

RECKONING

Annabel Livermore and
Mary McCleary



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CURATED AND ESSAY BY SUSIE KALIL

R*eckoning* brings together Annabel Livermore and Mary McCleary, fiercely independent artists who live and work in isolation outside the art mainstream. Both produce layered, ambiguous narratives that address the core issues of our time. Raw, tactile, eviscerating and more relevant than ever, Livermore's luminous, visionary paintings and McCleary's illusionistic mixed media collages both skewer and reimagine the "hot zone" topics of the real world: power, greed, religion, an unforgiving economic order.

Entering the full-throttle installation at Kirk Hopper Fine Art is to sense an art that is created under pressure: emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual. Their works are as personal as they are political – and we cannot separate the two any more than we can in our own lives. Chronologies are upended and narratives are apt to begin at the end and end in the middle. The deeper themes here are time and memory, their passage and unreliability, their corrosive effects and falseness. Beneath the surfaces are provocative, often intensely probing questions about the seeds of human nature. The role of the artists here is that of image-giver, poet, philosopher, transformer of raw material, mediator between life and death, and evocateur.

We are living in times of huge existential crisis, in which our country has become increasingly tribal with divisions at the intersection of sex, faith and politics. A "reckoning" is not only timely but urgent: It is the moment of truth – a time when one is called into account for actions to fulfill one's promises or the avenging of past mistakes and misdeeds; a time of bearing witness; an appraisal or judgment; a time in the future when forced to deal with unpleasant situations otherwise avoided. Both artists construct compelling realms, rich with primal associations.



▲ Mary McCleary

Thoreau's Fire
2017

Mixed media collage on paper
22 x 30 in.

◀ Front cover:
Annabel Livermore
Fatima
2016-18
Oil on panel
39.5 x 52 in.

Annabel Livermore is the alter ego of El Paso-based sculptor and poet James Magee, whose mysterious site, *The Hill*, has been undergoing construction for decades in the desert of far West Texas. When identity and creativity mingle, the artist is encouraged to work into and out of the deepest recesses of the self. However, Livermore and Magee don't simply "inhabit" the same body. Rather, Livermore's eloquent, unceasing exploration of how place, nature and gender intertwine in art reminds us that there is an otherness which lurks behind the fragile structures of everyday life.

A retired school librarian and self-taught artist from the Upper Midwest, Livermore came to the warmer climate of the Southwest in the early 1980s. Her subjects range from exquisite still lifes and mental "skylines" to gorgeously ominous locales, including the bars and streets of Ciudad Juarez as well as the Jornada del Muerto Valley in New Mexico. Livermore creates what one hopes for from art: images that draw us in and then challenge our belief systems.

Protected by handmade, gilded frames and panes of glass, the heavily layered oil on panel paintings evoke parallel worlds. Their mixture of oblique and direct iconography arouses strong afterimages in our minds as her stories take us on a search for transcendent human truth. They sharpen our attunement to all that might be possible. Reality lends weight to imagination and imagination gives color to reality. Livermore seeks that elusive area in between the physical present and the timeless world beyond. She subscribes to the philosophies that place us in the context of nature's ongoing cycle; that see an infinite, eternal entity as being embodied in all animate and inanimate things. Respecting nature's power, she views the world as composed of interacting opposites – light and dark, spiritual and physical, life and death.

In a way true visionaries do, Livermore has managed to get outside herself, beyond herself, and insinuate a poetic understanding of the plight of souls. Her fervor is jarring in its passion to celebrate the spirit with an almost mystical conviction. At the same time, Livermore manages both to deliver a shock, and to point out our diminished capacity to experience shock at the routine violence against those who teeter on the edge of invisibility. In *The Evening of December 20, 2010, the night 13 young innocent people were gunned down in their*

host's home while celebrating a birthday party, an immense creature straddles the mountains of Juarez, Mexico. It is an image of emotional disorder, a field of glowing explosive color, spoiled and invaded. Here, Livermore is determined for us not to forget episodes of history that so often are politically and culturally erased. *Cave of the Apocalypse, St John of the Cross* (2009) is a tenebrous world teeming with uncontrollable forces, a black engulfing emptiness wherein nude women are trapped by darkness, chaos, desire and evil. Livermore's rendering of Juarez's demonic underbelly is filled with dread and compassion, a scene as tender and fervent as a prayer.



▲ **Annabel Livermore**, *The Evening of December 20, 2010, the night 13 young innocent people were gunned down in their* host's home while celebrating a birthday party, 2010, oil on panel, 54 x 42 in.



Each narrative is spikily distinct, but themes echo and chime. There are stories of painful awakenings and refusals of innocence. Livermore offers no palliatives to her figures – or to her viewers. For the most part, however, the paintings burst with life and with the pleasure of their making. Varied in style and source, these works are distinguished by remarkable conviction and empathy with all the different subjects she depicts. They are extremely painterly, with much of their willfulness determined by Livermore’s distinctive sense of color: rich and harmonious, as clear as if seen in the full sun; but also dark and smoldering, expressionistic or high-key, lurid hues. All of the paintings in *Reckoning* give us more of what is filtering through her brain and heart, an interplay of what’s remembered, what’s seen now and what may come. Accordingly, the artist’s identity becomes an extension of the imaginary as much as the geographic locale, a particle in the whirlwind of nature’s forces.

▲ **Annabel Livermore**
Cave of the Apocalypse,
St. John of the Cross
2009
Oil on panel
30 x 76 in.

The paintings display a fondness of paradox and for joining opposites in balance: change and constancy, inwardness and aggression, female and male powered conventions. Throughout, Livermore makes use of the Magic Realist’s exploration of the dream, the nightmare and erotic fantasy. She is also moved by the spiritual urgency of William Blake, the British Romanticist who created a poetic and visionary art that embodied a personal philosophy. Critics writing about Livermore have noted the shared sensibilities of Chaim Soutine, another outlier, who used the brush as scalpel to reveal an immaterial world with crackling, wild emotion and tornadoes of pigment. Emily Carr’s paintings of the Canadian wilderness as spiritual ballast, which widen definitions of the female in broad, totemic explorations of the earth’s body are also relevant. So, too, are Charles Burchfield’s brooding works that employ reverberating lines to make plants and natural surroundings seem alive with menace. Yet Livermore has always constructed a universe in her own image. Her paintings function as metaphors for our subconscious landscape and acknowledge the turbulent activity constantly occurring there. The complex layers invariably convey a resplendence, depth of spirit and intensity that make them indisputably hers.



▲ **Annabel Livermore**, *Camilla Above the Dingle Derry*, 2014, oil on panel, 38.5 x 52 in.

In *Fatima* (2016–18), the transitory, otherworldly light seemingly transfigures the commonplace but also the very act of arrogating to oneself the powers of divinity. Here, Livermore quietly reaffirms the occult power of painting with great sweeps of color, punctuated with dabs, flecks and staccato strokes. In *Camilla Above the Dingle Derry* (2014), a nude female hovers in an ether of radiant astral light while the heads and limbs of swimmers are bobbing and dipping in a turgid Irish sea. Are the souls drowning? At risk of perdition? Will they be saved through some kind of transubstantiation? For *Mountain Near Veracruz* (2016–18), Livermore renders a large bird in a womblike vessel floating amid tropical foliage, volcanic formations, as well as botanical shapes resembling spores, tubers and sprouting seeds. Birds, of course, embody both the human and cosmic spirit – a symbolism suggested by their lightness and rapidity, the soaring freedom of their flight, and their mediation between earth



◀ **Annabel Livermore**
Mountain Near Veracruz
2016–18
Oil on panel
39.5 x 52 in.

and sky. Here, however, birds and flowers become ciphers for human fragility and helplessness – small and defenseless, they will surely be crushed from ecological degradation and our desire for greater material comfort. Livermore's elegiac scene commemorates the mutilated, an allusion of promise and atonement. There is a brittle tension between the bright, sharp surface, the exotic plants and great winged creatures hiding in the deep. The jewel-like flowers awaken the senses, as in a dream where the everyday and the eternal live cheek by jowl.

Livermore's paintings are about dreams, moments, perceptions, sudden insights. Her sense of time is as fast as a running river of events where everything seems to touch and blend. Color, air and light chase each other with abandon. Livermore lets us see invisible things, invents cosmologies, explores consciousness and endeavors to make the injustices, as well as the mysteries, of the world palpable.

Who are we? Where are we going? We hunger for genuine narratives that connect us to symbol and ritual, coming to terms with our place in the world, if only to find our way forth, Both artists explore the extremes of spiritual and social upheaval, as well as the very essence of storytelling and the role it plays in our lives.

Mary McCleary's lushly sensuous, intensive collages combine painterly craftsmanship and bold iconography. Her subject matter is taken from religion, science, history and literature – the sources of big themes. The narratives are off-kilter, slightly out of balance. At their core are issues of paradox – deception, illusion, blindness – but also elements of faith, the suggestion of hope as guiding forces. Her epic works are about our longings, our fallen state, about beautiful things leaving this world, never to return.

The subjects McCleary uses are friends, colleagues and family members; the materials she chooses to cover the surfaces are common and extraordinary, handmade and manmade – glass, sticks, lint, mirrors, small plastic toys, painted string and cord – chosen for texture and color, but also for their allegorical potential. McCleary attaches them on heavy paper, much in the way a painter builds layer upon layer of pigment on canvas. Although many references abound in her mixture of the found and the imaginary, the recontextualized and purely invented, McCleary always doubles back to a basic impulse: the desire to form.

We have to approach these images very closely to see them. If we come close enough, we are drawn into their magnetic field and enter into a private dialogue. All of the works convey an intimate feeling for materiality, pattern and structure permeated by a personal desire to communicate her own ideas and observations in a highly balanced visual language. At the same time, all her pieces convey the unabashed joy she takes in tinkering with tiny objects, minute surfaces and miniature detail, as well as the profound significance of the allegories which connect her microcosm to the culture at large. Such are the dispensations of work so pungent, so lively and intent on probing the dissonances and delusions – both individual and collective – that grip our strange times.

Admittedly, she has always been attracted to beautiful objects. McCleary grew up in Houston, in a family of women who were connoisseurs of American decorative arts – fine furniture, needlework, quilts, patterned porcelain. By accompanying them to museums, restored houses and antique shops, she was taught a respect for craftsmanship and good design. Since her parents were heirs to five houses, McCleary also spent her early years picking through other people's "stuff," analyzing evidence of their lives and thoughts. The particular



▲ **Mary McCleary**, *Colorblind*, 2018, mixed media collage on paper, 21.5 x 30 in.



▲ **Mary McCleary**, *Returning Home Again for the First Time*, 2007/2018, mixed media collage on paper, 22 x 45 in.

fullness of vision in her art stems from that continuous exchange of art and life. Deeply rooted in personal experience, the work is also well nurtured by pulp fiction, film noir, the Bible, poetry and linguistics – in particular, T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, C.S. Lewis and Czeslaw Milosz. Still, McCleary acknowledges that possessions are ephemeral and all will turn to dust one day. The transient nature of vanity, the idea of *Sehnsucht* – an inconsolable longing for “we know not what” – are combined in a paradoxical tension between the flesh and spirit, sin and grace, good and evil.

All of the works in *Reckoning* are carefully paced narratives characterized by passion, dignity, humor, fantasy, pathos and hints of danger. Both empirical and insightful, they are metaphors that stimulate an imaginative understanding of one aspect of experience for another. The specific titles and corresponding text embedded along the edges of the works themselves combine to create parallel orderings of reality in the mind’s eye.

Thus, the use of equivocal symbols produces multiple, ambiguous meanings that reflect McCleary’s highly individualistic perspective, as well as the circumstances common in contemporary American life. In *Holy Mysteries* (2010), a wondrous snowscape reveals itself to be a catastrophic plane crash. In *Colorblind* (2018), a hunter with rifle trained on his prey serves as metaphor for our stressful times of information overload. How do we determine what is true or false? For the unseen deer, such a reckoning is a matter of life and death. In *Time is Combustible, Memories Smoke* (2018), a young man looks back at an encroaching fire, even as he attempts to outrun time itself.

For *Returning Home Again for the First Time* (2007/2018), McCleary depicts men pulling a sled and trudging up a hill through a snowstorm. The piece relates to lines from T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*:

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you*

The poem may refer to Christ’s appearance before his followers on the road to Emmaus. According to McCleary, however, the constructed scene was also stimulated by an account of an Antarctic expedition during which a party of explorers experienced the constant delusion that there was one more member than could actually be counted. For *Sometimes in Darkness, the Stars Come Forward to Meet You* (2017), McCleary places us inside a car on a rainy night with a view of an Exxon station through a dappled windshield. Like our dark and uncertain times, we can only see a little in front of us. McCleary seems to suggest that often the patterns of the world – and our personal lives – come into focus as we move farther away. Light gets in through flickers and reflections, illuminating our paths and giving us hope.

Throughout *Reckoning*, Livermore and McCleary set up metaphorical relationships among and between images and words, weaving mythic tales out of ordinary experience. Moving seamlessly between the gritty realm of the real and the more primary-colored world of the fable, the artists explore the ways superstitions, cultural beliefs, or supernatural legends reveal – and reflect back – our identities and communities: our fears, hatreds, sympathies and dreams.



▲ **Mary McCleary**
*Sometimes in Darkness, the Stars
Come Forward to Meet You*
2017
Mixed media collage on paper
22.5 x 30.5 in.

► Back cover:
Mary McCleary
Time is Combustible, Memories Smoke
2018
Mixed media collage on paper
22 x 30 in.

Annabel Livermore

The Evening of December 20, 2010
2010
Oil on panel
54 x 42 in.

*Cave of the Apocalypse, St. John of
the Cross*
2009
Oil on panel
30 x 76 in.

Untitled
2016-18
Oil on panel
39.5 x 52 in.

Fatima
2016-18
Oil on panel
39.5 x 52 in.

Mountain Near Veracruz
2016-18
Oil on panel
39.5 x 52 in.

Birds
2016-18
Oil on panel
58 x 45.5 in.

On the Shore of a Dream
2008
Oil on panel
26.5 x 22.5 in.

Camilla Above the Dingle Derry
2014
Oil on panel
38.5 x 52 in.

Two Globe Willows Near Hatch NM
1997
Oil on panel
23.5 x 20 in.

All Annabel Livermore works courtesy
of the artist and Kirk Hopper Fine Art

Mary McCleary

The Hoo-Haa (Reckoning)
2003
Mixed media collage on paper
30.5 x 45.5 in.
Courtesy Moody Gallery, Houston

Returning Home Again for the First Time
2007/2018
Mixed media collage on paper
22 x 45 in.
Courtesy Moody Gallery, Houston

Time is Combustible, Memories Smoke
2018
Mixed media collage on paper
22 x 30 in.
Courtesy Moody Gallery, Houston

Thoreau's Fire
2017
Mixed media collage on paper
22 x 30 in.
Courtesy Moody Gallery, Houston

Colorblind
2018
Mixed media collage on paper
21.5 x 30 in.
Courtesy Moody Gallery, Houston

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

The Men Who Carry Pocketknives
2018
Mixed media collage on paper
30 x 23 in.
Courtesy Moody Gallery, Houston

Holy Mysteries
2010
Mixed media collage on paper
22 x 30 in.
Collection of Karen Hughes

*Sometimes in Darkness, the Stars Come
Forward to Meet You*
2017
Mixed media collage on paper
22.5 x 30.5 in.
Collection of Karen Hughes

Emily Knew Things
2013
Mixed media collage on paper
30 x 22 in.
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Waverly
Alexander Duggar

Prodigal Son
1996
Mixed media collage on paper
52 x 75 in.
Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Harry
H. Orenstein

We'll Take a Boat to the Land of Dreams
2011
Mixed media collage on paper
23 x 24 in.
Collection of Jeanne and
Tom Campbell



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