

Michelle Blade: Soft Thresholds

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The softly rendered worlds of Michelle Blade's paintings teeter at the edge of thresholds: on the cusp of twilight and darkness, among the shifting landscapes of imagination and memory, and in the space between mother and child, now empty of the umbilical cord but just as palpably connected. The scenes that Blade depicts represent moments, visions, or recollections from her life in and around Los Angeles, mediated through the work of the brush.

Framing either luscious natural environments or scenes where the natural world spills into the realm of the domestic (another allusive threshold), the paintings in *Maker of Meaning* predominantly feature figures who are visually enveloped by their surrounding environs. Blade's subjects, whose depictions range from compositionally significant to nearly imperceptible, often include the artist's two young daughters—a decision that indelibly tethers the act of painting to the act of mothering. In fact, the image of the artist as a mother is crucial to understanding the deeper temperaments of her work. Rather than conceiving of them as conflicting states of being, with the unilateral needs of one necessitating sacrifices from or impeding the growth of the other, Blade's paintings posit the work—and the stakes—of the artist and the mother as one and the same. Their edges leak into each other.

As such, the idea of lineage, not just biologically but conceptually as well, deeply pervades these paintings. Many of Blade's landscapes, for example, poetically index the lived history of her family members, who for three generations have traversed the same pathways, streets, and corridors that the artist and her daughters now navigate. With their layers of washy brushstrokes accumulated over time, the paintings echo this notion of lineage, translating it into material form. In *The Drive Home (LA Fwy)*, for instance, the tunnel of the 110 freeway peers out from the surrounding hillside, a panorama of lush greenery illuminated by diffuse end-of-day sunlight. Translucent gestures comprise the work's surface, with each mark augmenting the history amassed beneath it, much like tire marks accruing on the surface of a well-trodden road. As previous generations of her family have

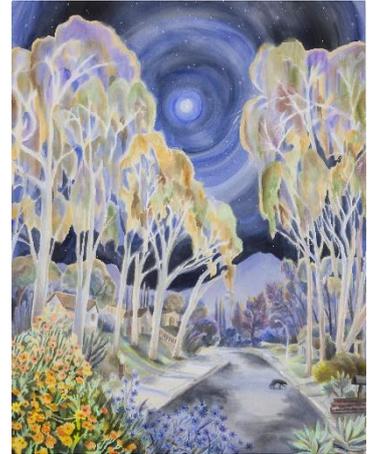


The Drive Home (LA Fwy), 2022.
Acrylic and ink on poplin,
188x157.5cm

traveled across this portion of the freeway (one of the oldest in the United States) innumerable times, Blade positions this painting as a direct tether to both lived and imagined familial memories.

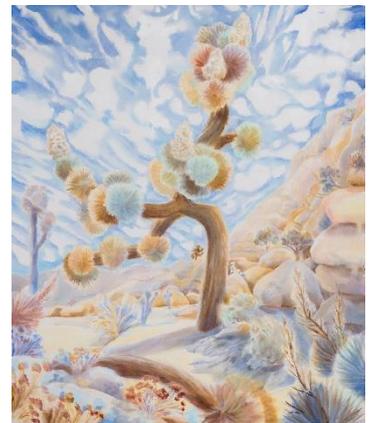
As an enigmatic portal to another place and time, the tunnel in *The Drive Home* functions as an evocative psychological metaphor, recalling the ways in which the mind harbors an infinite number of buried pathways. The image of a tunnel appears elsewhere in Blade's work as well. In *Loping Beauty (Coyote)*, which depicts a coyote carefully traversing a darkened, tree-lined street, the light of the full moon beams outward in concentric rings, recasting the entire night sky as a pulsating tunnel of light—an image often used to describe the threshold that appears at the onset of death. We can also consider the tunnel as a tube that burrows through the bowels of a terrestrial body, and in this sense it's reminiscent of the fallopian tube, the channel that leads to the womb. An umbilical cord also functions as a tunnel, this one a somatic passageway between mother and gestating child. In fact, Sylvia Plath referred to the process of giving birth as a "dark tunnel,"¹ underscoring its richness as an emblem of both maternity and transition. While Blade's work consistently mines such multilayered symbols, vacillating from the esoteric to the concrete, many of these motifs ultimately coalesce around the idea of motherhood.

Just as the edges of Blade's brushstrokes quietly bleed into one another, the maternal experience, once initiated, seeps into everything. For the artist, her landscapes function as sites for negotiating the intricacies of this experience, thus intertwining it with the transient ebbs and flows of nature. Her paintings of California's Mojave Desert, a space pregnant with liminal meaning, are particularly resonant. In the large-scale work *The First Bloom in Some Years (Joshua Tree Bloom)*, a large, serpentine Joshua Tree occupies the center of the canvas, its branches curl into muscular knots before splaying outward like limbs. This particular tree displays a series of puffy blooms (which in reality resemble bouquets of tiny sun-bleached orchids), infrequent adornments precipitated by a litany of perfect conditions (not dissimilar to pregnancy). On one side of the tree, a rambling mountain of boulders ascends skywards; on the other, a distant mountain range meets a marbled sky, with the clouds mirroring the amorphous shapes of the rocks below. To the right of the tree, tiny and nearly unseen, the artist's young daughters appear as two soft shapes amidst the tumbled landscape, an image that Blade directly translates from memory.



Loping Beauty (Coyote), 2022.

Acrylic and ink on poplin,
203.2x157.5cm

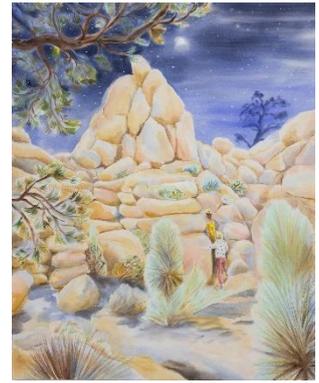


The First Bloom in Some Years (Joshua Tree Bloom), 2022.

Acrylic and ink on poplin,
188x157.5cm

¹ Sylvia Plath, *Three Women*, *The Collected Poems* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992).

Despite the extraordinary vastness of the desert, Blade's composition is tight and vertically-oriented, eschewing the conventional landscape format. This tightness signals safe envelopment yet also presages danger. On one hand, the composition cradles the children between several boulders—bulbous like pregnant bellies—as if the artist were, perhaps subconsciously, painting her daughters into an earthen womb. On the other hand, lethal rattlesnakes notoriously dwell in these crevasses (they are particularly active in the spring, when the tree is most likely to bloom). In this vein, the merciless landscape—rife with venom, needles, and barbs—appears to slowly encroach on the children, suggesting a predator poised to swallow its prey. Another painting, *Between Dream and Reality (Joshua Tree at Night)*, functions similarly. The girls likewise appear to be encircled by a precarious tower of looming boulders, with untold perils lurking within. Here, however, the artist cleaves the image into two, creating a collage of discrete memories: the sky above reveals a spectacle of stars and milky moonlight, while dappled sunlight discordantly illuminates the earth below. This gesture transforms the physical landscape into a psychological one, recalling the inscrutable threshold between what the mind consciously registers and what remains encased in the dark.



*Between Dream and Reality
(Joshua Tree at Night)*,
2022.
Acrylic and ink on poplin,
152.4x121.9cm

The contrasting observations that these paintings elicit recall the many calculations inherent to motherhood. When allowing her children unfettered access to the world, a mother must constantly weigh the risk between the potential for poetry—such as an encounter with a blooming Joshua Tree—and the potential for danger. The stakes of motherhood, just like those of life in the desert, are unforgiving. Blade's painting process, in fact, is equally unrelenting. While seemingly ephemeral, each mark that she renders on the surface of her poplin canvas exists permanently. Due to the nature of her materials, erasure becomes effectively impossible, making each gestural decision irreversible. Thus, as a painter, Blade must not only render marks but also alchemize them, an incalculable feat. Here, the role of the artist and the mother ultimately meet. Both function as origin points: makers of life and mythology who transmute gesture into form and imbue it with greater meaning.