

*Pondering Peace Amidst Mayhem*

Sarah Emerson could have seemingly used the popular "[Kilroy was here](#)" tag (GIs in World War II marked conquered territory with it) many times in her exhibition [The Unbearable Flatness of Being](#). The exhibition, which ran from December 11, 2015 - February 20, 2016, at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Georgia (MOCA), is comprised of 18 individual paintings presented in four catchy-titled sections. These astonishing, cartoon-like pieces depict a wildly vivid yet chillingly unreal forest (the world) ravaged by time, age, environmental issues—and war. (Contrary to the "flatness" referenced in the installation's title, the scope, dimension, and captivating colors of the paintings—acrylic on canvas, each 72" x 76"—are expansive and transfixing.) During her artist talk on January 26, 2016, at MOCA, the Atlanta, Ga.-based Emerson was asked why she used the tag only one time, in the section *Here's Looking at You Too (I-II)*. The petite, unassuming Emerson replied that she would never tell anyone what they should—or should not—see in or interpret from the exhibition or any of her surreal, nature-based paintings. She noted, however, that her use of the tag could signify that man *could have* caused the damage or "touched" the forest. This cannily contradictory answer is typical of Emerson, who cheerfully admitted that she thrives on creating ambiguity in viewers. With *The Unbearable Flatness of Being*, Emerson posits that the world, represented by the forest, and the physical, psychological, and environmental well-being of all life within it, is a fragile and dangerously evolving existence to which man and nature are witnesses.

Emerson's primary inspiration for the haunting forest in her exhibition was Japan's [Aokigahara](#), also known as the Suicide Forest, a dense region at Mount Fuji's northwest base.

Tourists flock to it because of its eerie beauty and many rocky, icy caverns. The experience can be treacherous, however: The forest floor, mainly volcanic rock, is hard to navigate, and it is easy to get lost—by accident or on purpose (to commit suicide)—in the claustrophobic, creepy environs. Many who dare venture into the Aokigahara use colorful markers to mark their paths. As a result, the initial entry to the forest is full of tape and debris; this correlates to Emerson's use of the "Kilroy was here" tag, implying that man either caused the decay of or “touched” the forest. (Interestingly, in the section *Here's Looking at You Too (I-II)*, she placed the tag in a cave and painted it black against a soft background. This strongly suggests (black and white) that man is mainly responsible for, but is ignoring or in the dark about, destroying the environment.) She also uses bright streamers—some with sharp edges or points (to keep man out?)—that wrap around the upper branches of witness trees and other elements. Witness trees have seen centuries of history, including war, in a specific area and now stand there as lone survivors.

*The Unbearable Flatness of Being* is a witness to world events that are continuous, compounding, and confounding. One experience or image builds on another, never ending and always evolving. Accordingly, the flow of and the elements in the exhibition have no beginning or end. It was meant to be a circular, connected experience, but due to space limitations at MOCA, the installation was set up as four sections on four walls. Each painting and each section can also be a stand-alone, unique piece—a reminder of the contradictions in her work.

True to her offbeat creative approach and dark outlook, Emerson's favorite source of inspiration is the horrible things—physical and psychological—that we do to others, the environment, and ourselves. The four sections of *The Unbearable Flatness of Being* portray

mayhem that man and nature may have witnessed or caused. We witness a disintegrating forest replete with both positive and negative images shifting on and above the ground: ominous clouds, sprawling oil slicks, raging tsunamis, burning tree trunks, bug-eyed creatures, friendly (looking) and ghoulish ghosts, sinister skull-like figures, and watchful eyes (that may or may not represent man). Save for the "Kilroy was here" tag, a playfully perverse tactic by Emerson to include a well-known war reference in her colorfully disturbing work, *Here's Looking at You Too (I-II)* is the warmest (a hint of rainbow-like sun rises from the ground) and least chaotic of the four sections. The titles for the exhibition's other three sections comment on physical



*Here's Looking at You Too (I-II)*, 2015, acrylic on canvas  
72 x 76 inches (182.88 x 193.04 cm)

destruction, hell on earth—or hell itself: *Of Brute Matter (I-V)*, *Where the Light is as Darkness (I-IV)*, and *As Above So Below (I-VI)*. Throughout, Emerson builds anxiety by manipulating her signature candy-colored palette (which is sweetly seductive but arrestingly artificial) and changing the frequency, size, color, and location of the images, to reflect the increasing violent intensity of despair and destruction. (Viewers can escape the chaos and cruelty via select, open

areas in each painting to see light and hope.) She is expressing that we should save the forest, but how can we find our way into it—and leave it? With or without our help, the forest continues to survive, but not necessarily thrive.

*The Unbearable Flatness of Being* assimilates her inspiration from varied cultural and personal sources—mainly her obsession with the atrocities we inflict on each other and the environment. Keen on presenting challenging, ambiguous work, she depicts these acts with sharp, subtly persuasive images—both violent and playful. Her one-time use of the "Kilroy was here" tag, however, is her most confounding visual statement. Contrary to her gently evasive answer at the talk, she could have placed the tag multiple times in the installation, clearly calling out that man did more than "touch" the forest. Maybe by using the tag only one time, she wanted viewers to remember it and question its inclusion in the installation. And to stress that man, even with limited presence in it, can adversely affect the environment.