

# Wall Street International

ART

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## Monica Canilao & Outi Pieski. Mimicry

21 Nov –20 Dec 2014 at Kristin Hjellegjerde Gallery, London



Our pasts are powerfully tied to our present, the lives of all our ancestors before us leading to where we are today. Imagine that past now. Imagine herds of wild bison, the broad flat plains of America; imagine the smell of a new forest, the unbroken view of the great Atlantic Ocean marking the end of the world as you know it. Now let us refocus, zoom out of this great continent and shift our gaze east, further, further across the water, up through Europe and the Baltic Sea until we reach the Arctic Circle. There, under the crown of the world, see snowy storms and endless tundra. Elk and reindeer travel across great frozen lakes under the electric dance of the

Monica Canilao, Swan Children 1 & Swan Children 2, 2009, mixed media, collaged paper, thread and tea bags on found board from an abandoned train station

Northern Lights. Both histories are home to two indigenous peoples, children of the dawn of the world who still remain, vibrant and alive, even when modern life and endless colonisation have changed the face of the globe. So it is that Mimicry (21 November – 20 December) draws on the two very different yet compellingly complementary heritages of Native American artist Monica Canilao and Laplander Outi Pieski.

Canilao is the great granddaughter of a Chinook Native American princess while Pieski is a Lapp, or more accurately, a Sami, as the indigenous people who inhabit Northern Scandinavia (stretching across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Western Russia) are called. The two women are united by complex historical contexts of cultural repression and denial of their people, beauty in craft, and existing as something of an enigma, struggling to retain aspects of their histories amongst an increasingly modernised world. This interest in their own heritage has led them to seek to ‘mimic’ the past – not to copy, but, in the words of Canilao, “to preserve these beautiful histories in the things that we make as a celebration of the old ways of doing things by hand and the passing down of tradition.” What we have here is an exploration of personal and cultural stories that are delved into, mined, researched and then reconstituted to forge new histories as a way of not losing what the past has to teach us.

The rust-coloured, feathered and collage work of Canilao often draws on the traditional colours and materials of the Native American cultures. In Mimicry, she presents us with a series of new works, created from old pin up posters. She imbues these nearly disintegrating relics with new life by weaving, sewing and using collage in different elements such as old paper, tea bags and lace. Her practice often transforms recognisable creatures and people into forms: by painting and using collage over existing images she is able to give them fresh stories and life. “The only constant in my life has been that I’ve always wanted to be creating, building, drawing, altering,” she has said. “My art practice is a way to generate a personal and living history. My community and collaborators, my roots and their nearly lost traditions, my neighborhood and its trash piles are all integral, necessary parts of my life and art.” It is this exploration of human beauty throughout time, and its subsequent abandonment and decay that, coupled with an exploration of “abandoned spaces and collecting pieces of cities and carrying them with me” has come to characterise Canilao’s life. This archiving of past moments and their subsequent transformation allows her to rebuild “narratives of forgotten lives, now enshrined with paint, graphite, metal, bone, cloth and other found remnants.” In doing so she explores the space that exists between not just past and present, but between the everyday and the sacred – the forgotten and the personal are transformed and re-appropriated to create a “newborn mythology.”

Meanwhile, Pieski’s painting, collage and sculptural works, which often hark to the icy hues and bare landscapes of the North, incorporate textiles from Sami clothing, such as the colourful ruffles that adorn the hems of dresses and the thick, long tassels found in shawls. Her paintings create a fascinating dialogue between the natural landscape and the people who have lived for millennia, and the textiles serve as an homage to the people who have lived – and still live – in the locations she paints. Delicate, feathery brush strokes create works that evoke the hoar of nighttime frost, blossoming across a window pane; or the morning dew on a springtime landscape, soft yellows and greens enveloped with the fluffy white of frost-tipped stems. Others still bring with them the brooding heaviness of winter clouds, pregnant with the promise of snow, that strange unearthly hue that heralds icy blasts. The eye travels across the surface of the work, squinting slightly, as if trying to see through snow-covered glasses, then is suddenly drawn down to a bright red or green ruffle, or pastel tassels, a fun and coy flourish to offset the natural landscape, much as the iconic blue and red costume of the Sami people must appear when traversing against the backdrop of an endless winter landscape. These paintings interpret Pieski’s own relationship to her environment, each place’s histories, myths and legends and her experiences within them. The paintings also have an energy to them – much as one may feel the forest is looking back at them, so too these paintings are aware of the viewer, and one cannot ignore the life force running through them. Meanwhile, her installation, *Ruossalas Bálágat | Crossing Paths*, brings to an immersive peak this sensation of landscape. Suspended from a wooden frame hung from the ceiling are swathes of Sami tassels in a spectrum of colours reminiscent of an

autumn landscape. Like icicles, they are draped, allowing viewers to walk into this forest of colour and highlighting the labour-intensive assembly of the work that harks to the joy of simple repetition and ritual.

This installation perhaps sums up the spirit of Mimicry. “Imagine: you enter a forest, and would like to see, to meet, an animal, perhaps,” explains Pieski. “As you continue along your way, you observe the landscape around you – the scenery changes, yet still you see no signs of life. Then, quite suddenly, you see an opening through the trees, like a portal into the deepest depths of the forest. There, you see an animal walking unobserved along its own path. It stops for a second, and looks your way. Perhaps, for an instant, your gazes meet. Then you each continue along your own separate paths, perhaps changing your step ever so slightly because of this meeting. Elsewhere in the forest you often see the footprints of people, other people, walking from somewhere else than you and going to a different destination.” Here, within *Ruossalas Bálágat | Crossing Paths*, the viewer can perhaps experience a transcendental encounter, or perhaps simply cross paths with another traveler. For this is what both Canilao and Pieski seek to do. Their journeys are long, stretching far back to their forebears, but they also continue into the present day – they reveal lives and histories that are vibrant, vivid and alive. Perhaps, they tell us, the past is never truly gone, but rather, like the dappled hide of a forest deer as it blends into the shadows of trees or the white fur of an Arctic fox, visible against the snow drifts only by the tips of its ears, it is there, living and breathing, right in front of your eyes, if only you knew where to look.

Text by Anna Wallace-Thompson

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**Opening Hours**

Tuesday - Saturday from 11am to 6pm

**Captions**

- 1 Monica Canilao, *Siren*, 2014, mixed media, tea bags, lace, collaged paper and thread on found file folder and vintage pin up, 21.5 x 31cm
- 2 Outi Pieski, *Ruossalas Bálágat | Crossing Paths*, 2014, installation, wood and thread, 240 x 160 x 240 cm
- 3 Monica Canilao, *Birds Eye*, 2013, lace, brass drawer handle, acrylic, sinew and burning on wood panel, 67 x 35.5 cm
- 4 Outi Pieski, *Kuru | Gurra | Gorge*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 160 x 120 cm
- 5 Monica Canilao, *Winter Coat*, 2010, vintage stockings, lace, wood burn and mixed media on found parlour portrait and wood panel, 38 x 56 cm
- 6 Outi Pieski, *Nuvvos Áilegas*, 2013, acrylic on canvas with thread, 85 x 60 cm



