

SHEBOYGAN, WISCONSIN

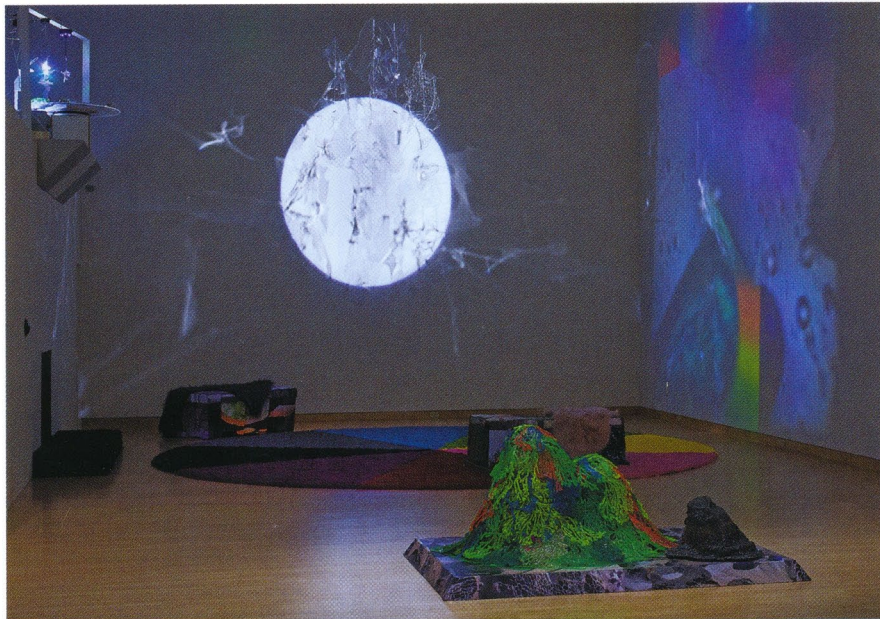
Joy Feasley and Paul Swenbeck

JOHN MICHAEL KOHLER ARTS CENTER

Philadelphia-based artists Joy Feasley and Paul Swenbeck have been collaborating for thirty-five years alongside their work as museum preparators and as a painter and a sculptor, respectively. Titled after the mysterious lights and colors we see when we close our eyes—and inspired by a dream of Feasley's—the exhibition "Out, Out, Phosphene Candle" continues their sustained exploration of the diverse scientific and mystic methods humans use to grapple with the unseen. Here, the duo's works are placed in conversation with loaned works by other artists as well as their own selections from the John Michael Kohler Arts Center's major collection of art environments and vernacular objects made by untrained artists, including Levi Fisher Ames, Emery Blagdon, Eugene Von Bruenchenhein, and Nick Engelbert. Feasley and Swenbeck's most ambitious presentation to date in terms of material range, conceptual scope, and sheer scale, the show comprises a series of installations that range from conventional museum hangs of photographs and paintings to darkened rooms crammed with historical artifacts, artworks, and the artists' personal effects. The exhibition provides a new perspective on the contemporary practice of turning to museum collections to ground, historicize, and refresh artists' practices, not only reframing the ways we engage with specific groups of objects that have traditionally fallen outside of contemporary art discourse but also positing cross-historical curation as a kind of clairvoyance.

Visitors begin in a low-ceilinged room—part domestic interior, part curiosity cabinet—dimly lit with filaments shaped into roses. The heady perfume of cedarwood emanates from the reddish flooring and from

View of "Joy Feasley
and Paul Swenbeck,"
2018. Photo:
Jeff Machtig.



split logs stacked around a tiled fireplace. Oddly shaped portholes punctuate the metallic and cobalt-blue-paneled walls. The view through each little window reveals a different display of both personal and borrowed items, some marked with tiny numbers that correspond to a laminated checklist of works on loan and others left undescribed. In one shrine-like vitrine—which has a black glittery backdrop of spiderweb drawings—ceramic flowers, figurines, and ax heads by Von Bruenchenhein surround the artists’ wedding bands, which are engraved with simplified smiling faces (Feasley and Swenbeck are a married couple). Astral-navigation instruments in a nearby vitrine give a clue as to how to read this grouping: as a constellation in which organic and ancient-looking forms are imbued with mythological patterns by the artists, who remain present by proxy through their rings.

After crawling through the hearth’s threshold, the viewer emerges into a more conventional white-walled, high-ceilinged museum gallery. A mobile of transparent, curved plastic shapes casts morphing shadows onto a dreamily abstract video projection that spans two corner walls. This is the backdrop for an installation grounded by a circular shag area rug geometrically divided into slices of pink, blue, orange, and black to resemble a color wheel used for the magical practice of dowsing. This motif recurs throughout the show, re-created in stained glass and paintings, suggesting that the concept of divination might have paralleled the artists’ act of locating references within the Kohler Arts Center’s collection.

Two tightly packed tableaux complete the pathway around this exhibition. *Listen, the Snow is Falling*, 2018, the only work made by Feasley and Swenbeck that bears a title here, is a twinkling, kitschy diorama of snow-powdered firs, contoured mountains, and pink electric candles in a sealed grotto, viewable through Perspex windows cut into geometric patterns. Nearby, and taking up a similar footprint, is an abundant greenhouse-style installation of ceramic and cast-bronze flora, botanic paintings, and neon plastic puddles, all under a silvery mesh canopy of gardener’s shade cloth. Here, Feasley and Swenbeck’s discrete works integrate most fully with objects from the collection. Feasley’s bright painting of an abundantly lucky field of four-leaf clovers hangs next to Nick Engelbert’s equally teeming *Flora from Hawaii*, ca. 1955, and Von Bruenchenhein’s *Lichens Magnified*, 1977, while Blagdon’s wire-and-wood mobiles twirl over Swenbeck’s ceramic plants like hanging baskets. These juxtapositions not only recontextualize the self-taught artists as creative peers but position Feasley and Swenbeck as intuitives in a transformative exchange.

—Bea Huff Hunter