

A surrealist painting by Julie Bell. A woman with dark hair, wearing a yellow dress, is reclining. Her head is tilted back, and her eyes are closed. A zebra's head is visible on the right side of the painting. The background is a mix of green and yellow, with a large, ornate letter 'B' on the left. Gold coins are scattered around the woman's head. The overall style is lush and dreamlike.

# B Fantastic Beasts

In her first solo show, artist and  
illustrator **Julie Bell** brings together  
figures and wildlife in luscious  
colors and compositions.

BY MICHAEL CLAWSON



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Julie Bell's newest paintings take place in an intergalactic realm deep within another universe, where her figures and wild animals float together amid the swirling cosmos of creation. This isn't Eden, but perfection—in the figure, in the light, in the beasts—permeates through every brushstroke as Bell's women reign peacefully with their animal counterparts on her ethereal planes.

"I truly have this feeling of mankind and nature—humans and nature—we have this connection between us and the animals. I'm interested in looking at that and painting those connections. Animals have everything to do with our emotions. Mammals have the same kind of brain that we do, a feeling brain, which is why we feel so close to them," Bell says of her new work. "When we look at animals or are around animals we feel that openness and honesty, and though it should be impossible to communicate, we are linked perfectly."

Bell will be unveiling her new works, all of them featuring female figures with wildlife subjects, May 4 at Rehs Contemporary in New York City. The show will be called *Lush: Paradisiac Fantasies*. Lush is a word that she heard during the buildup to the show and immediately fell in love with. "I like that it was sort of connected to paradise. The women are in this world of luxury," she says. "Lush is also an emotion you can get from that, which added another dimension to the title."

The show will, remarkably, be the artist's

first solo exhibition in her long and distinguished career, which began as an illustrator in the early 1990s after marrying painter Boris Vallejo, the famous illustrator who helped (with Frank Frazetta) cement the genres of fantasy, science fiction and sword and sorcery into mainstream pop culture. Working separately, and often collaborating on images, Bell and Vallejo brought fire-breathing dragons, fantastical monsters, heroic action scenes, figures once lovingly referred to as "babes & beefcakes," and other fantasy elements to life for book covers, magazine articles, card games, comic books, video game covers, posters and calendars. Besides illustration commissions, Bell has participated in group shows, conventions and worked with art groups such as the Art Renewal Center and the Portrait Society of America, and won dozens of awards all around the country for her work.

But the solo show has proved elusive, until now.

"It's such an exciting opportunity, and I'm so grateful to Rehs for giving me this chance. They prompted me and motivated me to create a body of work that can exist in one place," Bell says, adding that she's approached gallery work carefully in the past. "Galleries should be my sales team, out there promoting the work I give them. That's the way the relationship should be. One thing a gallery should never be is an artist's art director. They should never box an artist into one kind of work. I'm excited

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Float, oil on panel, 30 x 30"

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Julie Bell in her Pennsylvania studio.

that Rehs has trusted me with these new pieces and just really let me work in whatever box I wanted to work in."

The roots of the show stretch back to Bell's childhood in Texas. She recalls seeing Wynn Bullock's 1951 photograph, *Child in Forest*, which featured a young girl lying face down in a growth of ivy-like oxalis in an ancient redwood forest. "I remember seeing this when I was a child and just wanting to live in that photo," she says. "But I also remember thinking you couldn't do that in Texas. There were so many creatures in the grass that would eat you up. It was much later, after I had traveled more of the country that I realized that not every place had such vicious grass. In other places you could lie in the grass, and be in nature in this really intimate way, without being threatened by fire ants."

Using *Child in Forest* as a guide, it's easy to see how Bell was influenced by it. Nature could heal, it could comfort and it could nurture. In her own work for *Lush*, wildlife plays all these roles. In *Glory's Arrival*, the nude figure is held up by flamingo feathers as her body gracefully curves diagonally through the painting, echoing the curve of the birds' long necks. Not only is she drawing energy from the flamingos, they are drawing energy from her in a mutual exchange of strength and beauty. In *Sacred*, a nude figure is almost cocooned within a trio of nurturing elephants. Elsewhere in the show, in *Behind the Veil*, Bell paints zebras rearing up in a twisted mass with a human figure reaching up through the black-and-white maelstrom. There is a ferocity on the zebra's expressions, and yet the figure is not fearful as she establishes a balance within the painting. Other works include the horse-themed *Camargue*, the peacock painting *Lush*, and two significant lion works: *Paradise Dreamworld* and *When I Close My Eyes*, both of which cast humans as equals to the king of the jungle.

While the majority of the works are based on real animals—one griffin makes an appearance in *Unfolding Rainbow*—the places they inhabit are entirely imagined by Bell. The settings seem to exist in an indiscernible time and place, where perhaps even gravity has little to say over the course of events as animals and human figures float through celestial fields of vibrantly hued clouds. "I love playing with the physics in my paintings. When I was doing these metal, highly polished chrome paintings earlier in my career, I just settled on the fact that real life doesn't matter here. You just have to throw some of reality out the window," Bell says, adding that she did not have formal training as a painter and



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often learned on the fly as she worked. “Early on, before I was professional artist, I studied only life drawing. It was really the core of my studies. Boris taught me my basic technique that I started with and then I just got to work in illustration. Illustration was my skill and influence. And as I progressed I began to get very comfortable with all kinds of textures, all kinds of subjects, all kinds of figures. I felt very comfortable because I was adding tools to my toolbox.”

It’s those tools that brought her here to *Lush: Paradisiac Fantasies*, her first solo show, which she hopes will allow her to tell a more complete story about her interests, her career and her life. Today she lives in Allentown, Pennsylvania, where she shares a studio with her husband, and still splits her time between fine art and illustration. She’s surrounded by art on almost every side: her husband is a legendary artist, her sons David and Anthony Palumbo are both professional artists, as is Vallejo’s son, Dorian Vallejo. At family gatherings, as one can image, art is in the air. “I talk to David and Anthony every single day. They had wonderful art educations so I take information from them vicariously, gram by gram,” she says. “It’s great

that we can all share this passion in the family.”

And make no mistake, it is a passion, particularly wildlife. Bell’s painted forest nymphs, rancor monsters, two-headed dragons, chrome wolves of the apocalypse, exotic centaurs, six-armed gorillas, sirens, sorcerers and bats out of hell. But she comes back to real animals time and time again because they bring her joy.

“I see the world a little differently I guess. It’s all spirals, all connecting to each other. It’s a ballet, a symphony. And when you see these creatures, how they look and how they make you feel—they’re a gorgeous part of this world,” she says. “Some artists want to paint a darker side of life, and that’s great, but I don’t have to be that artist. I want to paint the things that bring me happiness.” ●

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*Unfolding Rainbow*,  
oil on panel, 30 x 30"

**4**  
*Camargue*, oil on panel,  
24 x 24"

**5**  
*Glory's Arrival*, oil on  
panel, 30 x 40"

## LUSH: PARADISIAC FANTASIES

**When:** May 4-24, 2019; May 4, 1-6 p.m., opening reception

**Where:** Rehs Contemporary Galleries Inc., 5 E. 57<sup>th</sup> Street, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10022

**Information:** (212) 355-5710, [www.rehscgi.com](http://www.rehscgi.com)