

## **SUHAYLAH H. | THE SPELL, THE PLOT, & THE ETHER**

### **ARTIST BIOGRAPHY**

Suhaylah H. (born 1993) graduated with a BA in Liberal Arts (Major in Environmental Geography, Minor in Comparative Literature) at King's College, London in 2017, and an MA in Comparative Literature at King's College, London in 2019. Suhaylah currently lives and works in Ely, UK.

Suhaylah, a self-taught artist, has exhibited her work in both the UK and the US since 2021. Suhaylah has contributed works to group exhibitions with BWG Gallery (2021, 2022), HdM Gallery (2022), the Auction Collective (2022) and Salon 21 (2023). Suhaylah has also featured work in two Partnership Editions collections (2022, 2023). Suhaylah held her first solo exhibition *Apparitions* with BWG Gallery in Spring 2022, and her second solo exhibition with Pilgrim's Contemporary in Spring 2023. *The Spell, The Plot, & The Ether* is Suhaylah's second solo exhibition with BWG Gallery.

In 2023 Suhaylah attended the Coulston Artist Residency in Scotland.

### **ARTIST STATEMENT**

Though investigating everything from figuration to total abstraction, Suhaylah H. is consistently drawn back to landscapes as a means of exploring the connection between material and immaterial worlds. Her studies in Environmental Geography and Comparative Literature at university fuelled her obsession with the intersection of landscape and symbolism.

Suhaylah is fond of the term 'dreamscapes' frequently given to her art, especially as she often references scenes or ideas from her subconscious. Yet she strives for a paradoxical lucidity she thinks is necessary to make the ethereal believable:

"It's a funny thing to draw shapes that describe movement while inevitably betraying their own stillness by virtue of being flat. In the end, it's about being able to look at an image thinking you're forever on the cusp of something you can't quite reach, nevertheless being utterly enraptured, allowing yourself to experience whatever it is that occurs when the supposed boundaries of all things corporeal and intangible vanish."

Birds that are not birds, trees that hang down to transform into pools of water, rocks whose reflections are more real than they are, and phantoms that connect your eyes to the natural world.

The gestures and materials Suhaylah uses in drawing and painting go a long way to maintaining this state of mind and space. It is a subtle creative balance, using the immediacy and density of oil pastels to bring about something ruminative and fluid.

## **EXHIBITION TEXT | THE SPELL, THE PLOT, & THE ETHER**

By Curator Jack Trodd

The 'dreamscapes' imagined in *The Spell, The Plot, & The Ether* arose from Suhaylah H's experiences of landscapes across East Anglia, from the fenlands, coasts and peaks of Eastern England to the historical city of Ely where she now resides. Suhaylah's dreamscapes include both 'natural' features such as geological rifts, flowing fountains and twisting tree limbs, and 'supernatural' features like rocky outcroppings, shimmering lights and ghostly apparitions, all of which are summoned through vivid colour palettes. In both of the rooms in the exhibition Suhaylah's dreamscapes surround a monolithic installation at the centre of each room, that functions as a lodestone through which the magic of her paintings pass both between each other, and to and between visitors.

Suhaylah's dreamscapes include both large- and small-scale observations of her own explorations of East Anglian terrain - from the medieval ruins at Bury St. Edmunds to swampy reservoirs, quiet lakes, mossy rocks, woven bird nests, labyrinthine roots and tapestries of vines. Such experiences and reflections are collected through drawings, photographs, and films which attempt to record something of the intangible mysteries of these places, alongside written notes on ideas about myth, religion and history that may inspire her artistic symbolism. Each dreamscape begins with Suhaylah's production of a textural map of the larger structures in the composition, followed by painting the meditative or diaphanous features which she had previously been captivated by, such as a distorted reflection or a dancing plant. Suhaylah then intuitively builds the world of the painting through a deluge of details and gestures using a predetermined and highly experimental colour palette chosen in response to the 'natural' and 'supernatural' environments she wished to portray.

The exhibition title *The Spell, The Plot, & the Ether* is a reference to a diary entry by Suhaylah, regarding a conversation that considered how entire worlds and stories can evolve from the details of land and life when given space to ruminate in one's imagination. This title also denotes the visual dramas of stories which could be either drawn out of, or transposed onto, Suhaylah's dreamscapes. Each element in the title of this exhibition functions as a homonym that represents Suhaylah's journeys through landscapes, her creative process, and a visitor's journeys through her dreamscapes:

- **The Spell** denotes a state of enchantment, a cyclical period of time, a sign
- **The Plot** denotes a story, a piece of land, a secret plan
- **The Ether** denotes the place 'beyond' into which things may disappear, and even return from

The romanticised dreamscapes in *The Spell, The Plot, & the Ether* draw general inspiration from ancient East Asian painting, Islamic art and Western Impressionist and Symbolist art; and particular inspiration from the landscape paintings of the artists Caspar David Friedrich and Anna Boberg. Correlations may be found between Friedrich and Suhaylah's use of the meditative contemplation of natural and painted landscapes, to access a place of refuge through which one may have

a transcendent(al) experience of an other-world beyond this world. Like Friedrich, Suhaylah also uses close observations of the influence of natural light effects to capture the mood and drama of a landscape in her artworks; and the medium of both drawing and painting to depict the beauty and spiritual drama of the natural world. The link between Suhaylah's dreamscapes and the local folklore of the fenlands, is also comparable to that between Friedrich's art and the work of artists of the *Sturm und Drang* art movement, many of whom drew inspiration from Icelandic legends and Norse mythology.

Boberg's paintings - which Suhaylah values both stylistically, and because of a shared use of non-classically trained techniques - included depictions of the lights and colours she saw in the arctic landscapes and auroras of the Lofoten archipelago (off the northern coast of Norway), which tested the sublime limits of human perception and conceptual understanding, and therefore offered the possibility of mystical experiences. Like Boberg's paintings, Suhaylah's dreamscapes combine a passion for the faithful description of atmospheric effects with uncannily haunting poetic flourishes.

The stories derived by a visitor from one of Suhaylah's dreamscapes come both indirectly from the stories that inspired this exhibition's body of work, and directly from their own unique contemplation of this artwork. Just as Friedrich and Boberg tried to gain a heightened perceptual awareness and conceptual understanding of the natural landscapes they reimagined in their artworks, so Suhaylah considers that the more visitors to her exhibition discover natural landscapes through her dreamscapes, the more they will ruminate on the beauty, histories, and mysteries of both.