

# Earth Tones: Soumya Netrabile's "mono no aware" At Andrew Rafacz Gallery

By Curtis Anthony Bozif

From now until May 25th, stepping inside the Andrew Rafacz gallery means stepping aboard *Mothership*. The painting, one of five included in Soumya Netrabile's solo exhibition, "mono no aware," is a four-paneled, seven by twenty-four-foot tour de force that commands not only the room, but the city of Chicago. By sheer mass, volume, and scale, it pulls viewers into its orbit, subsuming them in a sublunary panorama. To help guide visitors on their journey is a suggestion of a ruddy path anchored to the bottom edge of the canvas, conveniently placed where one enters the gallery. But after following a gentle curve, you're suddenly off-trail, lost in a twisting thicket. To go on, to traverse the wild expanse of canvas, you'll have to bushwack your way, crawl, climb over and tunnel through a tangled rhapsody of painterly invention. Weeks after the experience, the painting still commands my mind.

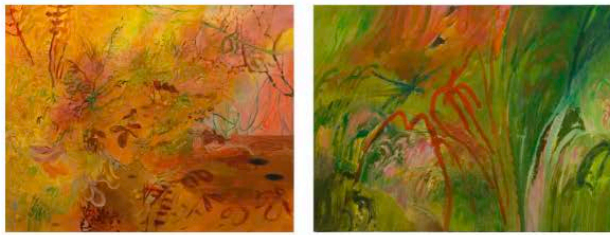


*Mothership*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 84 x 288 inches.

Photo by Ian Vecciotti, courtesy Andrew Rafacz gallery.

Netrabile, who earned her BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1996, has enjoyed a good deal of success in recent years, mounting solo exhibitions in New York, Oakland, Los Angeles, and Seoul. Her current exhibition—her second solo show at the gallery that has represented her since 2022—takes its name, pronounced moh-noh-noh-uh-WAR-ee, from the Japanese term that literally translates in English to "the pathos of things." The idea issues forth strong connotations of impermanence, transience, and the ephemeral. Time emanates from things, it hovers. Inhaled, it triggers a tingle of sadness.

To the extent they are landscapes, the paintings Netrabile has made over the last five years are not necessarily about place. Her walks along the Des Plaines River Trail near her home in Oak Park, Illinois (a suburb of Chicago) are no more important to her art than her hikes in New England, the Alps, or Patagonia. Netrabile's work is born of observation, but she doesn't paint in plein air. Nor does she refer to photographs. In fact, what something looks like almost misses the point. Rather, she stresses the importance of all her senses, especially touch. If taken by a plant, she touches all of it. Crawling on all fours, she digs to its roots. She sometimes puts things in her mouth, not so much for the taste, though there's that too, but to feel them more intimately. When she says she takes strong, "deep whiffs," it's easy for me to imagine her in a darkened wood, knees soiled, dirt under her fingernails, inhaling the musk of moist humus, closing her eyes. Memory, nebulous and living, composed of stimuli from all her senses, is fundamental to her art. It is her primary source material. How these memories are translated to canvas is not easy to say, even for the artist—but she does it with her hands, of that much, I'm sure. Informed by what she has felt, she creates roiling surfaces of a lush heterogeneity. Like the living world, her paintings are teeming assemblages of otherness and interconnection, incident, and form.



(Left) *Foragers*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches. (Right) *Flutter*, 2024. Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches. Photos courtesy Andrew Rafacz gallery.

Though overwhelmingly vegetal, animals make appearances too. Greeting visitors like an omen is the oval-shaped *Robin*, a very small and simple depiction of the bird as a collision casualty, specimen of study, or both. *Foragers* features ants, and *Flutter*, a dragonfly. In *Doll's Eyes*, a pair of ocular forms peer out from below the forest floor—or do they float above it, disembodied like a Cheshire Cat grin? The title alludes to a perennial of the same name, sometimes called White Baneberry, that in summer produces fruit resembling the porcelain eyes of a plaything. Aside from triggering pareidolia—the propensity to perceive meaning in patterns where there is none, in this case, part of a face—and scopaeesthesia—the feeling of having eyes on you, of being watched—the painting pulls my attention to questions around plant perception, plant sentience, and plant personhood.



Indeed, Netrabile's art can sometimes feel like biology, but art is not a science, thankfully. When her work is at its strongest, the thing we call *nature* becomes properly claustrophobic. For this reason, the lack of a horizon in her pictures is crucial. It flattens the picture plane at the same time that it evokes the boundarylessness of ecological thinking. Monet's *Water Lilies* come to mind, but Netrabile's light is much dimmer, if not murky. Hers is more like the radiant glow of the Expressionist landscapes of Emile Nold, Oskar Kokoschka, or Chaim Soutine. I hear, as much as I see, dissonance, standing in front of Netrabile's work. When dark fecund green rubs up against the deep red of overripe fruit or the mineral rich earth, to me, the tension is Schoenbergian. Because in a pure state, no hue contains its opposite—think of a color wheel—they tug at each other, seeking equilibrium, threatening to mix, always on the verge of turning to mud. Yellow ochre is, after all, almost brown. Only a blossomy pink—the painting at its highest pitch—can cut through the din of decomposition, symbiosis, and growth. Stay with me as I liken the order of pure, contrasting colors and the irreversible disorder—the entropy suggested in their mixing—to the second law of thermodynamics and Schrodinger's supposed paradox; not the one about a cat in a box, but how life, however temporarily, balances a slightly lower state of entropy against an otherwise increasingly entropic universe.<sup>1</sup>

"Empathy" is how Netrabile thinks of it—her intense, immersive "soaking in" of the natural environment. *Attunement* is another word for it. As in tuning. Like tuning a guitar or piano: increasing or decreasing the tension in a string to realize a certain pitch or tone. When in unison, multiple tones can be discordant, or they can achieve harmony. When you attune to the environment, you bring yourself closer to the resonant frequencies of the things around you. You blur the line, if ever so slightly, between subject and object, foreground and background, inside and outside. In their book, *Ecology Without Nature*, the philosopher, Timothy Morton, observes that tone "[is] the way in which matter is vibrating." As in a vibe, vibes, and vibing with. And of course, things *are* vibrating. At a fundamental level, all matter in the universe is composed of



(Left) *Recollection 1*, 2024. Oil pastel, chalk pastel, charcoal, graphite, oil on board, ceramic, 42 x 166 inches. Photo by Ian Vecciotti, courtesy Andrew Rafacz gallery. (Right) *Recollection 1*, detail. Photo by Curtis Anthony Bozif.

In a small side gallery are hung two works on paper titled *Recollection I* and *Recollection II*. In their fourteen- and ten-foot lengths, they resemble Chinese handscrolls. After spending time in the presence of *Mothership*, they feel thin, almost transparent. The drawings serve as a backdrop for a group of ceramics that are nothing if not biomorphic, even bodily. Many of their forms appear to borrow from orifices: an ear, a mouth, the pores of our skin. Defying gravity, they look like organisms that have crawled up the walls or found homes growing out of them. The effect is intimate, even tender.



“The terrestrial order, the order of the earth, consists of things that take on a permanent form and provide a stable environment for dwelling.”<sup>3</sup> Thus begins page one of *Non-Things*, by the German-based, South Korean-born philosopher and cultural theorist, Byung-Chul Han. But today, he claims, the “terrestrial order,” the “age of things,” is being replaced by the “digital order,” and “the age of non-things.”<sup>4</sup> When art, especially painting, is made to suffer the indignity of the digital image, of contentification, the conversion into information and data, Han’s words ring true and help explain the power of Netrabile’s work—especially *Mothership*, which for all the reasons above renders reproductions almost meaningless. Screens destroy scale. Inundated with information, Han writes: “Our perception loses depth and intensity, physicality and volume.”<sup>5</sup> In lieu of stable, textured experiences, we tap, swipe, and scroll. Our ability to linger and contemplate withers. Presence and recollection parishes. In this context, and at a time when most natural systems on this planet are in steep decline, the pathos of things takes on another dimension.

Curtis Anthony Bozif is a Chicago-based visual artist and art writer. He earned his BFA in Painting and Art History from the Kansas City Art Institute and his MFA from the Department of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University. His interests include environmental aesthetics, ecology, natural history, deep time, and technology. He has written for *Newcity*, *Bridge*, and *Chicago Reader*.