

Tanya Marcuse (American, b.1964)

Tanya Marcuse has always been intrigued by what remains, what is saved, and what is lost, in both nature and culture. In her photographic practice, she becomes a participant in these endeavors of preserving, constructing, organizing, and documenting. Many of her earlier projects focused on archives and museum collections, creating typological series and making new organizational systems for objects that have already been indexed, tagged, and displayed. In her series and book, *Undergarments and Armor*, made with the support of a Guggenheim Fellowship, she traveled to archives and museums in the U.S. and England photographing breastplates, helmets, corsets, bustles, mannequins and the dress forms that populate the storerooms. Marcuse draws together opposing categories –underwear/armor, male/female, hard/soft, armed/disarmed. She portrays these garments and suits of armor as sculptures of the body, carapaces that have outlasted their wearers. In *Wax Bodies* (2006-2008) and *Bountiful* (2009) Marcuse photographed wax anatomical and botanical models found in museum collections. Then, after more than a decade of considering the body and the archive, she began photographing single apple trees growing on endangered land in orchards near her home in the Hudson Valley, New York. In *Fruitless*, she chronicled single trees in black and white large-scale prints. Although the subject matter was new, her concern with ephemerality remained central. In *Fruitless*, Marcuse created a memorial for what will be lost, both through natural mortality and the artificial demise of open agricultural spaces.

Contemplating lost paradise in her immediate surroundings brought the artist to the more allegorical terrain of Eden in her series *Fallen* (2010-2015). Here, her vantage point shifts. Whereas in *Fruitless* Marcuse had positioned the camera low to the ground, to bring the horizon line low enough to isolate a single tree among many, in *Fallen* she began moving her view camera to its highest point, climbing onto a stool to examine the fallen fruit from above. All at once a landscape became a still life. Marcuse turned to color, finding that the lushness of decomposition required it. The photographs became more fictional. “I began obsessively collecting apples, searching the trees and the ground under them for fruit in the most striking stage of decay. I discovered that I could preserve this moment by freezing the fruit, which became the main elements of the tableaux of an abandoned, untended Eden.” The world Marcuse creates in these photographs seem perched between the natural and fantastical, the plausible and implausible, between the painterly and the photographic. Marcuse says, “I think of the delicate fly in a Crivelli painting, a tiny symbol of evil touching down on the wall beside the blissful Virgin and Child, oversized fruits dangling above their heads, the Christ child stroking a small goldfinch. I want to use this iconography to excess, mixing allegory and abstraction. I think of Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* and want to integrate the three separate panels of damnation, paradise, and earthly pleasure into one plane.”

The ancient Greeks imagined the machinery of fate as three women, weaving the lives of human and gods into an enormous tapestry, killing or giving life by snipping or knotting a thread. In her new series *Woven*, the artist imagines herself introducing time and thus mortality, into the lush flora and fauna which make up the millefleurs backgrounds of medieval hunting and falconry tapestries. The 5 x 10 foot photographs take weeks to compose, and during this process of composition, of collecting, arranging, burning, painting, and transplanting, there is change. Flowers wither, spiders build webs, new shoots emerge, and corpses decay. Influenced both by the Dutch *vanitas* tradition and the all-over graphic compositions of Jackson Pollock, she intends the photographs to be experienced as exquisitely detailed still lives when viewed from up close, but to hold together as immersive, more abstract composition from further away. As Marcuse is constructing the images, she consider each object both allegorically and aesthetically, using mice to represent evil, for example, but pokeweed juice to enrich the color palette. Although the pieces are all made on the same wooden frame and printed at the same scale, each photograph incorporates a distinct set of conceptual and visual ideas. Some are densely packed with plant and animal life, and others more open, sprinkled with small brightly colored flowers or verdant moss. What is common to all, however, is a sense of opulence which verges on excess, a plenty which verges on plunder. In these elaborately artificial tableaux, the inexorable movements of nature are shown forth and growth and decay, beauty and terror, life and death are woven together.