

Ayers, Robert. *Julie Heffernan's prophetic 'World Without End' at Simon's Rock*. Berkshire the Edge. March 17, 2016.

Berkshire
the **edge**

ART REVIEW: Julie Heffernan's prophetic 'World Without End' at Simon's Rock

By Robert Ayers Thursday, Mar 17 Arts & Entertainment



Julie Heffernan, "Self Portrait as Emergency Shipwright" (2013). Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W, New York.

Great Barrington — The Hillman-Jackson Gallery at Bard College at Simon's Rock is no bigger than a decent-sized living room, but through March 24 it is home to a remarkable show, Julie Heffernan's *World Without End*, that many a larger and better known venue might take great pride in.

Heffernan is a worthy heir to the tradition of European history painting. She makes large-scale pictures packed with pictorial detail and an extraordinary density of meaning. Although she calls her paintings self-portraits, she generally pictures herself engaged in peculiar narrative episodes, and their actual subject is one that concerns us all – the threats posed to our planet and to the life it supports.

"We are slowly making our world unlivable," she explains. "I want to bring to the surface the destructive action, waste, and contamination that is generally invisible to us. I need to imagine another way, to outfit myself with signs and banners that speak louder than I can, to envision how we might remake the world as it is slowly falling apart."

Rather than present literal images of present day despoliation, in other words, Heffernan invites us into an imaginary world that exists somewhere between romantic landscape painting, 50's fantasy comics, and our worst anxiety dreams. Her androgynous alter-ego occupies this territory looking like a refugee from classical mythology, often semi-naked, and wearing improvised tool belts or carrying baskets of dead animals.



Julie Heffernan, “Self Portrait on the Brink” (2013) Courtesy of the artist and P.P.O.W, New York

In *Self Portrait on the Brink* she portrays herself at the stern of an outsize wooden raft that approaches the lip of a waterfall. She struggles with the wreckage that the raft trails behind it – smashed furniture, empty bottles, and dead animals and fish – while her fellow passengers, unaware of the impending calamity, are casually playing cards inside an odd-shaped velvet tent.

Self Portrait as Emergency Shipwright shows her hard at work with a chainsaw on another log craft. This one towers above her, like a sort of Raft of Babel. Its cargo includes ornate architectural models and peculiar monsters. Skeletons haunt its dark recesses, and a red carpet has been rolled out for its passengers. To one side the sea is calm, to the other it smashes against jagged rocks. In the distance the sky fills with smoke above a burning fleet of ships and in the foreground trees writhe like bloated angry reptiles. High in the branches an old sign peppered with bullet holes hints that this place might once have been known as Neverland; nowadays people call it Dismay.

Julie Heffernan is not merely dismayed by the circumstances that she represents, however. She knows who is to blame – including those good ol’ boys who play cards while they deny there is any problem – and in both of these paintings she identifies them. Carved into the bark of a tree and daubed onto a sign marked DENIERS are names like Beck, Perry, and Palin. Also included (with a degree of prescience given that these pictures were made in 2013) is the name Trump.

This splendid show has been organized by Margaret Cherin, Curator of the Hillman-Jackson Gallery, and Jacob Fossum, Professor of Painting and Drawing, who explains that “What interests me most about Julie is her intense connection to her own imagination and creative powers and her ability to trust her revelatory impulses.” The Simon’s Rock students are fortunate indeed to have shows of this quality to inspire them. Just imagine how they would benefit if they had a proper sized gallery.