



## Storms, Lighthouses, and Pinup Girls

# SUSAN BEE IN PROVINCETOWN

BY ANTONIA POCOCK

A SURVEY OF OVER FOUR DECADES OF WORK BY Susan Bee at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM; August 23–November 17, 2024, with an artist talk scheduled for September 12) is titled after the artist’s enigmatic painting *Eye of the Storm* (2007). Echoes of Edvard Munch (one of Bee’s favorite painters) resound in this composition of churning, concentric brushstrokes delineating a storm at sea. In a visual pun, Bee depicts the center of the cyclone as a literal disembodied eye. Its spiral-filled iris recalls the haunting opening title sequence of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*, a film about appearances that deceive. In the eerily calm, red-tinged waters of the hurricane’s core, a female figure floats idly in a sailboat. Viewers may wonder: is the “eye” of the storm all-seeing, or is it limited by its singular, cyclopean perspective? Works throughout the show—which date from 1981 to 2023—further meditate on the possibilities and limits of vision by juxtaposing seemingly incongruent images from art history, film, popular culture, and the artist’s personal history.

The motifs in *Eye of the Storm*—floating eye, solitary figure, water, sailboat—reappear in multiple paintings on view. Curator Johanna Drucker writes in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition that Bee is a “metaphoric painter” whose work abounds in symbols and allusions. The marine imagery alludes partly to Provincetown, where Bee has spent many summers since childhood. Her parents, the artists Miriam

(above) *Eye of the Storm*, 2007, oil on linen, 48 x 51 inches

and Sigmund Laufer, were drawn to the Cape Cod fishing port not only for its natural beauty and magnificent light, but also for its bohemian creative community. Following in their footsteps, Bee and her husband, poet and literary critic Charles Bernstein, went on to bring their own children, artists Emma Bee Bernstein and Felix Bernstein, to the historic art colony annually. I first became acquainted with Bee's work through my close friendship with Emma, which blossomed during our studies of art and art history at the University of Chicago from 2003 to 2007.

When Bee first arrived in Provincetown at age six in 1958, it was a summer home to a group of New York artists, including Lester Johnson, Allan Kaprow, Red Grooms, and Bee's friend Mimi Gross, who embraced figurative painting and performance at a time when abstract painting dominated the nation's art capital. (Provincetown had also nurtured the Abstract Expressionists in the forties when they were misunderstood by the public.) By the seventies, filmmaker John Waters, actress-writer Cookie Mueller, photographer Nan Goldin (a touchstone for Emma's work in photography), and other self-identified misfit artists banded together in Provincetown. Beyond providing respite from the hustle of New York City, Provincetown also empowered artists to freely cultivate experimental, outsider sensibilities that challenged art world norms in the city. Bee's work, rooted in feminist art and theory, has consistently put pressure on the dictates of the male-dominated art scene in New York.

The earliest painting in the exhibition is *To the Lighthouse I* (1981), which Drucker identifies as a turning point in Bee's artistic trajectory. The lighthouse is also a recurring image in her oeuvre, as well as a symbol of Provincetown, whose historic lighthouses are a prominent sight along its shores. Prior to this vibrant, Matissean seascape, Bee's art was largely photo-based and abstract. As a master's degree student in art and art history at Hunter College from 1975 to 1977, she created photograms and wrote a thesis on the medium's originators, László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray. Produced by placing objects directly on photo paper, photograms are simultaneously representational, since they have literal referents, and abstract, since those referents are often ambiguous. Teeming with seemingly primordial forms, Bee's photograms anticipate her mature paintings that are jam-packed with incidents and intermix figuration and abstraction.

At Hunter, Bee also worked on large abstract stain paintings and minimal geometric compositions, and was encouraged by her professors, including Robert Morris, to continue in the vein of Minimalism—still a dominant strand of artistic practice in seventies New York. Blatantly rejecting that advice, Bee embraced the sensuous joy of bright-hued paint and overt figurative imagery in works like *To the Lighthouse I*—which could not be further from the austere, nonobjective forms of Minimal art.



(clockwise from lower right): Charles, Felix, and Emma Bernstein with Bee, Provincetown, MA, 2008



*To the Lighthouse I*, 1981, oil on linen, 50 x 40 inches

*To the Lighthouse I* calls to mind Virginia Woolf's novel of nearly the same name, in which a promised trip to a lighthouse loosely structures a concatenation of internal monologues. With little objective reality in which to ground themselves, readers must piece together the novel's events from the fragmentary and sometimes conflicting viewpoints of its protagonists. Bee employs collage elements in later works, such as *The Flood* (1983–2006), toward a similar effect: her juxtaposition of various visual styles conjures a world refracted through multiple modes of vision. *To the Lighthouse I* does not incorporate collage, but is a pastiche of Fauvism, which shattered Renaissance-era linear perspective into colorful flat shapes and staccato brushstrokes that evoke subjective sensations. For Woolf and Bee, the lighthouse, which guides ships at sea, might represent the pursuit of enlightenment along manifold, individual routes of perception.

Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* examines the nature of artistic perception through the character of Lily Briscoe, a painter who doubts the significance of her work in the face of a male character's assertion that "women can't paint." Briscoe justifies her painting by reminding herself, "But this is what I see; this is what I see," a mantra that establishes the goal of art as the rendering of subjective impressions—which is also how Woolf's friend, art critic Roger Fry, defended modern, abstract painting. Briscoe's partial descriptions of the painting she completes over the course of the novel hint at subject matter while also foregrounding formal relationships, mirroring Woolf's own experimentation with narrative and abstraction. Bee's *To the Lighthouse I* similarly combines recognizable imagery with passages that break down into mesmerizing abstract patterns—a duality that persists in later paintings included in the PAAM show.

Amidst the literary and artistic references, there is also a personal resonance in *To the Lighthouse I*. Painted a year after the sudden death of Bee's mother, its central motif returns in *Go Forth* (2011), a memorial painting for her daughter, Emma, who died at the age



*Marsden Hartley Meets Wonder Woman*, 1983, oil on linen, 30 x 20 inches COLLECTION OF JON FRIEDMAN AND JOANNE BARKAN



*Stormy Weather*, 1990, oil and collage on linen, 18 x 24 inches

of twenty-three in Venice, Italy, in 2008. Bee's lighthouses, then, might also symbolize safe passage to the afterlife.

Like Woolf and her character Lily Briscoe, Bee also addresses the concept of perception through a feminist lens. In particular, she frequently parodies the male gaze as it appears in both fine art and popular culture. For example, *Marsden Hartley Meets Wonder Woman* (1983) stages a confrontation of the early American Modernist painter and the comic book character within an all-over abstract composition of swirling lines. Hartley's presence is another oblique reference to Provincetown, where Hartley spent the summer of 1916 with fellow artist Charles Demuth, and which he portrayed in various degrees of abstraction. In Bee's painting, Hartley furrows his brow and recoils as Wonder Woman descends in front of him. As one of the first female superheroes, Wonder Woman, according to her creator William Moulton Marston, represented a new feminine archetype that was strong and powerful while also challenging the aggression of male superheroes. Marston's interest in erotic pinup art (which Bee appropriates in later paintings) informed Wonder Woman's blatant sexuality. As a backdrop to this meeting of male and female, avant-garde and kitsch, the tangled, looped forms call to mind Abstract Expressionism, often associated with hypermasculinity. Despite her diminutive stature, Wonder Woman, rendered in eye-catching red in the foreground of Bee's painting, seems to assert herself over both the male artist and the gestural abstraction that she leaves behind. Yet she is also partly a product of the (heterosexual) male gaze.

The eighties saw the rise of Neo-Expressionist painting—which notoriously excluded women artists—alongside the Pictures Generation, which included Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine, whose work dissected gender stereotypes in the mass media. Though Neo-Expressionism and the Pictures Generation are often pitted against one another, Bee's work from the eighties, such as *Marsden Hartley Meets Wonder Woman* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Pig* (1983), combine Expressionistic painterly passages with quotations from pop culture.



*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Pig*, 1983, oil on linen, 50 x 60 inches

This marriage of opposites encapsulates key issues in art of the eighties: the commercialization of self-expression, the seductive yet manipulative power of mass media imagery, and the possibility of visual pleasure within the imperative of critique.

*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Pig* is a humorous allegory of painting updated for women artists in the eighties. It features the cartoon character Petunia Pig holding a paintbrush while perched on the knee of a giant, Fauve-like female nude. Petunia scowls at her implied creation, who placidly returns her gaze. Is the pig artist frustrated with her attempt at a self-portrait, which, rather than mirroring her cartoonish appearance, takes on the guise of a Modernist odalisque? The act of painting a self-portrait as a female artist, the work suggests, entails excavating one's image from within layers of representations of women in art and media.

The experience of becoming a mother in 1985 inflected Bee's work in the late eighties and nineties. *Swan Song* (1989), *Monster Mitt* (1990), *Spider's Web* (1990), and *Stormy Weather* (1990) incorporate decals of Raggedy Ann, fanciful animals, and toadstools that evoke storybook illustrations as well as vintage paper dolls, bits of lace, and plastic flowers. In an essay titled "Breaking Ground" published in the November 1992 issue of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, a contemporary art journal which Bee cofounded in 1986 with artist and critic Mira Schor (whom she met in Provincetown), she addresses the common belief that being a serious artist and a mother is incompatible, or at least extremely difficult:

Perhaps instead of being the handicap that it is thought to be, childbearing and rearing ought to be viewed as a source of renewable energy and inspiration. A way to open up new ideas and viewpoints that you hadn't encountered before. Certainly I've found in my work that a reacquaintance with the imagery of childhood—nursery rhymes, fairy tales, comics, pop culture—through my daughter has infiltrated my paintings.

Images created for children became yet another stream of artistic representation for Bee to mine for inspiration and imagery. *Stormy Weather*, with its turbulent waters, girl, and boat, prefigures *Eye of the Storm*. The girl in this earlier work is a kitschy decal with wide-eyes and a floppy bonnet, who stares across an abstract sea of short, thick brushstrokes toward a Victorian-style illustration of a ship in the distance. Like the jazz standard of the same name, the painting conveys a sentiment of longing. Alongside the "energy and inspiration" afforded by motherhood, *Stormy Weather* hints at the weariness it also entails.

In the late nineties and early aughts, Bee's collage repertoire became dominated by forties-era illustrations of pinups and femme fatales from pulp book covers and film noir movie posters, although plastic flowers and cutesy children's images appear alongside this more adult subject matter in *Love is a Gentle Whip* (1999), and her signature disembodied eyes and sailboats can be found in *Miss Dynamite* (2001). In this and the related painting, *Beware the Lady* (1999), the cutouts are scattered across a strict yet colorful Modernist grid. The effect is an informal taxonomy of female stereotypes: blonde bombshell, gun-wielding vixen, damsel in distress, bathing beauty, etc. Within the grid, other painterly marks appear, including Jackson Pollock-type drips.

Art critic John Yau, whose essay on this body of work, "Beware the Lady: New Paintings and Works on Paper by Susan Bee," is reprinted in the PAAM exhibition catalogue, points out that Bee's parody of Pollock's poured paint in *Love is a Gentle Whip* resembles the flowing red blood she added to a nearby cutout of a fallen female figure. This echo of paint and blood, he argues, reminds us that the mass media "theatricalizes all of our experience." Pollock's work, which was contemporaneous with this strand of



*Swan Song*, 1989, oil and mixed media on linen, 16 x 20 inches



*Beware the Lady*, 1999, oil and collage on linen, 50 x 40 inches



*Love is a Gentle Whip*, 1999, oil and collage on linen, 36 x 48 inches

kitsch imagery and positioned as its antithesis, is more theatrical than its initial champions admitted. Bee thus finds common ground between the feminine, kitsch and masculine, avant-garde polarities of forties visual culture, and revels in the artifice and allure of both.

Bee's quotations from visual culture ceased to take the form of collage by the end of the aughts. Instead, she turned to painting what art critic Raphael Rubinstein, in his essay "Capitals of Pain and Love: Susan Bee's Recent Work," also reprinted in the PAAM catalogue, aptly calls "cover versions" of her sources. *Wanderer in a Sea of Fog* (2008), for example, is based on the titular Caspar David Friedrich painting but swaps the male rückenfigur ("figure from the back") with a female one. Though Bee copies Friedrich's composition, she does not mimic his style, instead translating the image into her own visual language of bold lines, bright colors, and simplified, rounded forms. Given Bee's German-Jewish heritage, paying homage to a painter who has been understood (albeit mistakenly) as the pinnacle of German nationalism is provocative. Even so, Friedrich's dual focus of the act of looking and the sublime in nature, which creates an ever-present tension in his work between the framing of a picture and that which is ungraspable, resonates with Bee's own preoccupation with vision (the eye motif and various gazes represented through a plethora of visual styles) and pictures within pictures.

Bee further foregrounds framing devices in her "covers" of film stills. *Pickpocket* (2013) reimagines a shot from Robert Bresson's black-and-white 1959 film of the main character in a prison cell during a visit from the woman he realizes he loves. In Bee's version, the prison bars are rendered as one of her vibrant, abstract grids, punctuated by Pollockesque drips. Rather than enclosing collage cutouts, here the grid becomes an impenetrable boundary between a couple. Framing, in this painting, is an artistic (and cinematic) activity as well as a metaphor for social isolation.

Reaching further back into art history, Bee's most recent work draws from medieval illuminated manuscripts and fourteenth-century tapestries. Her affinity for this material is no surprise given her penchant for Maximalism and horror vacui. *Days of Awe* (2023) depicts a town bursting with sharp-clawed, tongue-brandishing demons. Villagers flee toward the margins while angels look down from above. The cartoonish cuteness of the monsters, rendered in



*Pickpocket*, 2013, oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches

friendly shades of purple, orange, and blue, prompts the viewer to wonder whether they should empathize with the angels or demons. Rejecting the stark morality of Christian images—even replacing the crosses with flowers—Bee instead ramps up their pathos and humor.

Just as Bee's individual paintings spark surprising connections and contradictions within their panoply of references, considering her forty-year body of work as a whole reveals additional layers of meaning behind each recurring motif. From its storms and lighthouses to its femme fatales and demons, Bee's cosmos enraptures with its earthly delights while also grounding them in the vast history of visual culture. ▣

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*Wanderer in a Sea of Fog*, 2008, oil on linen, 18 x 14 inches COLLECTION OF SUSAN STRAUB



*Days of Awe*, 2023, oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches