

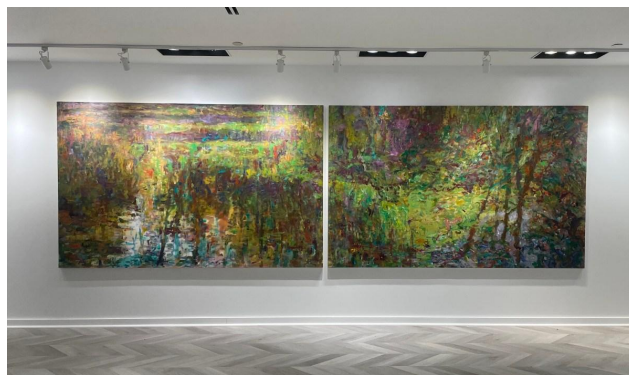
HYPERALLERGIC

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By Jennifer Remenchick

The Story of Incarceration That Inspired a Nature Painter

The beauty of the natural world coupled with the tragedy of racial oppression led to Foad Satterfield's painting series inspired by Albert Woodfox's incarceration.



Foad Satterfield, "Epic Jewel Lake" (2017), acrylic on canvas, 60 x 192 inches (all photos Jennifer Remenchick/Hyperallergic)

ASPEN, Colorado — Foad Satterfield's paintings convey the confidence that comes from many years of building trust with his materials, process, and intuition. His hazy landscapes consist of layer upon layer of brushstrokes that culminate in compositions that oscillate between representation and abstraction. "I let the painting take me where it wants to go," he says, "every piece demands a different kind of sensitivity."

Born in 1945 in Orange, Texas, and raised in both rural Texas and Lake Charles, Louisiana, he was highly influenced by the topography of the region. The aesthetic of

those untamed marshlands and lush swamps still suffuses his work. Growing up in the Jim Crow south, Satterfield used nature and walks in the woods to escape the harsh realities of the way he and other Black people he knew were often treated. An example of the racism that so permeated the region in his childhood occurred when he won first place in an artwork competition held for area schools. Segregation was still practiced in Louisiana and when the judges discovered he was from a school for Black children his first-place award was taken away and replaced with third place. “I didn’t really understand what was going on because I had no context for segregation so it didn’t upset me,” Satterfield told me in a conversation about his life and practice, “but my mother was traumatized.”

It is in this duality — the beauty of the natural world coupled with the tragedy of racial oppression — that a recent series of his work inspired by the life of Albert Woodfox can best be understood. Satterfield initially became aware of Woodfox through the national coverage of his ongoing incarceration. Woodfox was a member of the Angola Three, a group of African-American prison inmates who were kept in solitary confinement for decades, 42 years in Woodfox’s case. Originally named for the plantation that once occupied the grounds, and known officially as the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola Prison is notoriously violent, often referred to as the “Alcatraz of the South.” Woodfox was ultimately released in 2015 after pleading no contest on a lesser charge, citing his advanced age and deteriorating health as reasons not to fight the plea deal. He passed away from COVID-19 complications in 2022 at the age of 75.

Satterfield had a chance to meet Woodfox before his death at *All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50*, a historical exhibition held at the Oakland Museum of California that traced the radical political party’s roots and history. There, he was able to present Woodfox with a monograph of his work containing an essay by artist and writer Megan

Wilkinson, which Satterfield describes as “an incredible experience.” It was Woodfox’s association with the Black Panthers that some say got him in trouble — the former warden of Angola, Burl Cain, was quoted in 2008 as saying that Woodfox needed to continue being held in solitary confinement because he subscribed to “Black Pantherism.”



Foad Satterfield, “Woodfox No. 4” (2016), acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96 inches

Satterfield could relate to Woodfox because of their similar ages and backgrounds, and because he understood that many prisoners such as Woodfox started introspective practices, including meditation and the study of philosophy, while incarcerated in an effort to fill their time and maintain their self-possession. In many ways, Satterfield shares this feeling about his painting, seeing it as a ritual that affirms the continuity and creativity of the natural world in spite of the personal and collective traumas that scar many of us.

Included in *Elemental Variations*, his most recent exhibition with Malin Gallery, are two of Satterfield’s Woodfox paintings, “Woodfox No. 3” and “Woodfox No. 4” (both 2016). Visually, nothing is particularly different about these paintings in relation to others with less loaded titles, like “Epic No. 1” (2018) and “Flow” (2022). In fact, Satterfield

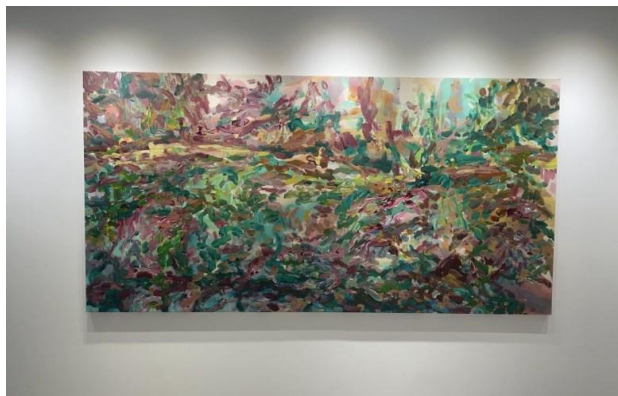
considered not naming them after Woodfox at all, preferring to keep his titles fairly vague so that viewers can have the widest possible range of subjective experiences with his art. He ultimately changed his mind, he said, because Woodfox “is where the painting came from; I was thinking about him while I made the work.”

Formally, the paintings range from the incredibly loose “What Matters No. 2” (2020), which looks almost like a brightly colored cloud or a break of sky in the canopy of a forest, to others that feel tied to a specific time and place, such as “Epic Jewel Lake” (2017). Satterfield composed them through an accumulation of heavily gestural brushstrokes using a combination of techniques, especially *alla prima* and *en plein air* painting. The artist is hesitant to delimit his process, and rather holds to the idea that each individual painting demands its own set of practices. While he cares deeply about social justice movements, particularly fighting systemic racism and climate change, he remains steadfast in his desire for viewers to have their own experiences with the work, hoping the paintings will inspire people to ask themselves bigger political and philosophical questions and take that inquisitiveness back out into the world.

During our conversation we touched on the question of how one stays hopeful in the face of oppression. Satterfield mused on his own past and how he made it through the Jim Crow south and his compulsory service in the Vietnam War. “In the end,” he says, “what kept me going was that I always had a vision ... that and choices — choices and desire create the world.” Across the exhibition I cannot help but think of Satterfield’s choices — to create paintings in the face of pain and to meditate on the stillness of nature while the surrounding world runs wild with violence. Perhaps most poignant is his decision to envision an exhibition, and a world, in which the name “Woodfox” references not only the terrors of systemic racism but also the beauty of art and the possibility of being set free.



Installation view of *Foad Satterfield: Elemental Variations* at Malin Gallery, Aspen



Foad Satterfield, "Woodfox No. 3" (2016), acrylic on canvas, 48 x 96 inches

Foad Satterfield: Elemental Variations continues at Malin Gallery (520 East Durant Avenue, Aspen, Colorado) through May 27. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.