

Emilie Stark Menneg's Supernatural | June 24–August 20, 2023
Bowdoin College Museum of Art | Brunswick, Maine
Exhibition Labels

Introduction

In her response to historic and contemporary artworks at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Emilie Stark-Menneg (born 1984) explores the permeability of boundaries in a dynamic suite of new works, at once playful and profound. Taking inspiration from sources as diverse as the sixteenth-century Italian painter Pontormo and the twentieth-century feminist artist Ana Mendieta, Stark-Menneg envisions a new version of the myth of Apollo and Daphne, as recorded by Ovid. If the ancient poet described the transmutation of the nymph into a tree in her flight to escape the pursuing god, Stark-Menneg does not allow the tale to end there. Instead, in the artist's imagination, Daphne penetrates Apollo with her branches. The union unleashes yet another metamorphosis as Apollo's body becomes a flourish of star dust, containing within it the seeds from which blossom flowers that subsume the body of Daphne. In this cycle of regeneration and regrowth, which plays out across her paintings, anaglyphs, sculptures, and augmented reality animation, Stark-Menneg locates a poignant metaphor for the intersection of art with life, echoing the work of fellow artists from the Renaissance to our own era. Here we experience the transformation of two dimensions into three and of stasis into movement, transporting us into the realm of the supernatural, where brave new worlds await.

Major support for the exhibition has been provided by the Lowell Innes Fund.

Object Labels



EMILIE STARK-MENNEG
American, born 1984
Sleighbing, 2023
acrylic on canvas
Collection of the artist

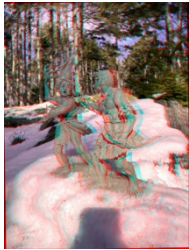
Juxtaposing the imagery of flight, the transition between day and night, and the haunting suggestion of a *memento mori*, Emilie Stark-Menneg's *Sleighbing* references several historic and contemporary works of art on view in this exhibition. Among these is Pontormo's *Apollo and Daphne*, a version of which takes shape in the rear of the sled under the hand of Stark-Menneg herself, who, in her proximity to Apollo, simultaneously occupies a position similar to Daphne. Meditating on the relationship between life and death, spring's fecundity and winter's snows, *Sleighbing* suggests the rapidity with which the pleasure of life can transform into its opposite, a reversal emphasized by the double entendre implicit in the title, which suggests activities both fun and fatal.

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PONTORMO
Italian, 1494–1557
Apollo and Daphne, 1513
oil on canvas
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation
1961.100.9

Pontormo (1494–1557) created this painting of Apollo and Daphne when he was just eighteen years old. Based on a story recounted in *The Metamorphoses* by the poet Ovid (43 BCE–17/18 CE), the painting decorated a carriage used in a carnival that marked the return of the Medici family to power after years of exile. In this image, Apollo, madly in love with the nymph Daphne, chases her through the woods as Daphne escapes his advances through her metamorphosis into a laurel tree. In Ovid's telling of the tale, Apollo adopted the tree's leaves as his emblem in memory of his beloved. Following this account of the myth, the Medici later appropriated the laurel to celebrate their triumphs. This painting inspired Emilie Stark-Menneg, whose adaptation of the myth it pictures is reflected in her accompanying works.



EMILIE STARK-MENNEG
American, born 1984
Daphne and Apollo in the Wild, 2023
anaglyph photo, inkjet print on aluminum
Collection of the artist

Seemingly caught in the midst of flight through snowy ground, Daphne begins her metamorphosis into a tree as Apollo bears astonished witness. To create the arresting scene, Emilie Stark-Menneg created clay versions of Pontormo's figures who now appear in a wintery forest. Playfully alluding to our contemporary tendency to bear witness through pictures recorded with our digital devices, the shadow of a smart phone lurks in the foreground. The three dimensional illusion created in this anaglyph highlights the seemingly magical process through which two dimensions become three and stasis becomes action as fantasy merges with reality and breaks into the physical space of the viewer.

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EMILIE STARK-MENNEG

American, born 1984

Daphne and Apollo: The Chase, after Pontormo, 2023

3D printed sculpture, 21.6”x12”x23” and accompanying augmented reality (AR): written and directed by Emilie Stark-Menneg, animated by Elijah Ober*

Collection of the artist



Capturing the culmination of Apollo’s pursuit of Daphne inspired by Pontormo’s painting, Stark-Menneg’s sculpture reveals the transformation of the nymph’s body into tendrils of branches as her feet merge with the ground and thrust roots into it. Just as two dimensions have become three, so too Daphne’s body undergoes a metamorphosis. The transition is emphasized in the accompanying augmented reality video which depicts the chase, seemingly playing out in our own space. The shimmering surface of the sculpture enhances its otherworldly quality.



EMILIE STARK-MENNEG

American, born 1984

Daphne and Apollo: The Trees, for Pontormo, 2023

3D printed sculpture and accompanying augmented reality (AR): written and directed by Emilie Stark-Menneg, animated by Elijah Ober.*

Collection of the artist.



In this sculptural work depicting the nymph Daphne and the god Apollo in the moments after their mythic chase, Stark-Menneg recasts the outcome of the tale recounted by Ovid. Here, as reflected in the augmented reality animation that accompanies this piece, Apollo’s body is penetrated by the branches that have become the body of his beloved. As he falls, Daphne becomes his caretaker, cradling his body in the manner of a Pietà. From this moment of intimacy, the two figures metamorphosize into a shower of star dust, pollinating the growth of future generations. The transformation is reflected in the accompanying animation, which can be accessed by scanning the QR Code with your iPhone.

*To view the AR video, aim your iPhone’s camera at the QR code on the object or above and click the link that appears. Click “open” at the upper right of the landing page of the app, and click figures to see the motion.

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Prayer Bead with Scenes from the Life of Saint Jerome, ca.1500–1530
Workshop of Adam Dircksz?
Present-day Netherlands or Belgium
boxwood
Wyvern Collection, 2544



Reliquary with Rock-Crystal Vessel, ca.1200–1230 (vessel might be earlier)
Present-day Belgium, France, Germany, or Netherlands
Rock crystal, gold, gems
Wyvern Collection, 0968



Plaque with the Tree of Jesse, ca.1500
Present-day Germany or France
Mother-of-pearl
Wyvern Collection, 1820

Intimately scaled, each of these devotional objects uses materials to convey the majesty of the spirit through their manipulation of light and space. The reliquary encloses the material remnants of a Christian saint in a small, rock crystal vessel mounted between a pedestal and a lid of fine metalwork. The shimmering mother-of-pearl plaque depicts the “Tree of Jesse,” a schematic representation of the lineage of Christ, and reflects the late medieval taste for beautiful, mysterious, and rare materials. The prayer bead, designed to be held in the palm of one’s hand, opens to reveal two scenes from the life of Saint Jerome, a popular figure throughout the Middle Ages.



THE MASTER OF THE VON GROOTE, AFTER JAN DE BEER
active Antwerp, ca. 1515 - 1520
A Triptych: The Adoration of the Magi, The Nativity at Night, with the Annunciation to the Shepherds, and The Flight into Egypt, ca. 1515-1520
oil on panel, in an engaged frame
Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund, Jane H. and Charles E. Parker Jr. Art Acquisition Fund, and Laura T. and John H. Halford Jr. Art Acquisition Fund
2018.25

Within classical ruins and naturalistic scenery, this work, an exceptional copy of Jan de Beer’s now-lost Adoration triptych, depicts various scenes in the life of the Holy Family. The birth of Christ appears at left and the Flight into Egypt is at right. At center, three wise men offer gold, frankincense, and myrrh, gifts that mirrored the global economy of Antwerp, where the work was created, and the circulation of commodities from India, Asia, and Africa. One king is a Black African whose turban identifies him as Muslim, although the artist depicted him in European dress. Through the Trans-Saharan trade route, African rulers were known and respected in Renaissance Europe. The work’s use of light to convey its spiritual narrative inspired Stark-Menneg’s *Sleighting*.

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FOLKERT DE JONG

Dutch, born 1972

When H2 leaves O, 2015

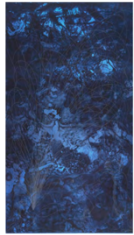
hologram, stainless steel frame

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Collectors'

Collaborative and the Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund

2016.39

With its mirror-like background, this hologram self-portrait by Folkert de Jong, based on an MRI of the artist's own head, visually hovers between a two- and three-dimensions. As the viewer moves, the fleshy surface of de Jong's face appears to dissolve, revealing the musculature and skeletal structure that lies beneath it. This work brings to mind the historic tradition of the *memento mori*, an art form that draws attention to the ephemeral nature of life. As de Jong observes: "It's good to be aware of death because it makes the definition of life clearer." Exploring this boundary in her own work, Stark-Meneg testifies to the interconnected life cycles in which all organisms participate, experiencing both growth and decline.



Chris Ofili

British, born 1968

Black Shunga, 2008–2015

line etching on paper

Museum Purchase, Barbara Cooney Porter Fund

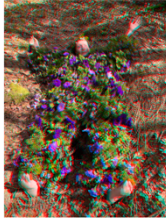
2016.3.6 (pictured) and 2016.3.11

Chris Ofili's *Black Shunga* portfolio raises questions about perception and visual resolution on literal and metaphorical levels. Challenging our sense of the familiar, the work's deep shades of blue on a silver-hued ground evoke what the artist describes as a "moonlike glow ... not dark nor light, everything is reflecting back." As our eyes slowly adjust, frolicking figures emerge, engaged in the intimate encounters suggested by the work's title, an allusion to erotic nineteenth-century Japanese shunga prints. Just as Ofili's prints grow out of a fusion of cultures, so too scenes of pleasure both combine with and emerge from the work's surface in a gradual revelation akin to the dawning of creative insight. This connection is amplified by the presence of a painter at his easel in each of the artworks. The release of breastmilk by the artist's partner in each piece suggests the joyful intersection of creative practice and life itself.

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EMILIE STARK-MENNEG

American, born 1984

Forest Flora, 2023

anaglyph photo, inkjet print on aluminum

Collection of the artist

In this anaglyph, a stereoscopic image, a two-dimensional image printed in magenta and cyan resolves into three-dimensions when the viewer holds the accompanying mask to their eyes. The visual transformation mirrors the metamorphosis pictured here in which a new figure—a self-portrait of the artist—emerges from a bed of flowers.



ANA MENDIETA

Cuban-American, 1948–1985

Silueta Sangrienta (Bloody Silhouette), 1975

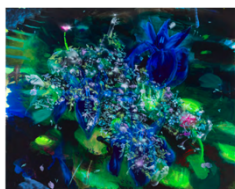
super-8mm film transferred to high-definition digital media, color, silent

Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Lloyd O. and

Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund in partnership with the New Media Arts

Consortium, a collaboration of the art museums at Bowdoin College, Brandeis University, Colby College, Mount Holyoke College, and Skidmore College
2017.11

Ana Mendieta's *Silueta Sangrienta*, or "Bloody Silhouette," explores the artist's sense of identity and her relationship to her environment. In this two-minute film, her body disappears, the indentation fills with a crimson-colored liquid, and her body reappears. As Mendieta later explained: "I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source." A source of inspiration for Stark-Menneg, Mendieta's work testifies to the interconnection between the earth and the human body through life cycles and rhythms that mutually support and reflect one another.



Emilie Stark-Menneg

Night Blum, 2023

acrylic on canvas, 80"x100"

Collection of the artist

A pendant to *Sleighbing*, Stark-Menneg's *Night Blum* suggests the promise of rebirth delivered by spring. Echoing the strawberries and daisies present in *Sleighbing*, *Night Blum* brings the hint of those blossoms to full flower. Beneath the light of the moon, a young woman—no longer made of bones but of the stuff of life—takes shape, suggesting the completion of the larger intersecting life cycles of human beings and the natural world that encompasses them. Representing the conclusion of Stark-Menneg's reimagined tale of Apollo and Daphne, the metaphorical figure of Daphne emerges from the foliage as if born anew.