

BROOKLYN RAIL

ArtSeen

Joy Curtis: *Night Hike and Ocean Grandma*

By Elizabeth Buhe

What is life like in the night forests of Madagascar, deep below the ocean's waves, in an ancient adobe, or inside the body? What patterns of movement, design symmetries, or interspecies relations govern those environments? Put somewhat differently, what natural systems of making and learning guide the living creatures that are found in such places? Joy Curtis's large-scale or wearable sculptures at Klaus von Nichtssagend, all made of fabric and hand-dyed by the artist with natural pigments, begin to suggest answers, moving us progressively farther from the stuff of material reality into abstractions that, presumably, we cannot see. Curtis expertly walks that line between depicting and suggesting, or representing and abstracting, so that ultimately the works' lessons do not pertain primarily to any one life form, but speak more broadly to the intelligence of nature and premodern ways of life. Although the sculptures contain recognizable forms, they are especially adept at mining shared morphologies between different kinds of living things. A wing might also be a leaf, a stem might be a spine, a vertebra might be a beetle.

In the center of the gallery, two large sculptures titled *Ocean Grandma*, *Sympathetic/Parasympathetic*, and *Future Organs* (2022–23) and *Night Hike 1 (Epiphytes)* (2023–24) are suspended from the ceiling. Each of these two pieces consists of soft sculptures that are networked together by an ecosystem of dyed ropes en-

twining them like a vascular system. We discern elements of plants and animals: a flayed and fraying torso; a beanstalk; valves, tubes, and a heart cradled in a custom-sized hammock; and most obviously, a humpback whale bereft of its hefty blubber. But just as quickly, the works' formal elements point to referents that exceed their immediate environment. For instance,



Joy Curtis, *Ocean Grandma, Sympathetic/Parasympathetic, and Future Organs*, 2022–23. Plant dyes on cotton, silk, and hemp; denim, kapok, steel, and bronze wire, 102 × 90 × 144 inches. Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery.

KLAUS VON NICHTSSAGEND GALLERY

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spirals stitched into the whale's tail suggest celestial cartographies, while a dark pink, pillow-like sacrum seems like a piece of ceremonial armor as much as a spinal bone. Slight shifts in scale aid in such conceptual crossovers between different times and places. Light brown melon-sized *Future Organs* imagine the constituent parts of an unknown species, while blue shapes in silk hemp and cotton velvet enlarge glands like the pea-sized pituitary gland and link to the terms sympathetic and parasympathetic in the work's title. These reference the autonomic nervous system, which in most animals controls involuntary processes like heartbeat and breathing, and differentiates how bodies respond to environmental stimuli—by “fight or flight” and “rest and digest,” respectively. Curtis targets her inquiry, then, on ancient systems that stand apart from human time or innovation. Similarly, *Ocean Grandma* suggests that Curtis's whale is female, valorizing the matriarchal social organization common to cetaceans.

The dark brown element perched on top of the accordion-like skeleton in *Night Hike 1 (Epiphytes)*, which Curtis colored using a historic black dye recipe, suggests both fungus growing out of a rotting stump and a moth with wings folded. In conversation, Curtis told me she was fascinated by the protruding wing of a dead hawk that she saw on the Florida road, which initially seemed to be an errant palm frond. Similarly, the aerial roots of the walking tree, the canopy of the screw pines, or eyes gleaming in the dark on a recent night hike in Madagascar were difficult to identify immediately. The way Curtis seizes upon—I am tempted to say honors—such shared morphologies is exactly what allows her work to cut through the distinctions humans have imposed on the world, especially at points in history such as the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, or in the project of colonization writ large. This is not to say that Curtis casts us contemporary people out of the work—far from it. For we find that truffle brown fungus/moth again, in a different permutation, as the wearable sculpture *Untitled 1 (black)* (2024), which is to be tied on one's back. Four additional garments hang on the wall: two tunics and two aprons with soft spikes sewn to them. When secured from the neck, the latter covers a person's front and back by continuing between their legs, rendering the wearer a thorny plant, a quilled rodent, or maybe even a dinosaur. Is this a model of symbiosis, as suggested by *Night Hike's* subtitle “epiphytes,” which refers to plants that grow on other plants without being parasitic to them? Perhaps so, as the wearable sculptures, performed at intervals during the show's run, invite us back into a world that Curtis has thoughtfully and persuasively reconfigured according to nature's priorities.



Joy Curtis, *Night Hike 1 (Epiphytes)*, 2023–24. Plant and mineral, and insect dyes on cotton, silk, and hemp, 90 × 42 × 69 inches.
Courtesy the artist and Klaus von Nichtssagend Gallery.