

Artist Katherine Sandoz's 'Water Ways' opens at Laney Contemporary

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“The product of one’s own lived experience forms a guidance system through spaces between the knowable and the unknown — this is where art forms,” writes Harvard University graduate student Sarah Ashley Borders Zigman on “Water Ways,” the most recent body of work by local artist Katherine Sandoz. “The lotus, a transcultural talisman across most of the ancient world crossed into a space of modernity, also resides here.”

Sandoz has been working with botanical subject matter for more than 20 years, beginning with her first show of

the imagery way back in 2002 at Gallery Espresso. With “Water Ways” at Laney Contemporary, however, it feels as though something new is happening, not just a step forward, but a sort of reinvigoration of the work she’s been doing for over two decades. Given that the lotus is a symbol for, among other things, rebirth, it makes sense that she would choose the flower that’s more than just a flower as the main focal point for the show.

But it was more than that: Prior to having fully fleshed out an idea for her follow-up to “Vernonberg,” her last show at Laney, she also found herself getting unsolicited reference images of lotuses from her network of supporters; and her husband, an environmental sci-

entist, discovered “two or three” atypically beautiful retention ponds that were covered in the things. In a sense, she felt the call of destiny to explore the lotus, its many meanings, its history, and its underpinnings as an iconic spiritual image.

“I’d never read the Lotus Sutra before,” she explained, referencing the ancient Buddhist text originally composed in Sanskrit. “I grew up in an Episcopalian-centered household, and that’s the information I got for theology. But you read another manual and you try it on, and you’re like, ‘Oh, yeah, that’s pretty interesting,’ and, ‘How did they know about this stuff back then?’”

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A collection of plexiglas lotuses are gathered on one of Katherine Sandoz's work tables as they await installation at Laney Contemporary

COURTESY KATHERINE SANDOZ

Sandoz

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She also moved into a new, much brighter studio space, and she made the conscious decision to not say no to Gallery Director Susan Laney, resulting in “Water Ways” including a staggering 44 new pieces.

Having had the chance to see the works in advance of the exhibition, however, I must be honest: The meaning behind the works, while well-integrated into the compositions themselves (something you’d expect from the thoughtful and relentless researcher Sandoz), feels almost secondary because the paintings are just so damn good.

For “Water Ways,” the artist has taken the best of her previous work, which included a certain freedom and joyful naivety, and combined that with her mastery at layering colors and composition. The result is a body of work that I’d almost describe as gritty, with wonderful “meta” touches, such as visible brush strokes and not entirely resolved dimensional elements, such as flowers, water, and sky being depicted on different planes, creating a not unwelcome multi-layered effect amongst the objects involved.

“What if the surface of the pond is



“One Who Knows” by Katherine Sandoz
COURTESY LANEY CONTEMPORARY

one surface in your painting, but then you also add what’s underneath and on top at the same time?” Sandoz asked me rhetorically. “Then you start flowing into sort of Buddhist thinking, where the lotus can’t be without the clouds, because they can’t be without weather, and the pond doesn’t exist without weather. And so the lotus is not really a lotus, is it?”

“Nothing that you put in the painting is not the other thing that you put in the painting, because the top of the surface

is the back of the surface,” she continued. “In the sense that [a section of the painting] does not exist without the thousands underneath it. So, it’s not just the top layer. It’s the top layer because it’s the product of all the other layers.”

Sandoz will also be incorporating sculpture into the exhibition, but in an unexpected way: After her ‘Katniss’ project at Telfair Museums’ Jepson Center came down, she bought it back and has reformulated each of the pieces of oversized, colored plexiglass into lotus forms themselves. In the case of ‘Katniss,’ the idea was that we, as viewers, were looking up at the pond above us. For “Water Ways” and her re-imagined version of the Jepson Center piece for Laney Contemporary, the artist will be hanging the newly created sculptures in their famous mirrored room, the idea being that we’ve now been drawn into the pond itself, and we’re swimming amongst the lotus blossoms.

In the sculptural example Sandoz showed me when I visited her studio, the potential for what the mirrored room might be was clear: As the sunlight spilled in through the colored Plexiglass, it created shadows that, when combined with the physical piece itself, looked remarkably similar to her paintings.

“When the colors meld, which is part of the magic of the Plexiglas, it doesn’t

feel so graphic,” she noted. “I love how ‘Katniss’ readily becomes the lily pad, and then the lotus.”

Sandoz has further commissioned local multitalented artist, DJ, tattooist, and fashionista Jimmy Butcher (whom she calls “James”) to do a soundscape to accompany the show, a musical landscape in which she instructed Butcher to, “Do you, but on the pond.”

Katherine Sandoz is well-established as one of Savannah’s premiere visual artists, one who consistently delivers high quality work that’s enjoyable to view and experience. With “Water Ways,” however, she’s taking another step forward, one which I believe Savannahians will be happy to take alongside her.

“When you give your viewers a handle on your tricks, [and] I do think my viewers are onto the fact that it’s not just the flower, I think it also helps to create a philosophy around our spiritual life, our political life, our relational life,” she said near the end of our conversation. “Because we can say, ‘Is it just that? Or is there something underneath?’”

“Water Ways” runs through June 2024. There will be an opening reception from 6 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Thursday, April 4, at Laney Contemporary, 1810 Mills B Lane Blvd. in Savannah. Learn more at LaneyContemporary.com.