



HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

Peeping Through a Painted, Sculpted Jungle

In Adrienne Elise Tarver's installation at Victori + Mo, the viewer is compelled to play the role of a voyeur peering through a jungle canopy.

Benjamin Sutton | March 17, 2017



Installation view of Adrienne Elise Tarver's *Secrets of Leaves* at Victori + Mo (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

Stepping into [Adrienne Elise Tarver's](#) installation at [Victori + Mo](#) in Bushwick, it's hard to know what to look at first. The room of painted and sculpted tropical flora is both alluring and impassive; its maximalism confounds. It feels very restrained, which is counterintuitive for an exhibition that includes wall-filling murals of foliage, hanging and protruding sculptures of plants and leaves, and canvases portraying enigmatic scenes glimpsed through branches. But this sense of inquisitive uncertainty is part of the point. Tarver's plants conceal and mask, their sculpted forms jutting from the walls and prodding visitors to peer closely into the two paintings in the exhibition, whose title — *Secrets of Leaves* — they both share.

The secret of these leaves is what's partly hidden beneath them: a brick wall in one painting and a partially nude woman who seems to be sunbathing in the other. Tarver casts the viewer in the role of voyeur, peeking through the foliage and — if you read the two paintings as frames in a sequence — over a wall to glimpse an eroticized figure. The power dynamics of looking are central to all of the artist's work, including the video of a fake modernist home and its half-glimpsed inhabitant that she showed [last year at BRIC](#), "[Eavesdropping](#)." But here, instead of an International Style abode, the setting is a verdant jungle. It calls up the legacy of European colonialism, gendered characterizations of fertile landscapes ripe for exploitation, and related paintings by [Henri Rousseau](#) and [Paul Gauguin](#).

But even such an analysis plays into Tarver's canny configuration. Surrounded by a lush installation filled with intricate sculptural elements — whose forms evoke the organic ornamentation of Art Nouveau, but whose materials are often surprisingly utilitarian, as with the seemingly delicate leaves made of latex caulking and wire mesh — I was inexorably compelled to focus on the uncomfortable dynamics of looking in one painting. This apparent inevitability underscores, perhaps, how deeply rooted our impulses to glimpse the "other" are. Jung and Freud would certainly agree — though they'd offer conflicting explanations as to why.

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Adrienne Elise Tarver, "Secrets of Leaves" (2016), oil on canvas, 36 x 24.5 in

Further complicating this inquiry into the power dynamics of looking and being looked at is the identity of the artist putting them on display. While Rousseau and Gauguin were European men painting tropical scenes populated by animals and indigenous people for an audience like themselves, Tarver is a woman of color prodding viewers to play the role of peeping Tom in an untamed jungle — to look in a manner similar to her exoticizing French forebears. There's a very subtle and self-aware postcolonial critique built into this work that, because of the exhibition's strange sense of restraint, could easily be missed. It asks us to think about who, historically, has had the privilege to look without being seen. I don't mean to imply that the meaning of Tarver's installation is contingent solely on her identity — to do so would be to limit the power of her work. However, knowing where the artist is coming from adds an extra layer of foliage to this exhibition's conceptual canopy.



Installation view of Adrienne Elise Tarver's *Secrets of Leaves* at Victori Mo



Adrienne Elise Tarver, "Secrets of Leaves" (2016), oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in



Adrienne Elise Tarver, "Untitled" (2017), acrylic latex caulking and spray paint on wire mesh, 10 x 14.5 in

Adrienne Elise Tarver's [Secrets of Leaves](#) continues at [Victori + Mo](#) (56 Bogart Street, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through March 19.

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