

You'll Want To Crawl Into This Artist's Surreal Paintings

One of Inka Essenhigh's new projects is a take on the local phenomenon known as Manhattanhenge.



Inka Essenhigh Studio, Spring 2017. Photo: Christopher Burke Studios, New York

Inka Essenhigh's paintings, which combine twisted narratives, liquid line work, and oneiric imagery, are at once otherworldly and rooted in specific times and places. This season, that dissonance will be on display in a trio of new projects. This month, the artist's surreal landscapes and fever-dream interiors will occupy the [Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art](#). In April, New York's Drawing Center will present [Manhattanhenge](#), a site-specific mural for the Soho building's stairwell. And later that month, she'll open [her first solo show with Miles McEnery Gallery](#) in Chelsea.

The title of the Drawing Center project is a reference to [the occasional alignment of the setting and rising sun with NYC's east-west street grid](#). In Essenhigh's drawing, which will be on the building's west wall, the city's buildings look alive, as if angling to consume the viewer. And in the work destined for Miles McEnery, the same streets are joined by the forests surrounding the artist's Maine studio to conjure an evocative urban-rural mix. Flora and fauna are anthropomorphized; Essenhigh creates worlds you want to crawl into.



Inka Essenhigh, *Political Cartoon Painting*, 2016. Courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery. Photo: Christopher Burke Studios, New York



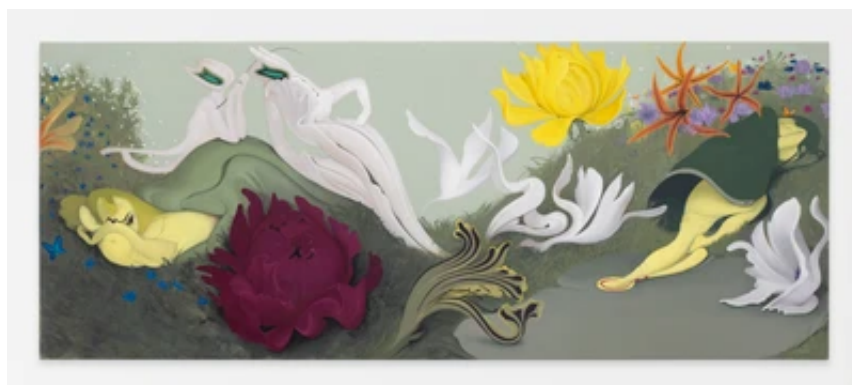
Inka Essenhigh, *New Condos*, 2016. Courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery. Photo: Christopher Burke Studios, New York

Essenhigh's current undertakings are the latest milestones in a career that

really got its start, she told GARAGE, with a solo show at Deitch Projects in 1999. "My first mini break was getting a show at Stefan Stux," she said, "but Jeffrey opened all the doors for museums and for higher-end collectors to come in and collect the work. He could really contextualize it."

Deitch's still-referenced 1992 group show, [*Post Human*](#), had already provided some of that backdrop. The influential exhibition shifted the discussion away from conceptualism to focus on figuration by arguing that what many of the most interesting contemporary artists—Janine Antoni, Matthew Barney, Mike Kelley—had in common was their reimagining of the body. According to Deitch's catalogue essay, this reflected a society obsessed with breast implants, crash diets, and mood-enhancing drugs.

"It gave people a way to understand Barney and Beecroft," Essenhigh agreed. She was part of Deitch's group too, and her figures, painted in loose swoops of enamel, won immediate critical acclaim. The early work was relatively spare, but in 2002, after a brief stint at Mary Boone, the artist switched from enamel to oil. Her goal was not to accept every painterly accident as divine intervention, but to really challenge herself. "I wanted to communicate clearly," she explained.



Inka Essenhigh, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2017. Courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery. Photo: Christopher Burke Studios, New York



Inka Essenhigh, *Forest Tableau*, 2017. Courtesy of Miles McEnery Gallery. Photo: Christopher Burke Studios, New York

Around 2006, Essenhigh made another decision, electing to only make work she'd want to live with. This meant positive paintings, narrative paintings... even sentimental paintings. It was a difficult shift to make in a hypercritical environment. According to Essenhigh, "When you're looking at art that is

trying to be positive, people doubt your intelligence." But she made the transition anyway; her Maine studio had inspired pictures of gods and goddesses frolicking in the woods, and the work continued in that vein for some time. Then in 2015, she began to wonder again about the most effective way to communicate with her audience in New York. She decided to return to enamel, but with a different approach. "Enamel eliminated the weight of oil painting—of art history—and gave the work a lighter feel."

Essenhigh described her process further: "I look for a mood, for something to say, then put down a brushstroke and see if it resonates. Then all I have to do is match that feeling." Her point was about more than just material process; it was tied to a larger ideology. "What I'm really railing against is this idea that the artist should not know what they're doing but discover it as they go along," she explained. "I'm trying to say there's something much more exciting. If I want to go to Paris, the point is go there. But if you don't have a map you might never get off the island. And that might be fine for you, but I don't think it yields results. It just becomes about you and your private journey."

[Inka Essenhigh: A Fine Line](#) will be on view at Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art through August 29. [Inka Essenhigh: Manhattanhenge](#) will be on view at the Drawing Center, New York, from April 6, 2018, to February 24, 2019. [Inka Essenhigh](#) will be on view at Miles McEnery Gallery, New York, from April 19 to May 25.

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