

Print archive: Robyn Maree Pickens on Zina Swanson

PRINT MAGAZINE • COLLECTED ESSAYS 12 MAY, 2022 • WRITTEN BY ROBYN MAREE PICKENS

In an exchange between two, meaning quivers and always remains unstable, incomplete, unsettled...

—Luce Irigaray. (1)

Or so it does in Zina Swanson's intentionally indeterminate conceptual and aesthetic plant-human worlds. Meaning quivers between viewer and work, plant and human, and between each decomposing twig and the vibratory aura the artist depicts. Yet the language attending these exchanges often inadvertently reifies twoness rather than quivering. Even the conjunction "and" seems to sediment the separation of plant and human, a hyphen (plant-human) fares little better, while the stitching together of individual words, such as the compressed compound "natureculture," (2) fails to fully unsettle the binary of nature (over there) and culture (here). These examples of linear syntax's inability to disrupt binaries serve to heighten the indeterminacy so clearly at play in Swanson's work.

Another example is the binary of science and pseudoscience which is often raised as a conceptual frame in association with the artist's work. Once binaries have been lodged in linear language, the presence or traction of indeterminate quivering, of unstable, incomplete, and unsettled confluences between entities is difficult to sustain. In linear syntax, the quivering of meaning requires effort. It is not the declarative given Irigaray claims. Yet it flourishes in Swanson's conceptual and aesthetic languages. In the confines of commonsensical, sequential syntax, we trail behind.

The collective title (with individual extensions) of the five watercolour and acrylic paintings in Swanson's series, *All my sticks have auras* (2020-2021), is decidedly provocative. One provocation available to the viewer is a confrontation with the dichotomy of death (decomposition) and life (vibratory aura). These portraits of forked twigs with auratic halos ask what and where is finitude? Where does death end and life begin? What is the quivering between them? Is a twig blown, torn, or shed from its larger plant body actually dead? Is finitude located in the twig host or the life host (the exchanges between earth, water, sun)? Is the twig still colonised by a (diminished) microbial aura? (3) How long does the auratic field emanate around any sentient body, such as a willow tree or rose, when consciousness leaves? Are these in fact dowsing rods? (If finitude is complete, how can a dowsing rod attract life?)

The sequence of questions above takes the artist's assertion (that twigs have auras) more or less as a quivering given, in order to explore some of the enigmatic affordances offered by a realistically depicted twig floating on white canvas, and the abstract emanation of its aura on all four sides. Swanson's formal juxtapositions of natural history-style realism executed in watercolour (twigs) and the acrylic zips of abstract colour field painting (auras) that frame it (and toy with the painting-sculpture boundary), affirm the generative collision she has engineered. In this collision, the windswept twig, *All my sticks have auras* (ground - pink, radiating - violet), is forever caught with its energy skin activated in a dynamic of love (pink) and intuition (violet)—at least in its affirmative auratic attributions. (4)

Some people will stare and stare Never knowing what is before them

—Ariana Reines. (5)



Zina Swanson, *All My Sticks Have Auras* (Ground - Yellow, Radiating - Green), 2021, watercolour on canvas, 30 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer

Footnotes:

(1) Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, trans. Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček (London: Continuum, 2002), 28.

(2) Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

- (3) Ed Yong, "When You Move House, Your Microbial Aura Moves Too," *National Geographic*, August 2014. nationalgeographic.com/science/phenomena/2014/08/28/we-constantly-imprint-our-homes-with-our-microbes (accessed 23 January 2021).
- (4) Simona Sebastian, "The Meaning of Aura Colours," *Chakra Anatomy*, 2019. chakra-anatomy.com/aura-colors.html (accessed 23 January 2021).
- (5) Ariana Reines, "Ariana Reines's Full Moon Report: Purgatory," *Art Forum*, 29 December 2020. artforum.com/slant/ariana-reines-s-full-moon-report-84769 (accessed 23 January 2021).

First published in The Art Paper Issue 00

Writer biography: Robyn Maree Pickens is a queer Pakehā assemblage who loves plants and writing. She lives in Otepoti.
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Zina Swanson at home in her studio, February 2021. Courtesy of The Art Paper. Photo: Sarah Rowlands



Zina Swanson, (L-R) *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Yellow, Radiating - Green)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 35 x 30 cm; *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Pink, Radiating - Pink)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 45 x 30 cm; *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Blue, Radiating - Purple)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 30 x 25 cm; *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Pink, Radiating - Violet)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 50 x 35 cm; *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Yellow, Radiating - Green)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 30 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer



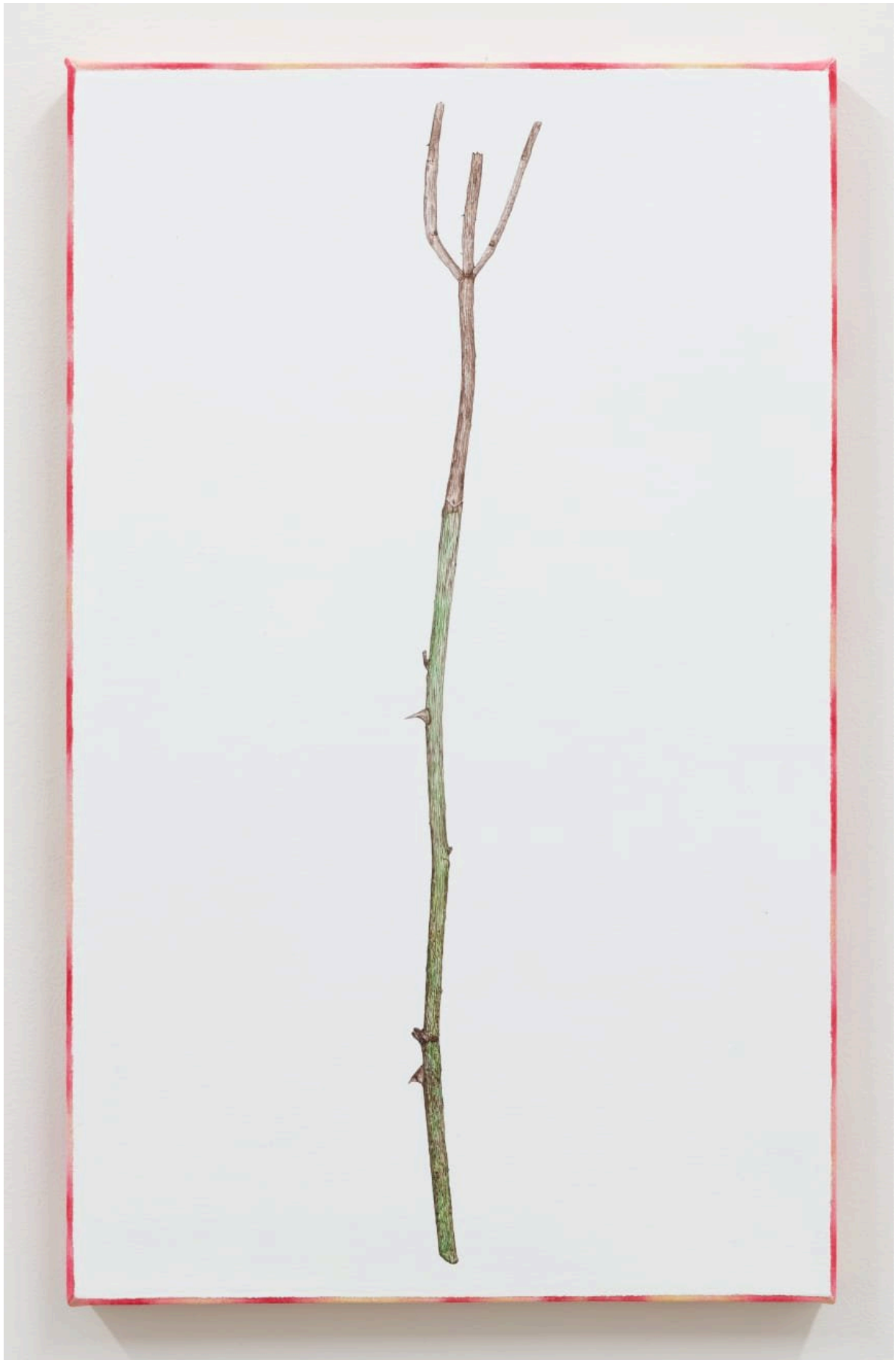
Zina Swanson, (L-R) *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Yellow, Radiating - Green)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 35 x 30 cm; *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Pink, Radiating - Pink)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 45 x 30 cm; *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Blue, Radiating - Purple)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 30 x 25 cm; *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Pink, Radiating - Violet)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 50 x 35 cm; *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Yellow, Radiating - Green)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 30 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer



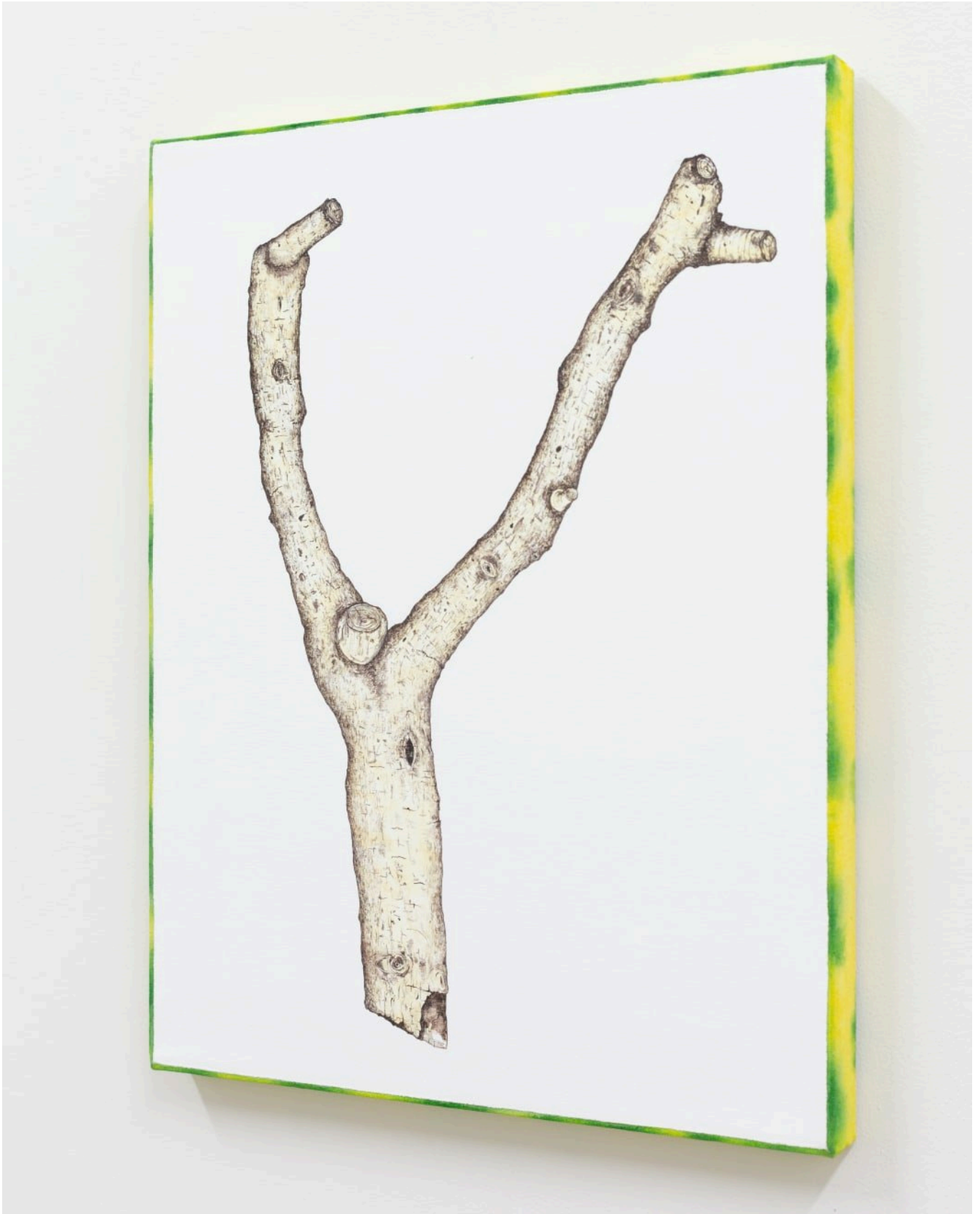
Zina Swanson at home in her studio, February 2021. Courtesy of The Art Paper. Photo: Sarah Rowlands



Zina Swanson, *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Blue, Radiating - Purple)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 30 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer



Zina Swanson, *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Pink, Radiating - Pink)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 45 x 30 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Sumer



Zina Swanson, *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Yellow, Radiating - Green)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 40 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sumer



Zina Swanson, *All My Sticks Have Auras (Ground - Pink, Radiating - Violet)*, 2021, watercolour on canvas, 50 x 35 cm.
Courtesy of the artist and Sumer



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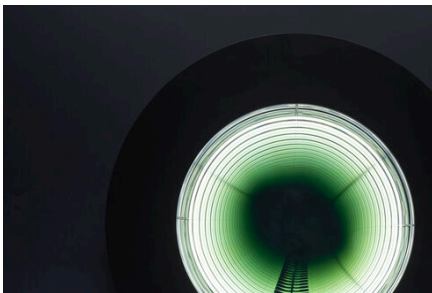
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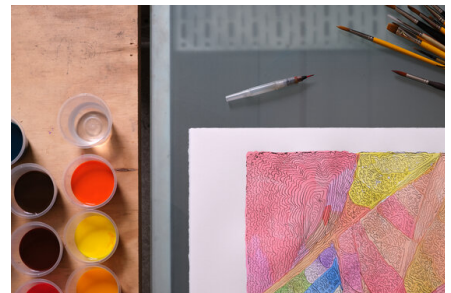
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"We have entered the realm of the otherworldly—the linear, the logical and the structured, folding inward and expanding outward upon the drawing plane. Her way of working has a strong sense of urgency and intuition, her mark-making has a zest that is distinguishably hers," writes Priscilla Rose Howe on Susan Te Kahurangi King in Issue 00.