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HYPERALLERGIC

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Ordering the Wild: A Talk with Amy Lincoln

by [Jen Galatioto](#) on February 8, 2013



Amy Lincoln, "Bird Island" (2012), acrylic on panel, 25 x 37 inches (all images courtesy the artist)

After a recent trip to Key West, I realized why most contemporary art in naturally beautiful places tends to suck. It's because the viewer has access to the real thing — a magnificent sunset, a flock of pelicans, a sailboat on turquoise seas. So depictions of what look better out a car window never measure up. There are some exceptions to this rule, of course; see: Georgia O'Keefe.

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But in a place like New York, a big and sometimes ugly city with little access to natural beauty, artists must convey the latter via art. Perhaps it's a defense mechanism to ward off the stress and discomfort often associated with life here.

Maybe this is why, walking down Metropolitan Avenue on a gray day recently, I responded to the sign for an art show at Projekt 722 featuring works by Amy Lincoln called *Plants, Portraits, and a Distant View*.

As I climbed the cold, metal, grated staircase up to the former Camel Art Space, I was relieved to find that the lingering smell of cat urine had dissipated after the rumored



hoarder upstairs moved out. Inside, I found a selection of ironically detailed tropical landscapes and still-life paintings that made me forget about the semi trucks chugging by outside.

The piece that initially caught my attention was “Bird Island,” with tropical-looking birds held captive on a tiny mound of lush and manicured land surrounded by water. In “Jungle with Zebras,” the “jungle” is a meticulously landscaped garden that hasn’t escaped the touch of humans; the artist has plopped down zebras in an environment not their own.

*Amy Lincoln, “Girl in Stripes”
(2011), acrylic on mdf, 13 x 10
inches*

Lincoln’s portraits, much simpler and smaller in scale, are displayed in the hallway of the gallery. “Girl In Stripes,” wearing a colorfully patterned sundress, does not sit in the sand, as we might expect. Is her access to the natural world limited? Or made off limits by the artist, as if assigned to the children’s table at dinner?

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Next to the landscapes are vividly colored and patterned tablescapes, with untouched plates of food and an uncomfortable but calming sense of order — that feeling at supper before the host gives the go-ahead to dig in.

I spoke with Lincoln about the exhibition.

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Jen Galatioto: *What do plants, portraits, and a distant view have to do with one another?*

Amy Lincoln: That's the title of one piece in the show that incorporated three different traditional genres of oil painting: landscape, still life, and portrait. I was interested in referencing all these genres together in one painting.

JG: *Is there a specific narrative among the different paintings?*

AL: This show really has in it three or four different lines of thought. There is some overlap, but there isn't really a narrative that ties them all together, though of course the viewer is welcome to come up with any narrative they might wish. My most recent are the tropical paintings: "Jungle with Zebras" and "Bird Island." Just before that, I was working on the meal paintings, "Dinner Table," "Breakfast Table," and "Dinner with A and K." Then there were landscapes, and some very demure, posed portraits of women from 2011. I tend to just let the work naturally progress from one idea to another. I have been really focused on landscapes for the last year or so.

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Amy Lincoln, "Jungle with Zebras" (2012), acrylic on panel, 24 x 37 inches

JG: *Can you speak to the order but at the same time wildness in all your paintings?*

AL: I like to have a bit of a sense of humor with some of the imagery in my paintings. The whole idea of zebras in the jungle is sort of a joke, even a play on the idea of naive painting, where someone imagines this exotic land but doesn't really have the details right. Zebras don't really live in the jungle, of course. As to the austerity, or order, to some degree that comes from an idea I have that there is so much useless crap we buy and then have to store, that if I am going to create a new object, it better be extremely carefully, beautifully, thoughtfully made. I would rather take a lot of time and make fewer objects, but make them really special and unusual. This is also the result of trying to make good compositions. I enjoy making complex compositions, but this requires putting trees in, then taking them out, repainting a fish so that it's one inch further to the left. There is a lot of trial and error.

JG: *Where are these places?*

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AL: With the tropical paintings, I have been following a line of thought about places we imagine that we haven't necessarily ever experienced. Everyone has an image in their mind of a tropical, desert island. I wanted this archetypal image to be the starting point. Same idea with "Night Pond," where I wanted to evoke this very familiar, almost cliched landscape of a pond reflecting the moon, surrounded by scary Halloween trees. Sometimes I also just see things in the world that make me want to do a painting.

JG: *Are the paintings meant to evoke a sense of calm? The opposite? Or both?*

AL: I'm not trying to evoke a sense of calm for others necessarily. At some point, plants just seemed like the best, most interesting, most weird, complex, and beautiful subject matter, and the only thing I wanted to paint. I definitely want to convey some strangeness. The color schemes are intended to be a little unsettling, and sometimes to convey a cultural idea.



*Amy Lincoln, "Dinner Table" (2012),
acrylic on mdf, 24.5 x 19.75 inches
(click to enlarge)*

To me, the colors in the tropical paintings — purple, pink, turquoise, lime green — are colors associated with an idea of the feminine, or the "other." In my mind they are connected to Orientalist paintings of the 19th century, when Europeans were fascinated with an idea of distant, exotic lands (and were also busy colonizing and oppressing said lands, of course). Other paintings have a red and blue and brown color scheme, which feels to me like the cultural center, like classic, masculine colors.

JG: *What do your paintings have to say about nature and people?*

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AL: I think my paintings are a whole lot more controlled and manicured than nature really is. I try to convey the structure of a plant, not to represent it realistically. I think a big reason I am drawn to paint plants and landscapes is that I live in a city. Whenever I get to spend a little time surrounded by trees or in a natural setting, I feel how therapeutic and calming it is for me. I suppose I want to be enveloped by my work in the same way, and for my paintings to provide some of this experience of nature that I am a bit starved for living in New York.

I've been reading a lot about how we are chemically altered by being exposed to the sun, and how spending time outside is how we evolved and really essential to good health. This makes a lot of sense to me.

[Amy Lincoln: Plants, Portraits, and a Distant View](#) continues at *Projekt 722 (722 Metropolitan Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn)* through February 24. There is an opening reception tonight, February 8, from 6 to 9 pm.