



## Capital City Arts Initiative

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, *Entitled to the Sun*, an exhibition by artist Rachel Stiff, at the Courthouse Gallery from February 5 - May 26, 2021. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to the artist, the Carson City Courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Danielle Kelly, who provided the following essay.

### Everything and Nothing

For those that appreciate the magnificence of the desert, it can be easy to lose yourself in its expanse, a fully engaged supplicant. But at what point does immersion become inertia? The desert is all consuming, characterized by an abundance that can collapse into a vacuum at any given moment. Is it possible to give in without losing yourself, if what was once everything suddenly became nothing? Rachel Stiff possesses the extraordinary ability to articulate this elusive precarity. In paintings, pastels, and graphite drawings, the exhibition *Entitled to the Sun* takes the viewer deep into Stiff's relationship to this delicate, changeable, and unforgiving environment.

A native of Montana, Stiff was born and bred in the American west. After earning her undergraduate degree in Missoula, the former cowgirl moved from Montana to Arizona to pursue her MFA. She traded the Sonoran Desert for the Mojave after a



Image courtesy of the artist; *Let Silver*; mixed media; 50.5"x 69"; 2018.

brief period in California, ultimately settling in Nevada in 2014. Her exposure to a range of desert communities, large and small, has introduced Stiff to some of the most dazzling vistas in the southwest. It has also heightened her sensitivity to the impact of human development on the delicate ecosystem and encroaching constructed environments.

Stiff is perhaps best known for her mixed-media paintings, large-scale landscapes that the artist calls "atmospheres". In these atmospheres, abstract shapes of color push and pull across the surface, some floating one over the other while more ghostly layers are ossified into relief, swoops and surges held frozen in place. The paintings evolve in a flowing contingency, each individual choice dictating the next until Stiff paints herself into a trap or "gets stuck" and must find a way out again. Stiff does not work from direct references, and there is no larger

proscribed plan, but rather a fugue of continuous problems or “messes and how to get out of them, a doing and an undoing.” For the artist, each painting records the history of this struggle and its resolution.

That’s not to say that Stiff has no ocular references. Every day she is collecting visual information, on hikes or bike rides through the rugged Nevada terrain. For Stiff, “walks and looking outside (are) ingrained into my aesthetic,” creating a catalog of curiosities and references. The artist examines the subtleties of the landscape, its corrosive force, as well as the tension between the desert ecosystem and the encroaching footprint of development. The cycles of struggle and resolution depicted in the paintings gesture to this tension. Stiff perceives the atmospheres as abrasive, loudmouthed and boisterous. They are also shamelessly beautiful. Paintings like *Let Silver* and *Tar Pimp* contain this strain with a physical complexity. Layers of alluring dusty pinks and sunset blues slide across the surface, suffocating textured areas of dark purple, while dodging casual laceration by long bloody slivers of shiny red paint. In this primordial scuffle, sky merges with land in a disorienting ecology. The artist has generously embedded a horizon line if only we are able to glimpse it, a grounding delineation for determining up from down and place from non-place.

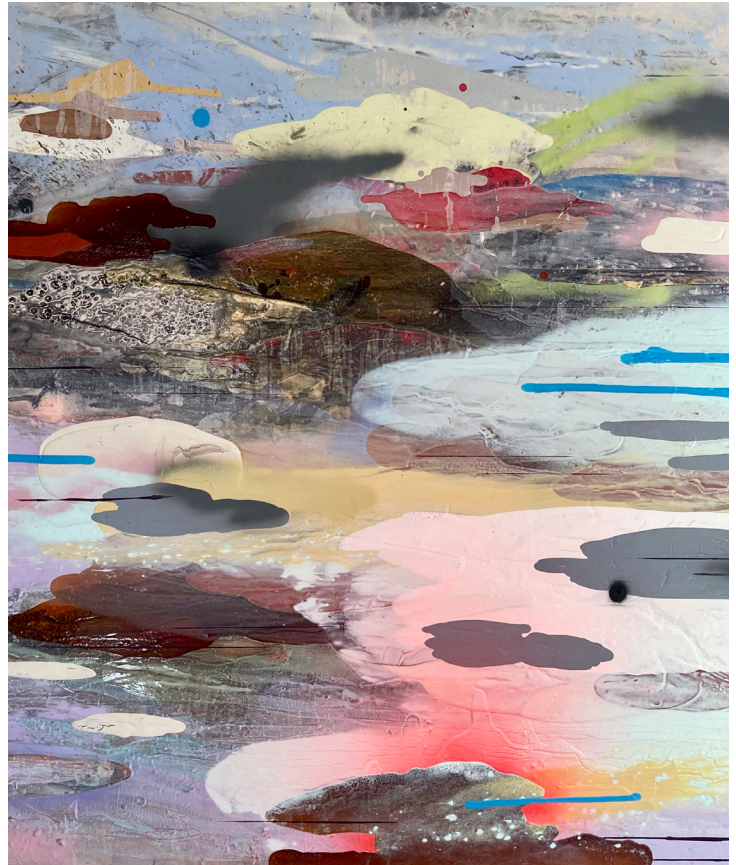


Image courtesy of the artist; *Tar Pimp*; mixed media; 50”x44”; 2019.

In contrast to the visually raucous paintings, the artist’s graphite drawings are profoundly quiet. The drawings are relatively new to Stiff’s oeuvre, emerging from the darkest days of the COVID pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. During long walks in the desert, the artist became lost in deep studies of local sagebrush and the tiny universe of textures and shapes contained within the strata of new and old growth. Answering a compulsion to explore these dimensions in graphite, the drawings provide Stiff a kind of solace, a sense of delicacy or preciousness, and a necessary marker of time.

The drawings develop through a lengthy process. Stiff applies a technique called *frottage*, a Surrealist strategy employed most notably by the artist Max Ernst. Frottage involves rubbing the surface of a textured material and responding in an instinctual way to the resulting random shapes. Although Stiff used one of her own paintings for the first *frottage*-based drawing, she now begins by creating unique plaster forms. Similar to grave or stone rubbings, the artist lays paper onto a piece of plaster and rubs graphite across the low-profile surface, recording the



subtle aberrations of the hardened facade. As the fine graphite builds in layers, lines and divots emerge, reminiscent of desert rock face or cloudy skies.

With the *frottage* complete, the next layer of exploration begins. Stiff works into the shapes created by the *frottage* technique, teasing out mysteries or patterns or structures. Using the strata of sagebrush as inspiration, Stiff immerses into the depths of the paper with extreme focus. She seeks a system, recording tiny shifts in altitude, line, and volume, sometimes working in pattern or repetition, and sometimes encountering the microscopic fibers of the paper itself. *Frottage* has a carnal connotation in French, a suggestive sensuality that also speaks to the intimacy of the work. Stiff labors at the drawings for extended periods of time until she experiences a breakthrough: “sometimes the drawings feel like they are going nowhere until I find the system.” This exploration provides a meditative space through which the artist is able to process and untangle thoughts.

Stiff has compared graphite to dark matter, an unseen material force filling our universe at an inconceivable magnitude. This matter expands and contracts in the untitled drawings, no bigger than 16” x 20” at their largest, suspending some forms in space while others are compressed or static. Some areas draw attention to the surface, a monolithic flatness, that effortlessly gives way to floating, fleeting depths. Throughout, there exists a complete collapse of definitive space, exhilarating and suffocating. The drawings are a refreshing return to the fundamentals of value and light for Stiff, a complete process of discovery. Her fascination is irresistible for the viewer, drawn into the vortex of these drawings by the artist’s obsessive scrutiny of each mark and subsequent discovery. Functioning in opposition to the brash paintings by virtue of their absolute quietude, these extraordinary drawings are secretive and reward careful study.

The artist’s pastel drawings provide a bridge between the brevity of the graphite pieces and the rambunctiousness of the paintings. In fluid, gestural marks, works like the *Dry Rush* series are exuberant explorations of color and shape. The light, lively drawings have the feel of quick studies or investigative reflections. Stiff characterizes them as nimble thoughts for processing day to day things, impressions that feed into the larger paintings.



*Dry Rush No. 2*;  
pastel on paper; 19”x14”; 2019.



*Dry Rush No. 6*; pastel on paper;  
19”x14”; 2019.



*Dry Rush No. 7*; pastel on paper;  
19”x14”; 2019.

Existential euphoria is a reasonable byproduct of spending time in the natural environment, ever mindful of our small place within the immense universe. Existential crises is equally understandable, utterly reliant as we are on nature for survival. The high stakes symbiotic

relationship between humans and nature, the micro and the macro, the local and the global, all run through Stiff's work. Her artworks are also genuinely beautiful, almost mystically so, hinting at William Blake's expressive romanticism or the radical spiritualism of Hilma af Klint and Agnes Pelton, bringing its own complications in both theory and practice. Contemporary art is a fickle mistress to Beauty and Nature, themes that can be considered quaint, whimsical, old fashioned, or well-worn. But similar to humor, beauty allows for a space to examine difficult or frightening subjects with guardrails. That's not to say that Stiff shies away from decay or deficiency. On the contrary, chaos and collapse are arguably her primary subjects. We can't always see where we are or what comes next, especially now during the COVID pandemic, and we have to live with the enigma. Sometimes we are in the desert in the dark. *Entitled to the Sun* embraces this entropy, confidently leading us into the unknown, the beauty of the imperfect, the fear of dissolution, the hope of discovery, breaking apart, coming together, doing and undoing, the rhythms of life.

Danielle Kelly  
Lake Forest, Illinois  
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