

EXPOSURES



LEFT: "Woven N° 9," 2015.
 ABOVE: A detail from the top right corner of "Woven N° 9." Marcuse says she wanted to make pieces that were "bigger and flatter," and offered a "sense of immersion" to viewers.

ABSTRACT STILL LIFE

Nature's Fabric

To create her new series of large-scale photographs, Tanya Marcuse stitches together digital images of her elaborately assembled tableaux of creatures and plant life, both living and dead. **BY DZANA TSOMONDO**

THE LARGE-SCALE IMAGES of flora and fauna in Tanya Marcuse's new project, "Woven," are reminiscent of medieval tapestries. The "natural" world that Marcuse depicts is in fact painstakingly crafted. The result is neither nature photography, nor a work of pure abstraction, but some commingling of the two. Viewed in its entirety, each 5x10-foot image is dense with

colors and textures, the all-over uniformity bringing to mind Abstract Expressionism. But get close, and you see the rough velvet of an antler, a bruised pear nestled in purpling leaves. "The scale of these pieces so intentionally disrupts that of the still life and moves it more towards abstract painting," Marcuse explains, "but I felt it was absolutely crucial that as

you move in close, the detail of tiny things is still extremely keen and can be experienced as still life." Marcuse's photographs are showing this fall at Julie Saul Gallery in New York City.

Marcuse often immerses herself in long-term projects. One of her first serious projects was 1983's "Slaughterhouse," the result of five months at an abattoir in rural Pennsylvania. When she started, all she could see was death, but as she continued to work, she found her focus shifted to the men who worked there, and to their relationships to each other and to the animals. "So naturally the photographs changed, and I learned something about this longer, lingering look at the same subject, about wrestling

with a subject, both visually and conceptually," Marcuse says.

Perhaps because of her penchant for long-term projects, there is often a clear narrative progression from one of Marcuse's series to the next. "Woven" sprang from ground Marcuse sowed with her previous series "Fallen" (2010-2015), made up of overhead shots of limp flowers and rotting, worm-ridden fruit strewn about the forest floor. While wrapping up "Fallen," with its theme of a paradise lost, Marcuse honed the visual language that defines "Woven."

"I was very interested in tapestry and Jackson Pollock, and became curious about making pieces that were bigger and flatter," she says, "wanting that sense of immersion

that comes when [a work engages] your peripheral vision."

It took almost two years for Marcuse to turn her inspiration into something concrete. Months of planning and orchestration go into these pieces. She collects things living and dead: flowers before they blossom, ferns before they unfurl, cocoons like quietly ticking clocks. One of Marcuse's challenges is working with fragile and perishable materials. Freezing and drying things helps stabilize them but it is a delicate dance. She also takes care not to harm living creatures. Discussing an upcoming shoot, Marcuse sounds more like a madcap naturalist than a photographer.

"I have raised a variety of caterpillars in different

stages of the lifecycle, have a small centipede farm, and have collected live frogs and received a gift of a dead black snake from the artist Portia Munson," she explains. "I've dried mushrooms and frozen mushrooms, but also plan on collecting fresh ones the day before [this upcoming shoot]. I'm burning and spray painting a kind of sedum that I want for its trailing properties, but not its chartreuse color for this piece. I carved out little holes in the dirt and rocks in the structure to make pools of water, and spray those each day with a clear waterproofing spray."

She tried to shoot her creations from overhead as she had with her series "Fallen," but realized that achieving the visual effect

she desired required new tools. She wanted to dissipate the "spatial tension" of the previous work in lieu of a more neutral perspective. After some trial and error, Marcuse built a 5x10-foot adjustable wooden frame in which she builds her tableaux. She began photographing these while standing on a scaffolding, adjusting the frame so it was perpendicular to her or at a slight angle.

While the structure was carefully engineered, Marcuse quickly realized that although the frame she had built solved the issue of perspective, the images were not as flat as she had hoped. The curvature of the lens on her 8x10 view camera meant that images weren't uniformly sharp at the edges. Frustrated, she took some compositional test shots with a newly acquired digital SLR and realized that with it, she had the ability to collage smaller shots together into a coherent whole. Now she uses approximately 30 frames, shot

across the structure, to make a single image.

"[Digital compositing] gave me the ability to have that tiny leaf in the corner be as well described as something in the center of the frame," Marcuse notes, "and that's significant because it's no longer capturing a single moment; it might take an hour to take all the shots that make up the final image."

Marcuse's process of building and photographing may sound overwhelming. But focusing on each meticulous detail takes her to a space of extreme concentration that she describes as "ecstatic." As fascinated as she is with the materials, she makes it clear that everything is done and conceived with the photograph in mind. This elaborate simulacrum, wherein fecundity and rot are woven together, first physically, then digitally, is all in service of that final image, gracefully toying the line between abstract art and landscape photography.