

Natalie Wadlington's wide-eyed charming characters paint a picture of our love of pets

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With big bug eyes, curved lines and an unusual colour palette influenced by Texan skies and sunsets, the American artist captures the essence of human-animal relationships beautifully in her latest series of paintings.



Worms after Rain, 2022. Oil on canvas. Image courtesy the artist, Library Street Collective, Detroit; and albertz benda, New York and Los Angeles. Photo by Thomas Dubrock

Pets are amazing. They can calm us down on a bad day, and their unquestioning love and loyalty can lift us from the darkness. It is these qualities artist Natalie Wadlington pays tribute to in her new body of work.

Front Yards, Back Yards depicts the time Natalie spent with her dogs and other animals in recent years as well as her life in Texas. It's supremely personal work that explores the artist's own fears, anxieties, and feelings of entrapment and how her dogs soothed her but also challenged her spiritually and emotionally.

The series is now going on show at Albertz Benda, the artist's first solo exhibition in New York. And it extends the domestic explorations Natalie has become best known for, which we first featured on *Creative Boom* last March.

Spanning drawing, sculpture, and painting, this new series employs multiple approaches for immersing viewers in a complex web of relationships between self and other, human and non-human, momentary instance and painterly representation.

Highly stylised narrative scenes combine evocative symbols with personal experience and explore an innate connection to the animals. The suburban settings recall the backyards where the artist spent her adolescence, while figures are modelled on her own body. Each portrayal is autobiographical while speaking to universal feelings of anxiety, excitement, discovery, and fear.



Putting on Dog Leash, 2022. Image courtesy the artist, Library Street Collective, Detroit; and albertz benda, New York and Los Angeles. Photo by Thomas Dubrock

"In these paintings, I imagine these scenes as actual gardens or plots of land, that figures are laying in as they encounter urban wildlife," Natalie tells *Creative Boom*. "Most of what is rendered is on a one-to-one scale, so for the larger works especially, it can feel like you are mapping out an actual front yard and strip of grass. The figures curve and bend to fit the frame of the canvas, which are all square in this show.

"I like the format of square, because it is neither landscape nor portrait. This works with my painting treatment as well, because I like to paint everything in the scene with the same level of attention and presence. To me, this stylistic and compositional choice makes me imagine that everything in the scene is laid out and presented with their perspective turned towards the viewer."

In each composition, Wadlington also explores a mood or feeling through palettes drawn from the expansive and ever-changing Texas skyscape. In *Front Yard with Crepe Myrtle*, for example, the sunset's brilliant colours are refracted across the canvas.

Warm orange-pink tones glow on a figure's skin; a bright pink tongue hangs out of a panting puppy's mouth as dusk's imminence is foreshadowed by purple hues landing on the sidewalk. Discrete instances convene to reveal an atmosphere of melancholy peacefulness experienced at day's end.

Here, the artist depicts humans passively: they lounge, curl up, or lay prone upon the ground, in contrast to the more expressive, energetic animals accompanying them. Interactions between humans and animals go beyond language, relying instead upon a deep sense of intuition or spiritual connection. Thick textural layers of oil paint forge suggestive tactile links, such as the shaggy cat fur scraped into the surface of *House Outside of Town*.

Natalie extends this physicality with a selection of ceramic creatures developed over the past year. Working with high-fire clay, Wadlington sculpts a selection of life-size insects that seem to crawl across the gallery walls; a seated dog wears a brindle coat 'knitted' out of clay. Brought together, these works invite us into the artist's private sphere, offering access to her observations of the living, breathing world around us.

Leaving Texas behind, Natalie has recently moved to and resettled in New York. "I spent the past two years in Texas, where my husband is doing graduate work at Texas A&M," she adds. "It was a safe place to live during the pandemic, as I had a live work studio, and could really focus on my work. However, I feel it is now time for an environment that is more lively, and will challenge me to grow in new ways. I desperately missed having a robust art community, and am already looking forward to studio visits with friends and artists who I admire."

Natalie Wadlington: Front Yards, Back Yards is open to the public from 9 September-8 October at Albertz Benda, 515 W 26th St, New York, NY 10001.