

NEW CITY

Bare Life: A Review of Soumya Netrabile at Andrew Rafacz Gallery

BY CHARLES VENKATESH YOUNG | MAY 8, 2024



Soumya Netrabile, installation view of "Mothership" at Andrew Rafacz gallery, 2024/Photo: Andrew Rafacz gallery

My first impression of Soumya Netrabile's current show at Andrew Rafacz was extremely relaxing: after the gallery's last exhibit, which foregrounded Ish Lipman's existential landscapes featuring pathetic

human subjects, Netrabile's playful bucolic canvases felt like a breath of fresh air—or so I thought. With dawning horror, I came to realize that Lipman's pitiable figures had gone nowhere. It was I, the viewer, who had assumed their role. Thrown into Netrabile's rust-hued naturescapes, I felt small and profoundly vulnerable—but nonetheless, a sublime beauty in them made itself known.

Netrabile is a nature painter, but not of the verdant landscapes and fertile pastures that term has come to be associated with. Rather, her convolutions of plant and animal matter resemble Thomas Hobbes' conception of the state of nature: a “war of all against all.” Somehow, this lawless state has been rendered so convincingly that you feel yourself enveloped by it, and in turn forget whatever critical tools you brought with you. All of your energy must be placed on eluding the human-sized ants and shapeless beasties littered throughout her paintings.



Soumya Netrabile, “Foragers,” 2024, oil on canvas, 48” x 60”/Photo: Andrew Rafacz gallery

The unsettling effect of Netrabile's paintings is achieved through the use of antagonistic pictorial techniques, something plainly visible in the sprawling four-panel work "Mothership," where flat rectilinear space collides with recessive curves; vague washes of color are thrown against sharp black outlines; and even in the realm of abstract signifiers, Netrabile juxtaposes icons—literal representations of their referents—with symbols, which are abstract and often have no visual relationship with their object of reference. Such formal contradictions are often used by painters like Albert Oehlen to create a sense of constantly-fleeting pictorial order—now you see it, now you don't. Netrabile, however, blazes her own path. She carries out a tantalizing balancing act, teetering on an imperceptibly thin wire between stylistic customs without falling on either side of it. Much like the self-renewing structure of nature, Netrabile's canvases harness these disparate customs to continually invigorate themselves, vibrating every second with newfound vitality. (The literal anarchic state depicted in her canvases is bolstered by an aesthetic one: Netrabile throws art history's dominant stylistic hegemons into a blender, producing a technique that's distinct without being unrecognizable. The biggest portions of her metaphorical aesthetic smoothie are as follows: Oscar Murillo's jagged scrawls, Helen Frankenthaler's languid fields, Cy Twombly's asemic writing, and Lisa Yuskavage's psychedelic fog.)

Also included in the current presentation are two of Netrabile's works on paper, where the pastels and charcoal sticks she's chosen to use appear stultifyingly flat and unable to convey the dynamism of her paintings. In this gap, Netrabile showcases her bravura as a technical bricoleur. Rather than using disparate pictorial customs to render nature's constant fluctuation, she does so morphologically: attached to each work are a number of biomorphic ceramic sculptures. The stark juxtaposition of each picture plane and the alien viscera that hang from it is jarring and absurd—so much so that it seems to conjure the untamed wilderness of the natural world.



Soumya Netrabile, installation view of "Recollection 2" at Andrew Rafacz gallery, 2024/Photo: Andrew Rafacz gallery

The exhibit's title, "mono no aware," is a Japanese phrase that translates approximately to "the pathos of things"—a mournful awareness of the ephemerality of all physical entities. If this sensation has any relation to Netrabile's paintings, it has to be ironic: The aesthetic experience of viewing her hectic nature paintings is more akin to being hit by a truck than becoming sensitively aware of the world's fleetingness. I walked out of Andrew Rafacz feeling thankful: I'd only had to encounter nature's primal violence in small, discrete units mediated by theatrical picture planes. (It's like watching the tiny carnages that take place in your washing machine—tell me you haven't ever thought "Gee, glad I'm not in there.") Seeing the real thing would've left me traumatized. In these passing thoughts, I inadvertently demonstrated Netrabile's greatest strength: that in her paintings, everything aesthetic is mere passing fancy, made trivial by terrifying corporeal self-awareness.

"Soumya Netrabile: mono no aware" is on view at Andrew Rafacz Gallery, 1749 West Chicago, through May 25.

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