

Ruckus

Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground

Review

Megan Bickel

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The persistent desire to seek relief from the life of the American South always appears fueled by the insistent longing for its love. As an artist that chooses to work in the South, I never cease from amazement at the resilience that seems buoyant in artists that assertively insist on continuing to do work in the region. It is a romance and a battle that seems corollary to the artist experience in the American South—for me, the American South affords financial flexibility and intellectual space which grant me the ability to be more exploratory and experimental in my practice; but these virtues go hand in hand with political hostility, a battle with outdated gender norms, and marginalization from the industry I work within (the arts). This romance and searching was astutely articulated in Michi Meko's *Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground* at Kavi Gupta, Chicago.

At first, admittedly being a formalist and a frantic materialist, I was attracted to Michi Meko's use of shifting variations of black paints and tones, holographic pigments, and various media from the artists' life when enjoying the wilderness such as cornmeal, fish scales, and cast iron pans. There appeared to be a connectedness between sculptural and dexterial objects and these massive paintings that communicated in tandem with one another *as well as* philosophically and culturally.

Meko's exhibit was a welcome reminder of my hometown in Kentucky and my gratuitous hours of solo camping throughout the Appalachias. So I sought it out. Upon entry, Kavi Gupta's towering gallery was dark, lights dimmed and lowered with spotlights on paintings made to shimmer in the dark. Literally beacons, the paintings cast inward light onto various incipient cartographies and stars that map the sky and the sea.

Crappie Painting: Render An Apocalypse. A Life for a Life. How to Kill a Fish (2022) mirrors a mastery of the type of searching, and announcing, of a presence, made visible in the provocation of glamors, security, and light in the complicated experience of rurality for most people who work in the arts (even more so for Black, Indigenous, POC, LGBTQIA+, and woman identifying artists). The work is inherently dark, relying on black pigments, but is provided the glamor of neon and gold. The painting is balanced on glass preserve jars (filled with what appeared to be cornmeal, I believe) seated in the same wooden crates I use to store my spices. "Crappie," here refers to the North American fish. The males are known to build nests and protect the eggs and the young. Much to the fish's demise, there is also a mega brand of high visibility fishing line called Mr. Crappie. The line is used in *Crappie Painting* as an explosion of color: a fluorescent green that highlights the thousands of individual white pencil marks, specs of gold leaf, turquoise, and violet bursts of chalky color amongst the dry but lustrous dark surface.

Kavi Gupta's curatorial statement described Meko's work as "incorporating romanticized found objects [and] the visual language of mapping, flags, and wayfinding into his work[.] Meko, then, constructs transcendent aesthetic spaces into which the viewer's psyche is free to wander." Yes, this feels like an appropriate synopsis of what Meko's work addresses—an easing of the muscles and a quiet of neural synapses that occurs when a body leaves highly architected spaces—such as cities. However, I would be remiss to acknowledge that considering a "transcendent aesthetic space" such as "wilderness" in a commercial gallery felt disingenuous. The sanitized commodification of an experience of solitude feels like an attempt to bottle the romanticized, and oftentimes fictional, serenity that living in rural regions fosters.

Bickel, Megan. "Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground," *Ruckus Journal*, 29 September 2022

I was taken by two different installations that were centered within the gallery. The first *Totes McGotes: Burdens Down. The Hiker* (2022) consists of a large, unwieldy pack of camping materials, cardboard boxes, something that looks like it could be a blue tarp or an IKEA bag, and some tie-dyed materials precariously tied. The piece towers atop a small coffee table, coyly seated in a pair of what looked like winter waterproof hiking Merrell's. The ankles of the hiking boots are stretched, presumably from use, and shoe laces stretch a couple of inches across the floor; they're tied to a small set of rusted cast iron pots and a small pan.

In a brief conversation with the artist via email, in which I had asked Meko to articulate the distinctions between his sculptural and painterly choices, he stated that it was a matter of specificity of medium, and for this work, a portrait, he stated:

Sculptures and paintings communicate differently, at times I need to make a comment in 3D while also using the 2D paintings as sculptural forms too. The bundled work is a portrait. It's the baggage I believe we all carry and won't admit to our own bullshit. I tried to personify that image of myself or ourselves lugging this shit around. It's also my having a joke by putting boots on a table. I think that gesture is hilarious.

Meko's comments on the second installation, what appeared to be what was left from a campsite fire, were more minimal. Leaving the primacy of fire to speak for itself, the work didn't have a name, but included some rocks and charred kindling (subtly indicating the mark of an actual fire within the gallery) on the floor in front of *A Beautiful Free Uneasy: The Rhodedendron Cave Hide Out* (2022). The reference to a fire creates a frame, a composition, or a paradigm that places the *experience of the place* that is loosely depicted in the painting, into perspective. The painting illustrates a lookout, a small camp perhaps off a trail, that looks over a ravine and into the night sky. The star burst mark, with blasts of pink and blue and gold leaf and other luminescent materials recall a type of spatial magic that is impossible to articulate. It's felt in your chest, as the term "breathtaking" suggests. For me, this fire recalls silent campsites in the hills of central Kentucky, alone in the evening, feeling overwhelmed by the presence of light beyond this planet.

A Beautiful Free Uneasy depicts a lively darkness. It's a darkness that doesn't elude to isolation, but a reminder that we can never see all of the beings within an ecosystem, and perhaps it is with the same capacity that it's impossible to see or hear all of the things that constitute our individual voice. This darkness that percolates in these works expands on both of these experiences.

Dark was the Night, Cold was the Ground, in addition to an understanding of "wild" spaces, which are critical to understanding it, also examine the artists' search for his voice in the wilderness as a Black man. A quote from Meko made available in the exhibition literature became a sort of rock formation in my understanding of the exhibiton:

Being Black in the wilderness is an idea I've been trying to chase down or play with for a long time. I wrote a book of field notes and took photographs, and made drawings. A lot of it was trying to hear my voice and understand what that meant—to hear one's own voice in wild spaces. What does a Black man sound like in the wilderness, versus the voice of John Muir or Ernest Hemingway?

Meko never really answers this question. He ponders it, as opposed to, say Ingrid Pollard, the noted British artist and photographer who in the 1980's made a series of photographs of Black friends in the British countryside; actively working to place the sight of Black joy into rurality in a series titled *Pastoral Interludes*. *Pastoral Interludes* received many observations in the press assuming that the work was about exclusion and isolation. When in fact, the photographs depict any range of emotions, most notably relaxation and joy—these were photos taken with her friends, afterall, during a walk in a lovely place.

Meko's quest to find his voice in the "wilderness" is cathartic. I always found the trail alluring because it was a

singular time where I was able to hear myself figure out problems. Meko appears to be a fairly mystical man, referring to his studio as a "sacred space, a laboratory where one gets to test hypotheses and search for a truth through the work." Therefore, I'd like to consider that the wilderness, here, can also be a metaphor for finding spirituality where tropes of spirituality haven't actively been constructed—such as a studio, or the train. Or perhaps, its about a guy who just really enjoys playing in the woods, and that's all it needs to be.

Notes:

1. Michi Meko." *Kavi Gupta Gallery*, <https://kavigupta.com/artists/94-michi-meko/>.
2. Visually interesting is the cord that swaddles these materials together. I felt resemblance to the gestural looping that results in a mapping gesture in the paintings; both acts requiring a wide movement of the arm.
3. Michi Meko, email coorespondance with the author in September, 2022.
4. "Michi Meko." *Kavi Gupta Gallery*.
5. Tate. "Ingrid Pollard Born 1953." *Tate*, 1 Jan. 1989 <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/ingrid-pollard-15859>.
6. "Michi Meko." *Art Papers*, 21st Annual ART PAPERS Art Auction // Artist Spotlight Interview / ART PAPERS, 22 Jan. 2020, <https://www.artpapers.org/michi-meko/>.