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Art We Saw This Summer

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JoAnne Carson

Through July 29. Washburn Gallery, 177 10th Avenue, Manhattan; 212-397-6780, washburngallery.com.



JoAnne Carson's "Updraft," 2022, in her show of paintings of single trees, each its own universe of botanical forms. via Washburn Gallery, New York

If you like paintings that grab your eyes and won't let go, consider JoAnne Carson's recent work at Washburn: eight midsize paintings of single trees, each its own universe of botanical forms, electric color, visionary light, possible planets and pop culture references. If Charles Burchfield had worked for Walt Disney, he might have come up with these.

Along with five drawings, these canvases comprise Carson's first solo in a Manhattan gallery since 1990. They continue four decades of riffing on trees, flowers and plants — enlarged, distorted and reinvented to the point of a weird, even scary autonomy — in both two and three dimensions. (See “Bouquet,” from 2001, a pale blue array of enlarged blooms the size of a small tree in the collection of the Brooklyn Museum.) They also graft together aspects of American Regionalism, European modernism and children's book illustration and presumably benefit from Carson's avid hobby — gardening.

Carson takes advantage of every pictorial possibility, including landscape backgrounds, cloud patterns, times of day. The faceted tree trunk in “Updraft” echoes the greens and browns of early Cubism. It is guarded by small trees that suggest spear points in a red/orange setting, where comets zoom, and parallel bands of yellow clouds may await the notes of the music of the spheres. Its branches harbor a slightly demonic mask of pink and lavender that matures into what seems to be E.T.'s face in “Sunny,” two paintings away.

These are Carson's best paintings yet and their excellence can't be an isolated incident. Her early '80s relief paintings — Natalia Goncharova meets Elizabeth Murray — should be revisited.

ROBERTA SMITH