

Like Entering A Mary Oliver Poem: Paintings by Isabel Forbes

OCTOBER 16, 2016 BY SCOTT NEELY



Detail of “Underfoot” (Oil on canvas, 30” x 40”)

Stepping into the new exhibition of paintings by [Isabel Forbes](#), on view at the Chapman Cultural Center in Spartanburg this October, feels like walking into a Mary Oliver poem. The gallery itself reads like poetry, moving through disparate images nonetheless tied to one another, a current of meaning running quietly through them. Nature fills the room, and the artist’s craft somehow enhances its presence. We pass through the gallery and step into the world, the world that surrounds us but that we have forgotten to look up and see. We are there.

But like [Oliver's writing on nature](#), these paintings are more than beautiful representations of the natural world. They communicate something to us, about us, something at once human and more than human: something real, to which we are connected without knowing it.



Misty Fog Rising (Oil on linen, 9" x 12")

Even when the subject matter is distant from the viewer, these images offer intimacy. They draw us in, as if the edge of the painting was within the visual field. We stand on the bank of the painting, ready to move across water.

Strange how loneliness, which comes through many of these paintings, does not dominate or overwhelm their tone.

This melancholy somehow enhances their warmth and our sense of being within them.



Detail of "Blue on Blue" (Oil on canvas, 24" x 24")

This may in part be because the theme uniting the paintings is not only that of nature, but of friendship across the boundaries of species, space, and kind. At heart the paintings are about connection, the way the natural world communicates across difference to bind us into networks of sustaining care and mutual regard.



Detail of "Voyage" (Oil on canvas, 30" x 40")

One senses that the artist knows herself as part of nature, of what she depicts, and that by painting she connects us with the world we so often fail to see, though we inhabit it every day of our lives.



Detail of “Fog Horn Coo” (Oil on canvas, 18” x 24”)

The beauty of the exhibition reaches its culmination in the subtle painting, “Fog Horn Coo”. Compositionally one of the most complex paintings in the show, it is also the most economical in its technical execution. Built to embody the art of camouflage, Forbes depicts a mourning dove concealed in an autumn forest. Here intimacy, loneliness, and warmth combine to produce a feeling of immense quiet, a hush at the center of the gallery. We enter in; we wait to hear a bird we can hardly see. It has called; it is about to call again.



Detail of “Fog Horn Coo”

We are here. And Forbes wants to connect us with how rich this is, this place. Beauty; solitude; craft; distance; intimacy; loneliness; friendship: these paintings draw us into the life we are living but so rarely know how to see.

Exhibition details
“The Nature of Things”
by [Isabel Forbes](#)

Opening Reception
Thursday, October 20 5pm-8pm

[Artists’ Guild of Spartanburg](#)
[Chapman Cultural Center](#)
200 E. St. John St.
Spartanburg, SC