



# INKA ESSENHIGH

## BETWEEN WORLDS

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery  
May 27–October 9, 2016

Inka Essenhigh's phantasmagorical scenes depict the threshold between intuition and spirituality with hallucinogenic intensity. Collapsing time and distance, she draws on the global library of the visual imagination, evoking allegorical traditions in which nature and humanity are magically entwined. These sources provide a vocabulary of archetypes, symbols that hold spiritual truths linking people across the ages and cultures.

Some works feature woodland gods of classical antiquity, such as Pan and Diana; in others, witches, tree spirits, water nymphs, and elves hearken back to Anglo-Saxon, Teutonic, or Norse folk traditions. These mythical beings appear with quirky phantasms who have no provenance, haunting and teasing us with their inexplicable presence. All these characters are bound to landscapes that are redolent of animism and metamorphosis: rocks, trees, water, and even pavement pulse with energy, while plants become chlorophyll-tinted hominids.

Addressing the malleability of time in another way, Essenhigh is attuned to stylistic precedents that convey allegory over naturalism. Her use of multiple light sources, undulating forms, and ambiguities of space and depth echoes certain aspects of Baroque painting. Composed of equal measures of ectoplasm and elasticity, her figures evoke sixteenth-century Mannerist El Greco's glowing and elongated people, or the pliant characters that make twentieth-century artist Thomas Hart Benton's compositions so dynamic. Most especially, Essenhigh's works have a stylistic kinship with fantastic literary illustrations, from late nineteenth-century fairy and goblin drawings by Arthur Rackham to twentieth-century masterpieces by Walt Disney such as *Fantasia* and *Snow White*.

Many of these precursors contain powerful psychological undercurrents, and beneath the whimsy of Essenhigh's work lies an unsettling, often dark mystique. She does not say what



Figure 1

With its proposition that dreams are the theater in which psychic dramas are acted out, Surrealism is a relevant touchstone for Essenhig. Her 2005 painting *In Bed* (cover) shows an organic blob of a figure writhing on a billowing cloud of blankets while being tormented by its own inner demons. As we likewise see in Salvador Dalí's *Sleep* (fig. 1), the self is metamorphosed, twisted and pulled into amorphousness when it descends to the land of Nod.

Also like the Surrealists, Essenhig loves the unexpected associations that arise from automatic drawing, in which surprising elements come into being through chance and improvisation. A selection of monoprints in the exhibition, created quickly and without preconception, shows the pleasure she takes in a near random call-and-response approach to picture making, in which certain marks and unexpected shapes lead to the development of startling monsters and scenes of blood-red ooze occupying the city, sea, and forest.

The transformations in both monoprints and paintings are playful; Essenhig speaks of the “fun of making shapes spring to life.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond the intrinsic pleasures of pictorial invention, the raucous *Spring Bar Scene* (2008; fig. 2)—set in New York's Lower East

secrets they may hold, instead inviting us to accept the unknowable as a trigger for unleashing our own imaginations. Her imagery seems at once coherent and inexplicable. It is burned onto the canvas like the most decisive moment of a dream, which may remain in our memory long after we wake.

With its proposition that dreams are

Figure 2



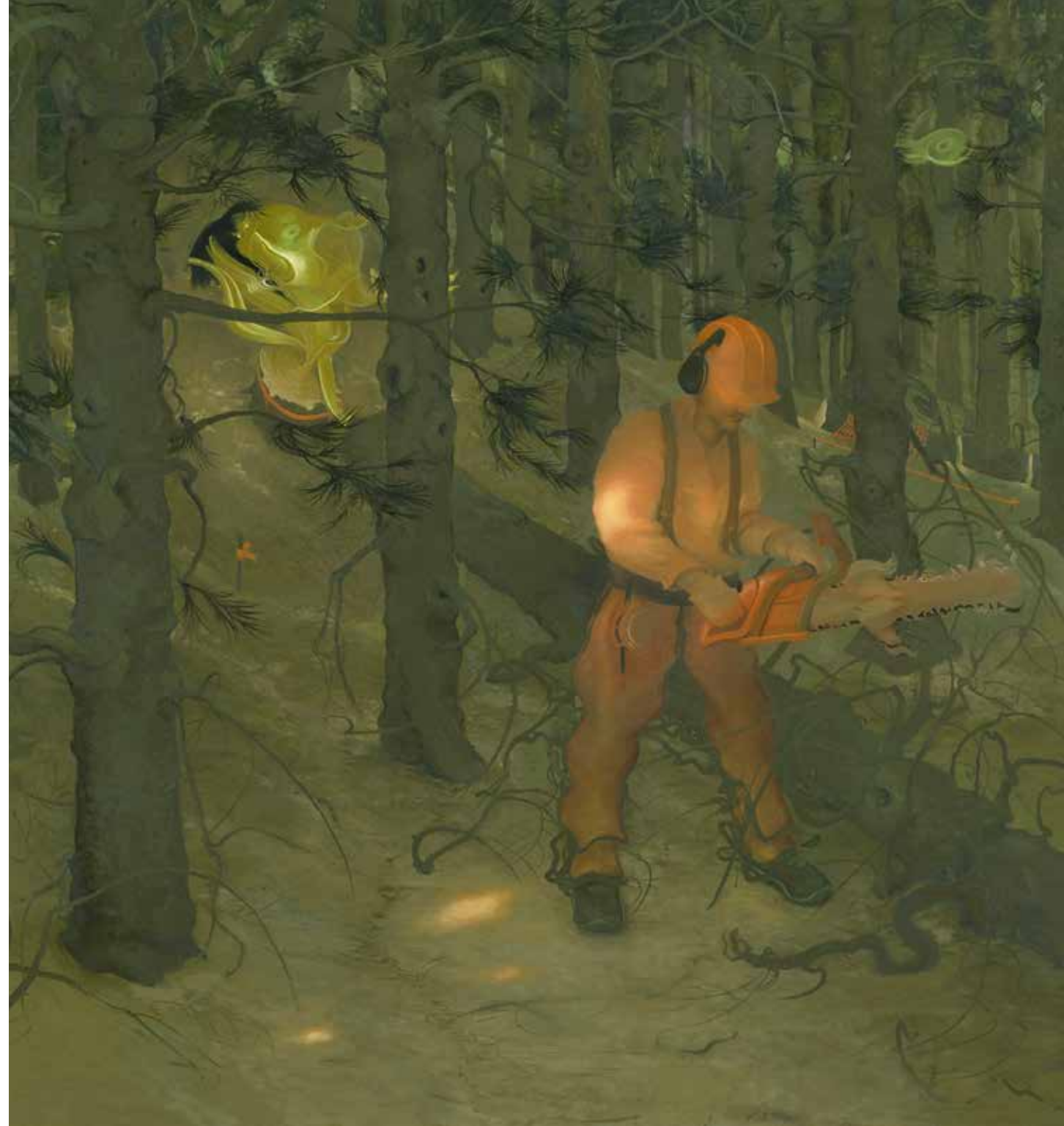


Figure 3

If as observers we were to go outside the bar, our minds already rattled by the jolly weirdness we had witnessed within, we might assume we are hallucinating when we see the scene shown in *City Street* (2013; fig. 3). The painting shows a warrior-elf shooting a laser at a weed growing through a hole in the road, like a white blood cell blasting an infection. Is this a puckish reply to Walter Benjamin's question about Eugène Atget's photography—"but is not every spot of our cities a crime scene?"<sup>2</sup> Can the tenaciousness of unwanted plants going up against the ruthlessness of animals and insects—and their magical hybrid elfin offspring—be a metaphor for the tendency toward conflict that is part of the human condition?

Figure 4

Side where Essenhigh lives—focuses on fun as a subject. Here, only the bartender and waitress seem human. The customers are grotesque and slimy green creatures that drink, grope, carouse, and pass out in a bacchanalia that emphasizes their base animality. Like Northern Renaissance painter Pieter Breugel the Elder with his scenes of peasant life, Essenhigh establishes a distance between herself and the revelers, casting an eye that is more affectionate than disapproving.





The anxieties underlying *In Bed*, *Spring Bar Scene*, and *City Street* are calmed when Essenhig turns her attention to the countryside. She spends part of every year in rural Maine and has found inspiration in the beauty of nature and power of the seasons. The conception of the forest as a sentient organism pervades a group of works that includes *Green Goddess II* (2009) and the triptych *Summer Landscape* (2013), which show wood spirits floating and prancing through field and forest, blissfully unaware of human existence. *The Woodsman* (2012; fig. 4) brings humanity and an accompanying sense of disruption into the picture. It shows a man with a chainsaw near a freshly cut tree, from which emerges a glowing tree spirit. Is this green figment happily bursting free from its prison, or is it going to exact revenge for the demolition of its forest home? The relationship between humanity and nature is as ambiguous as that of other dualities in Essenhig's work, of present and past, mythology and truth, sleep and wakefulness.

Several of Essenhig's recent works depart from blended forms and soft atmospheres to employ the pure colors, crisp edges, and flat shapes of early cel animation. In *Ali Baba's Cave* (2015; fig. 5), a spectral red-shrouded figure holds open a curtain to a cave that is spilling over with gold coins, jewels, a fancy wristwatch, and even a thumb drive. The painting echoes the story of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," in which treasure comes to the humble woodcutter who cares little for material gain, while the greedy and powerful are destroyed by their money-lust. But this is not just an illustration of an existing story with a clear moral. It is made enigmatic by the red figure at the entrance, who does not suggest any of the main characters in the story. The figure seems feminine. Is this Ali Baba as a woman, a gender switch that transforms the story into an

Figure 5

allegory for rewarding female goodness? Or is she a genie or other magical being, tempting us with worldly riches in exchange for something precious of our own, like our souls? In this and all of Essenhigh's work, no conclusion about meaning can be categorically demonstrated or contradicted, because she is less concerned about answers than interpretations.

Although she says that her art is transparent, a window onto her thoughts, Essenhigh hopes that her works capture “something else in my imagination that isn't just my psychology,” but rather ideas, experiences, and aspects of mysticism shared with other people.<sup>3</sup> We may consider her paintings in relation to our memories, cultural traditions, and beliefs. Or, entranced by their beauty and sense of wonder, we might simply return to a time in our own lives when sensations were allowed to stir the inner world without reason or explanation.

Mark Scala  
Chief Curator

## Notes

1. Inka Essenhigh, e-mail to Mark Scala, January 26, 2016.
2. Walter Benjamin, “Small History of Photography,” in *On Photography*, edited and translated by Esther Leslie (London: Reaktion, 2015), Google Play e-book.
3. Essenhigh to Scala, January 26.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

Born in 1969, Inka Essenhigh earned her BFA from Columbus College of Art and Design in Ohio, and her MFA from the School of the Visual Arts in New York. Her paintings have been exhibited internationally, in commercial galleries as well as at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Miami, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Royal Academy of Art in London. Her works are in the collections of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Denver Art Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Seattle Art Museum, Tate Modern, the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and the Whitney Museum of American Art.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Cover: *In Bed*, 2005. Oil on canvas. Collection of Lenore Pereira and Rich Niles, San Francisco. © Inka Essenhigh

Figure 1: Salvador Dalí. *Sleep*, ca. 1937. Oil on canvas. Private collection. Courtesy of Bridgeman Images. © Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2016

Figure 2: *Spring Bar Scene*, 2008. Oil on canvas. Private collection, London. © Inka Essenhigh

Figure 3: *City Street*, 2013. Oil on linen. Courtesy of the artist and Jacob Lewis Gallery, New York. © Inka Essenhigh

Figure 4: *The Woodsman*, 2012. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Victoria Miro, London. © Inka Essenhigh

Figure 5: *Ali Baba's Cave*, 2015. Oil on panel. Courtesy of the artist and Jacob Lewis Gallery, New York. © Inka Essenhigh

*Inka Essenhigh: Between Worlds* was organized by  
the Frist Center for the Visual Arts.



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This exhibition was funded in part by the Friends of Contemporary Art and

