



BURNING
IN WATER

Press Release

Valerie Hegarty: *American Berserk*

6 October 2016 – 5 December 2016

Opening Reception: 6 October 2016, 6 – 8 pm



Watermelon Head with Banana Smile,
2016, glazed ceramics

Burning in Water is pleased to present *American Berserk*, a solo exhibition of new work by the Brooklyn-based artist Valerie Hegarty. The show features a suite of watercolor paintings and four series of ceramic sculptures. *American Berserk* is Hegarty's first solo exhibition in New York City since her acclaimed *Alternative Histories* at the Brooklyn Museum in 2013.

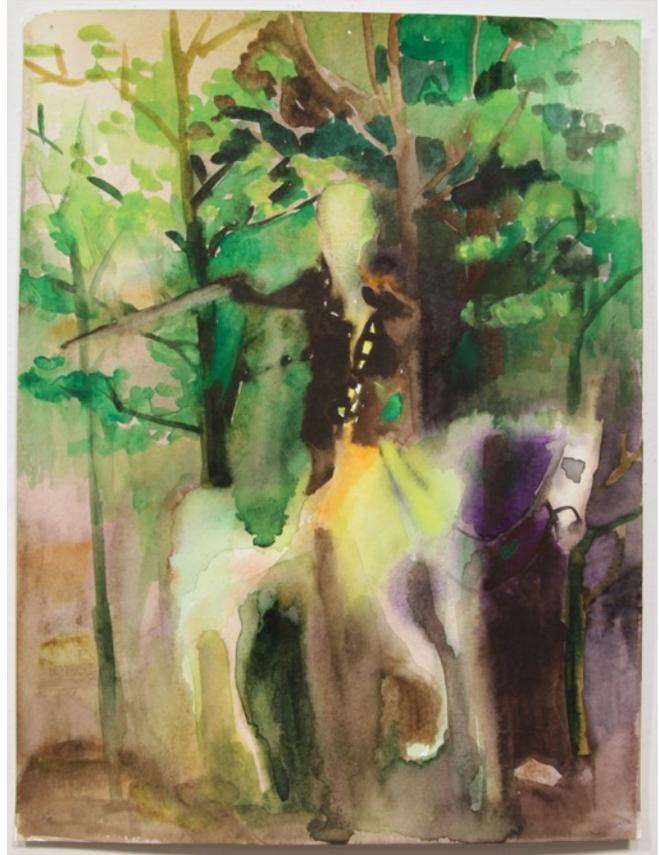
Throughout her career, Valerie Hegarty has explored fundamental themes of American history and particularly the legacy of 19th-century American art, addressing topics such as colonization, slavery, Manifest Destiny, historical revisionism, nationalism and environmental degradation in her work. Elaborating upon visual references to the art-historical canon of North America, Hegarty repurposes the ideological tenets of such works into a critical examination of the American legacy—artistic and otherwise. Cloaked within allusions to American classicism and evocations of the decorative and ornamental traditions, Hegarty's work consistently interrogates the darker ramifications of the American

Experiment, ranging from the environmental impact of expansionism to the conflicted and repressed dimensions of collective memory.

The title of the current exhibition is borrowed from Philip Roth's Pulitzer-prize-winning novel *American Pastoral*, in which Roth defines the inverse of the American pastoral ideal—epitomized by the violence, cultural dissolution and societal upheaval of the late 1960s and

1970s—as the “indigenous American Berserk.” In her essay “The Plot Against America” (2004) critic Judith Shlevitz identifies the “indigenous American Berserk,” which she defines as the threat of violence which persists just beneath the democratic veneer of American civil society, as a fundamental, recurring theme throughout Roth’s later novels.

With the concept of the “American Berserk” as a touchstone, Valerie Hegarty began the body of work in the current exhibition with a series of watercolor paintings that she created during a two month residency at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire. Viewed as a whole, the suite of watercolors suggests a fevered, hallucinatory vision of American history examined through the prism of its visual artistic traditions. Still life paintings of fruit evoke the works of Raphaelle Peale, although hints of rot allude to the degradation of the bounty of the American landscape. Individual arrangements of fruits are drained of vibrant colors, which Hegarty describes as an allusion to both the widespread practice of artificially ripening fruit in trucks with Ethylene gas and the way in which blood might drain from a viewer’s face if confronted by a ghost. The 18th-century agrarian ideal in which the American democratic project was rooted is personified as a ghost or specter, and the blight of the environmentally-destructive methods of Agribusiness are suggested by gaseous puffs of smoke.



The Ghost of History, 2016, watercolor on paper

Hegarty’s still life watercolor paintings also invoke the 17th-century notion of *Vanitas*, wherein depictions of fruit and vegetables represent the organic nature of human existence, with over-ripeness and rot intimating human mortality and ultimate demise. Correlations between the life-cycles of fruit and those of humans recur throughout *American Berserk*, most prominently in the sculptures of fantastical watermelons that anchor the show. This series evolved from both a 2012 relief painting by the artist, in which the interior surface of a watermelon became a tongue projecting from the surface of the painting, and the recurrent images of watermelons in her watercolor studies. Hegarty was inspired to begin creating her watermelon sculptures after viewing footage of environmental mishaps in China and Mexico in which fields of watermelons were sprayed with the incorrect growth hormone causing their pink insides to grow faster than their green rinds. The curious result was that the watermelons would spontaneously explode in the field. The indelible image of randomly combusting watermelons, both terrifying and darkly humorous, instigated further explorations of three-dimensional representations of the fruit in ceramic—a new medium for Hegarty.



Watermelon Decay, 2016, glazed ceramics

In the artist's hands, watermelons are imbued with a seemingly endless array of connotations. Watermelons, Hegarty has noted, are the most "bodily" of all fruits. Comparably-sized to a human head, their interiors are sanguinary. Strikingly corporal, Hegarty's watermelon sculptures acquire a range of anthropomorphized elements that suggest the span of the human life cycle: slurping tongues, oozing surfaces, ribbed carcasses, gnashing teeth and lubricated sex organs. Simultaneously, the sculptures invoke broader themes from American history, including the Arcadian mythology of the nation's founding and expansion and the malevolent racial stereotypes that American society has fitfully struggled to shed.

Hegarty pushes further into the sphere of personification in her "fruit face" works, in which watermelons and other fruits are reconstituted as visages. Evoking the proto-surreal portraits of the 16th-century Italian Mannerist Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the fruit faces maintain a curious inscrutability even as they seem to taunt the viewer.

Also featured in *American Berserk* is a series of sculptures of George Washington rendered in topiary form, which play upon the cultural recapitulations of the founding father's image that suffuse American culture. By rendering Washington as a topiary, Hegarty suggests a literal embedding of nationalism into landscape. Simultaneously, there is a diminution in stature from the hagiographic monumentalism of Mt. Rushmore to the modesty of domestic ornamentation or private souvenir. The faux-aristocratic pretensions of the topiary form succumb to consumerism and democratic ubiquity—from the grand estate to Disneyland to the suburban backyard.



Watermelon Head with Strawberry Eyes, 2016, glazed ceramics

American Berserk is on view at Burning in Water in NYC through December 5.

Valerie Hegarty (b. 1967, Burlington, VT) is a Brooklyn-based artist whose work frequently employs critical engagement with American history and addresses themes of memory, place and art-historical legacy through painting, sculpture and large-scale installations. Previous solo exhibition venues include Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, NY; Marlborough Gallery, NY; Locust Projects, Miami; Museum 52, London; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and Guild & Greyskul, NY. Public commissions include Autumn on the Hudson Valley with Branches (2009) for High Line Art and a special projects installation for the Brooklyn Museum. Her work is included in the permanent collections of the Brooklyn Museum, the Perez Art Museum Miami, the New Britain Museum of American Art, the Saatchi Museum, the Tang Museum and the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Hegarty received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has received grants and awards from the Pollock Krasner Foundation, The New York Foundation for the Arts, the Rema Hort Mann Foundation, the Tiffany Foundation and Campari NY. She has completed residencies at LMCC, Maria Walsh Sharpe, PS 122, MacDowell, Yaddo and Smack Mellon, and served as the first Andrew W. Mellon Arts and the Common Good Artist-in-Residence at Drew University.

Burning in Water is a New York gallery and project space featuring an innovative curatorial program that highlights the work of living artists with reference to broader issues confronting society. Founded in 2015 by Barry Thomas Malin, the gallery frequently collaborates with nonprofit and community-based organizations in presenting its projects. Past non-profit partners have included JustLeadership USA, Free Arts NYC the Wild Bird Fund and the Kenya-based organization UHAI EASHRI.

Burning in Water:

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Gallery Hours:

12 - 8 pm (Tues – Sat)

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