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In her exhibit "Psyche's Knot," Amanda Besl's paintings show hair enveloping and entangling objects, blurring the line between reality and fantasy.

Amanda Besl's 'Psyche's Knot' is deeply allegorical, visually enticing **Amanda Besl's show, 'Psyche's Knot,' is deeply allegorical**

By brooke leboeuf

News Contributing reviewer

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Amanda Besl's latest solo show "Psyche's Knot," on view at BT&C Gallery through Nov. 1, features a number of strikingly beautiful works that are as deeply allegorical as they are visually enticing.

Through a series of paintings and drawings, Besl lures the viewer into a dreamlike world where disembodied locks of hair envelope, entangle and, in darker moments, ensnare objects that are reflections of refinement and culture. The expertly rendered hair, with its fluid, sweeping movement, exudes energy and vitality as if it were a living, breathing life form all its own, anthropomorphic in its ability to imbue each work with varied psychological states, from malevolent to demure.

One of Besl's key influences is rococo artist Jean-Honoré Fragonard, who is known for fanciful scenes of frivolity and decadence. He often painted members of the French aristocracy engaged in playful pursuits with erotic undertones that allude to the more sensually indulgent side of aristocratic pleasure.

Fragonard also was a master at painting exceedingly lush landscapes. Besl's depictions of hair are reminiscent of these landscapes. She has referred to the hair in her paintings, in their more innocent renderings as verdure, a French term for lush green vegetation, and in more sinister moments as kudzu, a type of invasive vine that tends to engulf everything around it.

Besl's interest in Fragonard's work goes beyond mere stylistic reference; it is a way to explore the inequities and power struggles between men and women, particularly the ones who exist in predominantly patriarchal societies.

Napoleon and Josephine, a relationship defined by periods of both happiness and turmoil. After their divorce, Josephine lived out the remainder of her life at her beloved home Château de Malmaison, where she cultivated one of Europe's most renowned gardens. Some of Besl's drawings show a single flower or plant wrapped in strands of hair. The hair seems to strangle the botanicals, the two entities entwined, neither able to free itself from the other, yet both seem strangely at home in the entangled mess. Certainly an allusion to Josephine's life, her loves and the complications therein.

Besl also alludes to Josephine through the image of the swan. Josephine adopted the swan as an emblem, in part because she admired its elegance and aggressiveness. One work in which the swan appears, "Sargasso Sea," shows it sitting amid an abundant bed of hair. The work appears simultaneously serene and menacing, as achieved by the eerie greenish light that emanates from it, punctuated by warmer pink and orange tones. The title of the work lends a great deal to understanding this rather haunting scene.

The Sargasso Sea, located in the Atlantic Ocean, is a free-floating mass of seaweed that forms an unusual ecological world unto itself, much like Besl's world where abundant, coiling strands of hair become home to symbolic objects. The title also seemingly refers to "Wide Sargasso Sea," Jean Rhys' prequel to Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre," a story of a woman driven to madness by the patriarchal world in which she lived and who also had an affinity for the lush green botanicals of her Jamaican home.

Even with the abundance of historical and literary references found in Besl's work, it is still entirely and uniquely a world of Besl's creation, one that is seductive in its appearance yet unnerving in its revelations. A world that seems both real and dreamlike, as the lines between reality and fantasy are blurred, opening up strange and enigmatic spaces for contemplation.

Art Review

What: Amanda Besl, "Psyche's Knot"

Where: BT&C Gallery, 1250 Niagara St.

When: Through Nov. 1

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