

DAVID SHROBE: NATURAL SOVEREIGNTY

BY HEATHER MOQTADERI



David Shrobe, *Transition Mode*, 2023, oil, acrylic, charcoal, ink, wood laminate, painted canvas, flocking, wool, printed acrylic, sandpaper, and wood furniture parts on joined wood panels, 78" x 59" x 1½". Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery (Photo: Bob.)

Natural Sovereignty is New-York based artist David Shrobe's second solo exhibition at Monique Meloche Gallery in Chicago, opening February 3, 2024. Shrobe works in assemblage, collage, drawing, and painting, frequently incorporating elements found on the street near his Harlem studio. His subjects are inspired by vintage family photographs along with archival images representing the vitality of family life among Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities. Shrobe's body of work in *Natural Sovereignty* poetically navigates the linkage between personal freedom and the natural world. As the exhibition approached, I asked the artist about the narratives and concepts embedded in some of his recent works.

Transition Mode plays with interior and exterior spaces by portraying the family in a garden setting. Here, the outdoor space is a portal from labor to leisure. Shrobe describes the scene: "It's a tea party between a husband, wife, and dog in their garden transitioning from work to leisure mode." He notes that in this mode the "shoes and sneakers are coming off" as evidenced by a bare foot and Nike sneaker logo. This garden is an extension of the home in this group of paintings, and as the gallery explains a "site of sustenance, survival, and resistance."

Sheltered and *Gathering* draw from staged portraiture conventions, creating balanced compositional groupings with seated and standing figures. Hands serve as visual connectors between the figures, and communicate without words. Shrobe comments: "I love to draw and paint hands; their gestures say a lot. In these works, the hand gesture is what creates the familial bond in moments of tenderness." These family portraits communicate tenderness as a means of connection and protection, which is reinforced by Shrobe's titles. *Sheltered* suggests protection not only from natural elements, but from the realization of difficult realities. Shrobe expresses interest in themes of visibility and invisibility through his portrayal of these families. He explains: "There is a notion of memory and time that comes from my use of fragments and parts of the body to represent the whole figure or create a ghostly outline to signal the body. I use transparent elements to further imply these intersections and raise questions of visibility."

Navigators is a double-portrait of sorts, suggesting the interconnectedness of a father and son. Shrobe both references and upends traditional European maritime portraiture in this piece. The figures mirror one another, the son upside down, bringing to mind the position of a fetus in the womb—and how we all first navigate this world upside down. The child can also be read as part of the father's clothing. Where an 18th century marine portrait might emphasize the captain's awards pinned

to a uniform, a superficial representation of accomplishment, the son here is his father's prize and pride. The figures are represented in black flocking that absorbs light rather than reflecting it, creating a visual effect of the depth of a starry night at sea. Shrobe notes that *Navigators* is partly inspired by Langston Hughes' poem *Long Trip*, in which Hughes describes the sea as "a wilderness of waves" and "a desert of water."

Shrobe's seascape is composed of colorful shaped mixed media elements, so carefully merged that they feel seamless. It feels reminiscent of *pietra dura*, the art of forming pictures from colored semi-precious stones and marbles. Shrobe's blend of flat surfaces, wood grain, and pattern reinforce this effect. The artist frames the scenes in an oval, which he refers to as "a portal where a father and son navigate the seas and night sky." In this maritime scene, this portal, as in entrance or gateway, is playfully conflated with a porthole, as in a small round window on a ship. Shrobe's portal is framed in joined pieces of ceiling tins to create a textured frame evocative of rococo portraiture. He describes working with this material: "I started working with ceiling tins several years ago when I came across them at a salvage yard. I found the patterns and patina surface beautiful, and I began to use it for its reflective qualities and to push the work into a more sculptural space."

Habitual Growth goes a step further to fully immerse the subject in a landscape, visually conveying humanity's interconnectedness with nature. Shrobe explains: "This piece speaks to my interest in traditional healing practices, a communion with nature, and our symbiotic relationship to it." He goes on to describe his merging of subject and landscape: "In my work I'm often negotiating a space between abstraction and figuration, using a loose handling and gestures of paint and body parts to embody the figures. We see through the face and body into a world of flora and fauna; it's about being in the abundance of nature."

I asked Shrobe about the seemingly paradoxical title *Habitual Growth*, and he described it as the "constant growth needed simply to survive and experience joy." This concept of growth is relevant to the artist's own situation, as he is leaving his studio in a Harlem apartment that has housed his family for generations. Due to structural damage, the building is being gutted and reconstructed. Located just a block from the former home of the Studio 306 group, whose members included Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, and woodworker/designer Ad Bates, Shrobe's studio is situated in a zone of greatness. Shrobe comments: "Harlem is my muse; it's literally in all my work by virtue of the fact that physical remnants of Harlem



David Shrobe, *Sheltered*, 2023, oil, acrylic, ink, charcoal, board game, sea shell, suede, silk, linen, embroidered wool, printed acrylic, painted canvas, vinyl print out, wood laminate, on joined wood panels, 67" x 56" x 1". Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery (Photo: Bob.)

exist in every piece. There's such a rich history around here for me to tap into and draw inspiration from. The objects I collect have their own stories and histories to tell, they continue to live in the work I make." *Natural Sovereignty* is the last body of work he will create in this space. He is approaching the move like "spring cleaning," sorting through years of elements he has collected from the surrounding neighborhood. Treating his move as "habitual growth," he is staying optimistic and thinking of this transition as "a blessing in disguise, and a move for the better."



David Shrobe, *Gathering*, 2023, oil, acrylic, charcoal, ink, wood laminate, painted canvas, flocking, wool, printed acrylic, sandpaper, and wood furniture parts on joined wood panels, 78" x 59" x 1½". Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery (Photo: Bob.)



David Shrobe, *Navigators*, 2019-21, oil, acrylic, graphite, charcoal, piano keys, flocking, rubber, wood, canvas, fabric, silver leaf, cold roll steel, book cloth, and mixed media, 69" x 54" x 2 1/2". Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery
Note: This work was not exhibited in *Natural Sovereignty*.



David Shrobe, *Habitual Growth*, 2023, oil on paper, acrylic, ink, and charcoal on canvas, mounted on museum board and set in artist carved wood frame, 34" x 27". Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery (Photo: Bob.)
Note: This work was not exhibited in *Natural Sovereignty*.