

Resource Guide

NEW FRONTIERS Series for Contemporary Art

I came to see these thought bubbles as accumulated features of an interior self, and as a way into painting a different kind of self-portrait.... Gradually, I was able to pierce the space of the still life and find landscapes that mirrored a similar interiority.



CELEBRATING A DECADE DOWNTOWN

OKLAHOMA CITY
MUSEUM
OF ART **10**
2002-2012

DONALD W. REYNOLDS VISUAL ARTS CENTER

JULIE HEFFERNAN

INFINITE WORK IN PROGRESS

February 16 - May 13, 2012

JULIE HEFFERNAN

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ABOUT THE SERIES

NEW FRONTIERS Series for Contemporary Art underscores the Museum's commitment to the art-of-our-time and to recognizing contemporary art as a critical and dynamic part of our daily lives. The series provides a framework for the exchange of ideas between the Museum, artists, and the community, while connecting us to the contemporary art dialogue and to new perspectives in the field.

All is not well in their worlds—they are stuck up in trees or bound to great burdens—but there is also a sense of the rapt about them; boughs and branches weave in and around them, knitting them into these places, binding them to their worlds, while also giving them the means to play.



Julie Heffernan (American, b. 1956). *Budding Boy*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 78 x 56 in. Courtesy of P-P-O-W, New York and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco

Julie Heffernan: Infinite Work in Progress, the 5th installment of the NEW FRONTIERS Series for Contemporary Art, presents twenty-one beautiful and complex paintings by artist Julie Heffernan. Spanning a decade of her career, *Infinite Work in Progress* provides an in-depth look at the artist's work, which explores the intricacies of figurative, still-life, and landscape painting while systematically layering aspects of historical knowledge into complex compositions. Her paintings appear to hover between the reality of daily existence and forces that spread across time and space. Utilizing a broad spectrum of historical references, Heffernan presents sensual narratives in an ongoing, ever-changing, dialogue that describes aspects of our relationship to the planet's natural forces and to each other.

Heffernan's paintings make a number of art historical references and evoke styles ranging from renaissance to surrealism. But essentially her works are dramatic narratives that showcase light and shadow with a post-modern sensibility. She lures viewers into her lush, otherworldly landscapes, filled with sensuous figures, ripe fruits, and abundant flora. Going deeper into the composition, we see complex and symbolic imagery woven into a minutia of detailed scenes. Heffernan develops these vignettes through a process known as "image streaming," during which she passively taps into her unconscious thoughts and transforms them into a film strip of images playing in her mind. These spontaneous illustrations are then captured on canvas—projected onto fruits or medallions or intertwined with the trees, plants, and flowers.

What began as self-portraits of the artist transformed into allegorical scenes that combine the figure, landscape, and still life in search of a deeper meaning and understanding of oneself. The figures present the artist in a variety of forms, such as androgynous twins, males, oversized infants, or towering buildings, surrounded by symbols representing ambiguous and personal narratives in what the artist calls a "quintessentially feminine space."

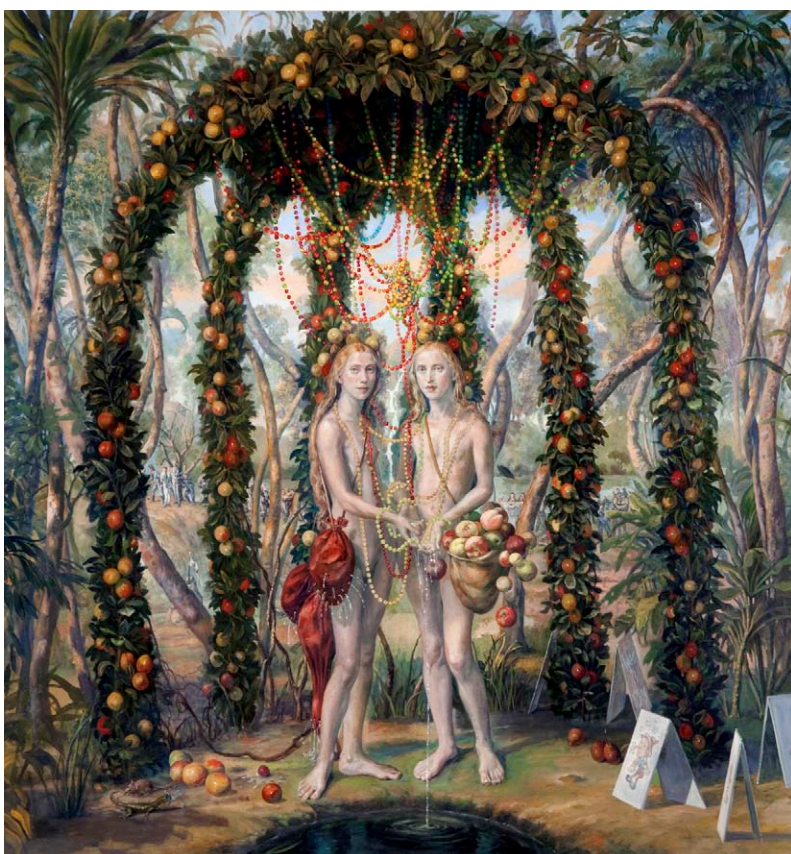
Heffernan paints rapidly, filling her canvas with fantasy landscapes, which at first glance appear calm and orderly but then unfold with a chaotic and emotionally charged account of the artist's views on topics such as identity, feminism, motherhood, politics, and life and death. In her more recent work, the figure moves away from the center of the composition and is often male. Much of this is inspired by her two teenage sons and preparing them for a future that is "murky and fraught."

JULIE HEFFERNAN

INFINITE WORK IN PROGRESS



Julie Heffernan (American, b. 1956). *Self Portrait as the Thief Who Was Saved*, 2011. Oil on canvas, 84 x 112 in. Courtesy of P-P-O-W, New York © Joseph Mills Photography/josephmills.com



Julie Heffernan (American, b. 1956). *Self Portrait as Waterers*, 2006–11. Oil on canvas, 70 x 67 in. Courtesy of Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco and the artist © Joseph Mills Photography/josephmills.com



Julie Heffernan. Photo: Christopher McCord

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Julie Heffernan (American, b. 1956) received her MFA from the Yale School of Art (CT) and her BFA from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Heffernan has been exhibiting widely for the past two decades. She is the recipient of numerous awards and grants, including the Fulbright-Hayes Grant, National Endowment for the Arts: Individual Fellowship Grant, and New York Foundation for the Arts: Individual Artist Grant, among others.

Heffernan's work is included in public and private collections internationally. Selected exhibitions include those at The Korean Biennial (Korea), Weatherspoon Art Museum (NC), Tampa Museum of Art (FL), Knoxville Museum of Art (TN), Columbia Museum of Art (SC), Milwaukee Art Museum (WI), the New Museum (NY), the Norton Museum of Art (FL), The American Academy of Arts and Letters (NY), John Michael Kohler Arts Center (WI), The Palmer Museum of Art (PA), National Academy Museum & School (NY), McNay Art Museum (TX), Herter Art Gallery (MA), Mint Museum of Art (NC), and Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VA), among numerous others.



Julie Heffernan (American, b. 1956). *Burning Man*, 2011–12. Oil on canvas, 54 x 42 in. Courtesy of P-P-O-W, New York and the artist
© Joseph Mills Photography/josephmills.com

*These pictures seemed
much stranger and
more interesting
than anything that I
consciously imagined
at the time.*

Before Viewing

Use the following questions and methods of inquiry to initiate discussion or writing exercises about the themes explored in the exhibition. Consider the following:

- Describe differences between figurative, still-life, and landscape painting.
- What is allegory? Research how allegory has been employed in the visual arts.
- Heffernan references a variety of art historical styles in her paintings, such as surrealism and the Italian Renaissance. Identify some distinguishing characteristics of those two styles (from large elements, such as subjects and composition, to small elements, such as brush strokes).

While Viewing

Use these questions to promote active viewing. Encourage students to take notes, sketch, or consider additional questions while they look at objects in the exhibition.

- Art critic David Cohen described Heffernan's work as "...a hybrid of genres and styles, mixing allegory, portraiture, history painting, and still life, while in title they are all presented as self-portraits." Identify and discuss the styles and genres present in each composition.
- Identify and discuss any historical objects or references in Heffernan's works. In what ways do these references contribute to an overall narrative or possible interpretation? Also, considering the natural forces and elements of nature in her works, what ways do these subjects contribute to possible interpretation?
- Discuss how Heffernan uses light and shadow. How does the artist incorporate time and space into the paintings?

After Viewing

Use these questions and activities to engage students in developing their ideas independently and in preparation for group discussion.

- Imagine Heffernan's works as strict allegorical paintings. As a short writing exercise, develop a variety of possible interpretations for the symbolic imagery in her compositions. (The artist offers very little exact interpretation, so feel free to be creative!)
- Heffernan titles many of her works as self-portraits or studies for self-portraits, and she loosely describes her work as paintings with a personal narrative. For this writing exercise, practice image streaming by free writing to develop your own study for a self-portrait using words. (Tips: set a time limit for this exercise; keep your hand moving without pause; do not read what you've written until time is up; keep writing regardless of topic, even if it's nonsense; and for the purpose of this exercise, do not concern yourself too much with grammar, spelling, or punctuation.)