

# HESSE FLATOW

Hyland, Samuel. "The Symbolists: Seeing Beyond Reality at HESSE FLATOW." *Sammys World*. Online. 2021.



## ***The Symbolists: Seeing Beyond Reality at HESSE FLATOW***

Showing at HESSE FLATOW from February 18th through March 20th, "The Symbolists: Les fleurs du mal" – an exhibition co-curated by Nicole Kaack and Karen Hesse Flatow – seeks to expound upon the thread of symbolism popularized in the 19th Century by presenting en masse a collection of artworks that work in tandem to combat conventional routes of idealism.

### **SAMUEL HYLAND**

In his oft-cited 1886 essay *The Symbolist Manifesto* – a pivotal assertion that came at the genesis of a soon-to-mushroom 20th Century Symbolist movement – the Greek literati Jean Moréas put forth that "representations of nature, human activities and all real life events don't stand on their own; they are rather veiled reflections of the senses pointing to archetypal meanings through their esoteric connections."

Prior to a renaissance-stemmed broadening of construct, art writ large took on the documentarian role of primitive writing, encapsulating for centuries what Moréas described as up-front value solely representational. To transcend the invisible boundaries of such a dynamic, yet, was to dualize the medium within itself: whereas to pick up a paintbrush anterior to the transition was to place a mirror in front of reality, to do so afterward was to give the mirror free reign within the real world's most poignant insecurities.

Showing at [HESSE FLATOW](#) from February 18th through March 20th, ["The Symbolists: Les fleurs du mal" – an exhibition co-curated by Nicole Kaack and Karen Hesse Flatow](#) – seeks to expound upon the thread of typology set in stone by the aforementioned shift by presenting en masse a collection of artworks that work in tandem to combat the conventional routes of idealism. "Challenging the escapist

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Hyland, Samuel. "The Symbolists: Seeing Beyond Reality at HESSE FLATOW." *Sammys World*. Online. 2021. impulse with criticality and humor, the artists in this show are not dealing in pure abstraction, rather, finding ways to express injustice, trepidation, and hope for the future through new figures, contemporary or invented," Kaack told *Sammy's World* in an email. "Drawing on the symbolic material of popular culture, astrology, the internet, and beyond, this show responds to the expansion of virtual worlds which, as ever, run in tandem with reality."



Tammy Nguyen – *Yolanda*, 2018

Of course, given an ethos of such modern relevance, there is a vital pandemic-influenced conversation with reality to be discussed in any exhibition of its class. With *the Symbolists*, this conversation is – rather than carried implicitly (and consequently *solely* ceremoniously) – thrown into the face of the consumer without apprehension. The lines blurred by the outbreak, for reference, were once-definitive margins distinguishing human technology from nature, social media from socialization, the computer screen from the outside world. By showcasing a selection of artworks that serve to address the seemingly two-sided

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Hyland, Samuel. "The Symbolists: Seeing Beyond Reality at HESSE FLATOW." *Sammys World*. Online. 2021. dynamic as one form, contrasting elements or not, *the Symbolists* asks of the entire ordeal: *Where did the line – if extant at all – draw itself in the first place?*

Included in the exhibition, which doubles as both a physical installation and an extensive online offering, are works by the artists Alicia Adamerovich, Joseph Samuel Buckley, Maho Donowaki, Hilary Doyle, Clark Filio, Caroline Garcia, Eliot Greenwald, Exene Karros, Nat Meade, Tammy Nguyen, Louis Osmosis, Georgica Pettus, Johanna Robinson, Sistership TV (Jessica Mensch, Emily Pelstring, Katherine Kline), Alicia Smith, and Astrid Terrazas.)

**"I think that a critical reading of our contemporary symbols is perhaps what I want to capture through this exhibition—realizing that images have meaning and that we need to address that in the ways that we respond to or adopt them."**

One of three above-mentioned creatives set to be interviewed on Saturday, February 27th as an opener of the show's virtual face, [Louis Osmosis was profiled by Sammy's World](#) this past December. In the conversation, Osmosis detailed a striking work of his up for display, wherein sourdough bread is reimagined as a vibrantly zipped-together reconstruction of its archaic form. "I wanted to deal with the sliced bread object as a site from which I could address failure in a different way, so what I wanted to do in an immediately visceral way was be like: *Okay, so there's sliced bread. Let me put it back together,*" he recounted. "In a very flamboyant Frankenstein kind of way. And from that, I found a new idea of addressing this concept of failure; illegibility, through this violent regression. To double down on its sliced-ness as sliced bread, and put it back together, but never take that away from it." Other pieces by Osmosis displayed in the exhibition include *Tortoise Shell*, a humanely resourced titular object permeated by remote-control car antennas that protrude from each scute, *Default\_01 (To Firmly Grasp it)*, a faux-bloodied t-shirt and accompanying bleached sweatpants working in conjunction to convey a crude punchline about nipple chafing, and *Seat*, the cushiony remnants of a deconstructed car seat bound up by intensely hued bungee cords, shoelaces, and yarn. Much like the exhibition they are found within, each piece offers itself as a lens through which one can equally see and make light of the implicit truths of reality: a refurbished loaf of bread – an ersatz-mechanical tortoise shell – an entire vehicle part transfixed to itself by household items... who is ever to say that the world we live in cannot be stripped away from itself, rebuilt, and furnished in reflection of our collective liking? Reality, Osmosis suggests, is as malleable as we muster the audacity to make it.

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**Louis Osmosis, *Seat*, 2021**

Myriad additional works on display by the aforementioned creatives include Clark Filio's *Truman Show* (oil on canvas, 2019), Johanna Robinson's *Imagination is defined by what lies outside* (oil on cheesecloth over canvas, 2020), and Alicia Smith's *Nagualism* (performance/video, 2017) – the latter being one of many virtual offerings put in place to make the exhibition as immersive as envisioned in spite of the pandemic.

*Truman Show* bends reality in that it undermines arguably its most foundational concept: that everything must lead to something else. Filio's painting depicts a nameless man at the foot of a shadow-comprised staircase. The setting, much unlike any staircase-adjacent idea upheld via the real world, is constructed by nothing but clouds and sky: for purposes of our planet, the highest one can go without escaping the stratosphere. Thus, a conflict is implicitly impressed upon the consumer's perception – the (mortal) man is seemingly poised to venture beyond any destination he could have yearned to reach. On Earth, at least, the sky is overall the limit. What treasure could possibly lie on the other end of the impossible? We are prohibited from knowing. The staircase cuts off at the end of the canvas. Yet, it must be posed that we were better off not knowing the fate of the subject: which is the more useful piece of information: the fact that the impossible is not really the impossible, or what one man out of 7 billion used that information to do? The information belongs to us, the consumer(s), and it is our prerogative to decipher both whether the staircase truly goes to nowhere, and, if the opposite, what we may use its reach to access.

Johanna Robinson, moreover, is a Brooklyn-based painter whose work has garnered a reputation for surveying as far outside the limits of knowledge as her own mind allows her to meander. The 24 x 18 inch work that is *imagination is defined by what lies outside* exists, alone, as a forward epitomization of Robinson's creative construct. The implicitly referenced converse to the titular *outside* is marked by the contents of a golden, circular fence at center. There is nothing within it – whereas, as suggested by the title itself, the expanse that finds its inception where the fence stops is filled to the brim with light; chromatic commotion; beautifully connoted frenzy. [The age-old gospel of 'thinking outside the box,' Medium's Mike Sturm writes](#), is "supposed to (signify) thinking creatively, freely, and off the beaten path." Robinson's rendition serves to scrutinize the familiar doctrine from its least commonly cited vantage point: why castigate the masses for willfully remaining in the "box" (or, in this case, fence), when you

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Hyland, Samuel. "The Symbolists: Seeing Beyond Reality at HESSE FLATOW." *Sammys World*. Online. 2021. could seduce them with the treasures that exist outside of its confines? Once again, reality is forced into a sleeve that demands that both of its dimensions be addressed simultaneously. Both sides – whether we favor them or not – are unshakable pieces of the real world. But both sides, just the same, are malleable if we have the guts to peer over the border.



Gallery image via Nicole Kaack.

[Alicia Smith's \*Nagualism\*](#), which, once again, is part of an unwavering effort made by the exhibition to transcend the boundaries posed by the pandemic just as it does those posed by reality, embraces the task of merging mental lines by way of a three-minute production. Reality – if it has, at this point, any concrete meaning at all – is presented in its most forthright form. A jaguar loudly eats away at a slab of raw meat. Among several remorselessly grotesque (yet, in a very eclectic way, intimate) elements made audible are ripping flesh, crunching bones, and harrowing growls. The natural scene is projected onto a wall, against which the artist stands. The excruciating episode replayed onto her face in a continuous loop, Smith spends the first portion of the video with her eyes shut. After about a minute, she opens them. She mirrors the chewing of the jaguar with her own mouth. Blood begins to spill from her lips. The film – in haunting silence – does not end, or necessarily *fade* to black, until an abrupt cutoff saves the consumer from its imagery. Though perhaps not as intentionally as Robinson's piece, Smith's tortured visual also prompts discourse on a long-famed injunction: *ignorance is bliss*. Often, reality is not solely existent as context to our collective narrative, but as a defining exterior display that plasters itself across our faces, an omnipresent terror we have been taught to disregard. With the eyes closed, one is shielded from the ugliest face(s) of the reality given them. Yet, with the eyes opened – no matter how ghastly the sight beheld – *something*, as opposed to the nothingness of Robinson's threshold, is to be experienced. By showing us both ends of the spectrum, *Nagualism* puts the distinction into our hands: is sentience worth mortification? There is one single reality that exists and is not open for change – but the sole means by which it is altered is the way it is construed. *The Symbolists* works to remind us of this power.

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**Louis Osmosis, *Default\_01 (To Firmly Grasp it)*, 2021; Maho Danowaki, *I Wish I Was a Land of Sand*, 2021**

The exhibition's origins themselves are particularly humble for the boldness it exudes. Curating exhibitions, for one, is a field that co-curator Nicole Kaack accidentally stumbled into upon being exposed to art-adjacent literature. Moreover, before Karen Hesse Flatow founded HESSE FLATOW, its namesake's curatorial home was a space called CRUSH CURATORIAL – named for the fact that she showed artists whose work she had a crush on.

"Karen came to me with an idea about the proliferation of symbols and virtual worlds today—in the historical symbolist movement, the world of images was much more limited than it is now," Kaack told *Sammy's World* about the current show via email. "From there, we were excited also to think about the breadth of messages being conveyed and to reinforce that those messages, while symbolic in expression, could be political, personal, or incisive in content."

*If gallery viewers left with one takeaway from the exhibition, we asked Kaack, what would you want it to be?*

"I think that a critical reading of our contemporary symbols is perhaps what I want to capture through this exhibition—realizing that images have meaning and that we need to address that in the ways that we respond to or adopt them."