

Pondering Peace Amidst Mayhem

A. Richard Langley

In her dynamic and disturbing exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia, [*The Unbearable Flatness of Being*](#), Atlanta, Ga.-based artist [Sarah Emerson](#) plays with words—and on our fear of maintaining tranquility in our cruel, chaotic world. The four sections have catchy names (e.g., *Where the Light is as Darkness (I-IV)* and *Here's Looking at You Too (I-II)*) and its title, save for the word “flatness,” is the same as Milan Kundera’s 1984 novel.

Contrary to the installation's title, the scope, dimension, and arresting colors of the 18 trippy paintings are expansive and transfixing. We witness a disintegrating forest replete with both positive and negative images: ominous clouds, burning tree trunks, bug-eyed creatures, baby deer, friendly and ghoulish ghosts, skull-like figures, and a culture catchphrase ("Kilroy was here").

Emerson builds anxiety by changing the palette in each section to reflect the increasing violent intensity of despair and destruction.

The Unbearable Flatness of Being is a cutting critique on, and raises many questions about, the world's fragile state and our personal and emotional well-being in it. Does Emerson believe that man is solely responsible for destroying the environment, or are unearthly forces involved? Do the changing frequency, size, and color of the installation's images among sections correspond with the visual focus of that section? Do the images of the deteriorating environment also comment on economic, social, and spiritual turmoil?

These questions will inform my expanded essay-length review on the philosophical and spiritual relationship between Emerson's installation and Kundera’s novel. He posits that if we experience no repercussions (lightness) for our earthly actions, we are conflicted (unbearable).