

Ann Diener: Growth

The concept of “growth” speaks to the many layers of Ann Diener’s newest body of work. It aptly describes her development as an artist as she dives deeper into her subject matter. She continues to challenge herself by increasing scale, complicating the perspective, and growing her vocabulary to express an intricate relationship to the land and nature on a personal and universal level. The swirling velocity of these images intertwines observations of the “natural” world as she sees it today with recollections of her past. She weaves in the energy of her memories in an attempt to reconcile what was to the current landscape that is—the rural farmland of her youth to the suburban industrialized agricultural industry of the present.

The descendent of four generations of farmers that settled in California’s central coast region in 1870, Diener has witnessed first-hand the evolution of agriculture in Ventura County. The transition from family farming to “big industry” rapidly increased after World War II when the focus shifted from wartime production to building and repopulating the States. The physical and political landscape was ripe for mass produced food and housing. Fordism paved the way for mechanized farming and large scale food distribution with the hopes of feeding the world—a dream yet to be realized—while developer-builders like Levitt & Sons created the aggressive model for tract housing that persists in spreading cookie-cutter communities and promoting stucco sprawl across the country.

In 1955, with the passing of her grandmother (who had a fierce and proud connection with their land), Diener saw the property that her family had worked for eighty-five years be subdivided and unceremoniously sold off to raise homes instead of crops. Now, only the occasional remnant of the previous generation peeks through in the form of her grandmother’s once grand, now run-downed house or a pile of rusting obsolete farm equipment. The fields no longer evoke rural prosperity and the sustainability of local markets. Instead, every ounce of production is squeezed from each square inch of dirt before it is paved and repurposed. International high-tech manufacturing with complex computerized water and feeding systems aided by petrochemicals and delivered by imported labor is the standard. As she observes more and more fields dissolving into neighborhoods, Diener has grown fascinated with the changing look of the fields as they are increasingly squeezed between industrial parks and big box shopping centers. Not surprisingly, Diener is drawn to the physical, social, and practical architecture of contemporary agriculture. She mines this natural/unnatural, public/private environment for her sharp, fat, skinny, smudged lines that she sees in the large spindles of wire, rolls of plastic, or stacks of wooden sticks to express the relentless rapid-fire pace of change.

“Nothing is permanent but change,” noted the ancient philosopher Heraclitus and each one of us comes to this conclusion at some point in our journey. Diener has chosen to put her realization on paper—nothing is static, everything is in flux. She is using the metaphor of the farm as a framework to express the angst, turmoil, and uncertainty of constant transition. Diener begins each drawing intuitively with no plan in mind or preconceived image to render. The images come from her field research and are driven by the action of moving a pencil back and forth across the page. She usually starts by drawing a geometric structure, a piece of architecture like the white plastic covered metal arches used for shade or the regimented lines of the crops. This gives her a basic skeleton to cover, permeate, obliterate as she layers the frenetic organic material.



Diener’s grid is frequently consumed or overrun by the wildness of plants, earth, and animals, or the swirling bale shapes that give her pictures electricity and speed. She often incorporates a pathway into the image as seen in “Stacked Field #1.” This device leads us into the work and points us to infinity. What lies around the corner or just ahead is never revealed. It is a perpetual forward movement. The same is true for “Field Panel #2,” except Diener presents multiple tunnels of endless sensations and places us inside the corridor—not at the entrance. Each step takes us deeper and the outside world appears to be closing in behind us like fairy tale children being swallowed up by the forest. The large horizontal paper and the intentional clearing of the white edges support the cinematic wide-screen effect that encourages us to enter and begin a futile search for a narrative amidst the churning, tumbling, and collapsing debris.

The work not only begs us to enter, it also pushes us around. The overall composition is large, baroque and beautiful. To take it all in, we must step back like land barons and assume the proprietary view while losing sight of the details. Advancing forward we are face-to-face with the intricacies of an individual spider, leaf, or berry—the micro reality. We gain more information but neither stance tells the whole tale. It is about the process. Our to and fro action emphasizes changing perspective. As we grow and move through the world, gaining and losing knowledge and experience, our memories expand and contract, blur, blend, and bleed to assist or hinder us in understanding what was in the context of what is.

This ambiguous tension between stasis and perpetual motion is the bare essence of Diener’s intention. She draws upon her personal experience to create lush, ripe, abundant images to express the anxiety of mortality—a subject of great art the world over. Her primary metaphor is one of high drama as the farmer, (whether embodied by her grandparents or corporate entities), attempts the fruitless challenge of harnessing the forces of nature. The family farmers suffer from the whims of weather, while big business agriculture depletes the top soil and ignores the future. Instead of setting “man versus the environment” in these new field images, Diener places us inside the turbulent dialogue. She pushes and pulls us to show we are part of an ever-evolving ecosystem, and we are growing, thriving, and decaying together. It is a rhythmic dance and sometimes we lead and sometimes we follow.

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