



Lunar Spring

NATASHA BOWDOIN

January 28 - March 12, 2017



FOREWORD

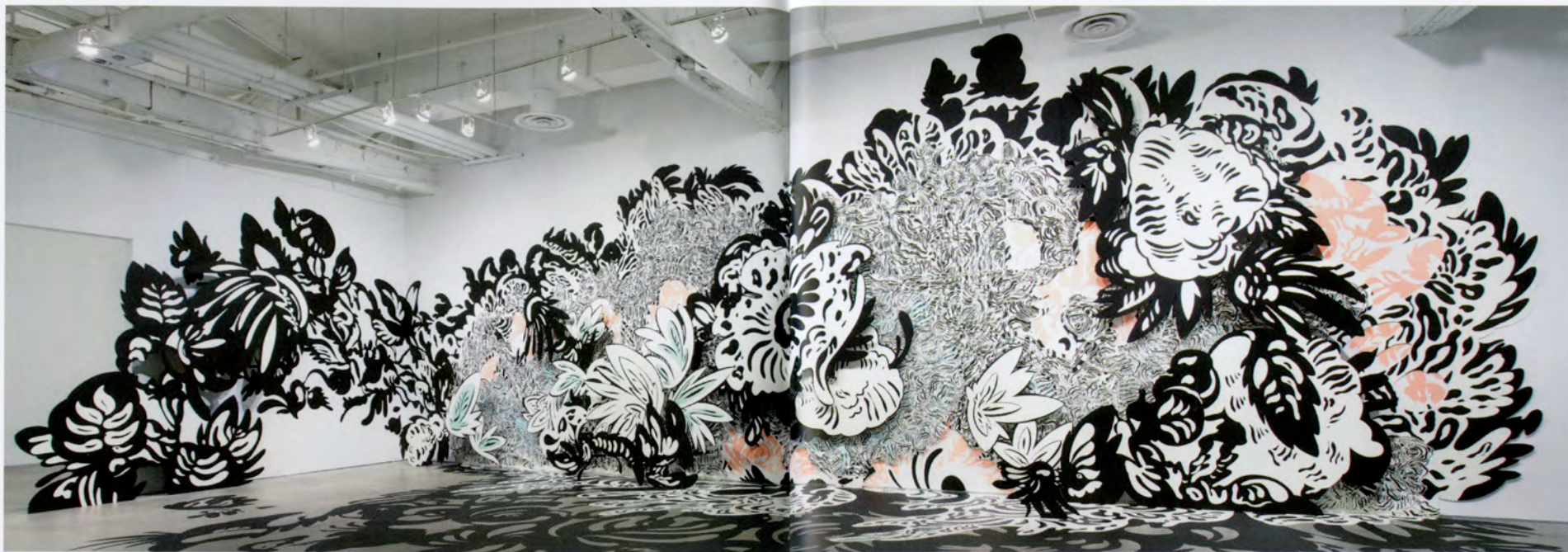
The Visual Arts Center of Richmond is pleased to present the exhibition, *Lunar Spring*, by Natasha Bowdoin and guest curated by Melissa Messina. Bowdoin has transformed the True F. Luck Gallery into an exploration of nature, language, and improvisation. As an early artist in the Quirk + VisArts Residency, Bowdoin was able to work on-site in our gallery to create a large site-specific installation and a series of collages and drawings.

During a residency period of up to 20 weeks, artists have unlimited access to the full range of studios in the VisArts facility and housing and a private workspace provided by our partner Quirk Hotel and Gallery. The program provides artists at any career stage the time, space, equipment and funding to innovate and expand their creative boundaries, allowing artists to develop one or more original works for their exhibitions and/or to respond creatively to the site of our gallery with installations such as Bowdoin's.

We use the exhibitions in our gallery to explore the different ways contemporary artists are innovating the materials and processes we teach in our 15 professional teaching-studios. For this reason, it is a pleasure to present an exhibition in which an artist takes such an intuitive approach to materials.

We extend our gratitude to Altria Group and the Allan and Margot Blank Foundation for their generous support of our exhibition programming. Related educational programming is supported by grants from The Windgate Charitable Foundation, The Community Foundation, Wells Fargo, Dominion Foundation, The Leonore G. Tawney Foundation, and The Fan District Association. We also thank the Virginia Commission for the Arts and CultureWorks & The Arts and Cultural Funding Consortium: City of Richmond, Hanover County and Henrico County for ongoing support of our programming and operations. I also extend appreciation to Melissa Messina for her thoughtful curation of this exhibition and for a beautiful installation of the works, to Gina Collins, interim gallery director for her care in organizing Bowdoin's time in Richmond and finally, to the artist, Natasha Bowdoin, for giving us all the opportunity to experience her artistic process first hand during her month in the Quirk + VisArts Residency program.

Stefanie Fedor
Executive Director
Visual Arts Center of Richmond



"This is a story of a certain spring that was more real, more dazzling and brighter than any other spring, a spring that took its text seriously: an inspired script..." - Bruno Schulz, *Spring*¹

"In nature nothing exists alone." - Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*²

Enter the world of *Lunar Spring*, a genus of forms and patterns that contributes to a long visual history of artistic examination of the human place within the natural world. Natasha Bowdoin's investigations in nature began as a child among the woods and waters of Maine, and formalized in her studies of classic literature and painting. These experiences inform her artistic practice today and are evidenced in the multifaceted universe

she generates. In each piece, Bowdoin demonstrates a totality of mark-making, an expansion of color palette, and a plethora of organic imagery that has been cultivated for many years. Botanical collages, as if grafted together, bloom in full pageantry in a site-specific installation that seems to vegetate and grow directly out of the gallery walls. In more intimate works on paper in adjacent rooms, detailed textures found in the installation's massive

surface morph into the faces of insects. In *Lunar Spring*, moths are made in human scale, while the surface of the moon becomes pocket-sized. Each piece derives from the next—either as a magnified microcosm or miniaturized macrocosm—speaking to the interconnectedness and complexity of our relationship to the world.

Visual connections abound as we wend in and around the pieces in response to their shifting scale, placement, and complexity. Six interrelated bodies of work—two made in her studio in Houston, the others made on site in response to the gallery's architecture during her artist-in-residency

experience—embody and evoke transformation. In pieces large and small, *Lunar Spring* induces a childlike wonder and desire for exploration that is both grand gesture and private invitation. We become like Lewis Carroll's literary figure Alice in her subconscious journey through a landscape of unexpected scale and questioned meaning. We correlate parts and motifs from piece to piece, and room to room, to satisfy our need to establish order. It is this lineage, the human desire to establish systems and linkages in the physical world, shared by both the artist in her process of making and the viewer in his or her process of ordering, that becomes the leitmotif of the exhibition.

¹ Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*. Trans. by Celina Wieniewska. (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 141. *Spring* was originally included in "Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass" which was first published in the United States of America by Walker and Company in 1978 and was originally published in Polish as "Sanatorium pod klepsydra" in 1937.

² Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962), 51.

Lunar Spring (detail), 2017, site-specific installation with ink, acrylic, cut paper and vinyl, 15 x 52 x 2 ft.

Lunar Spring informs and transcends our experience of nature. More than simply interested in physical phenomena, Bowdoin finds particular inspiration in how it has been interpreted over time. She scours books, from classical literature to historic botanical illustrations, to early comics and cartoons, for source material. Her gestural confidence stems from her ability to intuit these many influences and reflect them in layers both tactile and conceptual. The underpinnings of her practice can be likened to the transcendentalist interpretations of nature, and its impetus in particular as a reaction to humans' increased manipulation of the land.³ Her work also follows the lineage of the early twentieth-century naturalists who explored and captured existence through artistic representation and language. Though Bowdoin's works invoke the natural, they are always at once artificial, rendering the artist as contemporaneous negotiator of the real and the imagined.

If joy can be an act of resistance and play an act of defiance, these philosophies are in full demonstration here. Layered in these flowing arrangements, just beneath the awe of their intricacy and the pleasure we take in

experiencing them, is a call for contemplation. As this culmination of imagery expresses the energy and urgency manifest in the physical world, it also invites us to consider our impact on our environment. There is a certain accessibility to Bowdoin's work that is a powerful tool to unite viewers in this awareness. *Lunar Spring* welcomes us with its über-blooming tendrils and impactful delicacy. Bowdoin intentionally follows in the long-standing creative practice of animism and personification so that we may connect and empathize with the powers of the elements. Her work also follows the humanistic depictions of flora and fauna that have historically infiltrated satire and irrationality, excess and overture, into our attempts to navigate our position. Likewise, Bowdoin explores the ways in which Surrealist gestures are intended to uncover psychological understanding. This power to subvert expectations culminates in work that is serious in its playfulness, measured in its whimsy.

These references do not belie the improvisational energy of Bowdoin's art. Like the naturalists, Bowdoin attempts to capture the way in which biological forms have built-in mutations. Her



Lunar Spring (detail), 2017, site-specific installation with ink, acrylic, cut paper and vinyl, 15 x 52 x 2 ft.

³ Bowdoin had produced past works directly informed by the writings of Thoreau and Emerson and other Transcendentalist writers.

line-work seems contradictory in that it is both measured and spontaneous, flowing and fixed. It evokes intrinsic movement as well as the anxious transformation of Spring. Her use of abstraction celebrates an openness to interpretation, transcending absolutes and set definitions. The work does not explain, rather it reverberates in order to "embrace fluidity instead of locking it

down."⁴ It possesses a potent holistic quality that begins as meditative practice in Bowdoin's studio as repetitious lines manifest information. Bowdoin transfers the energy from her sources onto paper in a process akin to ceremony, the enjoyment of which carries over into the exhibition and connects artist to viewer in metaphysical ways.



Lunar Spring (detail), 2017, site-specific installation with ink, acrylic, cut paper and vinyl, 15 x 52 x 2 ft.

⁴ VisArts "Engage," video interview in the artist's studio in Houston. December, 2016.

For the site-specific installation entitled *Lunar Spring*, Bowdoin brought from her studio only Sumi ink drawings of maze-like optic cut-outs, and her researched and considered concepts. Liking her process to jazz, she describes these as her instruments readied for improvisation.⁵ The piece is not premeditated, as she prefers to respond to the empty wall where "infinite potential exists."⁶ For this piece, once again taking inspiration from literature, she imaginatively interprets a portion of the 1937 short story *Spring* by Bruno Schulz. In it she finds particularly fertile ground as its subject matter and style convey a world of fluidity in which nothing is what it seems and nothing is fixed. She not only mirrors the organic qualities of her literary reference, but also the natural and fantastical processes it depicts. The vibrant patterns, calligraphic marks, and layered forms that jut and flow from the wall and floor encourage discovery. They suggest the harmony and agitation of metamorphosis. As such, the piece expresses the "processions and manifestations, revolutions, and barricades" of *Spring* that Schulz describes, as well as the "infinity of sadnesses and delights that seek in vain their equivalents in reality."⁷

For the first time, in the exhibition at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond, Bowdoin employs vinyl to extend her imagery in visual play to the gallery floor. The black vine and leaf forms creep onto the concrete ground and mimic the botanicals scalloping the wall. It is graphically striking, offering cohesion to the composition, but it also lends a ghostly sense of menace, a Kudzu-like expanse balanced only by the handsome floral forms and airy swaths of pink and mint above. This technique acts as silhouette, bringing about an affectation of shadow and underbrush. It also slows down the process of looking. Upon entry, viewers are quite literally taken aback by the scale and vibrancy of the piece, and then they begin to explore it, walking over the work with trepidation. In this perfect metaphor, we find ourselves ideally trampling lightly within nature, in relation to nature, considering every step.

The installation takes its aesthetic cues from the drawings of moths and moons placed in adjacent galleries where Bowdoin's colors and forms are as bold and breathtaking from afar as they are spellbinding up close. Across from the installation, three sovereign moths command attention; their

⁵ Artist talk at VisArts, February, 2017.

⁶ VisArts "Engage" video interview, December, 2016.

⁷ Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*. Translated by Celina Wieniewska. (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 141.



Sphinx Moth, 2016, gouache and ink on paper, 74 x 51 in.

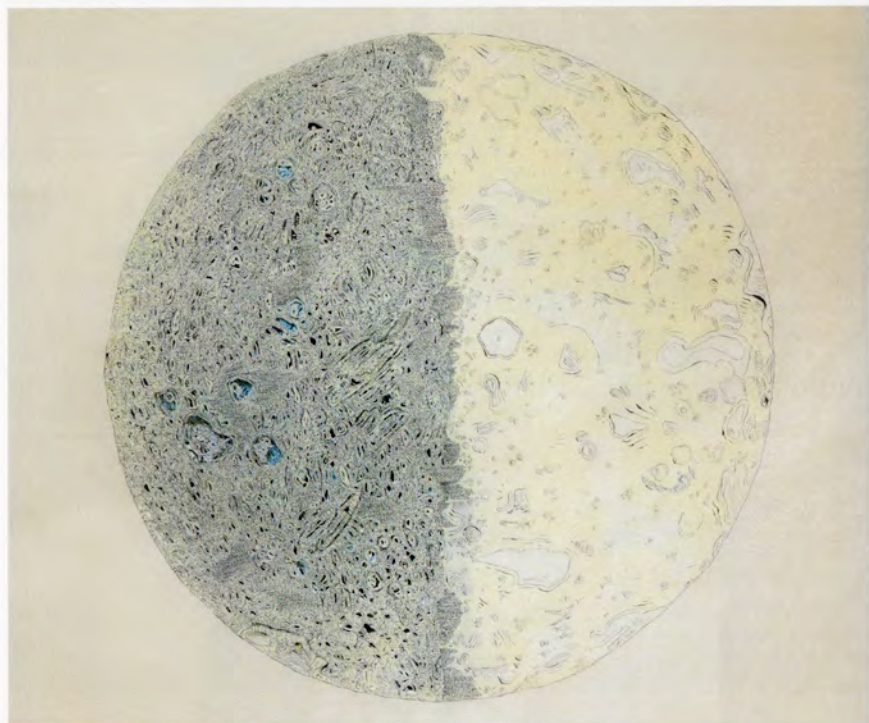


Luna Moth II, 2016, gouache and ink on paper, 74 x 51 in.

bright palette renders them non-threatening. These under-valued species are lauded here in regal display, embellished with distinctive textures. The amalgamated imagery is sourced from various naturalist illustrations, and in Bowdoin's abstracting hands, they are compelled to individuality. We suspend disbelief as the dynamic complexity of marbled wings almost animate beyond the frame. The saturations of pink and fingerprint-like patterning of *Luna Moth I* were the aesthetic guides for the *Lunar Spring* installation. The turquoise and yellow palette and sinuous lines of the *Sphinx Moth* recall the cut-paper topography of the moon drawings

to be discovered in the next gallery. And the autumnal hues of burnt orange and energetic swirls of *Luna Moth II* share the feverish urgency of the cut-paper *Spring Study* collages. Strikingly, the moths' stately presence and simultaneous delicacy suggest a paradox of the corporeal. Each carries as much strength as fragility, a reminder of nature's delicate balance.

These works and others expound on notions of disguise. In the moth drawings, Bowdoin allows for anthropomorphic characteristics, patterns of the human in the natural world, to emerge in the textures of the wings. She correlates the moth's



First Quarter, 2016, ink and gouache on cut paper, 41 x 42 in.



camouflage, a biological need for protection from predatory danger with human empathy. She masquerades our likeness in ornamentation to illicit compassion. She likewise creates a personal connection to the moon by imbedding a micro-script translation of Italo Calvino's 1965 short story, *Distance of the Moon*, onto cut paper surfaces. In these pieces, the lunar phases of waning, first quarter, and waxing unite scientific premise and fantastical tale. Bowdoin was inspired by the tones of Magic Realism in Calvino's story that describe our moon coming close enough that we can easily jump back and forth from

earth. She "liberates the words from the page" attempting to "re-imagine how we might experience text, away from the repetition of reading left to right, and back to a more transformative experience."⁸ She relocates the emphasis of meaning, thereby transcribing it anew in both the original text and the interpretations of the moon, and in so doing pluralizes the readings of both.

These intricate lunar surfaces move beyond scientific illustration. The ink and gouache linear detail rendered under and on top of the lacy cut paper creates a haunting effect. We are transfixed by their

Waxing Crescent (detail), 2016, gouache and ink on cut paper, 41 x 42 in.

⁸ VisArts "Engage" video interview, December 2016.

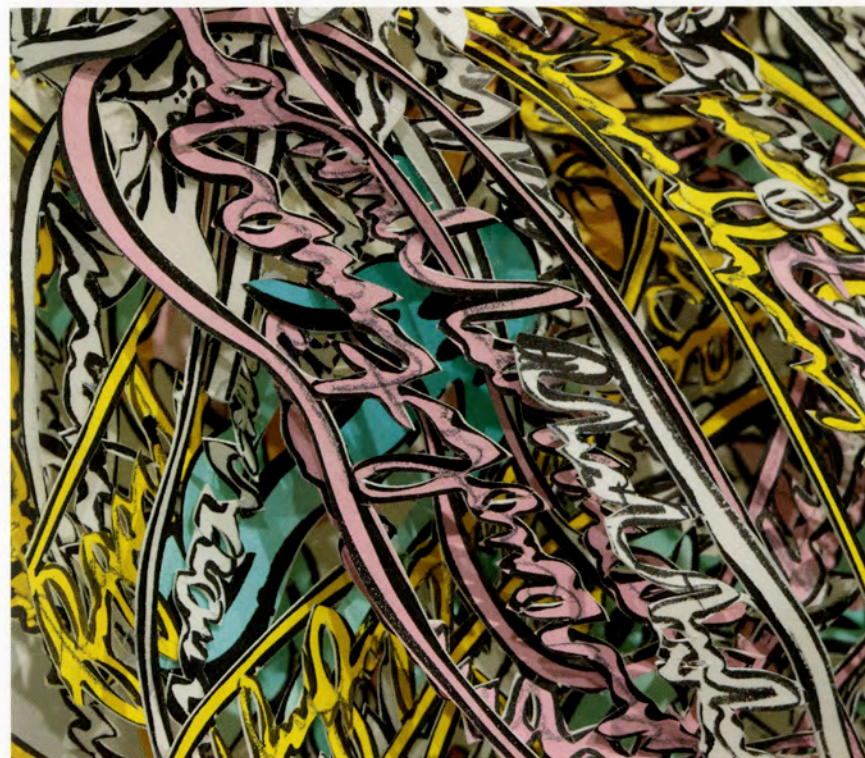
specificity and then surprised by their inaccuracy. Though based on images of the moon's surface, Bowdoin takes artistic liberties to transport the imagery beyond what we see through a telescopic lens into a more intuitive place. These are the moons of our own dreams. Perhaps it is the freedom Bowdoin feels in working with cut paper that translates into this

unexpected expansiveness. In her controlled approach she finds liberation in cutting paper and layering textures to "embrace ambiguity and the random chance of process."⁹ She extends this approach to the viewer, allowing us to sense the surface of the moon, to imagine its weight or weightlessness, its light and darkness.



Spring Study I, 2017, ink and gouache on cut paper, 10 x 8 x 4 in.

⁹ Ibid.



Throughout *Lunar Spring*, Bowdoin consistently upends our sense of scale and proportion. What is envisaged as massive in one work becomes minute in another. This method can sometimes evoke disorientation. The three *Spring Study* collages, for example, uphold a density and tension despite their small scale. *Spring Study I* and *III* express the tumult of growth, but also the exclamatory result of the struggle. In *Spring Study II*, wonder intermingles with disease and aggravation. The intense twisting ribbons of abstracted cursive remind us that nature is sometimes maleficent. These forms serve both as formal

consideration, repeating Schulz's text with intense vibration, and symbolic gesture in that the language is literally tied together. Its illegibility challenges our parsing of a system and desire for conclusion. Similarly, process and chronology become cyclical as in this image, beginning and end are indiscernible, offering continuum instead. We therefore intuit the cyclical energy of seasonal renewal. The pieces recall what the famed ecologist Rachel Carson described as the infinite "healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after winter."¹⁰

Spring Study II (detail), 2017, ink and gouache on cut paper, 10 x 8 x 4 in.

¹⁰ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 24.

Like biological material and processes, Bowdoin's work conveys the mimicry of the internal and external, and parts blur together or are born of one another. This is most evident in small ink drawings from the *Transform-her* series. Rendered in hot pink, orange and white, the cellular forms are outlined in black with a cartoon-like sense of humor. They maintain the graphic quality and distortion of animation, a language in which "nothing is contained by its own boundaries," to tell an abstracted story of transference, osmosis, or perhaps fertilization.¹¹ While these are the most stylized pieces in the exhibition, they recall similar marks found subtly in other works. Placed in the back gallery, they encourage closer inspection and renewed reading of the visual

information throughout *Lunar Spring*. They connect most closely to the *Luna Portrait* series that uses "nature as a mirror" to explore humanity in the guise of insect and bird features. Their hybrid style, mixing the graphic nature of cartoon with the intricacy of naturalist drawings, complicates the larger more static and austere moths that hang nearby.¹² These more witty portraits become our stand-ins, and we seek our personalities and discernible features within their abstracted faces.

Akin to feminist approaches, Bowdoin upends the notions of high and low aesthetics with her use of alternative media derived, in this case, from the decorative, illustrative, and cartoon traditions. Additionally, she furthers the



Spring Study I, II, III, 2017, ink and gouache on cut paper, 10 x 8 x 4 in. each, Installation view

¹¹ Conversation with the artist, February 2017.

¹² Ibid.

feminist legacy that challenges these categorical distinctions of media in cut paper handwork that moves beyond traditional notions of craft and purposefully oscillates between the delicate and the aggressive. Moreover, her work heeds the call to revere natural processes, a philosophy that stems not only from a feminist art tradition but an eco-feminist worldview. We cannot deny the interconnections among women, non-human animals, and nature,

and Bowdoin's work in refined and clever ways calls attention to our need for respect and awareness of this interconnection.

A "lunar spring," which recalls the imagery of the moon and the abstracted botanicals on view, as well as the work's palpable feeling of change, is in itself a fantastical phrase. It is an imaginative title that nods to the Surrealism and Magic Realism intoned in Bowdoin's work, and in its



Luna Portrait Series, 2017, ink and gouache on paper, 11.25 x 9.25 in. each



deceptive quality the spirit of the trickster figure is also invoked. An inspiration of Bowdoin's, this timeless character of art and myth brings about transformation, typically through unconventional and mischievous ways. And like the trickster, the artist uses both empirical and intuitive knowledge to arrive at each piece in *Lunar Spring*. Remarkably, the complexity of her work is created through both careful research and a period of "not knowing."¹³ Her pieces, also rooted in humor, mutation, and absurdity, speak to what we think we know and what we attempt to know in our

scientific pursuits, even blurring our understanding of what it means to know. As the American anthropologist and folklorist Paul Radin writes, "through [the trickster's] actions all values come into being."¹⁴ Likewise, the work of Natasha Bowdoin does not present finite definitions, but rather invites query: What comes of our relationship to the natural world and what will become of it?

- Melissa Messina, Guest Curator

Installation view, *Lunar Spring*, Visual Arts Center of Richmond

¹³ VisArts "Engage" video interview, December, 2016.

¹⁴ Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. 2nd ed. (New York: Schocken, 1972), xxii.



Luna Moth I, 2016, gouache and ink on paper, 74 x 51 in.



BIOGRAPHY

Natasha Bowdoin earned a B.A. in painting and classics from Brandeis University in Waltham, MA, and an M.F.A. from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, PA. She has had numerous solo exhibitions at galleries, museums, and art centers in the U.S. and Italy, including the SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA; Monya Rowe Galley, New York, NY; the Roswell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, NM; and Talley Dunn Gallery, Dallas, TX, to name a few. Additionally, her work has been included in group shows nationally and internationally. Her work has been reviewed such publications as Artforum, BOMB, and Wallpaper* Magazine. In addition to The Quirk+VisArts Artist Residency, she has completed artist residencies at the Core Program in Houston, TX, the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, NE, and the Roswell Artist Residency Program in Roswell, NM. Bowdoin was born in West Kennebunk, ME, and currently lives and works in Houston, TX where she is also an assistant professor in painting and drawing at Rice University.

Waning Crescent, 2016, ink and gouache on cut paper, 41 x 42 in.



Spring Study III (detail), 2017, ink and gouache on cut paper, 10 x 8 x 4 in.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Lunar Spring, 2017
site-specific installation with ink,
acrylic, cut paper, and vinyl
dimensions vary; seen here
15' x 52' x 2'

Luna Moth I, 2016
gouache and ink on paper
74" x 51"

Luna Moth II, 2016
gouache and ink on paper
74" x 51"

Sphinx Moth, 2016
gouache and ink on paper
74" x 51"

Luna Portrait Series, 2017
ink and gouache on paper
12 pieces; each 11.25" x 9.25"

Waning Crescent, 2016
ink and gouache on cut paper
41" x 42"

Waxing Crescent, 2016
ink and gouache on cut paper
41" x 42"

First Quarter, 2016
ink and gouache on cut paper
41" x 42"

Spring Study I, II, III, 2017
ink and gouache on cut paper,
10" x 8" x 4" each

Transform-her Series, 2017
gouache and ink on paper
2 pieces; 16" x 13" each
4 pieces; 9.25" x 7.25" each



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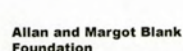
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