

**Daisy Dew-Diamond  
Louise Sheldon**

May 26th - June 25th, 2023

**Essay**  
David Kennedy Cutler

**STANDARD  
SPACE**

The first time I heard Bill Callahan’s “Diamond Dancer” was when Louise Sheldon was playing song-selector on a car ride between Providence, RI and Brooklyn, NY. A driving rhythm is overlaid with a tale of a woman who dances so hard that she turns herself into a diamond. In Callahan’s dry vocal delivery, an impossible action becomes completely sensible. I imagine the song as an excellent partner to the transmutational thinking of Sheldon’s paintings.

For her exhibition Daisy Dew-Diamond, Sheldon has selected what she describes as “mostly paintings of flowers,” and yet that organizing rubric barely prepares an audience for her depictions of gyres of flowers, wild spirals, rippling textiles, tablecloth patterns, and geologic-looking protrusions. From amongst the watercolor-saturated torrents of pattern, color and competing lines, Sheldon plucks bemused human and animal faces out from the riotous surfaces. Like pearls harvested from an oyster, these chremamorphic characters are Sheldon’s dew diamonds: shimmering droplets to reward the patience of early-risers, foragers, cultivators, beach-combers, or poets.

Daisy Dew Diamond was gleaned and altered slightly from the poem “A Little Prayer” by Robert Service. Sheldon describes the poem as “something I would want to read at a funeral, and something I want to remember and be reminded of every day.” Service’s tone of appreciation echoes Sheldon’s sentiment of wanting to cherish fleeting moments:

Let us be praiseful, Sire, for simple sights; -  
The blue smoke curling from a fire of peat;  
Keen stars a-frolicking on frosty nights,  
Prismatic pigeons strutting in a street;  
Daisies dew-diamonded in smiling sward -

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After several years of major changes—the passing of her mother, the birth and joy of raising her son; and a relocation from Brooklyn to Maine—Sheldon considers her new work a culmination and response, both “looking backwards and forwards.”

Her artistic approach, from exploring the past to drawing and reading with her son, seem like a totally reasonable method for addressing pain and hope, memory and change. But the images ushered forth from her brush are so irrational, stimulating and otherworldly—so unconstrained by conventional narrative logic—that a conversion has taken place. Sheldon’s ability to transport and transform, I believe, is based on her unique talent of collapsing sense and senselessness. The paintings appear effortless and natural, but are also full of relational energy and formal frictions, providing transport into her particular world-view.

Take, for instance, her response to being asked if her time working as a florist influenced her, where she describes the 6am arrivals in Manhattan’s flower district as mornings “when I was still dreaming,” navigating the “goat paths” of the street to the pluck from the “meadows of the entire world.” In this telling Sheldon pulls back a curtain—we are no longer on a cramped city block between Sixth and Seventh Avenue, but have begun to wander with animals and flowers in far-off fields.

Before that car ride listening to music with Sheldon, I had stayed overnight at her parents’ house in Providence. She showed me her childhood desk with carved with the words “Yo soy” (noting the tear-filled trauma of struggling at Spanish homework), where she no doubt began to make art. She describes her early childhood:

My father worked for the newspaper and he would bring home the paper that the mimeograph had printed the international wire from all day with the news. I used the paper like a scroll and drew endlessly.

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Upstairs, in the attic of their house filled with old textiles and wallpapers was an enormous trove of costume jewelry and trimmings left behind from the former tenant. Sheldon would spend hours in the attic digging through everything, as well as going to museums and gardening with her mother:

In the summerhouse we rented we had a plot that had a border of nasturtiums and marigolds and then parsley. The caterpillars would eat the parsley. I loved the smells and colors. When I was older I planted a cutting garden with zinnias, dahlias and gladiolus. I became obsessed with gladiolus because they created more little bulbs and those colors were new and different than their parents.

Note the way that she describes the flowers as a family, with discernible parents and children, as if they were just neighbors renting a garden apartment down the block. Sheldon conjures a storybook outlook of the world, but her recent works have become a swirl of imagery detached from coherent narrative. Her recent reflections on her relatives and her childhood have collided with her experience drawing with her son, and layering images under his drawings. Her dive into pockets of the past is only enhanced by reading her and her husband's own childhood books with her son.

This enhanced state of receptivity is like tapping into a dream state while fully conscious. Whether labeled fantastical or psychedelic, Sheldon's vision is like a morning of the mind, where each new thing is greeted through the lingering grog of sleep. Rising from a starfish dream to say hello to a tablecloth friend. Appointment later with a lunchtime pal. Patterns become people; the flowers assemble and turn their faces in unison; characters from songs become mushroom-like barnacles; butterflies and an untethered weaving are swirling around a fluttering face, complete with lipstick and heavy eyeliner.

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Sheldon's lyrical praise and unbridled wonder is brewed up into a cosmic confetti. She gleans simple things and then spins them into wild arrangements, where the most quotidian object can be loaded with generous personality. Everything in her world is interchangeable, transmutational, and able to be shared—a strange celebration, indeed.

I am reminded again of Bill Callahan's lyrics:

She was dancing so hard  
She danced herself into a diamond  
Dancing all by herself  
Dancing all by herself  
And not minding

And the one thing on her mind was  
The one thing on her mind was:  
"It's time I gave the world my light  
"It's time I gave the world my light  
Starting tonight"  
Diamond dancer, diamond dancer

- David Kennedy Cutler, 04-2023