

Paradise Lost: Kimia Ferdowsi Kline's Latest Paintings Explore the Ills of Intimacy

BY MARGARET CARRIGAN | MAY 15, 2017



"Breathing on Land," 2017.
(Kimia Ferdowsi Kline and Turn Gallery)

Intimacy is a fickle thing. As inherently social creatures, humans can't help but crave emotional and physical care from others of their species. But with closeness comes too-close-ness. It's this question of "how close is too close" that Brooklyn-based artist Kimia Ferdowsi Kline takes up in her latest exhibition, "Breathing on Land," on view at New York's Turn Gallery through June 17. Her paintings, rich in color and emphatic in gesture, reveal figures embracing, restraining, scrambling, and falling in their quests for connection and survival. The artist spoke with ARTINFO's Margaret Carrigan about femininity, family, and failures.

A lot of the paintings included in "Breathing on Land" are very new, having been produced just within the last eight months or so. What prompted this new body of work for you?

In the last year I've really been thinking about closeness in relationships, especially the dual nature of intimacy: the idea that we, as human creatures, *need* each other, but that need doesn't stop us from complicating each other's lives sometimes! I've spent a lot of time considering what it means to be a family—whether you're related by blood or marriage—and what it means to be a long-term partner, and how those things expand and contract over time. I've also been interested in using nature as a metaphor for our inner emotional states; a lot of the titles of these works reference the elements and whatnot. I'm interested in how we use these archetypal, uncontrollable forces like earth, wind, fire, etc., to mirror our inner emotions.

You use a lot of really bright colors in many of the works on view, especially yellows. But they don't always feel warm or fun. Some are fluorescent, almost radioactive looking. Why do you veer toward garish?

It just goes back to this idea of the thin line between safety and toxicity inherent in intimacy, honestly. Like, being close with someone invites some toxic elements into the relationship. But we can't cut ourselves off from those aspects; to survive we have to engage in it, we have to learn to navigate those radioactive waters.

Are the different female figures in the show's namesake painting, "Breathing on Land," representative of different people in your life? Or are they more like totemic representations of femininity?

The figures symbolize women as a whole and what it means to be a woman—what it means to survive as a woman when there are so many demands placed on you, your time, and your idea of self. The title of the painting kind of says it all for me. Like, of course breathing on land is an obvious thing you should be able to do. But even though it's a very simple process, sometimes it can feel really difficult. Sometimes you can feel smothered or like you can't catch your breath, you know?

"Breathing on Land" reminds me of Matisse's iconic "Joy of Life," with its bright color palette and simple, soft, feminine bodies activating the landscape. Is that an intentional reference?

I look a lot at Matisse. I look a lot at Gauguin. Hockney, too. O'Keefe, even. I think I'm interested in the Fauvists more than anything; I like the way they use color to evoke emotions. But, yeah for sure, Matisse for me is like if I had an artist grandfather.

Were there other artists in your family?

No. Both of my parents are from Iran, so I'm a first-generation American. As the daughter of immigrants, you're allowed to be, like, three things: a doctor, a lawyer, or you can be an engineer. But I always wanted to be an artist, which I announced to my parents at the age of eight, according to them. Basically, going into the arts was the worst possible thing I could've said to them! They were shocked. But then, as I got older, they said they weren't really allowed to study what they were passionate about and they didn't want that for me and my brothers. So they were like, "if you're serious, you can do it," and were very supportive from there. But my dad still made me minor in business, which tanked my GPA!

A lot of the paintings in the show are highly layered—I can see the shadows of figures and forms underneath washes of color and it looks like you've even scratched or scribbled into the paint in several of them. But you haven't always approached your surfaces like this, right?

I've been thinking about this a lot. My process has become almost sculptural, like I'm carving. For a really long time, I made these perfectly brushed surfaces and I really wanted them to look pristine, like an Ingres painting. Then something happened where I had an old panel and a painting on it that I hated, so I decided to paint over it. The texture from the previous painting showed through and I loved the way it looked, so that's what I started doing. Under all of these are other paintings that were unsuccessful. And I used the ghosts of the past lives of these paintings to sort of add to the final piece. Essentially, all of my failures are in there, on view for all to see.

I like how that corresponds with this idea of intimacy you're working through. Closeness is so often engendered by vulnerability and failure.

Yeah, that's a really good point. Being vulnerable can make you seek comfort, or it can make you defensive or aggressive. I'm interested in that tension and I think you see that in a lot of the pieces: a touch can look like a caress, or it can look like a slap. Take "Two Heads," for instance, which kind of inspired the whole show for me. It looks like someone embracing another, but their arm is around the other's head: It could also be interpreted as a choke or strangle-hold.

I also noticed this other painting, "Two by Two," which reads to me like a Garden of Eden image: two figures walking hand in hand in a lush landscape. It's almost like a nod to the original, archetypal story of intimacy gone awry, resulting in the Fall of all humanity.

Ha! I didn't even think about that. My previous two shows here at Turn have dealt primarily with nature. My first show here, in 2014, was actually titled "Eden." It was all about gardens since gardens are highly symbolic in Persian culture. I've never been to Iran—as members of the Bahá'í faith, my family was very persecuted there. That's why my grandparents had to leave. So I've never been but I grew up hearing all these amazing stories about my grandmother's garden. My dad's family had orchards of pomegranate and fig trees. I grew up hearing these about these idyllic places that were such a part of my family's history, but I couldn't access them. That's another difficult part about intimacy: sometimes you just can't get in.

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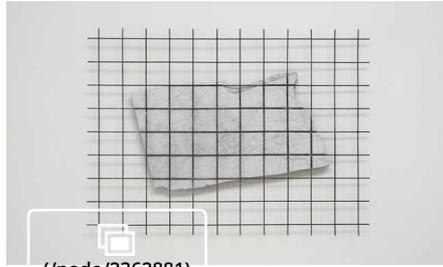


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