

# MARC STRAUS NEW YORK

## Entang Wiharso

### *When Rabbits Eat Meat*

I can find solitude, hope, dreams, and pleasure in nature and my garden is a place where I empty my tired mind and where new ideas grow. Gardening and making art have many similarities - observing, collecting data, analyzing, experimenting and looking for conclusions. The garden is both a reductive place and place of escalation. Like art, it can be a respite from fatigue and loneliness. Plants, gardens, and landscapes have appeared in my work over the last decade as a way to discuss geopolitics, migration, heritage and history. In these paintings to be exhibited at Marc Straus Gallery, I wanted a historical reorientation that engaged collective memory of the land. These works imagine the U.S. in a series of mindscapes. Some images reflect the traumatic penetration of a childhood experience with drowning and imagine climate change and sea level rise. Contaminated Landscape, which was exhibited last year and is an important precursor to this show, began my exploration of how social and political systems protect colonial history and slavery to perpetuate heritage in the midst of extreme environmental changes. We move about our lives barely realizing we are in the middle of a chronic, life-threatening condition.

When I was gardening in Indonesia with all its challenges, the idea emerged that the Indonesian landscape created during the colonial era buried a lot of suffering and simplified the complexities of society at that time. Subsequent work reflected a landscape stripped of its history, a landscape simplified to create a colonial story, a version of the place wasted. The first time I saw a corpse flower was in a botanical garden in Belgium, although it is originally from Indonesia and Southeast Asia. This flower has migrated throughout the world since colonial times as part of the effort to assert foreign ownership of Java and as a sign of the golden age of colonialism. British General Raffles took credit for the “discovery” of the flower after locals showed it to a member of his expedition. That is why it is often known as the Rafflesia flower. In these images of the corpse flower, I am claiming my heritage and rejecting the success and narrative of colonialization - the romanticism that was created at that time and is still perpetuated to this day.

Living in the United States, getting to know the trees and plants was a way to connect and feel associated with my home here. Gardening was a way to learn how to survive. It allowed me to feel like I belonged and existed in this environment. During research that took me through the southern U.S. (North and South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas) I discovered a lot of historical text and subtext from the environment and architecture, including agricultural processes and public monuments, as well as unmarked historical sites that are carried forward in the collective memory. Plants, flowers, and landscapes manifested through past actions and labor, are signs that express existence, heritage, and migration

# MARC STRAUS

## NEW YORK

throughout history. After a visit to Charleston, South Carolina where a tour guide pointed out a tree in the middle of the city that had been used for lynching, I became obsessed with painting trees. In this context, trees serve as a rejection of that violence as well as a reminder of the dark history of slavery and the origin of hate towards people of color, which is still present in the social fabric of America today.

I developed my use of glitter because I am fascinated by the idea of an unfixed image. Glitter allows me to create lush, camouflaged surfaces in order to talk about malleable perception and presentation. The glitter and cartoon-like figures in these works mask darker, perhaps sinister, subjects in this body of work. I am interested in the uncomfortable juxtaposition between beauty, humor, and kitsch with pain, suffering, and fear. The strong association with craft creates a useful tension to speak about skewed perceptions of identity. The surface of these paintings buries information and deceives our eyes. They reflect a willingness to be blinded by comfortable explanations, a willingness to ignore evidence of danger and suffering in favor of pleasant thoughts. I want people to wonder, *Is this a reflection of reality, or an exaggerated story?*

—Entang Wiharso  
1 April 2023