

Life Forms: A Review of Scott Wolniak's "Crosscurrents" at Goldfinch

BY CURTIS ANTHONY BOZIF | OCTOBER 2, 2023



Scott Wolniak, installation view of "Crosscurrents" at Goldfinch/Photo: Ryan Edmund

When the seventeenth-century Dutch microscopist Antonie Van Leeuwenhoek became the first person to see and describe microorganisms, what he called animalcules, can we say the size of the known world increased? Science, ultimately, would strengthen our resolving power to arrive at Planck length, the smallest unit of measure in quantum physics. Size at this scale is difficult to comprehend, but incomprehensibly small scale is the stuff of life, where it began. Phytoplankton in the ocean produces seventy percent of the oxygen we breathe; it's estimated we're host to over thirty-trillion microorganisms, about equal to the number of cells in our bodies; and nearly one-tenth of the human genome consists of ancient viral DNA insertions. Truly, "existence is coexistence," as the philosopher [Timothy Morton](#) likes to say.

It's with these scales and ecological thoughts in mind that I consider "Crosscurrents," Scott Wolniak's second solo exhibition at Goldfinch, the East Garfield Park gallery that consistently punches above its weight. In a [blurb](#) on the gallery's website, Wolniak sounds downright Transcendental, Muir-esque even, expounding upon the natural world and the effect it has on him, going so far as to invoke the collocation "life-force" to describe the style of his art. Somehow, I know what he means.



Scott Wolniak, "To Become a Spiritual Seeker," 2021-23, acrylic, oil, oil pastels, colored pencils, graphite and pumice medium on canvas, 33" x 27" / Photo: Tom Van Eynde

"To Become a Spiritual Seeker" is airy and diaphanous. Painted with a lightness of touch—a Wolniak signature—vaguely botanical dabs of Naples yellow and Portland gray mottle and float about while salmon and sap green delicately cling to the warp and weft of the canvas. Centering the effervescence: a smiley face, and why not? In "Window and Bird," incidents of pumiced texture interrupt layers of biomorphic forms in liquid acrylic thinned like watercolor—another Wolniak signature. The canvas glows with the warm dappled light of a summer understory, inducing memories of resinous pines and the reedy song of a hermit thrush. Suggesting vermiculated earth, a cluster of conspicuous gestures worm their way over the purpley raw umber ground of "When Do Roots Talk to Each Other?" A spiritual journey, transcendence, begins on the ground, in the dirt, and here we return to the incomprehensibly small, the title alluding to mycorrhizal networks through which plants send subterranean signals, a discovery made by the ecologist Suzanne Simard in the mid-nineties and later made famous by Peter Wohlleben, bestselling author of "The Hidden Life of Trees," as well as rockstar mycologist Paul Stamets, seen in such documentaries as "Fantastic Fungi." Wolniak's paintings teem with the organic and when I look at them I can't help but see fungi, bacteria, archaea, unicellular organisms and the organelles inside of cells. "Trickle-down Consciousness," "Map Tree" and "Painting for Octopuses" are positively mitochondrial.



Scott Wolniak, "Window and Bird," 2022, acrylic and graphite on canvas 72" x 60"/Photo: Tom Van Eynde

Another way to consider Wolniak's work—in its apparent not-quite-idle meandering that, for all its nonrepresentation feels born, however faint, of observation—is as a welcome alternative to what a few years ago the artist and critic Walter Robinson famously called "zombie formalism": an in-vogue, market-driven brand of simple, often process-based abstraction. And yet, the somewhat all-over abstractness of his variegated canvases feels surprisingly fresh given the increased popularity of surrealistic and appropriation-based painting the critic Alex Greenberger more recently identified as "zombie figuration."

I'd like to suggest a third category of prevalently undead: zombie geometry. Painting as a meticulous process beholden to tape, masks, stencils, templates, rulers and other higher authorities with which artists exact stiff, typically opaque, impenetrably hard-edged and ultimately lifeless geometric forms. "Radish, Et Al" features the most pronounced example of the Wolniak row: a horizontal visual structure that, far from the Cartesian grid, is drawn with the loose sweep of his arm. To which strict rectilinear expressions of form, far from some modernist notion of purity and the universal, appear utterly conservative, authoritarian. Compared to the vitality and pulse present in Wolniak's paintings, made exclusively with a free hand, a perfectly straight line is the reanimated corpse of a one-dimensional point; an angle, the robotic change of direction after hitting a dead end. The Wolniak row supports permutations of organic looping forms. Stacked, they recall the cross-section of sedimentary layers. When you think of the Cambrian explosion, remember the profundity of Darwin's discovery was not that life forms change over time, but that these changes are random: mutations that by chance prove beneficial.



Scott Wolniak, "Radish, Et Al," 2022, acrylic, graphite, paper pulp and pumice medium on canvas, 72" x 60"/Photo: Tom Van Eynde

The modestly sized, lichen-like "Landscape Compression," at last, reminds us that it's always about perspective and scale. If you zoom in tight enough on a landscape, eventually you're looking through a microscope, pan out wide and far enough and it's astronomy. To fully appreciate the biosphere, and Wolniak's work, one needs to expand the scope of their thinking. Returning to Earth, many astronauts report a cognitive shift upon seeing the planet from space. The overview effect, as it's called, is a profound mix of emotions, awe and self-transcendence, and awareness of both the interconnectedness of life and its fragility. About fifty miles of atmosphere, the distance to the horizon seen from the observation decks of Willis Tower, separates life as we know it from the deadly vacuum of space. From this perspective, the biosphere is a thin shell. A green wash clinging to the surface of a rock adrift amid solar winds and crosscurrents of intergalactic cosmic rays.

"Scott Wolniak: Crosscurrents" is on view at Goldfinch, 319 North Albany through October 21.