

# ARTFORUM

## Diane Burko

CRISTIN TIERNEY

Diane Burko's "Bearing Witness," her exhibition at Cristin Tierney, examined the boundlessness of nature's sublimity, even in the midst of terrifying ecological collapse. The artist's mixed-media paintings—grand, spectacular works that are both figurative and abstract—are an ingenious fusion of AbEx abandon and impressionistic delicacy. Take *Summer Heat 1 & 2*, 2020, which is seven feet high and more than thirteen feet wide. The right side, made up of four separate canvases, features a weather map-like rendering of Italy, doused in fiery oranges and reds—surely a statement on the crushing swelter that took over the country at the start of the titular season the year this piece was made. The cool blues surrounding the boot-shaped nation, alas, provide no relief. To the left of this scene were two more canvases, hung atop one another. In the lower portion, we experienced some kind of sylvan conflagration. We also saw a silhouette of a creature being burned alive near a denuded tree—an omen of mass extinction, perhaps.

These paintings are driven by what Kandinsky called an "inner necessity," a compulsion fueled by the artist's deep spiritualism. But Burko's art is guided by an unwavering environmentalism. In 1977, at the age of thirty-two, she flew with James Turrell in his Helio Courier aircraft over the Grand Canyon. One wonders if this trip helped foster her reverence for sweeping landscapes, which links her paintings, however obliquely, to the Hudson River School's transcendentalist depictions of nature. Clearly the artist was taken with light and space, Turrell's ostensibly matterless subject matter. Burko has since traveled the world, taking in the fjords of Greenland and the volcanoes of Hawai'i and Iceland. In 2013 she went to Antarctica and the Arctic to see firsthand the melting of the polar ice caps. In 2023 she journeyed to the Amazon rainforest to study the effects of record-breaking wildfires and deforestation. She has used satellite-derived imagery, among other photographic sources, as a means to her aesthetic ends, and she was profoundly influenced by Al Gore's ecological activism.

A trio of smaller canvases, all twenty inches square, were hermetically self-contained masterpieces—more powerful, to my mind, than the larger paintings. In *Amazon 34*, 2024, a disk centers a kind of orange "sun" surrounded by leaves and flowers that appear to emanate from it. The flora hover over a black ground—a sort of limbo space, a portal into nothingness. In *Amazon 35*, 2024, the golden disk has expanded; pine fronds are visible through a hole in the middle of the shape as more greenery tentatively embraces the bright orb like a funeral wreath. In *Unprecedented Study 3*, 2021, we see a quartet of pale moons in different sizes, placed against an abstracted landscape marked by verdant growths and blue sky. Below this tableau is a dark predella full of ghostly figures akin to amorphous spirits resting comfortably in a grave. Since Burko is now eighty years old, I suggest that these remarkable works are not just memento mori for our decaying world, but memorials to the artist herself, in anticipation of her own death. They are marvelous revelations of nature in a metamorphic process, from wondrous beginning to heartrending end.

—Donald Kuspit



Diane Burko,  
*Summer Heat 1 & 2*,  
2020, diptych, mixed  
media on canvas,  
overall 7' x 13' 6".