

Aurora consurgens

April 2 - 30, 2022

Agnes Walden

Written by Harron Walker

If you ask Agnes Walden about art, just as I did at her Gowanus studio in February, you will undoubtedly hear her reference “the vocab,” that is, the vocabulary of her images: its lines, its colors, its textures and shapes. For me, a writer who deals in words and sentences, such language for the visual feels heady and conceptual. For Walden, however, it’s all very intuitive, as is her literal desire to paint. “Non-painters almost don’t get that painting is about the literal stuff, the physical properties of the paint,” she explains after referencing a lecture on this very subject by Amy Sillman. “The excitement of experimenting, of moving slime around in this really pleasurable way.” She laughs, apparently caught off guard by her own blunt and vulnerable-making admission that 1) painting is, at the end of the day, kind of gross, and 2) it is sometimes this aforementioned grossness that makes her want to pick up her brush in the first place.

In creating the work featured in *Aurora consurgens*—Walden’s solo exhibition of drawings and paintings, on view at Launch F18 in collaboration with Uprise Art from Apr. 2 through Apr. 30, 2022—the artist has leaned into her intuition and away from overthinking it. The portraiture on display still reflects her long-held fascination with trans subjectivities: the threat that representation poses to her subjects and the ways in which she, as the author of that representation, might attempt to safeguard them from an ungenerous gaze. But her newer work diverges in terms of its, well, *vocabulary*. Where we once saw only what Walden observed firsthand, albeit warped and obscured to defend her subjects’ integrity, we now see non-observed objects: a pair of transparent starfish, a scrim of circling flowers. Their inclusion speaks to the artist’s increasing fascination with Catholic artwork found in early modern Europe—a return of sorts to the kind of imagery that flooded her youth, as she was raised Catholic. She borrowed the exhibition’s title, Latin for “rising dawn,” from a medieval alchemical manuscript, which, she tells me, is filled with “lots of really insane illustrations with lots of gender stuff happening in them.” Having Googled it: can confirm.

The figures in some of her newer portraits remind me of centuries-old depictions of saints and saviors. They're slack, all tension having gone from their limbs. Their eyes gaze upwards as if they're possessed, or perhaps they're receiving a vision from on high. But a vision of what?

Well:

- *Lessons from a Starfish* or *Self Portrait at Work* takes inspiration from a piece of criticism by Eva Hayward in which the Gender & Women's Studies scholar gleans transsexual meaning from an Antony & the Johnsons song released over a decade before frontwoman Anohni disclosed her transness to the public. "Do not some starfish regenerate themselves from injury?" asks Hayward. With the transsexual as with the starfish, "[t]he cut is possibility...part of the ongoing materialization by which a transsexual tentatively and mutably becomes."
- In the painting, Walden has rendered herself with starfish over her eyes. Some of their points are intact, others have been severed, others in various states of regeneration.

Meanwhile:

- *Book of Hours* takes its name from the medieval devotional texts containing daily prayers and practices, or as Walden puts it: "Something that tells you how to live every day."
- At the center of the image, which Walden describes as "overtly horny," sits a trans man with a testosterone patch on his left inner thigh. On his right, we can see what appears to be the glowing, golden imprint of yesterday's patch. Between his open legs, he has laid out an open book. Where the content of its pages should be visible to the viewer, there is instead a pattern painted in various flesh tones that evokes the patch motif.

I trust you to connect the dots.

Walden tells me that with this new work, she's trying to be less subtle about the things that excite her, to be more obvious about what every piece is about. It's part of an effort on her part to "make cis people chew their food" when they engage with her art. One could argue that this intention represents a shift in strategy for Walden in terms of how she engages the cis interlo—I mean, viewer; while still refusing to give them the simple allegories they expect—the ones that would reduce us to an object to their subject, a window through which to see themselves, a means to their own end—she confronts them with greater clarity as to what she means to say, rather than retreat to the shadows of obfuscation. Then again, one could also argue that this clarity wasn't meant for cis people at all. "Any trans woman would read this as a really hamfisted image," Walden says in reference to *Splitting Fossils*, a charcoal and pastel drawing in which an invented transfeminine subject hammers at a fossil between her legs. Again, I'll let you figure it out.