

**Sylvia Fein: Matrix 275 at BAMPFA
November 13, 2019–March 1, 2020**

At the age of 100, Sylvia Fein continues to engage a steady, vibrant—and sometimes literal—dialog with her medium. In her intimate retrospective exhibition of thirty-five works, *The Painting Told Me What to Do* (2012) is perhaps the show's most colorful and emphatic image. Its four vertical forms are flaming and tree-like, growing from the ground with spindly, dark trunks subsumed by pinkish-red strokes. The title suggests an artist in a trance, and a vision that flows and flows.

The works range from 1946 to 2018; all are egg tempera, Fein's only medium, with which she creates various levels of density, from thin washes to built-up texture. Replete with otherworldly landscapes, most of the paintings are inflected with a surrealist's edge and some mystical whimsy—comparisons could be drawn to Leonora Carrington's moody convocations and David Huffman's abstract outer space-scapes. Fein's work, however, exudes a quirky wholesomeness. She did her undergrad studies at the University of Wisconsin in the 1940s, putting her amongst a group of artists who were dubbed the "Surrealists of the Midwest." In 1951 she earned her MFA at UC Berkeley, and she's lived in Martinez since about that time, the art-world equivalent of being off the grid.

These locations are instructive. Her *View of the Valley* (1956), depicting a barely developed Martinez, is a pint-size panorama of craggy mounds, green and spiky in the background, ruddy clay-red in the foreground. This landscape is somewhat inhospitable, yet atop stairs cut into the hillside there is a blue-green female figure sitting with a standard poodle. These figures have expressions of contentment, friendly beings surveying a vista dotted with orchards, silos, pavilions, and possibility. Just over fifty years later, *Fein's Martinez, CA* (2007), is a murkier vision, with craggy, barren trees punctuating pale grayish-green rolling hills. One of those hills has an eye. What it, and Fein, see in this landscape is not the social observation of over-development, but something barren, a California winter with just a wisp of green. It is a psychological view, the winter of one's life.

Paintings that feature cat eyes—or a fusion of cat and human eyes, as seen in the 2005 *Cat's Eye*—recur, and channel the irresistibility of feline imagery. *Two Kitties in the Garden* and *Kitty in the Garden* (both 2005) are adorably weird, with round cat eyes burning out of a densely patterned camouflage that nearly obscures the animal faces. The cuteness of the goggling eyes is balanced by ocular occult overtones. Irises become floating planets in the surrealist dreamscape *Musical Sky Eyes* (2010), hovering somewhere between the celestial and terrestrial; the elements are suspended in murky green spaces that also evoke a field of seaweed. There are descriptively titled paintings such as *Dandelion Eye* (2009) and *Kite Eye (or Eye Kite)* (2006) that suggest the mystical, though the artist has described making these works as a "fun and thrilling experience."

Fein's work was reintroduced to the Bay Area with a 2014 survey at Oakland's Krowwork, an exhibition that included more figurative paintings and an intimate video interview with the artist. The BAM exhibition, while compact, is a welcome centennial birthday celebration for Fein, and a gift to viewers. The appeal of Fein's work here is her vision and her perseverance. On the wall, they tell us what to do: look, feel, wonder.