

For Immediate Release

Katherine Sherwood

Hortus Conclusus

7 September – 26 October 2024

Opening Reception: Saturday, September 7, 5:00 – 8:00pm

Walter Maciel Gallery is pleased to present *Hortus Conclusus* by Katherine Sherwood featuring work from her new *Pandemic Madonnas* and ongoing *Brain Flowers* series painted on found Art History reproductions and colonial-era classroom maps. The title of the show translates to “Enclosed Garden” and the subjects continue Sherwood’s interest in art history while incorporating her own personal narrative of disability with the inclusion of her digital brain scans.

In the new series, Sherwood depicts imagery from Late Medieval *Madonna and Child* and Northern Renaissance *vanitas* paintings, reimagining the subjects with disabilities in a resilient and deviant demeanor. The holy figures’ faces are covered with digitally-collaged MRIs of her own brain, creating an uncanny dialogue between past and present and recognizing Sherwood’s long fascination with the Madonna subject dating back to her *Aggressive Women and Female Martyrs* paintings that she made in the late 1970s. Initially begun in the early days of Covid, these works are rendered on the back sides of classroom maps supported by wood dowels with parts of the classical image of the Madonna and Child reconfigured with skeletal masks and reimagined with different disabilities. Disrupting the classic Christian narrative, she creates beautiful and revered disabled figures with protective masks and prostheses that often have horrific and scary expressions much like the pandemic. The subjects become metaphors of the fear and misunderstanding of people whose bodies or ways of communicating may be different to overturn notions of discrimination and suffering. For Sherwood, her paintings are anything other than expressions of fear but rather symbols of hope and healing for both disabled and able-bodied persons alike.

As a disability rights activist and feminist, Sherwood has a complicated relationship with *Hortus Conclusus* imagery. She is drawn to the gilded, sumptuously painted Late Medieval depictions of the Virgin Mary enthroned in a walled garden but questions the notion of her being locked within the space. The scene is depicted from the Vulgate Bible’s *Song of Solomon* which states “A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse; a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up.” Solomon’s erotic poetry was later interpreted allegorically to refer to the mystical marriage between Christ and the Church, a key element of the visually rich ritual that initially drew Sherwood to church iconography as a non-Catholic in a Catholic high school. Sherwood has long admired Solomon as a healer, making note that he too had a disability. The patriarchy’s obsession with walled gardens and chastity has led to the ongoing violent regulation of women’s bodies and their physical and spiritual confinement. Sherwood makes a comparison of the technological MRIs to the metaphorical masks that women wear to conform to the roles imposed on them. They reveal as much as they conceal, seeing through the skull’s enclosure to see the brain matter accessing our interior selves.

In addition, a series of new still life paintings from the *Brain Flowers* series are included in the exhibition that continue to reference artworks by female artists working in Europe during the 17th century. The original artworks are by Portuguese artist Josefa de Óbidos, Italian artist Giovanna Garzoni and Dutch artist Maria van Oosterwijk and all of the works include brain scans thoughtfully collaged within the surfaces. Sherwood’s work subverts the dispassionate medical gaze with spiritual passion and confronts the historical exclusion and abuse of people with disabilities with faith in our ability to heal ourselves and create an inclusive society. Her paintings bring hidden histories to light, counter ableist representations, and reclaim space for disabled bodies in idealized depictions of beauty and salvation.

Katherine Sherwood received her BA from the University of California, Davis and her MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute. She is a Professor Emeritus of Art Practice at the University of California, Berkeley where she also taught Disability Studies. Sherwood’s work will be included the exhibition, *For Dear Life: Art, Medicine, and Disability* opening on September 18 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego. Her work was recently included in the exhibitions, *Bodies of Work: Art and Healing* at the Sun Valley Museum of Art, *Body Politics* at the Torrance Art Museum and *Hella Feminist* at The Oakland Museum of California. Sherwood is the recipient of a Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant, a Guggenheim Fellowship Award, National Endowment for the Arts grant and the Adeline Kent Award. Her work was included in the *Whitney Biennial 2000* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, *Revealing Culture* at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington DC, *Golgi’s Door* and *Visionary Anatomy* at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC (traveled). Sherwood’s paintings are in the collections of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Oakland Museum, Berkeley Art Museum, San Jose Museum of Art, Everson Museum and University of Missouri, Museum of Art and Archaeology.