

WIDEWALLSMAUVAISES HERBES - THREE FEMALE ARTISTS AT SIMON LEE
GALLERY, HONG KONG

Art Exhibitions, Review • Abby McKenzie

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Simon Lee [Gallery](#), Hong Kong's most recent group exhibition *Mauvaises Herbes: Sarah Crowner, Caitlin Keogh, Paulina Olowska* presents the aesthetically divergent new work of three artists, linked by themes of **the biological, the feminine and the botanical**, in order to display a common narrative convergence of subject and execution. The group show constitutes Simon Lee's first collaboration with Caitlin Keogh and the gallery's first presentation of the work of Sarah Crowner in Hong Kong.



Installation Shot, *Mauvaises Herbes: Sarah Crowner, Caitlin Keogh, Paulina Olowska*, 2017, Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong, [Courtesy](#): The Artists and Simon Lee Gallery Hong Kong

Figuring and Unfiguring

Despite the artists' common interests and personal friendship, *Mauvaises Herbes* is a strong display of the diverse and juxtaposing formative attitudes to painting. This aspect is most notably highlighted in their relationships to [abstraction](#) and [figuration](#), as strategies of narrative metaphor. Sarah Crowner's latest pieces, for example, are composed of fragments of painted canvas stitched together in the process of "figuring and unfiguring". Through this composition, her work creates an **undefined intersection between painting and collage**, subtly questioning the cohesion of these self-containing categories. Antithetically, Paulina Olowaska's work is resolutely figurative, composed of **deftly textured brushwork** that, though relatively sparse descriptively, composes lyrical figurations of her subject. Curatorially acting as an agglutinating constituent between these two extremes is Caitlin Keogh's simplified form, born out of an inspiration of both [Art Nouveau](#) and the [designs](#) of William Morris.



Installation Shot, *Mauvaises Herbes*: Sarah Crowner, Caitlin Keogh, Paulina Olowaska, 2017, Simon Lee Gallery, Hong Kong, Courtesy: The Artists and Simon Lee Gallery Hong Kong

Disordered Transfigurations of Organic Growth

These diverse aesthetics and formative practices come together in a **conversation over how technique is infused with the narrative**. The first thematic vein of this is the exploration of the botanical and biology. In this regard, within Crowner's work, with its fragmented use of shape, each painted form is used to represent different botanical specimens including sea grasses, pods, kelp and weeds. The negation of geometric order within these compositions ultimately reflects the disordered transfigurations of organic growth, with allusions to the infiltrating force of biological structures. In a similar thematic, through adverse technical execution, Keogh's work also deals with an infiltration of nature, both through a botanical and an ethological angle. In each of her [images](#), the organisms encroach upon the other material form in a manner that depicts a subversive prepotency. This is especially prevalent in *Rampant Vulnerability* (2017), where the insects crawl upon the woman's body as





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Mauvaises Herbes

Alongside this preoccupation with the ethological and the botanical, the work of each of these artists is inescapably infused with an examination of the feminine and, by correlation, the feminist artistic discourse – arguably the most overt of which, thematically and iconographically, is Keogh's use of the body. In each of the three works within the show, the imagery is strongly anthropomorphic. From the figurative depiction of the woman's body in *Rampant Vulnerability*, the vein-like structures of *Strange Labor*, to the connotations of the vaginal form in *Bombyx Travels*. In each, the botanical and ethnographic elements, combined with the cuspidate graphics, become pseudo-sexual symbols of a dehumanized saccharine sexuality. The underlying psychological exploration thus appears to be sexuality, or more broadly the femininity, the constitution of which eschews containment. It is this idea of containment that links Keogh's work with the pervasive biological exploration in Crowner's pieces, depicting a natural course resisting enclosure in a clean, absolute form. Furthermore, in a different manner, Olowaska also contributes to this avenue, but in a more narrative than thematic fashion. In this regard, the avoidance of feminine containment comes through the inherently-perceived social contradiction within her subject, Dr. Biruté Galdikas, who is presented embodying the emblems of the mother whilst operating within a STEM environment – the social and intellectual structures of which, all too often, diminish the utility of feminine characteristics.

The combination of these two thematic veins belies a subtle consideration of strength and self-perception within the three artists' work. In this respect, each has highlighted and ultimately transformed the notion of impertinence or overreach, through the lens of the botanical whilst fundamentally expressing an examination of gendered perceptions of subjugation and containment. Thus, in combination, the strength of *Mauvaises Herbes* is the close interrelation of the individual practices of the three women, which supports each work without neglecting or emancipating any practices from the whole.

Mauvaises Herbes: Sarah Crowner, Caitlin Keogh, Paulina Olowaska is on view at [Simon Lee Gallery](#), Hong Kong until 27th May, 2017.

Featured images: Installation Shot, *Mauvaises Herbes*: Sarah Crowner, Caitlin Keogh, Paulina Olowaska, 2017, Simon Lee