

The background is a dark, textured painting. It features a central, dark, somewhat abstract figure that resembles a horse's head or a similar animal, looking towards the right. The figure is surrounded by various shapes and colors: a large, light-colored, vertical shape on the left, a bright yellow shape on the right, and several smaller, colorful shapes (blue, pink, yellow) scattered throughout. The overall style is expressive and abstract.

PROJECT ATRIUM:
SARAH EMERSON

March 23, 2013 - July 7, 2013

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART | JACKSONVILLE

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Painting grand-scale murals with a fierce intensity, Sarah Emerson spotlights the fragility of life and man's interaction with and impact on his natural surroundings. Part rebel, part teacher, and full-time mother, the Atlanta-based painter and Emory University art lecturer continues to rail against the manmade world with a paintbrush in one hand and a Power Ranger in the other.

Emerson's freewheeling spirit can be traced back to her nomadic childhood, growing up in several places in Louisiana, southern and central Florida, and Michigan. Exposed to a mixture of rural, suburban and urban landscapes but never settling in one area for too long, she felt a certain detachment from what she calls a "sense of place and its occupants." Unable to define anywhere in particular as home, she found solace in local wooded areas, yet always with a restless eye looking toward the horizon of her parents' next destination.

Playing with her father's camera as a child, Emerson became interested in photography, and that developed into a more serious passion in high school. She enrolled in art school, and as part of the curriculum had to begin working with paint. She discovered that the medium, more than film, allowed her a better sense of the immediacy, physicality and creativity of the artistic process. It also enables her to question authority and critique the disintegrative aspects of capitalism.

Emerson's works present viewers with highly stylized versions of nature by taking patterns already visible in the natural world and painting them in pastel hues, paint by number repetition. Inspired by themes ranging from battlefields, war propaganda, literature, and idyllic gardens, she uses the landscape for impression, abstraction, symbolism, and sentiment. Emerson manipulates scale and spatial relationships, twisting her subjects into flat emblems and shifting planes. Early paintings, such as *Endless Night*, reveal these evocative themes.

FACING OVERLEAF (Clockwise from top)

Black Pool II, 2012. Acrylic and Rhinestones on Canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

Black Pool III, 2012. Acrylic and Rhinestones on Canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

Black Pool, 2012. Acrylic and Rhinestones on Canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

COVER

Black Pool (Detail), 2012. Acrylic and Rhinestones on Canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.



Two deer stare straight out, as though the viewer is invading the forest, as crows peck at pools of blood in the background. The stag's protective stare is both startling and tender, as he stands watch over the forest and his partner. Shimmering red crystals cover the pools of blood, as though sunlight reflects off of them as it peeks through the canopy. The result is a visually enchanting composition that combines bright color with macabre narratives that leave the viewer with a sense of both wonder and melancholy, reminiscent of the her literary idols Robert Frost and Jack London.

For her *Underland* series, Emerson has focused on creating underworld reflections of the natural landscape. She had rarely used black as a primary color before starting the series, but the BP oil spill on the Gulf Coast in 2010 seemed fortuitous as it encapsulated her work, thematically and visually.

ABOVE

Endless Night, 2003. Acrylic and rhinestones on canvas. Courtesy of the Artist.

Each painting has depicted a fantastical analogical study of an actual place combined with the myths and remnants of the real events associated with that location. Once on canvas, the place is removed from reality; it becomes an image reflection or vague memory filtered, abstracted, and compressed into geometric shapes. For Emerson, the artificial underworld in her paintings becomes a story of its own, an apocryphal place mimicking and appropriating a reality of paradise and innocence lost. Each painting is a parallel plane with repeating symbols and “memento mori” motifs dressed up to camouflage a gaping darkness lurking beneath the surface.

An inescapable brew of violence and death lurks at the margins of Emerson’s paintings. Like colorful crepe paper hung at a funeral, the paintings are punctuated by thick stripes of color. In *Sea of Trees III*, effluvial lines of hot pink and marigold yellow drift through the air like some evil, intoxicating poison leading you to your doom. The subject is based on Aokigahara Forest in Japan at the base of Mt. Fuji, a legendary suicide destination and a haunt for demons in Japanese legends. Search parties and family members often use brightly colored ropes to help find their way out of the thick woods. Another painting, *Black Pool*, any inkling of bucolic tranquility has been erased by the death wail rictus of a skull figure in the painting’s foreground. The trees appear to bleed into the black river, as an enchanted glade turns haunted.

Beyond painting, Emerson has also created several large-scale installations constructed of vinyl applied to the windows of leased buildings in several locations. *The Moon is Down*, her installation at Flux Projects 2010 in Atlanta, is an example of what she terms a “human lightbox.” Viewers enter a continuous, multi-panel landscape of an event falling apart, composed of iridescent red and black bursts of color. Emerson enjoys these new methods, as it gives viewers many ways to interact with the piece depending if it is viewed during daylight or moonlight—inside or outside the gallery space. She also enjoys the ability to create an environmental setting within the urban landscape, as she has also created an *Underland* work on an underpass in Atlanta.

In *Black Sea of Trees*, her new *Underland* mural for Project Atrium, Emerson explores the space and scale of the Haskell Atrium Gallery to create a view for those standing at the edge of the wilderness, safe and sound from



ABOVE

Black Sea of Trees, 2013. Preliminary sketch for installation in MOCA Jacksonville's Haskell Atrium, Acrylic.
Courtesy of the Artist.





the blackness in the distance. Using the scale to emphasize the mystery and power of nature and the unknown lurking in the dark or beneath the surface, the mural documents an imagined landscape based on the visual exploration of innocence lost and the beauty and revenge within our natural environment. Emerson also integrates large-scale letters spelling SAFE & SOUND in a whimsical, sweet, and comforting text. This creates a jarring contrast to the steaming, molten rivers of blackness ooze down the mountain, leaving behind trees stripped of foliage and the skeletal remains of its arboreal denizens. Overall, the piece shows the epic aftermath of man and nature's eternal struggle to coexist. While she tried to reassure the viewer that all is safe and sound at the edge of the wilderness, she reminds us, as Robert Frost stated that "...the woods are lovely dark and deep."

ABOVE

The Moon is Down, 2010. Lentic film on glass. Installation view *Flux Projects 2010*, Atlanta, GA. Courtesy of the Artist.



ABOUT SARAH EMERSON

The talented painter has created a new entry in her lauded *Underland* series as part of *Project Atrium: Sarah Emerson*, Emerson is a 1998 graduate of the Atlanta College of Art with a Bachelor of Fine Art and she received her Master of Fine Art from Goldsmith's College, London in 2000. Over the past decade she has exhibited her work in galleries and museums throughout the United States and Europe including White Columns, New York; Cosmic Gallery, Paris; and Real Art Ways, Hartford, CT.

ABOVE

Underland, 2012. Mural commissioned by *Living Walls Atlanta*. Acrylic paint on 2 walls.

Installation view: Reynoldstown at Fulton Terrace and Holtzclaw, Atlanta, GA. Courtesy of the Artist.



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