

ARTFORUM

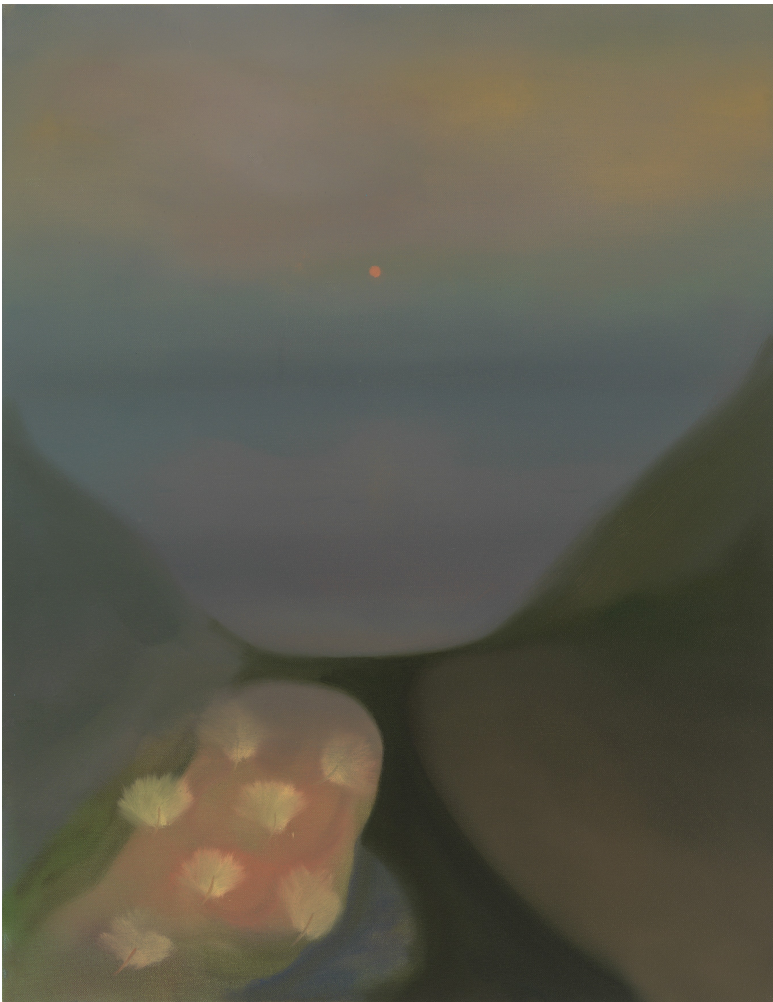
MAY 2026

VOL. 64, NO. 9
REVIEWS CHICAGO

Michelle Wasson

ANDREW RAFACZ

By Robyn Schiff



Michelle Wasson, *Facing West*, 2024, oil on canvas, 26 × 20". Tom VanEynde

I grew up near the crowded beaches of the Jersey shoreline, so it was almost miraculous that a group of us teenagers who'd just learned to drive found and regularly visited a deserted stretch of sea we called "the secret beach." Among our first freedoms as young women was swimming there alone together on hazy June mornings. I have not thought about that private place in more than thirty years; it was somewhere we could, and did, uneventfully look at each other's new bodies, a moment when we could see what we were without also being looked at by men. Entering Michelle Wasson's "Songs of the Marauder" at Andrew Rafacz, the ominous calm of this rare locale came back to me. It was seemingly serene, but we were unsupervised by any lifeguard. Who knew when a rip current might have swept us away?

The nine oil paintings that comprised the exhibition shared the muted, diffused palette of beach glass. Six of these were crepuscular seascapes, some of which beckoned the eye down a narrow corridor to reach the water.



In *A Sea for Us*, 2026, a pathway to the shoreline cut through two voluptuous greenish boulders, and the sky—was it sunset or sunrise?—was a wash of buttery yellow and fading pink. The somber and distinctly feminine ghostliness of the landscape recalled the dangerous enchantment of Peter Weir's film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975). A cloud formation slung above the water obliquely approximated the famous floating lips in Man Ray's photocollage *A l'heure de l'observatoire, les amoureux* (Observatory Time: The Lovers), 1934: surreal whimsy enhancing eerie beauty. Those two boulders (or others like them) appeared again in *Facing West*, 2024, but here, instead of looming from afar, the point of view fixed on the passage between them, where a luminous and otherworldly amoebic form seemed to peer out at the horizon. Above, a pinprick of a peachy moon—or was that the sun?—looked as much like a peephole or the pinhole aperture of a camera obscura as it did a celestial body, heightening the feeling of secretly gazing, or being gazed upon.

That same distant orb appeared floating in the sky of four of these paintings, most notably in *Sirens Pass*, 2026, where the daylight moon or evening sun gleamed off an ambiguous dome in the foreground. The scale was inscrutable. That terrarium might have fit in the palm of my hand or, yet again, might have sheltered multitudes. There was no human form to measure its scale against. Likewise, in the playful painting *A Certain Spring*, 2025, mossy tubers on a white disk—these might as easily have been delicacies on a plate or aliens sunbathing on the hood of their saucer—abstracted a more typical seascape. Well, typical only if we were to accept a Rothko-red Earth burning under a yellow sky—which I was inclined to do. I'd personally like to hang *A Certain Spring* next to Florine Stettheimer's *Heat*, 1919, to revel in the burnt siennas and acrid golds of these uncannily similar pictures of summer languor.

As dreamy as all of these landscapes appeared, some of their titles intended unease. *A Sea for Us*, *Facing West*, and *Great Beyond* looped under the exhibition title "Songs of the Marauder" beg the questions, Who is doing the looting, and, What violences to the land and its inhabitants are obscured by that raider's bard? Engaged with the Western tradition of landscape painting that removed traces of civilization to stake a fresh imperialist claim, Wasson knows her painterly lyricism is as pernicious as it is alluring, and a doleful atmospheric lamentation pervades.

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