

IN LEIDY CHURCHMAN'S «CROCODILE», THE ANIMAL KINGDOM MIRRORS THE HUMAN WORLD

The artist's survey at the Hessel Museum of Art at CCS Bard, Annandale-on-Hudson, links life on microscopic and cosmic scales with moments of spiritual self-searching and reflection.

Review by Natalie Haddad
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'Form is emptiness, emptiness is form': so teaches the Heart Sutra, a text central to Buddhism, emphasizing that all phenomena are interdependent and no one thing can exist on its own. Artist Leidy Churchman seems to channel this sentiment across the more than 60 paintings that comprise 'Crocodile', his first museum survey. A range of styles and subjects – Buddhist symbols, Maine landscapes, corporate logos, animals, tombstones – fill canvases both small and large, as well as a mural-sized floor piece commissioned for the show. Over time, though, such disparate imagery coheres into a broad vision of nature and cultures as interconnected.

Churchman's paintings have a dreamlike quality, their idiosyncratic subjects – such as the crocodile creeping into dark waters in the exhibition's titular work, from 2016 – rendered slightly hazy by soft, sometimes smudgy surfaces. You can feel unmoored before one, from the expansive Atlantic Ocean vista of *The Oceans Blew as Blue as Your Eyes* (2018) to the silvery surface of the Hudson River in *The Piers Untitled by Emily Roysdon* (2016), from which rises the lone remnant of a pier.

An alluring palette of oceanic blues and pastoral greens saturates many of the canvases, from the emerald and chartreuse of Crocodile's scales to the deep indigo sky in *Relief of Weariness by Ultimate Mind* (2017), which frames the silhouettes of a human and various animals, evoking the vastness of the cosmos.

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In an interview with Churchman in the accompanying catalogue, curator Lauren Cornell describes his work as ‘encourag[ing] us to look at quotidian things anew’. The artist achieves this by translating a range of subjects into a highly personal pictorial language that is also largely devoid of the human figure. Paintings of the beginning of life – a baby giraffe emerging from its mother (*Giraffe Birth*, 2017), for instance – as well as its end – the tombstone in *Spiders* (2011) flanked by two cobweb-laced trees – offer existential metaphors of human mortality in their depictions of the natural world.

Doublings and reflective surfaces abound: from the Atlantic Ocean and Hudson River to the pool in *Basically Good* (2013), in which a quizzical mouse studies his own image. As if to wryly illustrate painting’s capacity to prompt self-reflection, the mirror at the centre of *Infinitely Rich Qualities of Mind* (2017) is empty – a void for us to fill in.

A number of paintings on display approximate the styles of other artists, such as Forrest Bess and Chaim Soutine; these feel stiff and laboured. Churchman’s stronger works engage with philosophical terrain. For example, *Mabakala* (2017) – which portrays the fanged mouth of the Buddhist ‘protector’ deity floating in a dark sea surrounded by shafts of turquoise light – grows more layered and boundless the more time you spend with it.

This boundlessness, central to Churchman’s artistic and spiritual practices, also derives from his openness and commitment to social difference. *The Teachers* (2018) depicts the cover of *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation* (2016), a study of racism and white privilege in the American middle-class embrace of eastern religions, by Reverend angel Kyodo williams and Lama Rod Owens, both Buddhist scholars and queer people of colour. *The Piers Untitled by Emily Roysdon*, meanwhile – based on a photograph by the titular feminist artist – references the Manhattan piers where gay men, homeless LGBTQ+ youth, artists and performers gathered before their demolition in the 1990s.

Churchman’s considered renderings suggest his intimate connection with these subjects. They anchor his beautiful and contemplative works in the world in which he lives, a world where marginalized people and non-human species are connected by their struggle for survival and liberation.

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