

The Madeleine Moment: A Review of “Florence/Somerset” at Alice Wilds Gallery

BY RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS | AUGUST 29, 2023



Installation view of Florence/Somerset/Photo: Courtesy of the gallery

Like Marcel Proust’s madeleine, the smallest of things—a smell or the slant of light—can offer us the most profound experience of memory and nostalgia. Artists Breehan James and Barbara Sullivan have taken the quotidian, a family cabin in northern Wisconsin and the daily discoveries of the domesticated and natural world, and have together curated an exhibition of deep emotional clarity. “Florence/Somerset,” at The Alice Wilds in Milwaukee is an investigation of the rural counties in Wisconsin and Maine where these artists have chosen to focus on their artistic practices.

Contemporary art often layers irony and distance between the object and the viewer. Artists shield themselves from emotional forthrightness with theory, coolness and control. Not so here. James and Sullivan offer visual and emotional complexity encountered in the everyday.

Breehan James is a painter’s painter. A graduate of Yale’s star-making MFA program in 2007, this pedigree has not diminished the connection to her upbringing in an industrial corridor of Wisconsin. Her grandfather built a humble cabin in the woods in the 1960s that remains basically unaltered, and James has chosen this location for “Cottage Book,” a continuation of a nearly twenty-year investigation of a place focusing on her summers spent there.



Breehan James, “Cottage Book: Tree on Tree,” 2020, acrylic gouache on paper mounted on panel, 10” x 13”/Courtesy of the gallery

The paintings indeed echo pages of a book, or perhaps a filmic narrative. Painted with gouache on paper, they begin with an image of the modest, russet cabin as if winding toward it from the driveway. From there, the series moves between interior and exterior, often breaking compositions from macro to micro in focus. In "Front Door," we see an image of a yellow screen door in perspective in one frame, and then a close-up of black-eyed Susans in a vertical column on the right. The yellow repetition between the door and flowers melds these contrasting views. The viewer feels as if they might be approaching the door and looking downward at the ground as they walk.

In "Cottage Book 4," we see the rudimentary silhouette of a tree cut out and pasted onto the scaly trunk of a pine tree in the yard. A close-up on the right, of what appears to be the exterior wall of the cabin, echoes two more tree decorations perched above a lyrical sculpture of cement figures. James seems enchanted with the predilection to create renditions of nature while surrounded by nature itself. It is a beautiful game of color and creation. Her paintings ultimately, in both detail and mood, evoke the familiar, the beautiful, and the steadfast nature of the cottage. Inside, lantern light glows amidst the ephemera that a family has collected for generations. At times the paintings seem slightly too devoted to photographic sources, as if James feels she must capture every single moment. They are meticulous observations about the poetry of this place.



Barbara Sullivan, "Rug with Discarded Clothing," 2006, polychromed fresco relief, 46" x 68" x 9"/Courtesy of the gallery

Above and below the regular, linear installation of the "Cottage Book" series, Barbara Sullivan interweaves her fresco relief sculptures. As James has, Sullivan moves between a deep commitment to the object and the lyrical poignancy of her subjects. Most of her sculptures are life-sized, and include animalia in the form of a sleeping fawn, woodpeckers, and a perky skunk. There are domestic moments as well. A white bathroom sink is rendered as if the viewer peers down from above, replete with a tan bar of soap, nail scrubber and rubber stopper. On the gallery floor, a pair of Levi's and a pair of pink, floral-patterned underwear pool onto a striped, woven rug. The mundane but yet weighty narrative nature of this sculpture is a testament to deep looking, and to deep feeling.

Sullivan's objects are rendered with a whimsical sculptural sensibility paired with a minutely detailed paint treatment, giving them a magical, heightened realism. The frescos, painted in the traditional manner of water-based paint in wet plaster, is a time-sensitive and laborious process that harkens back to the Egyptians and the Renaissance.

Both elevated and familiar, this two-person exhibition is a testament to artistic transformation.

"Florence/Somerset" featuring Breehan James and Barbara Sullivan at The Alice Wilds, 900 South 5th, Suite 102, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on view through September 30.