

Art in America

Will Sheldon on Tattoos, Painting, and Mall Art

By Art in America

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Will Sheldon is best known as a tattoo artist whose fantastical imagery—spindly, Gothic fairies, dragons, skeletons—is distinctively stylized and rendered in playful colors. He recently mounted an exhibition titled “Trouble After Dark,” comprising five paintings of varying sizes from 2019 and 2020. Scheduled to be on view at Team Gallery in New York until May 2, the show closed only five days into its run due to COVID-19. Sheldon’s paintings frequently echo motifs from his tattoos, but they also feature landscape settings, airbrushing techniques, and a much darker

palette of blacks and purples. Sheldon often creates the effect of deep space by painting fine lines against soft, airbrushed backgrounds. Below, he compares the processes of painting and tattooing, and describes setting up formal prompts in order to challenge himself.

Often in my work, I find myself thinking “I can’t do that,” which makes me want to try. I made *Web*, the first painting you see when you walk in, to challenge myself after a friend visited my studio and asked, “Are you even able to just paint one thing?” Usually, my paintings have a lot going on. So for *Web*, I tried to keep it simple and paint just one thing: a spiderweb.

To make the paintings in this show, I combined airbrushing and hand painting. I do both techniques using Golden acrylics—I water down the paints to airbrush them. Sometimes, I start with a black canvas; other times I build up to the black with layers of dark washes. Then I’ll go in with a black airbrush and make a sketch of the landscape or scene. I build up the painting from there, working my way to the more detailed layers on top, which I create using a brush. Sometimes, the idea comes from a sketch I did beforehand, but usually, I’m just drawing straight onto the canvas, creating the image right then and there.



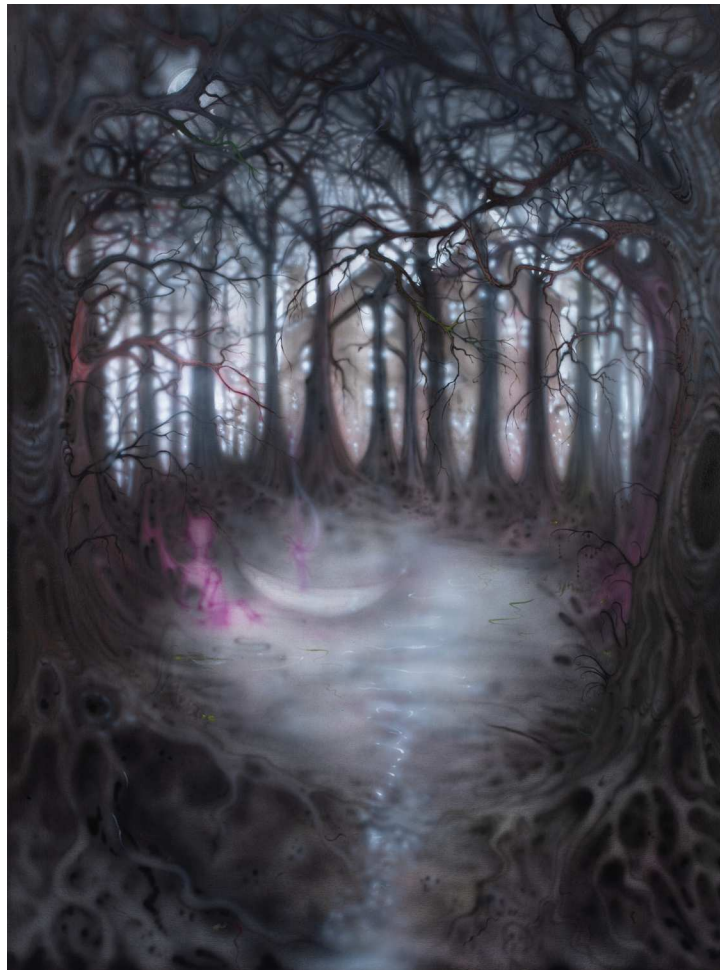
Tattoo by Will Sheldon.

This process is pretty different from tattooing, where you have to work out your drawing before you start. Tattoos, of course, are much less forgiving: you can’t just paint over them. I usually tattoo lots of figures, and I found myself feeling pretty uncomfortable without them. So for this show, I challenged myself to move toward landscapes. Landscapes are not very common in American tattooing, but in Japanese tattooing, they are.

I also like to challenge myself to combine colors that you wouldn’t expect to see together. I’m really drawn to Hieronymus Bosch’s paintings for that reason: they have all of these pastel pinks and greens that are almost like baby colors. Yet they definitely don’t feel like baby color paintings.

For *Sitting in Skull Garden*, I experimented with taking what’s basically an illustration from the trading card game Magic: The Gathering and making it pass as a painting by rendering it on a

canvas. This painting is something I'd have been really psyched to have in my bedroom as a kid. It's this big, magical fairy painting, and if you look closely, you'll see that this fairy, who is wearing a plaid skirt, is sitting on a bunch of skulls. But if you just took out those elements, the work would be a much more traditional landscape. I like that all you have to do is put a giant fairy into a painting, and suddenly it looks like mall art.



Will Sheldon: *In the Garden*, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 40 by 30 inches; at Team Gallery.

Heart Gate shows an ornate gate in front of a spooky castle on a dark, ominous hill. There are a few hearts in the show: one in the crown of this gate, one in the center of the spiderweb in *Web*. Hearts are yet another sort of sappy taboo I wanted to try to make work.

In the Garden is based on Tompkins Square Park in Alphabet City, Manhattan. I walk there three or four times a day with my dog, Misty, when there's not a global pandemic. But I called it the more generic "garden," because a lot of people have their own particular parks that they frequent. Also, "garden" sounds more magical.

For me, painting and tattooing really both come down to drawing. I draw every day. With painting, I feel like I have a bit more freedom than I do with tattooing. But in quarantine, I'm focusing on drawing—obviously, I can't tattoo anyone right now. My whole life, drawing has been a way for me to get through things. I don't mean hard things; it's just how I pass the time. That's not very different in quarantine.

—As told to Emily Watlington