

## ARTFORUM

## Clare Woods

CHISENHALE GALLERY

Nature almost never looks this good, and painting rarely does either. Clare Woods's three enormous landscape paintings—*Rock of the Night* (the largest, measuring thirty-six feet in length), *Gwen's Bobby*, and *The Grump*, all 2006—spread across three walls of Chisenhale's cavernous space as if poured in great waves. Glossy and intricately painted, this immense trio of works (collectively titled "Deaf Man's House") overflows with sinuous natural forms: masses of leaves, roots, grasses, branches, mosses, puddles. CinemaScope in scale and format, "Deaf Man's House" adheres unmistakably to the long British tradition of pastoral landscape painting, somehow managing to conjure two contradictory moments of the English countryside—a mythical, verdant, gothic past and the mutant overgrowth of postindustrial abandon.

Woods's work is brimming with tantalizing contradictions. The panoramic format and the Romantic, orgiastic atmosphere are contradicted by the tight, horizonless composition and the emphasis throughout on the most minute details of the natural world: the mirror-like sheen of flat water; the unruly, tentacular forms of an uprooted tree; the fanlike veins of a tiny leaf. This attention to detail is further contradicted by the viewer's conflicting needs to stop and look closely and to walk along each huge painting in its entirety, often stepping away in order to take in the image as a whole. In the same spirit of contradiction, we gaze upward at these giant works, nine feet tall, as if looking up at a movie screen, yet the images themselves are always of natural landscapes at ground level—the shoreline of an abandoned, swampy beach; the damp, rotting underside of a fallen tree; the flora of the forest floor. The dark *Rock of the Night*, moreover, is oddly suggestive of corals and floating, slithering, unrecognizable things that live at the bottom of the ocean. Similarly, while existing resolutely within the medium of painting and instantly recalling Jackson Pollock with their unkempt, all-over rhythm, the paintings are actually photographic in origin. Like most of Woods's art, they are based on innumerable snapshots taken by the artist, pieced together and enlarged to form these wondrous panoramas. The unnatural, disjunctive seams where the photographs were joined are rigorously painted in, providing another contrast: this time with the illusion of Pollockesque, painterly spontaneity.

Meticulously hand-drawn beneath the paint, the works recall Warhol's *Do-It-Yourself* landscapes, with each color confined within its own outline, making these luscious organic scenes feel, paradoxically, as artificial as the gleaming bright pinks, blues, and purples she sometimes favors over her usual muddy greens, grays, and browns. The thickly painted shapes of enamel and oil paint seem perpetually wet, with each application of color standing up from the panel at minutely varying heights, resulting in a layered, uneven surface with its own valleys and rivulets—a surface microtopography echoing the big landscape of the picture. Skyless and claustrophobic, they nevertheless manage to convey a sense of vast, breathtaking beauty, a feat even more impressive in three works all achieving the same high caliber.

—Gilda Williams



Clare Woods, *Gwen's Bobby*, 2006, enamel and oil on aluminum, six parts, 9 x 24'