

Building or Undoing Worlds? 'Janiva Ellis: Fear Corroded Ape' at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 31 January – 6 April 2025

Emily Shoyer

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Installation view of 'Janiva Ellis: Fear Corroded Ape' at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, 2025, with *Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands*, 2021–2024, on the left (oil on canvas, 81.3 x 58.4 cm), courtesy of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, photo by Julia Featheringill

What is worlding? Philosopher Martin Heidegger describes the 'world' as the structure of images, ideas and relationships in which human beings exist and act. For Heidegger, humans only exist within, and because of, this structural context.¹ The ongoing, and active, nature of the term 'worlding' implies that the context – the world – does not just exist but rather is

¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, New York, New York, 2008 [1927]

constructed. Narrative texts and visual artworks often proposit to create visions of new worlds and realities. Certain works of fiction or visual art might be praised for their creative world-building capacities. The figural, surrealistic paintings of contemporary American artist Janiva Ellis, for example, have been described as ‘portals to other worlds’.² While in her earlier painting, Ellis experimented with depictions of specific cartoon characters in densely hyper-colourful oil-on-canvas works, her recent work on view in an exhibition at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University features darker, unlocatable and intentionally unfinished scenes. This raw exhibition offered an opportunity to see her wider practice in a new light. Rather than portals to other worlds, could Ellis’s scenes be understood as a gesture at what the scholar of aesthetics Rizvana Bradley calls ‘unworlding’?³ In ‘Janiva Ellis: Fear Corroded Ape’ these new paintings create a tear in, in order to reveal the violence endemic to, our reality, instead of building new worlds to escape it.

In her 2023 book *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*, Bradley argues that the world (the dominant reality as described by Heidegger) is an aesthetic form itself defined by Eurocentric terms and made to seem ‘universal’. That reality is shaped by violent, gendered, racial and aesthetic forces which cannot be disentangled. Bradley writes, ‘worlding, otherworlding, reworlding, and counterworlding are each prominent examples of this terminological and conceptual turn toward and, in some instances, ostensibly against or beyond the world’.⁴ When Black artists such as Ellis who craft otherworldly scenes are described as aesthetically constructing portals to other worlds, their practice is often deemed liberatory. However, Bradley reminds her readers that the aesthetic cannot be liberatory because it always sutures our totalising reality of antiblackness. As she notes, ‘the aesthetic is neither innocent nor incidental, neither epiphenomenal nor emancipatory’.⁵ Instead of worlding, she advocates for ‘unworlding’, when an artwork reveals the gendered and racial regimes of our reality, rather than evading it. Bradley offers the unfinished as one aesthetic of unworlding. Ellis’s new and primarily incomplete works that were on view at the Carpenter operationalise the unfinished to unveil the insidious underbelly of the aesthetic.

Ellis calls these new and incomplete paintings ‘dust bunny ideas’ as they belong to a group of canvases she had previously abandoned for a myriad of reasons. Their exhibition at the Carpenter Center originated in 2019 when Ellis refused to participate in a group show that former curator Dan Byers (current curator at the Williams College Museum of Art) was organising. This rejection resulted in a long collaboration between Byers and Ellis, with the curator ultimately encouraging the artist to re-engage with the existing work in her studio. Ellis maintains a studio painting practice in both Los Angeles and New York. She was born

² See the introductory text for ‘Janiva Ellis: Fear Corroded Ape’ in the exhibition brochure and on the website, January 2025, <https://carpenter.center/exhibitions/janiva-ellis>, accessed 8 April 2025

³ See Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2023, p 281

⁴ Ibid, p 282

⁵ Ibid, p 281

in Oakland, California and raised in Kauai, Hawaii by a single mother. Painting since she was ten years old, the artist first learned to draw from a mentor named Tammy Day, one of the few Black women she knew in Kauai. After graduating with a degree in painting from California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 2012, she took some time away from the studio. In 2017 she showed a selection of five Day-Glo paintings featuring disturbing variations on comic characters such as the Pink Panther or Daffy Duck in ‘Lick Shot’ at 47 Canal gallery in Manhattan. Ellis was then included in the 2018 New Museum Triennial in New York and had her first US institutional solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami in 2021. The exhibition, titled ‘Rats’, was a disappointment for the artist, who felt frustrated, as she articulated in a recent interview in *The New York Times*, that the institution required her to frame her work around, ‘the paradox of being a Black woman’.⁶ Ellis’s paintings in the Carpenter Center exhibition ask larger questions and cannot be reduced to a simple exploration of identity.

After ascending the brutalist Le Corbusier-designed ramp to enter the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, visitors were confronted by a portrait of a blueish lady (as the title suggests) speaking on a cellphone, set in relief against a background of layered, roughly-drawn gable-roofed buildings. Resembling a cubist painting, this abstract and fragmented scene bolsters the sense of menace that this smirking *Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands* (2021–2024) embodies. Loosely rendered, geometric and architectural backdrops appear in several of the thirteen paintings that were on view in the white-cubic exhibition space. The architectural scenes are inspired by Ellis’s grandfather John H Beyer, who studied architecture at Harvard when the Carpenter Center was completed in 1963.⁷ Bradley explains that architecture itself is a technology of designing the world, and therefore of worlding.⁸ The fragmented and ruinous architectural scenes in Ellis’s paintings, which gesture at something falling apart (rather than being built up), can be interpreted as a kind of unworlding. In *Mingling* (2021–2024), most of the canvas is occupied by a cavernous attic composed of overlapping and descending architectural beams. *Whimsy* (2021–2024) features intersecting pointed arches, and a pile of figures sit underneath a maze of floating rafters in *Untitled* (2023–2024).

Like the demonic lady in the introductory painting, many of the characters in these paintings, including a minotaur in *Whimsy* or a translucent cartoonish figure in *Mingling*, are neither human nor more-than-human, inviting the viewer to undo such categorical distinctions. However, these paintings do not simply demonstrate a positivist vision of interspecies entanglement. For example, in *Olfactory Exorcism* (2023–2024) and *Gay Orpheus* (2023–2024), human figures are enveloped within threatening botanical armatures. In *Gay Orpheus*, the seemingly human figure at the fore reaches through a thorny floral plant towards another figure embedded in

⁶ See Travis Diehl, ‘A Painter Whose Work is Never Finished’, *The New York Times*, 8 March 2025 www.nytimes.com/2025/03/08/arts/design/janiva-ellis-painter-cambridge-manhattan.html, accessed 8 April 2025

⁷ See *ibid*

⁸ See Bradley, *op cit*, p 310



Installation view of 'Janiva Ellis: Fear Corroded Ape' at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University, 2025, with *Gay Orpheus*, 2023–2024, oil on canvas, 122 x 91.5 cm (left), and *Olfactory Exorcism*, 2023–2024, oil on canvas, 122 x 91.5 cm, courtesy of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, photo by Julia Featheringill

darkness at the rear. A breasted, bare-headed partial body emerges as the centre of a large plant-like form in *Olfactory Exorcism*. When Ellis was painting this work, Danni Shen, the Senior Curatorial and Public Programs Assistant at the Carpenter, told me, the artist was reading Octavia Butler's *Bloodchild* (1995), a short story about human-alien-insect reproduction.⁹ On reading *Bloodchild* myself, I was struck by the violence that the Tlic (the insect-like species who have invaded earth) demonstrate towards the humans they impregnate. Even in a story that has been interpreted by scholars such as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson as a liberatory, multispecies narrative modelling mutation and ceding of control, there are many violent and rapacious scenes.¹⁰ *Olfactory Exorcism* visualises a kind of multispecies mutation yet refuses to present a beautiful or escapist scene in doing so. The bald creature at the centre of the canvas stares out at the viewer with confrontational and widened eyes. Like the gnarled claws that emerge from within an abstract swath of blue and red oil paint in *Rat Hands* (2020–2021), this canvas reminds the viewer: they remain in a position of threat.

Many of the characters – such as the seated cartoon figure in *Mingling* or the two bodies embracing in *20–24* (2020–2024) – who inhabit Ellis's scenes are slightly translucent and, in that way, refuse their full appearance before the viewer. This makes sense, as Ellis herself has

⁹ See Octavia Butler, *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, Seven Stories Press, New York, New York, 1995

¹⁰ See Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "'Not Our Own'": Sex, Genre, and the Insect Poetics of Octavia Butler's *Bloodchild*, in *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, New York University, New York, New York, 2020

expressed wariness around the ongoing exploitation of Black artists, whose mere appearance in a gallery might stand in for actual institutional reform or confrontation of the racial realm of aesthetics.¹¹



Janiva Ellis, *Mingling*, 2021–2024, oil on canvas, 51 x 40.5 cm, courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York, photo by Julia Featheringill

In that vein, some viewers might have interpreted the title's inclusion of the term 'ape' as a commentary on identity and a reference to the dehumanising racialisation of Black people and their historic comparison to monkeys. However, paradoxically, Ellis titled the show 'Fear Corroded Ape' after a line in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). A book about ruthless individual ambition in an industrial and dystopic society that tries to constrain genius, *Atlas Shrugged* includes a monologue by the individualist John Galt who opines that a person who cheats their way into a job they do not deserve and cannot handle is a 'fear-corroded ape'.¹² The mythology of white genius in the novel is reminiscent of current US President Trump's own mythology: he is in the process of shutting down 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion' initiatives nationwide precisely because of a belief that people of colour who have been hired in ambitious positions could not have deserved it. Rather, according to his logic, they must be 'fear-corroded apes'. While Ellis did not intend for this precise connection, I do think it speaks to the longstanding

¹¹ See Diehl, op cit, www.nytimes.com/2025/03/08/arts/design/janiva-ellis-painter-cambridge-manhattan.html

¹² See Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, Random House, New York, New York, 1957

and ongoing violent logics of white supremacist ideology. The show's title reminds the viewer not to be surprised by the events of the present.

The last painting in the exhibition is only 16 by 12 inches. *Hop Moth* (2019) is most similar in many ways to Ellis's earlier work, given the bright yellow and cartoonish quality of the central winged figure depicted mid-flight. However, it remains unclear if this winged creature, reminiscent of Tinker Bell from J M Barrie's story of *Peter Pan*,¹³ is entering or exiting the scene. An example of the in-between and interstitial quality of the exhibition, *Hop Moth* models neither escape nor capture. She seems instead to resist arrival, appearance or finality.



Janiva Ellis, *Hop Moth*, 2019, oil on canvas, 40.5 x 30.5 cm, courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal, New York, photo by Julia Featheringill

Bradley and Ellis were to be in a public conversation at the Carpenter Center on 3 April 2025. As a fan of Bradley's scholarship, I was excited to attend and perhaps hear them discuss the themes central to my interpretation here. Yet, as Harvard University, the Carpenter's academic home, at that moment demonstrated 'a capitulatory orientation to the Trump administration's intimidations', as Bradley noted on her Instagram on 1 April, they jointly decided to withdraw from the event in solidarity particularly with the university's African

¹³ J M Barrie's *Peter Pan* was initially written as a play in 1904; later, in 1911, the same characters were fictionalised into a novel, *Peter and Wendy*.

American Resistance Organization (AFRO) and researchers partnering with Birzeit University in the Occupied West Bank who continue to face oppression and suppression.¹⁴ A few weeks after Bradley and Ellis's act of boycott, Harvard filed a lawsuit against the Trump administration arguing that the withholding of billions of dollars in federal grants and attempts to control the university's teaching methods are not legal.¹⁵ In response, the administration has threatened to pull even more funding. While this act of resistance by the university is encouraging and admirable, it remains to be seen whether the particular concerns around the 'insufficiently balanced programming on Palestine' that Ellis and Bradley called out will be addressed.¹⁶ In the meantime, the violent metaphysics of the United States, of this world, of Ellis's reality, continue. To ensure that the viewer does not ignore it, her paintings unworld.

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¹⁴ See Rhea Nayyar, 'Artist Pulls Out of Harvard Talk Over Academic Freedom Concerns', *Hyperallergic*, 2 April 2025, <https://hyperallergic.com/1000714/artist-pulls-out-of-harvard-talk-over-academic-freedom-concerns>

¹⁵ See Kwasi Gyamfi Asiedu, 'Harvard University sues Trump administration to stop funding freeze', *BBC*, 22 April 2025, www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4grwkyxgjwo, accessed 22 April 2025

¹⁶ *Ibid*