

Koak: Artist Koak's New Show is a Study in Contrasts

By Claire Frost

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Artist Koak at work in her studio in San Francisco's Dogpatch neighborhood.  
Courtesy of Koak and Altman Siegel Gallery

It is a blandly overcast December day in the Dogpatch neighborhood when I arrive at **Koak's** studio. Opposite the entrance, a wall of windows blankets the industrial space with cool winter light, illuminating the rich colors and textures of the paintings and drawings. She is deep into finishing the work for her show at Altman Siegel gallery, which opened last month to coincide with Fog Design+Art fair and runs through February 25. While her previous exhibitions dealt with the perils of domesticity and the nuances of touch — particularly prescient when *Return to Feeling* debuted at Altman Siegel in March 2020 — for the current one, *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*, Koak focused on a persistent sense of free-floating anxiety in relation to our precarious built and natural worlds. "It feels strangely detached to not make work about that right now — when everyone I know and the world around us feels locked in a loop of anxieties," she says.

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"Facade" is among Koak's new works, on view at Altman Siegel gallery through February 25, in the artist's solo show, *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*.

Courtesy of Koak and Altman Siegel Gallery

Koak describes how her bodies of work tend to coalesce around ideas that initially emerged on the fringes of previous projects but gain form and momentum when placed in relation to each other. A conceptual anchor of the Altman Siegel show is a bronze sculpture of a flower being bathed because "it's so futile, and also aspirational," she says, adding that it feels like an apt representation of "the struggle of delicacy vs. strength, and subtlety vs. invincibility, in our relationship to nature."

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Such perceived dichotomies are central to Koak's practice. Born in Michigan and raised in Santa Cruz, Koak came to San Francisco to study at California College of the Arts, ultimately receiving an MFA in comics. Her work — in painting, drawing and sculpture — retains the graphic sensibility and an emphasis on figure-based narratives of the medium she was trained in. The paintings and drawings mainly center around femme figures that are composed of gorgeously swooping and tapering lines who sit, recline and crawl through lushly colored (often domestic) spaces to create scenes that are both tender and incisive in their consideration of human behavior.



"En Garde" is among Koak's new works, on view at Altman Siegel gallery through February 25, in the artist's solo show, *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*.  
Courtesy of Koak and Altman Siegel Gallery

Thus, for Koak, the playfulness and absurdity of washing a flower brings a "Let's laugh so we don't cry" feeling that is crucial to thinking about something as stressful as, well, stress. With this work, it allowed her to diverge from the "piercing with tension" version of what art about something uncomfortable might look like, she notes. Instead she created "a room of paintings, presented in varying tones — whether it's style or color or how the paint is handled — that feels more authentically like a sense of anxiety."

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Taking this approach, the fresh paintings that lean against the walls of her studio vary from small to towering, representing deep blue nudes, billowing landscapes, and even a still life held together by the distinctive style and care that Koak brings to each painting. Each composition is carefully planned through multiple rounds of drawings. Painted black lines are built up with discarded pencil shavings so that they appear richer and fuller. And what could be considered white negative space in the largest of the paintings was built up in layers — using over five gallons of white paint — to achieve a texture that looks like drywall rather than paint on canvas.



"California Landscape" is among Koak's new works on view at Altman Siegel gallery through February 25, in the exhibition *Letter to Myself (when the world is on fire)*.

Courtesy of Koak and Altman Siegel Gallery

The meticulous attention that is necessary to conjure these effects is the result of obsessive repetition that forms something greater than each material layer, and it evokes a sense of calm and control that is as much of an illusion as the surface it creates. Similarly, by the time I write this, the chilly clouds of a few weeks ago have turned into what feels like a perpetual rainstorm that reveals the vulnerability of structures — both natural and constructed — to withstand such continual pressure from anything, even something as essential and desirable as water in our drought-ridden state. This profoundly disorienting reality is when her work takes shape: "[When] my brain is too tired to pinpoint nuance, it opts for the complexity that juxtaposed images excel at," she says, further explaining, "I don't know how to talk about the stress ... so in that way, the show is an homage to its own creation. An act of what can be created through stress to reflect it."

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