'll find the owl, which is much less distinct than certain oddly emphatic patches of tree bark and tangles of branches.

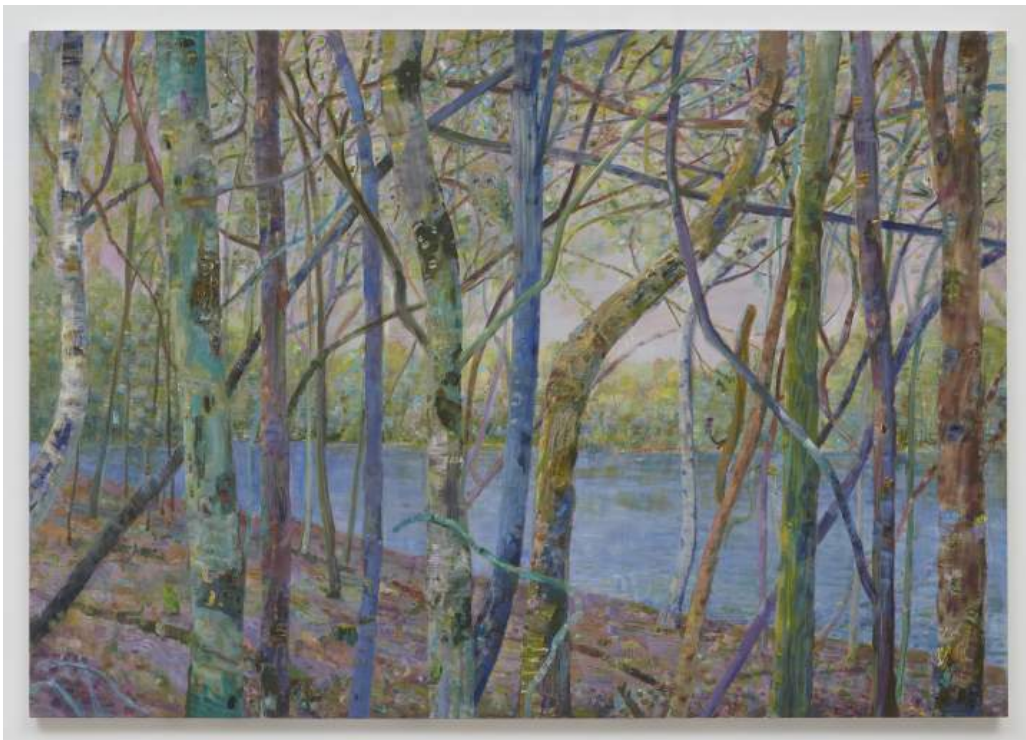


Colin Brant, "Tree With Sleeping Leopard" (2018) oil on canvas, 34 x 43 inches

After happily losing myself in the spatial and chromatic intricacies of "Owl Lake," I moved on to "Tree With Sleeping Leopard" (2018, 34 x 43

inches), in which a big cat, surrounded by foliage, dozes on a branch, one foreleg and paw dangling languidly. The branch on which the creature lies is one of four that, preternaturally parallel in arrangement, stretch diagonally across the canvas. Was I looking at a huge, savage, thinly disguised claw mark?

Suddenly infected by what you could call iconographical cat scratch fever, I combed through the other paintings in search of hidden messages, puzzles, puns, and potential Rorschach tests, remembering the cryptomorphic intent that some outlier art historians have imputed to depictions from centuries past of wood shavings, puffs of smoke, rumped drapery, and even the trees in Cézanne's allegedly straightforward landscapes. I decided I could make out the word "YADDO" among the intertwining branches in "Owl Lake," but of course that suggests more about my preoccupations than the artist's. Inarguably, there are faces to be found in the tree bark. Maybe.



Colin Brant, "Owl Lake" (2017) oil on canvas, 42 x 60 inches



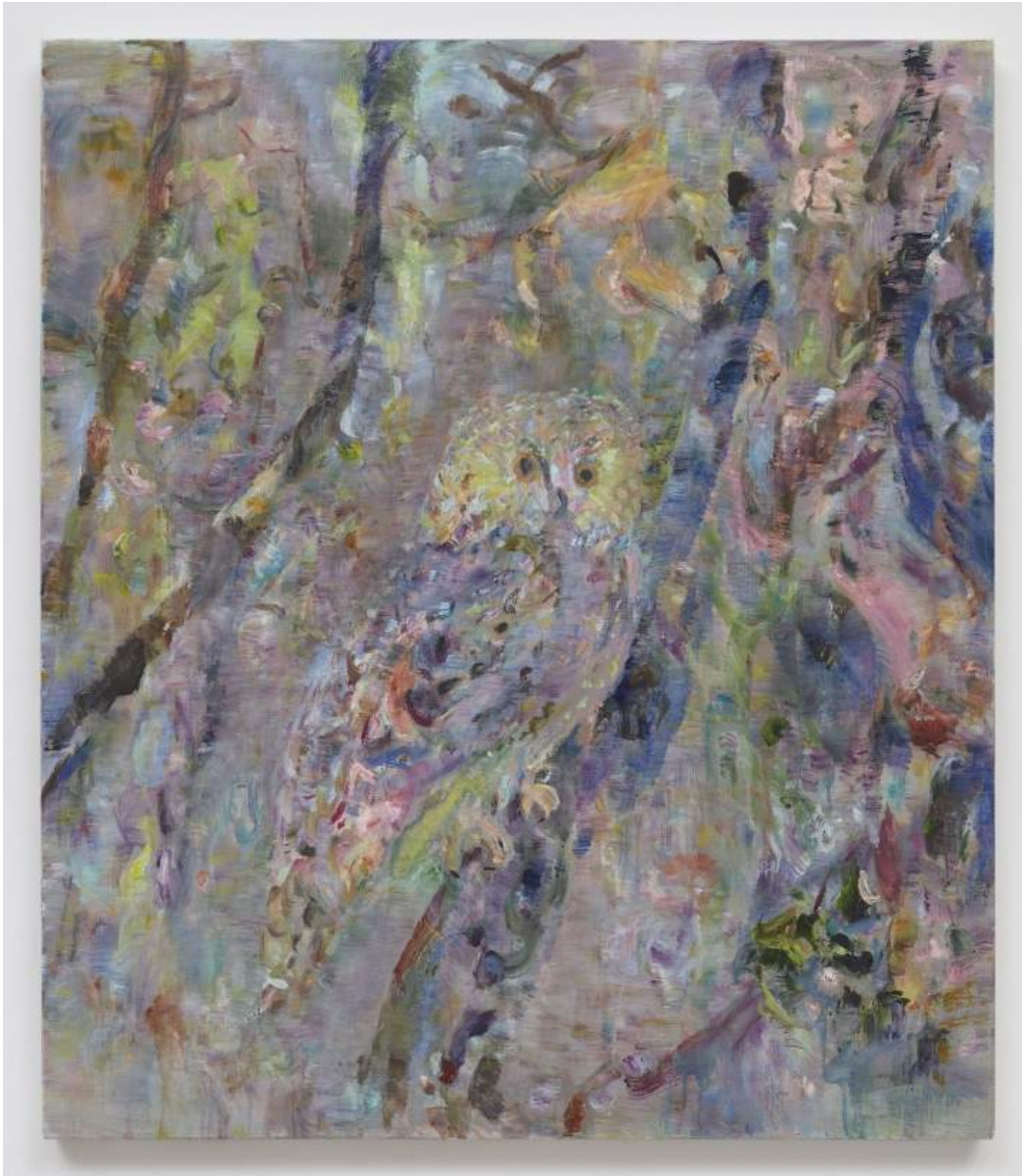
Disguised by a shift in scale, hidden-in-plain-sight images abound in “Canoe” (2017, 38 x 48 inches), which is structurally similar to “Owl Lake,” though more loosely painted. Tiny photos and drawings clipped from printed pages are collaged to the surface and believably inhabit the space of the painting: a lovely little hummingbird, a goldfinch, a mother opossum schlepping her babies, a bunch of toadstools. An abandoned canoe, the only evidence of humans in the entire exhibition, rests at the water’s edge, threatening to drift away into the placid, silver-blue water. The trunk of a birch tree bisects the little boat like a “forbidden” symbol, as if to warn that no human interlopers are allowed.



Colin Brant, “Canoe” (2017) oil on canvas, 38 x 48 inches

This painting (among others in the show) recalls the work of Martin Johnson Heade, the nineteenth-century American painter whose delightfully contrived tableaux typically include closely observed examples of flowers and birds in the extreme foreground, set against a panorama of

the species' native habitat — often, tropical jungles — with no sign of civilization in sight. One significant difference is that Heade, a contemporary of the Hudson River School (though not usually associated with it), was a master of deep space, while Brant usually allows relatively little pictorial elbow room between figure and ground.



Colin Brant, "Owl #3" (2016) oil on canvas, 30 x 26 inches

Drooping vines and fluttering leaves frame the stately, stationary subject of "Owl #3" (2016, 30 x 26 inches), who regards the viewer skeptically from a perch at the painting's center and appears, as owls often do, both



supremely poised and slightly demented. Brant doesn't let chlorophyll dictate his palette, and there's far less green here than there are gentle purples, pinks, blues and a rainbow of warm and cool grays. Figure and ground are treated so similarly in this painting, the earliest one in the show, that if not for its bulging eyes, the bird might merge with the surrounding feathery foliage.

It's not possible to count the parrots in "Parrots" (2017, 34 x 43 inches) because, in addition to the six or seven clusters of brushstrokes that certainly or probably represent a parrot, there are many more that possibly do so, and still others that might once have done so. The threshold for descriptive clarity is uncertain, making the painting a sanctuary for expressive distortion.



Colin Brant, "Parrots" (2017) oil on canvas, 34 x 43 inches

A despondent, rust-colored orangutan, clinging to a couple of spindly vines, confronts a startled toucan in "Canopy" (2018, 30 x 40 inches). The

impossible vantage point (up there in the treetop, where the little ape can barely find support) links it to paintings in the mode of Nicole Eisenman's "Subway 2" (2016), which locates the viewer hovering over the tracks in front of an oncoming G train, and "The Races at Longchamp" (1866) by Edouard Manet, where we seem to be standing in the middle of the muddy track, about to be trampled by speeding steeds. In other words, the painting would make more sense if the viewer were another orangutan.



Colin Brant, "Orangutan" (2017) oil on canvas, 14 x 18 inches

This prospect would be borne out if "Orangutan" (2017, 11 x 14 inches) were a mirror instead of a canvas — not inconceivable, given its slightly amused subject's position in space, which is roughly equal to the viewing distance the painting calls for. The blurry, heavily blended background does nothing to indicate a situation other than the here-and-now. And you'd be smiling, too, if you'd just found a nice stout branch to hang on to.

Colin Brant: People of the Forest continues at *Jeff Bailey Gallery* (127 Warren Street, Hudson, New York) through March 18.