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ELISE ADIBI: RESPIRATION PAINTINGS

The Frick - Pittsburgh

By Tim Hadfield

Elise Adibi, *Respiration Paintings* at the Frick Pittsburgh, installation view of the south wing.

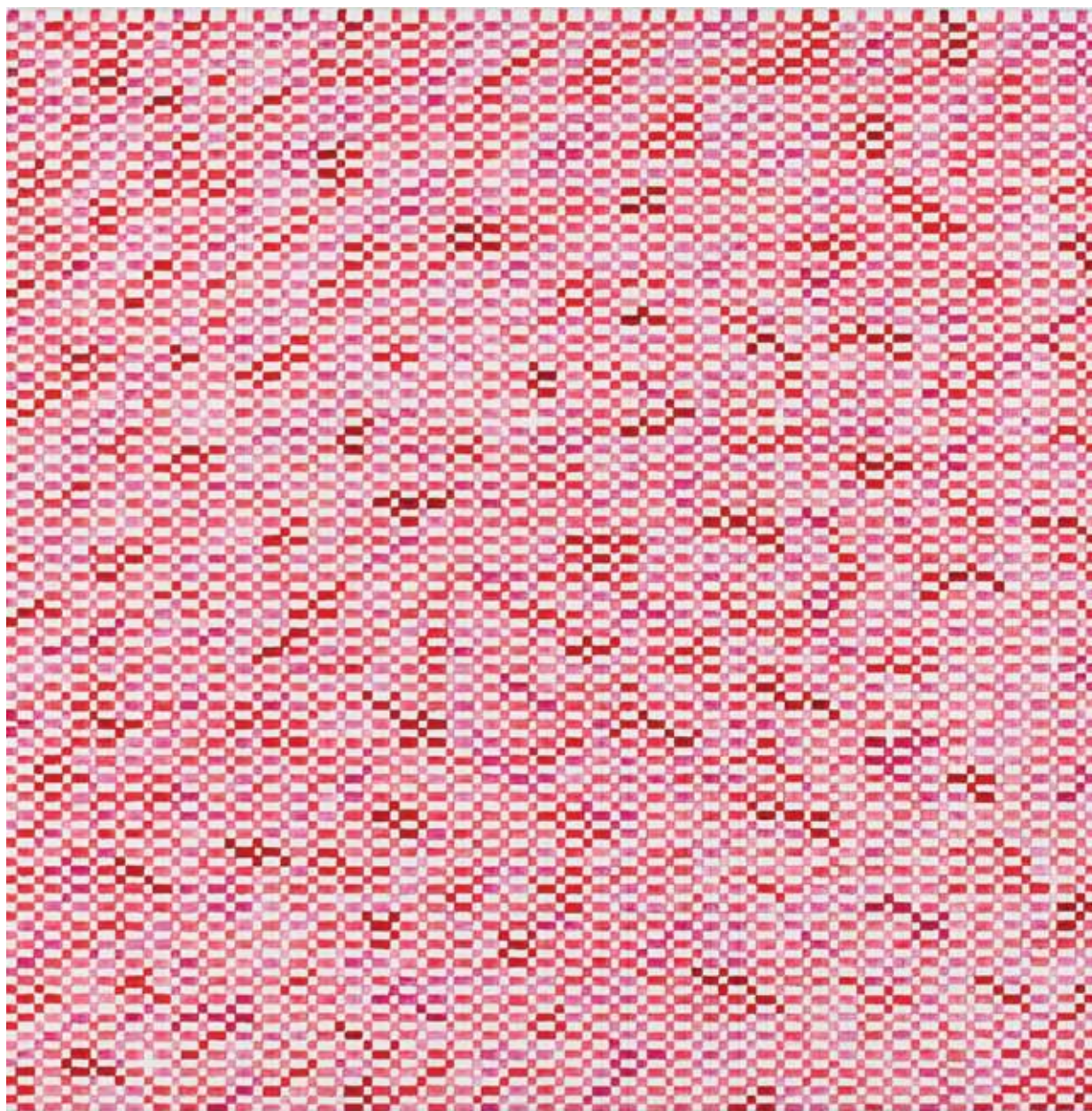
Elise Adibi's installation *Respiration Paintings* at The Frick, Pittsburgh, is the latest in a series of collaborations—the first was with Vic Muniz—intended to generate partnerships with contemporary artists inspired by the museum's unique grounds and collections. Aside from the museum itself, the grounds feature an unusually diverse combination of buildings that includes a renovated late 19th Century greenhouse built to provide flowers and sustenance for the Frick family homes. This is where Adibi chose to site her installation.

Found sleeping quietly in the beautiful grounds, once entered, the greenhouse is transformed into a hothouse of radiant color and sensory indulgence. Adibi has filled both wings of the greenhouse with a precise display of eighteen canvasses punctuated with floral and herbal plantings, chosen to complement the paintings in color and fragrance. Mostly thirty inches square, the eighteen canvasses stand to attention on raised planters, two larger pieces at either end of each wing, all bathed in a grid of fenestrated sunlight. Judd-like in their precision, intervals and repetition, the exactitude of the presentation suggests the rigorous inquiry of a laboratory, an observation strengthened by the presence of an unexpected pungent and unknowable mix of scent. Floral and herbal notes emanate from the plants, but from the canvasses a more alchemical, exotic blend suggests a carpenter's wood shop, or maybe a Middle Eastern bazaar.

Supermoon Painting 2016, for example, has materials listed as: *rabbit skin glue, oil paint and lemon, cardamom, sandalwood, jasmine, and neroli essential plant oils.*

After a spell in New York, Adibi is now based in Pittsburgh, and since graduating from Columbia with her MFA in 2007, her practice has been inspired and defined by this distinctive incorporation of botanical, mineral and biological elements—including traces of her own body—into the very substance of her paints and supports. These materials reflect an almost mystical connection the artist makes between her painting, organic growth and our interdependence with plants. Key to her process is the artist's use of distilled plant oils, which as the product of photosynthesis, Adibi describes as "embodied light." Employing their scents to emit an aromatic signal from the impregnated canvasses, she activates the physical and perceptual space between painting and viewer. In connecting visual observation with olfactory association, this symbiotic relationship changes the closed system of the square canvas into an open system of multisensory experience among artist, plants, paintings and viewer. Adibi succeeds in making the paintings as living entities, like the plants surrounding them.

The paintings divide into four distinct groups to address these themes. Florid, soft focus 'pours' of plant oils, mixed with pigment



Elise Adibi, *Rose Grid*, 2017, rabbit skin glue, graphite, oil paint and rose otto and geranium rose essential plant oils on canvas.

blush with high key color, as they mimic the surrounding floral plantings. Grids propagate finely rendered rosy scales of hovering rectilinear segments, bringing to mind a musical score with their trilling rhythms—one is named *Rose Chord*. Glowing copper-grounded paintings carry blossoms, drips and swirls of green verdigris patina, the result of oxidization with, among other agents, the artist's urine. As a Pittsburgh native, Adibi will be familiar with fellow Pittsburgher Warhol's piss paintings. A further group of monochrome paintings fared surprisingly well against the elements, but they are less interesting as a result.

The six-month duration of *Respiration Paintings* shaped a unique opportunity for the artist to subject these 'living' paintings to an accelerated lifespan, spent breathing in the amplified seasonal extremes of heat, humidity, and sunlight—to leave them as Adibi puts it—to their "...uncertain fates." While they bleach with sunlight, absorb moisture and ripen with mold, meaning evolves with them and they change from signifiers of growth and fecundity, to one of colonization and atrophy. By fall, the unrelenting cycle of climate change has caused the surface of one or two paintings to start lifting gently off their grounds, while black mold has speckled some canvasses and colonized the bottom of others.

One cannot help but surmise about the future of these paintings. Once out of their hothouse environment, will the artist arrest this transformative process, and prepare the work for a future life in a sterile gallery? Or allow them to remain host to their parasitic infiltrations, abandoning them to 'deteriorate' into inevitable entropy? Breathe out.

Adibi's finely balanced and executed installation offers us no easy conclusions. Instead *Respiration Paintings* suggests its true significance is to illuminate the continuum of life and the beauty of decay itself, as it ridicules our unquestioning attachment to permanence and the tyranny of perfection.

Breathe in. ■

(April 15 – October 22, 2017)

Tim Hadfield, a British artist, educator and curator, is currently a professor of media arts at Robert Morris University in Pittsburgh. He has exhibited widely in the United States, Europe and Asia. As a curator, he has presented exhibitions across the U.S. and internationally. In 2003, he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and in 2010 co-founded the Sewickley Arts Initiative.