

Lyles & King

Kathy Ruttenberg

Sunshine at Midnight

March 19 - April 30, 2022

21 Catherine Street, 19 Henry Street and Outdoor Sculpture Space

*“Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her.”
— William Wordsworth*

Lyles and King is pleased to present *Sunshine at Midnight*, an expansive solo exhibition of ceramic works by New York state based artist Kathy Ruttenberg. This is her first solo exhibition with the gallery, and it will span the gallery's three spaces at 21 Catherine Street, 19 Henry Street, and Outdoor Sculpture Space.

Having emerged from New York City's fertile 1980s East Village art scene, the scope of Ruttenberg's artistic practice has incorporated varied mediums throughout the past decades, culminating in a focus on rich ceramic sculpture and tableaux. Ruttenberg's mastery of the medium is immediately apparent, thanks to both the scale and intricacy of her work whose individual elements are created and then fired before being intricately composited into their final fantastical forms. Highly textured and earth-toned, these assemblies inhabit pastoral settings where Ruttenberg's visual narratives combine points personal, political, and spiritual, into unimaginable dreamlike scenes.

Around the turn of the millennium, and a period of personal loss, Ruttenberg relocated to the hills of upstate New York—an area where the wild is always close at hand. Given this proximity to nature, it's not surprising to see the artist's gradual shift away from her urban life and what she describes as work of “darkness and isolation,” to a broader corpus that feels immersed in the kingdoms of flora and fauna. “I felt the earth going upstate,” she explains. “It awakened a protective nature in me and for the world.” These nature scenes defy a logical ‘naturalism,’ instead conjuring elements of the surreal and sublime. Thematically, forebears such as Leonora Carrington and Remedios Varo come to mind, alongside contemporaries such as Marcel Dzama and Kiki Smith.

Ecology and feminism intersect in much of Ruttenberg's work, often joined by a menagerie of spirits and an attendant sense of spiritualism. Gaia, the primordial, seems present—the moon and sun buoying the proceedings, lending a certain twilight gravity that encompasses folk knowledge, paganism, and children's stories. A humanoid deer, perched on a tree stump, holds a young woman's hair aloft. Elsewhere a kneeling girl suckles a baby fox calling to mind a fairy tale yet to be written.

At the very center of the exhibition is *As the World Turns*, a monumental kinetic work which showcases Ruttenberg's inventive wild ambition and dedication to advancing ceramic form. Here, on a rotating platform, a girl hugs an elaborately wrought tree, her face illuminated by practical lighting recessed in the trunk. Surrounding this embrace are a coterie of humanoid fawns upon smaller tree stumps upon an exceptionally detailed, glazed forest floor. The rotation imposes a type of visual grammar upon the scene, recalling in many ways cinematic techniques imposed by precise camera movement that serve to develop a narrative sense of connectivity.

Much like the fairy tales of Northern Europe, death is part of the narrative. Themes of regeneration permeate. In *The Moment After*, a severed female body lies in a glade surrounded by flowers, a large

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treeshoot erupting from her womb. Here is life from death, fecundity after decay. While perhaps formally an echo of Marcel Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, Ruttenberg removes the peephole and opens this unexpected scene for all to see.

Violence is present—notably meted out by humanoid forms with distinctly masculine bodies. Ruttenberg seems to find salve in a personal vision of the natural world; where animals exist in a kind of harmony of her own imagination. In these places, healing and affection are offered to those who submit to nature's charms. A girl finds respite beneath the canopy of a tree full of life. While it's not an exact vision of natural reality—for animals have a certain savagery inherent—it's a brilliantly surreal one that seeks to illuminate the darkness before us all and guide us along the way.

—James Casey