

# SAMUEL FREEMAN

Los Angeles, California

## *It's the Little Things That Kill You*

*Blue McRight's Eco Elegies*

Michael Duncan

In her 2015 exhibition, *Drink Me*, Blue McRight submits the tightly bound branches, model birds, and hoses of her sensuously daunting sculptures to the dominating rule of culture. As prim yet comically unsettling reminders of the kinks in our relationship with nature, these surrogate creatures and plant forms—all wrapped in bandages—are warning signs of the destructive urges underlying the taming of nature over the past two centuries. As a longtime outdoors person, skilled in wilderness hiking, camping, and scuba diving, McRight has seen radical changes in the environment during her lifetime. Earlier exhibitions featured series of sketchbook paintings that responded with gentle, sometimes caustic humor to well-groomed front lawns, vacations in air-conditioned trailers, and other suburban attempts to tame and domesticate nature. In her previous exhibition, *Quench*, McRight amped up the urgency of her work, addressing the depletion of California's water supply and using that crisis as the springboard for a subtle poetic investigation of the dark psychological factors at work in the demise of the natural world.

*Drink Me* focuses those ideas and metaphors. The sexual connotations of the new sculptures—their sly allusions to bondage and castration—invite Freudian readings and a kind of geopolitical association of the environmental crisis with phallogentric power-structures. McRight's sculptures act as artifacts from a ruined arcadia, reflecting the inevitable desiccation inherent in our seemingly irrepressible desire to consume all the planet's resources as fast as we can. A kind of death-wish beyond the games of S&M steers society's flagrant disregard of ecological devastation. With their empty canteens, mummified birds, and dried up garden hoses, McRight's sculptures seem made in reaction to the "fuck it" attitude of global warming naysayers. As decayed souvenirs of natural splendor, they inspire a tragicomic pathos.

There is a long tradition of art using natural disasters as subject matter, ranging from late eighteenth century paintings of active volcanos and storms at sea to Joe Goode's epic drawings of tornadoes and Karen Carson's light box depictions of forest fires. A sense of the sublime arises from these distanced views of nature's fierce uncontrollable payback. McRight's sculptures tap a different, less immediate kind of terribilitá, one provoked by the ecological havoc of our time. Anchoring this exhibition is the large-scale *Siren*, a barren uprooted ten-foot tree, mummified in electric blue Vet-Wrap elastic and bound with thread, horizontally suspended in space. In many of her works Louise Bourgeois used elastic-wrapped doll-like figures to reflect the psychological traumas of her childhood; McRight's wrapped objects address broader social concerns. Attached to

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*Siren's* brittle spindly branches are heavy brass fire hose nozzles in a variety of lengths and styles. The thrusting nozzles are poised like Medusa's snakes aiming in all directions—but the muzzles of this death-ship are depleted and empty, unable to spray anything. Like the rocky island home of the seductive sea-nymphs who lured Ulysses to shipwreck with their seductive song, this beautiful blue floating reef signals doom.

Eleven smaller scale sculptures composed of wrapped garden hoses and nozzles, collectively titled "Other," are united by a similarly furious impotence. With feminist wit, McRight plays in her title with the Freudian term used to contrast with the "self," presenting table-top phalluses, each posed as an anthropomorphic creature: an arched-back hissing animal, a coiled viper, a drooping worm. Two of these comically forsaken members stand on small rusted boat propellers—but they're going nowhere. Defensive and forlorn, these representations of the "other" have collapsed, having violated nature one too many times. In a statement, McRight explains that she chose the blue of the Vet-wrap in *Other #1 (It's the Little Things that Kill You)* in honor of the Blue-Ringed Octopus, a tiny but lethal creature whose pigment comes alive when provoked. Despite their comic appeal, these representations of the patriarchal "other" seem the root of the problem.

Human engagement with nature is only a nostalgic memory in the world McRight presents. In the wall installation, *Rainbow*, twenty-one vintage distressed Boy Scout canteens are hung horizontally by their variously long straps, their bodies arranged from dark to light according to the sun-bleached tones of their khaki-colored canvas covers. Ink marked signatures of former owners, dents, and scuff marks signal the canteens' former lives. While as a reflection of a "rainbow coalition" this work might not be endorsed by the bigwigs of the B.S.A., the installation of souvenirs from childhood suburbia is a poignant celebration of diversity and by-gone engagements with nature. In *Reservoir*, canteens partially filled with sand are stacked vertically in a bookshelf like forgotten buried tomes; their straps hang before them as desolate reminders of past vitality.

*Sierra*, the exhibition's other large-scale work, seems an elegiac reminder of our fall from nature. Constructed from an inverted seven-foot tree bound in black bandages, the work stands on its upper branches, its body and appendages littered with protruding bronze nozzles. Slightly listing to one side, awkwardly erect, the work seems to be drained of life and close to collapse. In both Hindu culture and the Kabbalah, the symbol of the tree of life is often depicted inverted, with its roots emanating from divine unity and light. McRight's dark version of this symbol seems severed from that kind of power, done in by the brutal intervention of mankind.

As parts of two works titled "Oar Birds," McRight uses snap together models of songbirds from "Bachman Birds of the World," a hobby-shop series that she had enjoyed putting together and hand-painting as a girl. She perches these assembled toys designed for young nature lovers at the tops of rowboat oars and wraps the entire amalgamated form in black bandages, binding them

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in place. As harbingers of nearby land, birds are welcomed presences for those lost at sea, but McRight has stated that the black coverings of the songbirds refer to the invasive crows flooding her Venice neighborhood. McRight's embalmed songbirds might be seen as talismen, reminding us of what nature ideally proffers and how its losses affect us all.

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