

CRITICISM ► [EXHIBITIONS](#)

Monday, December 10th, 2018

Trouble in Eden: Luisa Caldwell at Smack Mellon

by [Joy Sperling](#)

Luisa Caldwell: *A Cat in God's Garden* at Smack Mellon

September 29 to November 4, 2018

92 Plymouth Street, at Washington Street

Brooklyn, smackmellon.org



Installation shot, Luisa Caldwell: *A Cat in God's Garden*, Smack Mellon, 2018. Courtesy of the artist

Luisa Caldwell's recent exhibition at Smack Mellon, *A Cat in God's Garden*, radiated nostalgia for summer, conjuring delicious fantasies of sitting in the garden amongst glorious blossoms with endless time to read. Caldwell's show exuded such goodwill it was hard to resist, and the artist even installed a beautiful bunch of fresh flowers from her own garden in one corner of the installation and offered visitors a free poster of one of her drawings. But even as I was hypnotized by the shimmering mirage and wished it to be real, I began to see that beneath its heartwarming surface there was much more to this complex, intelligent, deeply imbricated installation.

The show comprised of 210 drawings, each eight and a half by 11 inches, arranged in a grid in two large wall panels, and six hand detailed vases on books stacked on wooden stools or chairs. The drawings of flora from a distance read like decorative ceramic tiles. On closer inspection, however, they revealed a complex intellectual and emotional narrative. Some were composed and rendered to suggest historical botanical drawings, many were even overlaid with geometric shapes and patterns. Other drawings were more compositionally formal with vases and flower arrangements, systematically drawn to suggest the illusion of depth. This alludes to the European and American floral painting tradition and its attendant symbolism, including the *memento mori*. Others were drawn in the lighter amateur style of nineteenth-century “lady-painters” who used the wholly different symbolism encoded in the “language of flowers” according to species. And still other drawings were flat and illustrative as if in preparation for decorative schemes or designs. Many are filled with such life and energy that they seem to jump off the page into the exhibition space with the over-brilliant color of markers that sing out with bright, glowing fluorescent colors. In among the various panels the sun, as a bright fluorescent highlighter-yellow orb, dances around repeatedly to tie the entire happy, zappy pattern together. And, hidden deep in the foliage of one is a small black cat.



Luisa Caldwell, *Sentinels*, 2018, with ceramic book: Hinter Wipflinger di Bassano, 2018. Etched found ceramic vase and underglaze ceramic, 12 x 9.25 x 1.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist

The stacks of books are arranged at intervals around the exhibition space, further recalling the feeling of a summer garden. A general sense of bonhomie pervades the place. On closer inspection, however, as with Caldwell’s drawings, ambivalences reveal themselves. The books, arranged by size, are mostly art tomes and coffee table titles from major museum blockbuster shows. Most of the subjects are mainstream modern artists, mostly male, known for their interest in color—Matisse, for instance, who is represented several times. The narrative is amplified by several books on gardens and gardening. But Caldwell then embeds one ceramic book of her own creation in each stack. And it is with this sly disruptive act that she temporarily pivots the narrative. In one stack, for example, she entitles her book *Nanny and her Flowers*; in another, *For the Love of Cats*; and in yet another, *Hinter Wipflinger di Bassano*. The ceramic books stop us temporarily in our reading of titles but we read on, absorbing them as part of a larger narrative. Yet, the memory of each ceramic book creates a slipstream of significance that worms into our minds. Caldwell’s references to her personal

history, to our relationships with cats, and to the underground collector and gardener confound and tease us. We cannot open the ceramic books, so unlike the other volumes they are mute and mysterious, keeping their secrets permanently hidden and sealed within their clay covers.

This refrain is echoed in the heavy decorative vases that surmount each column of books. Five of the ready-made vases are etched with new imagery through sandblasting and the final one uses an underglaze. Almost all of them feature flowers and plants from behind which, on one side, the image of a large sitting cat stares out at the viewer. The stylized bands of floret decorations and sealed lids are clearly intended to evoke ancient funereal vases. One even presents a formal portrait of an Egyptian cat sitting erectly, sporting a bejeweled two-tiered collar and ear rings. Caldwell notes the Egyptian cat-headed goddess Bastet as one of her inspirations: A goddess who protected the Pharaohs, she later morphed into the goddess of perfumes, notably, in relation to Caldwell's installation, produced from flowers. The staring cats that protect these sealed vessels, like Caldwell's ceramic books, disrupt and disorder the idyll, because, as we all know, when you bring any cat into a garden chaos ensues.

And so, cats seem to disrupt the idyll of Caldwell's ideal garden. Just as dogs symbolize fidelity, cats stand for infidelity and indifference. They are the companions of witches, the manifestation of evil, and the source of chaos. They are hunters who watch and plan, who feign sleep when plotting attack. And, like Caldwell's irrepressible flowers, they have never been completely domesticated. As Caldwell herself notes, her use of cats derives from their ubiquity on the Internet, but while we are seduced by the cuteness of kittens online, they will soon enough reveal their true character and do something truly awful.

While Caldwell's show at first felt almost preternaturally happy, everything she puts in her garden takes on multiple, sometimes conflicting, sometimes conflating significances. Her world does not sit quite squarely on its axis. She creates images that superficially comfort and appease our fears but that also start an itch at the back of our brain. She builds meaning cumulatively and creates subtle resonances until we begin to feel that her garden of earthly delights could turn on a dime into a darker, more fearsome place, even if it hasn't done so yet. Having set a cat loose in Eden, Caldwell sits back among the flowers, with some light reading, to watch the results of her work.



Luisa Caldwell, Tree of Life series, 2018. 210 drawings: pen and marker on card stock, 11 x 8 ½ inches each. Detail. Courtesy of the artist