

HUMAN, NATURE

KIMBERLY BRADLEY

"I celebrate myself, and sing myself / And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." These opening words of "Song of Myself"—the first poem in American poet Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, the 1855 volume for which this new body of work by painter Fatma Shanan is named—capture the ongoing relationship between the "I" and the "we" that underlies so much of this artist's oeuvre. In these mostly small-scale paintings, a female figure moves through space in an off-white dress. She stands pensive and solitary in a verdant garden; she crouches or reclines, with palpable muscular tension, on an undefined ground. In an act of surrender or resignation, she arches backward over a *sevil* (outdoor water fountain) on a gray wall dappled with sunlight. In several paintings, this protagonist—a representation of the artist herself—is surrounded, even overtaken by branches and flowers that seem at times to sprout from her body's rigid poses.

Whitman's work is often interpreted to signify that each of his titular leaves of grass is unique and beautiful: an individual. But multiple blades, together, also create an interconnected whole, a community. Shanan's works have long explored the duality between the sovereignty of the individual and the cohesion, but also the limitations, of community through symbolic means. In many of her previous paintings, portraits of a female body, often her own, appear in domestic settings and with recurring motifs, like the Oriental carpet, that directly or indirectly delineate physical and psychological boundaries and mediate her place in the world.

Now she moves into a wider, wilder zone within nature—by no means wilderness, but rather the beauty of nature and the emotions that arise when surrounded by it. It is intriguing that a female artist from an insular Druze village in northern Israel, now living in Tel Aviv, would take cues from male nineteenth-century American transcendentalists: not only Whitman but also Ralph Waldo Emerson, a philosopher, author, and naturalist whose ideas of self-reliance and searching for one's own truth became a leitmotif of American literature. In his seminal 1836 essay *Nature*, he states that the human soul finds itself in nature. Nature is where human freedom in its purest form resides; only when a person is free from societal strictures and distractions and introspects can she know herself. Shanan admits that until the past few years, she did not deeply observe and appreciate natural beauty. This attitude has gradually shifted, reflecting her pursuit of freedom and establishment of new boundaries. The past year, one in

which the global Covid-19 pandemic has decelerated humanity's doings, she found herself increasingly engaged with nature. In Shanan's artistic search for self, this discovery marks a renewal of sorts.

There is movement and dynamism in these paintings. Contours, fabrics, buds, petals, and skin are rendered in Shanan's signature mosaic-like color application. Most backgrounds appear as blank negative space that is at last open, unmediated, and undefined. In *2 Flowers Self-Portrait* (all works 2021) Shanan's figure, alone on a mostly white ground, squats in precarious balance, appearing to touch a long-stemmed flower and hold another blossom in an outstretched hand. Or is the second flower's stem growing from her arm? In *Self-Portrait and Leaves*, too, the boundary between person and plant is blurred. Facing the viewer and shown from the chest up, Shanan's image is splashed with colorful blossoms that again seem to sprout from her; her eyes are concealed behind hair and large golden leaves, nearly undifferentiated in texture and color. In *Self-Portrait Flowers* the artist stares at us, hair adorned with pink and fuchsia flowers; but here, stems either grow or are pulled by the artist's own hands from her nostrils, a somewhat grotesque gesture softened by the figure's confident, calm gaze.

In several self-portraits, a few spindly branches shoot from Shanan's seated or standing figure like antennae, assessing the empty environment, growing high to reach for a metaphorical light or low to take root. In the end, the body retains its integrity. In former work cycles, the artist imbedded her own image within the weaves of aforementioned Oriental carpets; here she removes herself from the weight and restrictions of these manmade, symbolically laden objects and portrays herself as the author, or coauthor with nature, of her own fate—one small painting shows only a dark-sleeved forearm and hand, holding an elegant budding branch curving upward as if it's a botanical paintbrush or pen ready to render or write a new story, a new future.

These paintings are profoundly feminine, but not declaratively feminist; the protagonist is too introspective in her performative poses and resolute in her expressions to concern herself with a male gaze. Yet here are many other nods or winks to Western art history—the crowns of flowers around the artist's face are vaguely reminiscent of Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (ca. 1480). Her muscular balanced poses echo those on ancient

Grecian urns. The reclining image in *Laying and Flowers* is an exercise in sharply foreshortened perspective like that of Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (also ca. 1480). And the standing figure in *Garden*, as well as the almost percussively abstract-ed greenery surrounding it, evokes the atmosphere of a late-nineteenth-century post-Impressionist painting. In *Fountain*, Shan'an's almost draped, backward pose over the sevil could be read as a motherless Pietà.

The artist connects all these allusions in an exploration of the "I" that is, for her, more clear-sighted than ever. The works' neutral grounds signify a potentiality. The protagonist's solitude appears to come from strength and self-assurance, not isolation. Implied here is also a *resilience*, but at the same time a surrender to a greater power, a communion between the body and nature's universal truth. This resilient surrender is bit like the flowers or blades of grass shooting up through cracks in a sidewalk; an image familiar to everyone. Shan'an, after all, is not only expressing her own self-discovery, transcendence, and explorations of natural beauty, but is also inviting us, the viewers, to consider these as well. The narrator in Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* repeatedly proclaims that he is everything and eve-ryone, even in his individuality. For Shan'an, it seems that even in freedom, there is connection and belonging.

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