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“Nature and Culture Co-Exist Uneasily in the Work of Jessie Homer French”

by Gemma Tipton



If an innate element of the human condition is striving to make sense of the world through order and narrative, then its negative consequence is our tendency to devise highly limiting categories. Take Jessie Homer French: she’s self-taught; she’s an older artist; she lives in rural California; and you could describe her painting style as naïve. All of which factors would, in theory, place her firmly within the vexed category of ‘outsider art’. Yet the term implies an ingenuousness in intent, which is not the case here.

Homer French knows exactly what she’s doing, so don’t let her idiom fool you. Homer French’s flat oils present a world in which nature and culture coexist, yet from which a sense of unease also oozes, satisfyingly, with every assured brushstroke. There’s a timeless quality to these works: the exhibition at mother’s tankstation presents paintings made over the past 40 years, whose recurring style and subject matter demonstrate the artist’s persistent patience in exploring the world around her.

# Frieze

*Dawn Trout on Rosachi Ranch – East Walker Nevada* (1991) is a pastoral scene of fish swimming through weedy waters. The artist is a keen fisherman and the image is adroitly observed, but a dark horizontal, mid canvas, and the thick green-blackness beyond a line of dancing purple flowers add a sense of menace. Nature may provide pleasant pastimes, but don’t expect it to be easily tamed.

In this, Homer French seems to sit in a lineage that stems from the French post-impressionist master of the pastoral naïve, Henri Rousseau – another self-taught artist – who perfectly captured our ambiguous relationship with the natural world. And yet, in paintings such as *Urban Wildlife* (2013), there’s also a subtle connection between Homer French and Ed Ruscha, a close contemporary and friend, whose work manages to make the seemingly ordinary feel utterly Other. The long, horizontal canvas of *Urban Wildlife* depicts one of those sweeping LA hinterlands: there are pylons and palm trees, houses and warehouses. But, unless we’re watching a particularly vivid sunset, the whole landscape is aflame and the skies a carefully controlled riot of reds, oranges and yellow ochre.

Homer French is an artist who clearly revels in narrative. *Berenice, Montecito Heights* (2017) shows the green hills of northeast Los Angeles speckled with houses, which appear to be in constant conflict with the lush vegetation surrounding them. But, in the fold of those hills, the grey bulk of the city rises up on the horizon: smog-bound, dense, a threatening inevitability, unless nature itself can rise to the challenge. The battle, here, has already commenced.

Another quality that renders Homer French’s work unmissable is her deadpan sense of

humour. *Condo Gothic* (2004), with its titular nod to Grant Wood's iconic painting *American Gothic* (1930), features a white apartment block in a sylvan setting. Small, ornamental bushes dot its perimeter. But skeletal black trees in the foreground almost obscure the view. Their fallen leaves strew the otherwise perfect green lawns and their winter colour seems like a prescient promise of death. Where's the humour in that? It's in Homer French's wise and wry observation of the ultimate futility of our endeavours to control nature, and our determination to continue to try.

In a parallel show at mother's tankstation's London space, Homer French again demonstrates her wit. Her 'mapestries' are fabric wall hangings that sprang from the artist observing the heavy shelves of books and weighty artworks suspended over her friends' beds in earthquake-prone California. Depicting fighter jets, fault lines and small black dots to denote human settlement, they are shown alongside watercolours of landscapes and antique engravings, each overlaid with the dark triangular shape of a stealth bomber. The threat of death may linger in the air, but at least these tapestries won't do you in.

Jessie Homer French, 'Stealth Bomber/s' was on view at mother's tankstation, Dublin/London, from 21 February until 30 March 2019.