

Inka Essenhig: Revealing and Concealing



Studio shot, Inka Essenhig. Photo: Gary Brewer.

By GARY BREWER March 29, 2024

“Plants are nature’s alchemists, expert at transforming water, soil and sunlight into an array of precious substances, many of them beyond the ability of human beings to conceive, much less manufacture.”

—Michael Pollan, *Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World*

“Paying attention is a form of reciprocity with the living world, receiving the gifts with open eyes and open heart. ... One thing I’ve learned ... there

is no such thing as random. Everything is steeped in meaning, colored by relationships, one thing with another."

—Robin Wall Kimmerer: *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*

I visited the artist Inka Essenhigh in her studio at The Clemente, an old public school building on the Lower East Side of New York. After climbing five flights of stairs to her top-story studio, we entered her space. It looked like an artist's garret from another time and place, illuminated by skylights overhead in old-world dormers.

Her work has an exquisite voluptuousness, the color chords deeply felt, the compositions fluid and dynamic. She works from memory and imagination rather than from direct observation. Her plant forms and landscapes comport with our recognition of the world we know, but they also have an aura of another world—like ours, but intoxicated with the poetry of the artist's vision.

Essenhigh said of her subjects, "We live in an animate universe. Plants and the living world communicate with each other. I try to reveal something about this in my paintings. I create images of plants that are sentient beings of some kind. In the process, sometimes they want to be revealed and sometimes they want to remain concealed. I start with an idea, and then the life of the painting takes over." Her method is an organic unfolding of intention, the medium and the subjects within her paintings.

Just as an author developing a character in a novel may have a story line in mind, but as the novel progresses, its personality may refuse to comply with the author's original plan, similarly, the subjects in Essenhigh's paintings take on an inner life. Her paintings develop slowly, intuitively, with the ebb and flow of the artist's intentions and the painting's demands.

Several untitled paintings that she was still working on leaned against the

walls. A large piece that was almost finished presented a magical scene of ghost pipes (a plant that is colorless due to the absence of chlorophyll) surrounded by a fairy world with different plants that seem to be slipping in and out of states as animate beings. Deep color chords resound. Stillness pervades the scene. The luminous ghost pipes emit a subdued radiance against a background of muted blue-greens with delicate, pale magenta highlights. Her mystifying color use is highly original, the darker, subdued background colors interacting with the more luminous figures in the foreground, give them a ghostly radiance.

"The ghost pipes," Essenhigh said, "are both translucent and opaque simultaneously: revealing and concealing. There is something new in the way they hold color. I begin a painting with a feeling; it could be the light of a sunrise that guides me. When I start a painting, I can sustain that feeling until the halfway point, then the painting starts to take over."

Essenhigh paints in enamel, working on canvas stretched over wooden panels. This allows her to sand down and rework areas until an even, smooth surface is refined. For Essenhigh, something about the sheen of the enamel frees it from the weight of history.

"I want my paintings to have a lightness to them. Paintings that look like they were labored over do not feel right. They are not something you want to live with. Early in my career, when I was still finding my way, I decided I wanted to make paintings I would want to live with as my guide," she said, "I wanted beauty."

We spoke about the weird, subjective nature of what is deemed valid in the art world, and how that can change in the blink of an eye. Artists such as Charles Burchfield, once deemed corny and anachronistic, are seen in a different light after the brilliant exhibition *Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield*, curated by the artist Robert Gober for the Whitney several years ago. Now, figurative painting and portraiture that were thought dead and retrograde for so many years, are overflowing in galleries.

"I grew up in Ohio—we had many Burchfield paintings in our museum collection. I always loved his work. For many years, his paintings were 'unseen,' being outside of the mainstream of art world fashion. Then suddenly, a shift occurs and perceptions change; people can finally see the work with open eyes and see the radiant spirit in his paintings," Essenhigh told me.



Inka Essenhigh, Untitled (work in progress). Photo: Gary Brewer.

Animism is the belief that the world—plants, animals, rivers, mountains—is imbued with a living spirit. In the early 20th century, the French philosopher Henri Bergson sought to define a scientific understanding of what he called the *force vital*: a life force that animates matter. In current research into the hidden world of plants, trees, forests and fungi, we have learned that roots and fungi combine to form mycorrhiza—a network or web that links living

things together in a forest. It has been playfully nicknamed the "Wood Wide Web." Plants communicate and provide nutrients to each other in symbiotic relationships; the forest is a self-governing organism that sustains the health of all.

Two smaller paintings leaned against a wall. One is a close-up of ghost pipes against a slate blue-green background that might be a study for the larger painting. Next to it, another painting of several pale translucent flowers seem to be in flight, enlivening a deep red background. Their green stems curve in fluid lines into a light turquoise early modern vase. On the vase is the silhouette of a woman sitting at the edge of a sea, water rippling around her under a star-bejeweled night sky. On either side, two forms with an opalescent luster echo the flowers. They look like seashells, though they are inventions, different life forms born within the artist's imagination. The painting's composition suggests the exquisitely animated botanical illustration of the 17th-century naturalist Maria Sibylla Merian.

Essenhigh was also working on a fantastical bird's-eye view of a futuristic city. The buildings towering above a grid of traffic lanes, or maybe lanes for some form of transport yet to be invented, were luminous humanoid figures, radiant with inner light. They look like gods and goddesses of a future race of beings. Essenhigh said of this piece, then in its early stages of development, "I am playing with how newer building are being illuminated, and I'm trying to achieve a sense of movement in the grid of lanes that weave beneath these towers. I am trying to create a sense of incredible speed and stillness simultaneously."

The balance between lightness and dark, movement and stillness exist within a painting's subjective vocabulary and as part of the human condition. Our world used to be divided into stable and simple divisions of organic and inorganic, sentient and non-sentient, living and dead matter. As science and natural history delve deeper into the mystery of our phenomenal universe, these categories are becoming more porous. Indeed, "Everything is steeped

in meaning, colored by relationships, one thing with another."

In Essenhigh's paintings, one gets a glimpse into the artist's vision of this mysterious shape-shifting universe that we inhabit. Her poetic interpretations of our world are paintings whose design, color, form, and materiality shape a subjective response in the viewer's heart and mind: these are paintings that reveal the living pulse of life.

Inka Essenhigh will have an exhibition at [Victoria Miro Gallery](#) in London, spring of 2025. She is represented in New York by [Miles McEnergy Gallery](#). WM