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Shilling-Janoff, Alana. "Beauties Unintentional, Accidental 'Isabel Nolan An Answer About the Sky,'" *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 7, 2014.



BEAUTIES UNINTENTIONAL, ACCIDENTAL ISABEL NOLAN *An Answer About the Sky*

Isabel Nolan's *An Answer About the Sky*, on view at the Sean Kelly Gallery (September 13 – October 18, 2014), is a history of the virtues of accident and error that unfolds in 14 works across media including paintings, sculptures, a rug, and a series of reflections authored by Nolan herself in prose that is both limpid and lyrical. The result is a disquisition of staggering beauty, at once masterful and zany, about the aesthetics of failure, the unexpected promise of faltering ambitions, and the thrasonical delusion of art's immortality—a conceit which the centuries have stubbornly repeated, deaf to the possibility that art's impermanence may constitute less a threat and more a splendid vulnerability. The fitful fellowship pairing art's power with its evanescence registers in each canvas. Within their intimate dimensions (often less than a foot in width) stir maelstroms of color. Vivid and varied, they at once create figures in an economy of decisive brushstrokes and undo their own fleeting empire over form as images seem unmade as they are made, always promising to slip into nothing but the dripping paint that threatens to undo the form it makes.

The narrative of *An Answer*, begins with myths of classical antiquity, moves towards Renaissance intellectual history, modernity, and, ends finally, with an apocalyptic time beyond our time where that dripping paint has become the form of trees and archways. The narrative "told" visually—each painting a variation on a single shared palette—is also "painted" in words with a narrative titled "One Sun So Hot" (2014), a series of six passages that surface at regular intervals throughout the exhibition.

Icarus, son of that legendary artificer, Daedalus, supplies the mythic foundation for "An Answer," and not by accident. He is the very emblem of Art writ large with its Janus face, both mother of errors and delusions and a source of visionary creation. The fable of Icarus's demise figures prominently in the first three passages of "One Sun So Hot," each a correction of the last. The first "One Sun" is a simple narrative of the Icarus myth. In the next, the narrative turns ponderous with symbol, equating Icarus's fall with the standard allegorical interpretation about hubris dear to moralists since antiquity. The third passage offers a new allegory, one that reframes Icarus's demise as an unsought and felicitous source of creativity.

The notion that loss and invention can be partners is expounded with particular care in a pair of works—the first encountered in the exhibition—obliquely linked to Icarus. The first, the oil painting, "Molten" (2014), is an exemplar of the intensity of color sustained by committed saturation and brushstrokes, visual equivalents of the *sprezzatura*, or studied carelessness, so characteristic of Nolan's work. It is punctuated with the first of the "One Sun So Hot" (2014) series. "Harbinger" (2014), a stained glass sculpture, is fixed overhead, a study in discipline and geometry, spare and severe.

"Molten" initially appears, unequivocally, a rendering of a sun. After reading the description of Icarus's death as a fall into a sea that buried him, words reframe "Molten," endowing it with fresh complexity. Perspectives change; what was at first so emphatically a sun becomes the golden head of its victim—perhaps the vision that a horrified Daedalus beheld as he watched his son fall into the sea. The subject of the composition is both the agent of demise and its victim. The rigid lines of "Harbinger" suggest a sun as well. Yet, if seen at the right time, from the right angle, "Harbinger" rewards accident and contingency. Its harsh, stylized sun relaxes into a portrait that also suggests Icarus; it is a likeness that exists in light alone.

The paintings of *An Answer* press forward from myth into history, bounding from the bounty of one type of error to the next. The exhibition moves from a painting dedicated to Prometheus's stone, the synecdoche for the site

of that Titan's punishment, to the labile ecstasy of poet John Donne to the pastoralism of "Quietus in the pre-Copernican place" (2014). The latter features a quaint village nestled between hill and river presided over by an unassuming sun; an idyll founded not on unrepachable ideals but rather an untroubled ignorance of geocentrism.

For all its claims to rhapsodize inconsistencies and accidents, "An Answer" is also a direct response to one of the great definitions of art forged in modernity, one so lexically rich that words become weighted with an unintentional opulence. This is, naturally, the epiphany of Stephen Daedalus's in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: "Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly ... as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable." The direct opposition to Joycean aesthetics is not accident. It is tacitly announced in the exhibition's mythological commitment to Daedalus's counterpart, Icarus. Moreover, Joyce's character declares allegiance to a "prism of a language many-colored." *An Answer* is also a prism, one created by fidelity to a single palette of colors with variations of yellow dominating the rest, a commitment that makes color as deliberate as a clause, simultaneously defined and delimited by chromatic solidarity. Nolan does more than counter Joyce; she reveals how Joyce's Daedalus unwittingly obeyed the laws of "An Answer," of an art bound to accident and error. Daedalus defined his medium by what it was not—words as as a surfeit of colors, from goldenrod and tangerine to ultramarine—forcing language into the lovely paradox of subverting itself to better present itself. Nolan uses color as a language too, a lexicon of myth, history, and prophecy; one that is forever, forever falling into the soundless depths of ephemerality.