

## Janet Cooling: 1978-1982: A futuristic retrospective

Curated by Ashton Cooper for the Jack Hanley Gallery in New York City, Janet Cooling: 1978-1982 showcases nineteen pieces from the artist's early career, bringing them together for the first time since their original showing.

As a painter who frequents large-scale gator board canvases, Cooling displays a passion for alternative, almost apocalyptic, landscapes, shirking three-point perspective and clear horizon lines for flattened and floating elements: flaming yellow skyscrapers, jagged white-blue lightning bolts, and twisting plumes of smoke all mixed together with cerulean and lime-colored human heads. The arrangement is an experimental mix of women within landscapes, with her gator board paintings interspersed among pencil drawings and conventional canvases featuring rainbow hues of paint, Prismacolor, and paper matting. Cooling deconstructs familiar symbols of nature and industry, causing her compositions to become tense and intensely personal: "Morgana" (1982) is a portrait crowned with birds flying above a conch shell nest, depicting a woman Cooling knew in her daily life in vibrant blue and at monumental scale; "Route 22 to Nowhere" (1982) overflows with oil barrels and missiles, dramatically clashing against figures referencing the wholesome Americana of Breck shampoo models. Such gator board paintings—their irregular edges calling attention to their physicality—straddle the line between painting and sculpture. Accordingly, Cooling fuses high and low taste, her inky backgrounds and dramatic shading characteristic of a student of Caravaggio enraptured by the advertising of urban nightlife and stoner art.

This synthesis becomes especially meaningful when considering this exhibition not just as a commercial display but as a site for cultural representation. Curator Ashton Cooper does not proclaim to have "discovered" Cooling, unearthing her like some overlooked curio. Cooper imbues the exhibition with respect for both Cooling's work and the viewers themselves, allowing them to understand Cooling and her historical context on their own terms. Perhaps most poignant are the four pencil drawings near the gallery entrance, frenetic in their depictions of women passionately embracing amidst abundant nature; "Reindeer and Cattails" (1980) is one such drawing. Admittedly, the animal elements are awkwardly stiff, seeming like absentminded additions to the softly rounded women—the latter of which reveals Cooling's real passion. Works like "Tundra"

(1980) become looser in their sketchiness, almost effervescent against solid black. In combination, these pieces are unbridled displays of lesbian love a decade after Stonewall and during the start of the AIDS crisis. The drawings are not exceptionalized as a blip on the subculture radar; they are interred as a meaningful facet of history.

*Janet Cooling: 1978-1982* brings up the broader query of the gallery as an intersection of commercial and scholarly interest, particularly after an artist's more active period. How does one curate with greater sensitivity for contemporary artists of marginalized identities? Accompanied by the gallery pamphlet briefly detailing Cooling's sexuality and relocation period from Chicago to New York, *Janet Cooling 1978-1982* provides an answer: Sure, we have a tenuous relationship with the present, given the dystopian landscapes of Cooling's visions, but it is the black infinity filled with stars—a la the cosmos of *Web of Perception* (1982)—that is even more potent now. Cooling's forward-thinking look at a future for marginalized identities is incredibly enduring. Given the approaching 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Riots this year, and given a renewed public interest in feminist and queer history, *Janet Cooling 1978-1982* feels like a welcoming home.

*Janet Cooling: 1978-1982 is currently on view at the Jack Hanley Gallery in New York City.*