

A CURIOUS NATURE  
PAINTINGS BY SHELLEY REED



# A CURIOUS NATURE:

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February 12, 2017 - June 4, 2017

WELCOME

The Fitchburg Art Museum invites you to explore **A Curious Nature: Paintings By Shelley Reed** with wide eyes and an open mind.



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## Director's Foreword

**T**he Fitchburg Art Museum is proud and privileged to present the work of one of New England's most extraordinary artists in **A Curious Nature: Paintings by Shelley Reed**. Since the 1980s, Shelley has been a vital presence in the Boston art world, and has actively shown her work in museums and commercial galleries across this country and abroad. **A Curious Nature** is her first major museum exhibition in New England since her 2005 Maud Morgan Prize show at the Museum of Fine Arts. This Prize, according to the MFA, "honors a Massachusetts woman artist who has demonstrated creativity and vision, and who has made significant contributions to the contemporary arts landscape." In Shelley's case, this is an understatement.

Shelley is one of our region's foremost practitioners of an area of contemporary art practice often labeled "appropriation art." The key concept here is that the artist is not entirely making up brand new imagery, but is largely borrowing or quoting images from the history of art. Thus, the images appear in a new and fresh context, which changes their meanings. Authors, poets, and musicians do this all the time—Bob Dylan just won a Nobel Prize, and his work is packed with lines, passages, and ideas from the Bible.

But the power of Shelley's work lies not only in her deft appropriations. She is a virtuoso painter, whose sheer formal and visual mastery not only rescues dogs, ducks, and tigers from the dustbin of art history, but also makes them howl, shriek, and snarl. Her paintings are not geek games for art historians, but operas fraught with emotion. And best of all, they are breathtakingly beautiful (and they look spectacular in FAM's contemporary art galleries!).

Nick Capasso, Ph.D.  
Director



## Acknowledgments

Shortly before I officially began my tenure at the Fitchburg Art Museum, I joined Curator Mary M. Tinti and then Koch Curatorial Fellow Emily Mazzola for a studio visit with Shelley Reed. My in-person introduction to Shelley's work on that day centered on her new paintings on paper. I recall seeing **Cabana (after Urbani and Tiepolo)**, 2016 on the wall and marveling at the composition's emphasis of the void and the mystery that her editing of historical paintings invited. In subsequent months, I had the opportunity to collaborate closely with Mary and Shelley in refining the checklist and developing the layout for **A Curious Nature: Paintings by Shelley Reed**. My list of thanks thus begins with a note of gratitude to Shelley and Mary for the time, energy and thoughtfulness that they each devoted to this exhibition.

Shelley's talent and hard work must be commended first, as the show's success rests on her skillful painting and continued production. While the backbone of the exhibit is comprised of canvases from the past decade, the paintings on paper were produced in the months leading up to the installation of **A Curious Nature**. It was thrilling

to receive updates from Shelley and to think through with her how best to situate each isolated subject in a space that was being filled with dynamic mashups of botanicals and animals on canvas. FAM also extends many thanks to Shelley's gallery Danese/ Corey for lending her work to this exhibition.

Shelley was no stranger to the Fitchburg Art Museum, having shown her work in the group shows **Still Life Lives!** (2013) and **New England, New Talent** (1994). Nor was she unfamiliar with FAM's tireless Director Nick Capasso, as he had included her work in **Post-Modern Baroque: Contemporary Painting and Photography** (1992) at the deCordova Museum. Yet **A Curious Nature** is her first solo show at FAM and her first time collaborating with me, and I am grateful for her openness to the continued dialogue that shaped the evolution of the exhibit.

On this note, I am deeply indebted to Mary for her mentorship since I began as a Koch Curatorial Fellow in June 2016. Despite her maternity leave and resignation in January to care for her adorable baby Maisie, she has remained a consistent source of inspiration. I've loved every minute of working

with Mary. It was great fun to weave our words together to draft the didactics, and our visions together to finalize the look and layout of the exhibition. Furthermore, I am immensely grateful for Mary's enthusiasm and confidence in me. She is a tornado of optimism and a talented curator.

Even a solo show has many moving parts and takes a team to pull together successfully.

Manager Charlie Cruz, preparator Matt Oates and Intern Sasha Pacek were diligent in their attention to all details of the installation, and their meticulousness is evident. Director of Education Laura Howick once again designed a fantastic Learning Lounge that provides visitors with a better understanding of Shelley's process. We're fortunate to have an interactive that was developed by the National Museum of Wildlife Art in Jackson,

The exhibit's lovely catalogue is a product of FAM's ongoing collaboration with Professor Robert Carr and his talented students at Fitchburg State University. This semester marks the eighth semester that Dr. Carr and his Document Design undergraduates have created an innovative online catalogue for FAM. Dr. Carr's students continue to surprise us with their ideas, dedication

FAM's Marketing Manager Kledia Spiro this spring to promote **A Curious Nature**, as well as to define the evolving vision of FAM as, in the students' words, "our museum." Thank you to the students on the marketing team (Christopher Gerardi, Camden McLaughlin, Sean Mullen, Kyle Prudhomme, Emily Tivnan, Amarah Williams, and Mattie Woodside), as well as the students on the cinematics team (Erin Leamy, Nicholas Trotto, and Emily Zollo) for your work and commitment to FAM. These efforts serve as an important document of FAM's evolution.

Lisa Crossman, Ph.D.  
Interim Curator



Detail from *In Dubious Battle*

So, my gratitude extends to other members of FAM's team, including Director Nick Capasso for his support of all aspects of the exhibition. In addition, Marketing Manager Kledia Spiro and Fitchburg State University Intern Stephanie Saba designed a fabulous logo that captures the tenor of Shelley's show—a mix of conflict and beauty, elegance and mystery. The multi-talented Collection

Wyoming and some audio and video clips that were created by the Columbia Museum of Art in Columbia, South Carolina in the Learning Lounge. FAM thanks these institutions for their generosity, as well as the Clementi Family Charitable Trust for continued support of the Learning Lounge, and the Simonds Lecture Fund for the sponsorship of the exhibition and education programs.

to the project and growth as designers over the course of its development. Thank you Ryan Best, Jessica Coates, Rachael DeLisle, Eleni Demos, Brockton DiSalle, Elizabeth Garside, Lia Jackson, Amber Palizzolo, and Daniela Wholey for bringing your own skills and creativity to this project. A cinematics and marketing team worked closely with

## A Note from the Curator

**A** **Curious Nature: Paintings by Shelley Reed** brings together works on canvas from the past decade with never-before-seen paintings on paper. The combination of new and old is spectacular and asks viewers to consider how one might inform the other, as well as to take each subject and scene on its own. My collaboration with Reed, and continued looking at her imagery, tickled the nerdiest part of me. As an art historian, I reveled in learning more about artists and subjects that she, as Director Nick Capasso states, plucked from “the dustbin of art history.” Yet one of the most “curious” aspects of Reed’s work, and one that I believe gives her paintings their enduring power and magic, is the way in which she makes the past present through a sustained process of rediscovery, skilled repainting and reconfiguration of fragments.

Under Reed’s direction, the stage is set with movable and repeatable parts that make for a compelling display of grayscale fragments stitched together into a changeable narrative. In each canvas, the lack of a consistent light source and other formal clues seem to call for a piecemeal evaluation. The clues circle around the topics of time and psychology, indicating a preoccupation with the potential, the sinister, and the oddity of living beings. The curiousness too plays out through the way in which Reed’s works are naturalistic, but contain quirks that recall the stylistic quality of the historical paintings she references. Other peculiarities such as the boat without a captain that floats through the waterway in **In Dubious Battle** give us pause. Time stands still in Reed’s paintings. For instance, a mass of fighting cats and dogs are caught in the moment before blood spills.

The works on paper further highlight Reed’s interest in fragments. In these pieces, she isolates a subject on a monochromatic ground, removing all or most of the landscape or architectural context. This simplification focuses one’s attention on the treatment of a dead crane’s feathers, the way that the tiger’s glance over its shoulder modifies its snarl, and the sorrowful eyes of the white horse. The men too, removed from their settings and original identities, become receptacles for our impressions. But their eyes, like many of Reed’s other creatures, stare and implicate us in the story.

For each person, the pull of Reed’s work could be different. For one, it could be the impressive scale of her paintings. For another, it might be the vast tonal range that she achieves with a limited palette of black and white. Or, it could be her skill at painting foliage, florals, the intensity of an animal’s eye, the seeming

vulnerability of one creature or the ferocity of another. We find drama, beauty, and a deep reflection on human nature in Reed’s paintings—be it an elaborate multi-panel narrative or a depiction of a single animal.

And appropriation is indeed a key part of her craft. Reed’s use of appropriation is obvious as a generalized part of her process, but the portions that she appropriates are not. It’s fascinating to find the parts that caught her eye and to compare them to the original. Yet these details are not announced or underscored. Instead the recurring subjects, landscapes or architectural details become simply part of her creation of a new environment for the viewer to observe. It’s in this world that seems at once both natural and contrived, peaceful and fraught, beautiful and disturbing that we are left with the animals and men to look around, to think, and, if need be, to run from what we find.

Lisa Crossman, Ph.D.  
Interim Curator



Details from **Tiger (after Janssens and Landseer)**, **White Horse (after Grant and Stubbs)**, and **Bird (after Oudry)**

## Shelley Reed: Caught in a Net\*

**S**helley Reed deftly melds aspects of painting, theater, and cinema to create complex narratives rich with beauty, drenched in mystery, and fraught with anxiety. In her large canvases, on the scale of history painting, small incidents are writ large and stultified allegorical systems are transformed into dynamic images of great emotional substance and subtlety. Reed magnifies the power of these paintings by taking full advantage of the human fascination with animals, our biological and existential Other.

As a contemporary painter, Reed is in part a bricoleur. A great deal of her imagery is borrowed from art historical sources, sometimes wholesale, sometimes from details of other paintings, and sometimes cobbled together and fully recontextualized. During the last few decades, Postmodernist appropriation artists have been concerned with the integrity of authorship and originality, epistemology, the deconstruction of images to reveal structures of power and control, the mechanical reproduction of images, and satire and irony. Reed's work obliquely raises these issues by virtue of the very fact that she appropriates. But they are by no means

her major concerns. This artist is sincere and serious in her quest to resuscitate images for their enduring eloquence, and for their potential to create new meanings.

Reed is particularly attracted to artists that only the most ardent students of Northern European Baroque painting would recognize: Melchior de Hondecoeter, Jean-Baptiste Oudry, and Franz Snyders (among others)-all famous in their day, now languishing in the dustbin of Art History. She applies their animals, arabesques, and architecture to her own aesthetic, where they are enlarged, recombined, stripped of color, set on new stages, and rendered with the bold expressive brushwork that has energized Baroque, Romantic, and Expressionist painting throughout the Western tradition.

The paintings are literally attractive. Viewers come close to admire the painter's bold blacks and whites, the delicately modulated tones of grey, and the masterful compositions of fluid, sinuous shapes. The images are fecund with ripe fruits, lush garlands, intricate decorative detail, and the unabashed charm of the animals themselves.





But something is amiss amidst all this beauty and delight. Reed carefully crafts a shallow theatrical space that is somehow neither indoors nor outdoors, a product of culture rather than nature. Why are animals here? And what is it, exactly, that they are doing? Their confrontations with each other, and the viewer, seem much more human than animal with their unsettling anthropomorphic postures, gestures, and gazes. This drama is intensified by cinematic effects. The point of view in most of Reed's paintings is from far below (like a movie theater), and the action looms almost threateningly above the viewer. The darkening sky, used to such great effect in a host of black-and-white films, helps to establish a moment pregnant with uncertainty. The calm before the storm is about to end, the flowers will be cast to the winds, the piles of fruit will topple, and the animals will scurry for cover.

Four hundred-odd years ago, when Hondecoeter et al. were thriving, their animals were understood quite differently. Then, the visually literate subscribed to a nominal symbolic system in which rabbits = lust, dogs = fidelity, owls = wisdom, etc. Within this cultural code, animals were actors in morality plays. In Shelley Reed's paintings, animals are actors

in performances that are considerably more ambiguous. Specific signifiers of virtues and vices take on broader roles as they express a wide emotional range that involves the intricacies of danger and desire. The artist frees Allegory to become Metaphor, and allows animals to agitate our imaginations as well as our souls.

Nick Capasso, Ph.D.  
Director

\*This essay was originally published in the exhibition catalogue for **Shelley Reed: Caught in a Net** at the Sears-Peyton Gallery in New York, NY, March 15 – April 14, 2007.

Detail from **In Dubious Battle**



# Exhibition Images

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**By the Well (after Weenix and Hondecoeter), 2010**

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**Bird (after Oudry), 2016**

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Untitled (after De Laresse), 2007











Hitched (after Desportes and Hondecoeter), 2013



**Rooster and Turkey (after Hondecoeter), 2009**

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**White Horse (after Grant and Stubbs), 2016**

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Left: **Hound and Cockatoo** (after Desportes, Hillegaert, and Weenix)  
Right: **Hound and Tortoise** (after Desportes and Hondecoeter), 2014



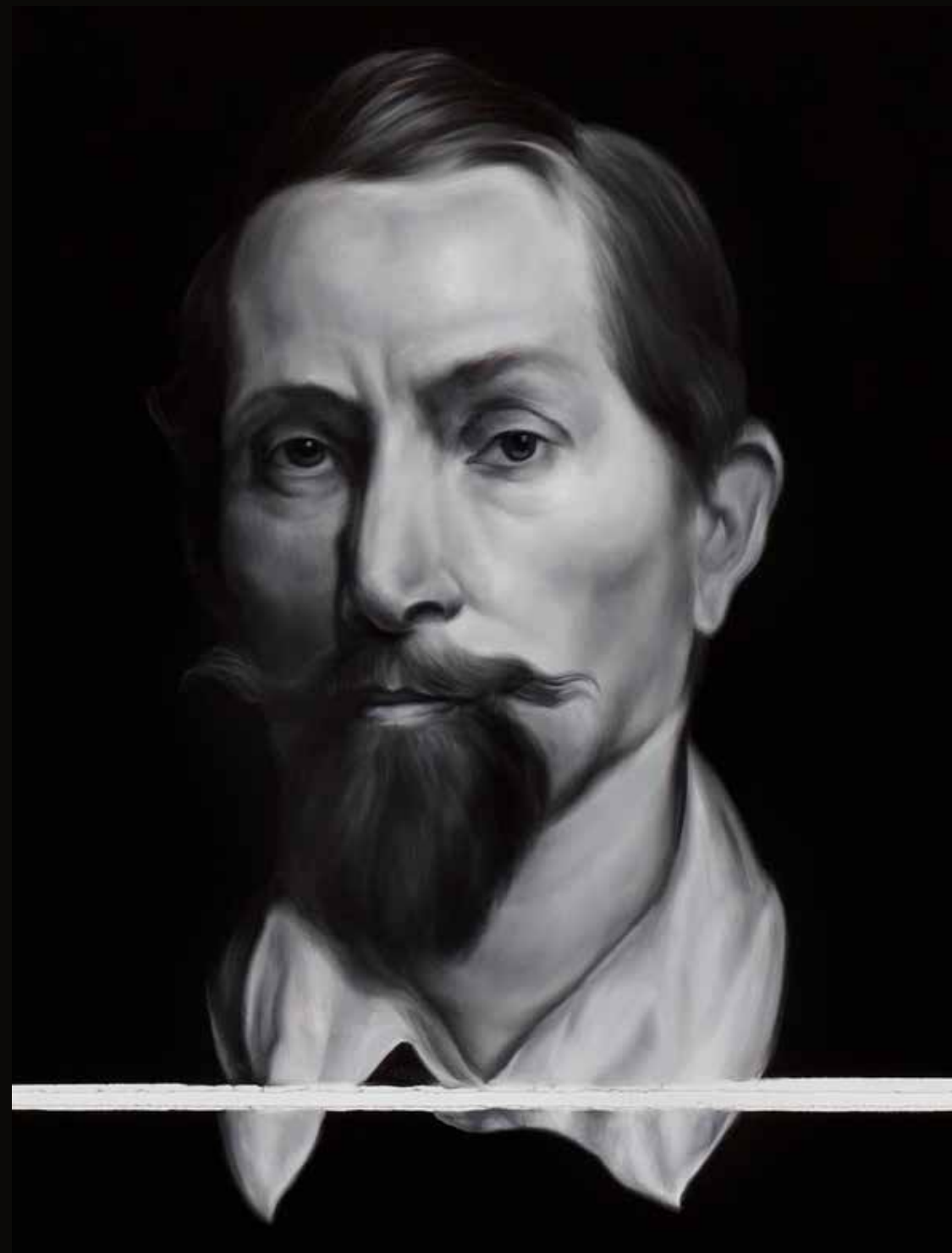


Left: **Hiding (after Ward)**, 2014  
Right: **City Bound (after Ward and Breenbergh)**, 2014

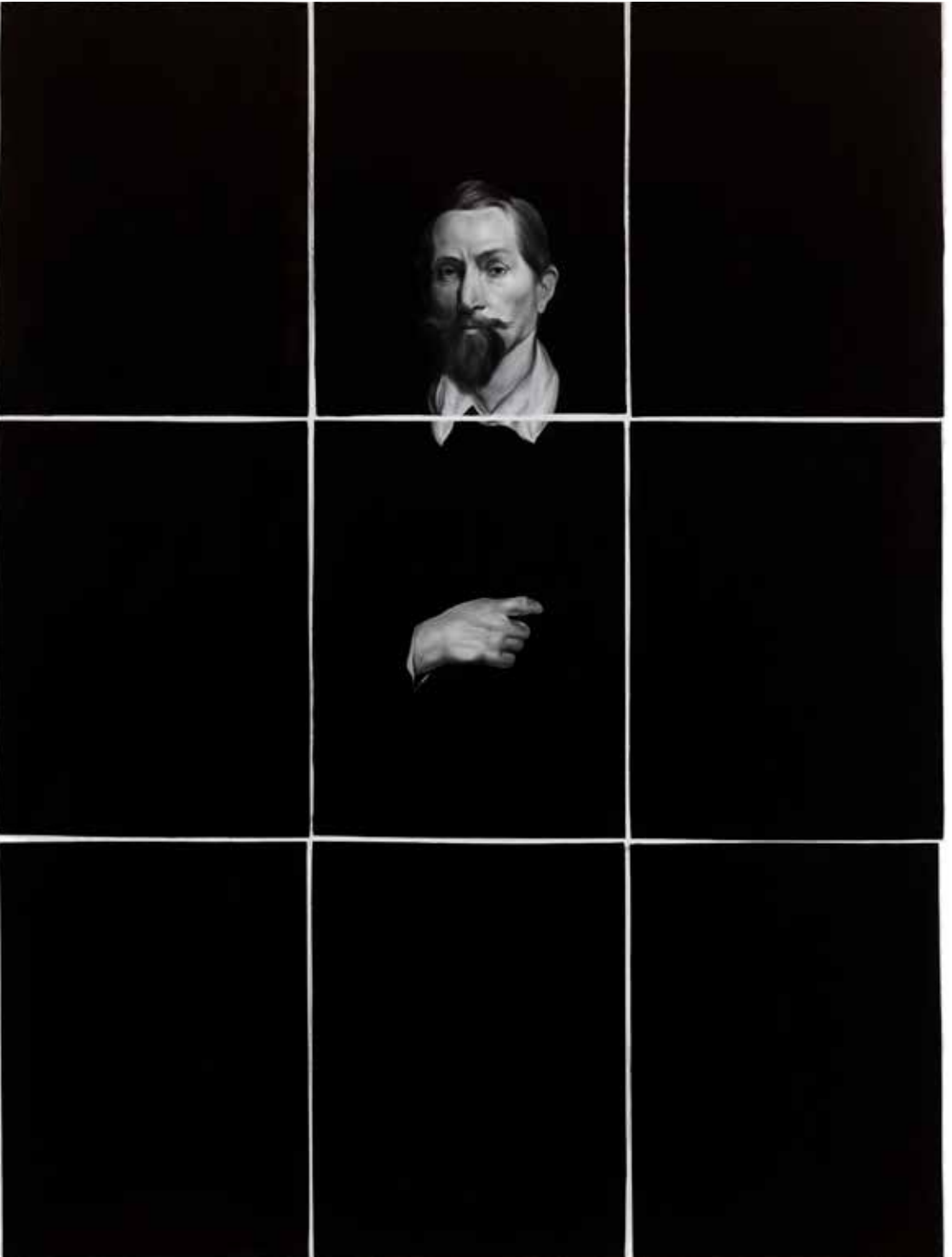












Men (after Perugino, Raphael and Van Dyck), 2017







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Tiger (after Janssens and Landseer), 2017







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Garland with Bird (after Marrel and Durantij), 2009

























**In Dubious Battle, 2013**



**Untitled (after de Lairese), 2007**

oil on canvas  
65 x 74 inches  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey

**Garland with Bird (after Marrel and Duranti), 2009**

oil on canvas  
66 x 55 inches  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey

**Rooster and Turkey (after Hondecoeter), 2009**

oil on canvas  
87 x 102 inches  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey

**By the Well (after Weenix and Hondecoeter), 2010**

oil on canvas  
90 x 80 inches  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey

**Hitched (after Desportes and Hondecoeter), 2013**

oil canvas  
84 x 110 inches  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey

**In Dubious Battle, 2013**

oil on canvas  
84 x 564 inches (11 panels, attribution to 23 artists)  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey

**Hiding (after Ward), 2014**

oil on wood  
**City Bound (after Ward and Breenbergh), 2014**  
oil on canvas  
48-inch diameter (each)  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey

Left: **Hound and Cockatoo (after Desportes, Hillegaert and Weenix), 2014**

Right: **Hound and Tortoise (after Desportes and Hondecoeter), 2014**  
oil on canvas  
left panel: 69 x 63 inches  
right panel: 69 x 57 inches  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey

**Bird (after Oudry), 2016**

oil on paper  
120 x 176 inches  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey  
Photo Credit: Stewart Clements

**White Horse (after Grant and Stubbs), 2016**

oil on paper  
90 x 132 inches  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey  
Photo Credit: Stewart Clements

**Men (after Perugino, Raphael and van Dyck), 2017**

oil on paper  
90 x 66 inches (each x 3)  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey  
Photo Credit: Stewart Clements

**Tiger (after Janssens and Landseer), 2017**

oil on paper  
90 x 88 inches  
Courtesy of Danese/Corey  
Photo Credit: Stewart Clements





Detail from *In Dubious Battle*

## Artist Bio

Shelley Reed is a painter who uses art history as a point of departure. She is represented by Danese/ Corey and the Sears-Peyton Gallery, both in New York.

Shelley was awarded a Traveling Fellowship in 2013 from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and was a finalist for a Massachusetts Cultural Council Fellowship in 2012. In 2006, she received a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant. She was the recipient of the 2005 Maud Morgan Award from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and a 2005 Berkshire Taconic Artist's Resource Trust Grant.

Her work can be found in public and private collections, including: the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Wellington Management Company, Fidelity Investment Corporation, Hallmark Collection, Lila Acheson Wallace Collection, Bank of Boston, Rose Art Museum, Danforth Museum, and the DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park.

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Detail from *In Dubious Battle*



This catalogue accompanies the exhibition **A Curious Nature: Paintings by Shelley Reed**, presented at the Fitchburg Art Museum February 12, 2017 – June 4, 2017.

The exhibition was organized by Curator Mary M. Tinti and Interim Curator Lisa Crossman.

The text was written by Lisa Crossman and Nick Capasso, and the catalogue was edited by Lisa Crossman.

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Catalogue design by the students of Rob Carr's Spring 2017 Document Design course at Fitchburg State University: Ryan Best, Jessica Coates, Rachael DeLisle, Eleni Demos, Brockton DiSalle, Elizabeth Garside, Lia Jackson, Amber Palizzolo, and Daniela Wholey.

Published by the Fitchburg Art Museum

185 Elm Street, Fitchburg, MA, 01420

[www.fitchburgartmuseum.org](http://www.fitchburgartmuseum.org)

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