

WEAVING DREAMS

ANTHONY CUDAHY'S SPINNERET AT OGUNQUIT



REVIEW

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OGUNQUIT MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

543 SHORE ROAD
OGUNQUIT, MAINE

THROUGH JULY 21

Step inside the Ogunquit Museum of American Art (OMAA), and a luminous transformation unfolds. The salt-spray roar of the Gulf of Maine retreats and a different type of sensory gale rises up. Phosphorescent dreamscapes. Intoxicating light and shadows. Hues so delicious you can almost taste them. Familiar faces you couldn't possibly know. This is "Spinneret," the first solo exhibition in the United States by the contemporary figurative painter Anthony Cudahy (b. 1989, Fort Myers, FL).

"Spinneret refers to the interconnectedness and pattern-like repetition that lends meaning to Cudahy's remarkable body of work," stated Devon Zimmerman, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at OMAA, in "Anthony Cudahy: Spinneret" (Monacelli Press), the comprehensive monograph published as a companion to the artist's exhibition. "It draws inspiration from – and is named for – the silk-producing organ that spiders use to weave, or spin, their webs. Cudahy creates his web by interweaving texts and images from sources past and present, forgotten and well-known, canonical and personal, to construct works of incredible complexity and consideration."

Spanning the last five years of Cudahy's illustrious career, the "Spinneret" exhibition at OMAA emerges as a monumental ode to the interplay between personal narratives and historical echoes. Through 31 significant paintings, Cudahy intricately weaves a

narrative that spans the realms of art history, queer archives, allegory, symbolism and so much more; a meticulously spun world where found photos dance with Renaissance paintings, social media feeds and fragments of memory.

"We are thrilled to be presenting 'Spinneret,' Cudahy's first solo exhibition in the United States," Zimmerman said. "An exhibition of a contemporary artist of Cudahy's stature is a triumph for OMAA, underscoring our commitment to showcasing exemplary contemporary talent with our audiences. Cudahy's work poetically navigates the simultaneity and vertigo of our contemporary moment. This far-reaching survey will examine the web of themes that animate the artist's work. In several new works, the artist responded to Ogunquit's place within the history of American Modernism and dramatic site within nature."

The first encounter with Cudahy's paintings in "Spinneret" is an immersive experience. These works demand your attention with their pulsating and tactile colors. Teals. Deep reds. Earthy browns. Unexpected bursts of yellow. Pronounced blues. These unexpected color combinations are a hallmark of Cudahy's style, jolting the viewer out of complacency and forcing a deeper engagement with the work.

Foremost, Cudahy is a figure painter. His figures are enigmatic. They range from billowy, barely remembered, almost abstract

LEFT: Anthony Cudahy, *Anti-bausor tree (protected sleepers, wolf's-bane and spider around)*, 2021, oil on canvas, 96" x 72". Photograph by Charles Rousell.

RIGHT: Anthony Cudahy, *Reader*, 2022, oil on linen, 24" x 18". Photograph by JSP Art Photography.

representations to meticulously rendered portraits of friends and lovers. He captures both the fleeting intimacy of a stolen glance and the hyper-real detail of a specific pose.

Cudahy harnesses his forms and colors, in part, with a “wet-on-wet” technique, resulting in a lush and fluid aesthetic. This approach creates a sense of immediacy, as if you’re witnessing the scene unfold in real-time. Each brushstroke feels alive. There’s a physicality to the brushwork. Seen up close, the use of impasto, washes, color fields and even monochromatic backgrounds further adds depth to Cudahy’s painterly explorations. In some works, the background melts away into abstraction, emphasizing the figure’s solitude or introspection. In others, the textures provide a stage for the drama to unfold, the thick application and loaded brush maneuvers creating a sense of tension and anticipation.

But the true magic of Cudahy’s work lies in the intricacy of its construction. He acts as a weaver, meticulously combining and crafting scenes from a vast and eclectic archive, their origins hinted at by a familiar pose or a borrowed motif. Film stills. Ancient sites. Hagiographical icons. Botanical studies. Scientific programs. News footage. Found and family photographs.

This concept of interwoven narratives reaches its zenith in a painting like “Anti-bausor tree (protected sleepers, wolf’s-bane and spider around),” a captivating yet unsettling work within Cudahy’s “Spinneret” exhibition at the OMAA.

At first glance, Anthony Cudahy’s “Anti-bausor tree” presents a seemingly idyllic scene — two figures sprawled peacefully in a field. However, a closer

examination reveals an undercurrent of unease, a subtle dissonance that compels deeper exploration.

“Now, wait a minute! What am I looking at here? Are these figures sleeping — or are they dead?”

The title acts as your first clue. Bausor Tree is a phrase practically begging you to search for it on Google. Referencing a mythical poisonous tree, it hints at a darkness lurking just beneath the surface. This foreboding is amplified by the curious absence of the very element the title suggests.

Cudahy takes a deliberate step in erasing the Bausor Tree from his reimagining of a woodcut print of the medieval engraving (Bauser vel Bausor, “Ortus Sanitatis, Mainz,” 1491) that first inspired him. This act of erasure transforms into a powerful statement. The blank space at the painting’s center becomes a physical manifestation of forgotten narratives, a void where history and myth collide. Yet, the erased image isn’t truly gone. It lingers as a ghostly presence, shaping the composition and infusing the scene with a sense of unease.

Cudahy meticulously replaces the Bausor Tree with the wolfsbane flower, a highly ambiguous and dangerously neurotoxic flower which has long been used as a poison — as well as a medicine — and has long-served as a potent symbol for misanthropy and death, as well as to ward off negative energies and promote positive change. The purple wolfsbane blossoms in proximity to the figure’s face create a subtle tension, a visual reminder of mortality’s constant presence and the ambiguous nature of the threats and assurances we find ourselves constantly confronted with in this modern world.

The spider perched above the scene, inspired by a Kate Bush song (“A Coral Room”) reflecting on loss and the relentless passage of time (“As the spider of time is climbing over the ruins”), adds another layer of meaning.

This intertextual weaving is central to Cudahy’s practice. He draws inspiration from diverse sources like 19th century scientific journals, contemporary music and personal experiences. These fragments are then meticulously arranged, creating a palimpsest of sorts — a layered visual narrative where past and present, fact and fiction, intertwine and through an artistic form of intellectual alchemy become animated into more than the sum of their Frankensteinian parts.

Unlike a traditional palimpsest where one text erases another, Cudahy’s version allows for a more complex interplay. Each element retains its own significance while simultaneously enriching the overall meaning. For example, the figures in the painting — modeled by the artist and his husband, photographer, Ian Lewandowski — become both specific individuals and universal representations of human vulnerability.

In “Anti-bausor tree,” Cudahy leverages absence, suggestion and symbolism to create a work that is deeply evocative and intellectually stimulating. It is a painting that lingers long after the viewer has turned away.



Anthony Cudahy, *Eroded beach*, 2023, oil on linen, 72" x 72" x 1 1/4".
Photograph by JSP Art Photography.

Stepping into “Spinneret” at the OMAA and being surrounded by paintings like these is like drifting into a waking dream, a vague and resonant world where glowing memories shimmer like phantoms, familiar people become intimate strangers and emotions bleed into landscapes.

Cudahy doesn't seek to dictate a singular meaning. His work is an invitation to dialogue, a conversation across time and space. He draws inspiration from the great masters of the past – Giorgione's enigmatic figures, Bruegel's bustling landscapes, the serene melancholy of Lois Dodd's portraits – yet he never merely imitates. Instead, he uses these references as jumping-off points, creating a visual vocabulary that is distinctly his own.

What truly elevates “Spinneret” is the sense of personal journey it offers. Each painting acts as a portal, inviting you to step into the artist's world and conjure your own narrative. There are no predefined interpretations, no singular truths waiting to be revealed. Instead, Cudahy provides you with fragments of his world — a lover reading from a book adorned with butterfly wings, a sunbather sprawled on an eroded stretch of beach, figures intertwined beneath a mythical tree.

These fragments become prompts, evoking associations, emotions and memories within the viewer. “Spinneret” serves as a reminder that art, at its best, is a mirror held up to the human experience, reflecting our complexities, vulnerabilities and enduring capacity for love and connection.

Eric J. Taubert



Curator: Danni Shen

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manuel pardo
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stardust drawings



stardust drawing "mother and i" 2009, japanese archival ink on handmade paper, 48 x 16" (monograph pg. 57)

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