

## UNDERDONK



Ruth Marten

#907, 2015

Watercolor on 19th c. print, 7 3/4 x 8 inches

"At last we saw water gleaming at a distance, and came to a clear tarn, lined with brown leaves and holding a fair picture in its bosom...what a place for summer, and how one envies the frogs!"

- Una Hawthorne <sup>[1]</sup>

# Nightjar

May 12 - June 18, 2017

**Opening Friday, May 12 7-9pm**

Underdonk is pleased to present **Nightjar**, a show of five artists confronting human relationship with nature and animals. This relationship is rapidly changing as the ecosystem becomes increasingly hostile and threatening to both humans and animals. The exhibition explores the conceptual, spiritual, personal and investigative ways in which we can relate to the organic, natural world around us.

**Sharon Core** plants and grows the subjects of her photographs with her own hands. Having created a geodesic dome at her upstate studio, she explores the function and effect that long durational time can have on works of art. Planting, choosing and framing the contents of each photograph, Core is like a scientist as she moves all the way through form, even before it's inception. The resulting photographs embody both the literal "sottobosco" of the floral bed and it's ecosystem and references the 17th century *Sottobosco* painting genre (as in the work of Dutch painter Otto Marseus van Schrieck). Core's photographs evoke a possessed, spatial presence in the woods, while a marginal world sets the stage for the darkening, deepening forest, from which slowly emerges an awareness of the delicate microworld of the forest bed.

**Valerie Hammond's** traces lie somewhere between the spirit world and the human world - perhaps even a decomposition. Beginning by tracing the arms and bodies of her friends and relations, Hammond visualizes what transmutations of organic forms might lie inside the human outline. Filling this skin with a floral and infernal essence, flowers and fruit become wounds and ferns are skeletal in Hammond's figures, imagining the slipping away of the human into a primeval space that might be of the land or the sea.

As a tattoo artist in New York in the 1970s and 80s and an illustrator for many years, **Ruth Marten** understands the power of images. Her works on paper unravel symbols and historical settings into new, mysterious narratives that change the power relationships between humans and animals. Awakening curious narratives in the 18th and 19th century prints she overdraws, Marten unearths something provocative from known historical contexts: surreal worlds where animals can have as much stature, emphasis and power as humans, and sometimes even more.

**Priscilla Fusco's** sculptures engage microfauna from an investigative, cautionary position. The eponymous *Grunter*, a clay bell hung from the ceiling, emits a low-frequency warning or alarm sound, bringing our attention to a small and humble life form: the worm. "Worm charming" is used to draw worms up out of the ground in a process that mimics the worm's natural predator, the mole. This sounding is used to collect worms for bait and also as a competitive sport around the world. Fusco's work highlights our own strange symbiotic effects on other creatures' ecosystems, letting us become aware of the call of the predator and the human attempt to mimic it. Nearby, the charred baseball bat signifies another kind of human-made alarm (ringing the bell) and a prophetic artifact of a ruined world.

With her raku-fired "Little Ghosts," **Deborah Masters** conjures up the spirits of animals. Evocative of altarpieces or devotional objects, these figures intimate aspects of Masters' personal relationships with and attachment to animals. One can feel the memory imbued in Masters' hands as borne out by the textures and definition of the figures in the sculpted animal's face. Their satin dresses mark their wraith-like detachment from the living world. As if attempting to reverse the dying process, they honor the deep connection that can exist between animals and humans.

Like seventeenth century botanist and naturalist Maria Sybilla Merian, only recently recognized for her important contributions to biology and entomology, these artists show an urgent sense of uncovering, discovery, growth and attachment to the natural world, engaging both an analytical mind and a sensitivity that is finely honed through the experience of working with one's hands. Through ornament and adornment, transmutation and material exploration, these artists find ways of building structures and then using those structures to look further into the nature of their subjects. What emerges is a careful, long-form attention to the minute, small scale flora and fauna that subtly surround us and the animals we live with and invite into our lives. These artists lead us through the garden, sometimes into its darkest and strangest parts, whispering that we shouldn't be afraid, but stand up - or kneel down - and look.

-Ashley Garrett, May 2017

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[1] Una Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne's eldest daughter, describes in a personal letter following in the footsteps of Thoreau's journey through Walden Pond.

St. John, Thomas. "Una Hawthorne in Brown's Woods, Brattleboro, Vermont." In *Nathaniel Hawthorne; Studies in The House of the Seven Gables*, 1993.

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**Underdonk** is an artist-run project space in Bushwick

Address: 1329 Willoughby Ave, #211, Brooklyn, NY 11237 (L train to Jefferson)

Hours: Saturdays and Sundays, 1PM - 6PM and by appointment

For more information please contact

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