We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live

JULIE BUFFALOHEAD, AMBREEN BUTT, ANGELA FRALEIGH, DINORÁ JUSTICE,
JAUNE QUICK-TO-SEE SMITH, ORKIDEH TORABI & MARIE WATT

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Marc Straus Gallery, 299 Grand Street, New York

We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live is a seven-artist group exhibition inspired by Joan Didion's writing. The phrase first appeared in her 1979 essay "The White Album" and was later used as the title of her 2006 book of collected nonfiction. For Didion, narrative is not an ornament but a necessity, a way to organize chaos, to make sense of history, memory, and identity. The exhibition *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live* takes this provocation as its starting point, gathering artists who use storytelling as both method and subject. Their works remind us that stories are not only told but also made, in paint, fiber, print, and performance, and that through them, we construct meaning, community, and continuity.

With a cast of anthropomorphized characters, Julie Buffalohead merges elements of Native American tradition with contemporary issues to create painterly worlds that delve into the complexities of cultural identity, folklore, and self-discovery. In her dynamic painting *Grandmother Spider*, the traditionally wise, nurturing, and protective figure is splayed out in spider shape beneath an orbit of animals symbolizing her role as a creator who weaves together earth and sky, animal and human. By conflating the mythical with the ordinary and the imaginary with the real, Buffalohead creates space for the viewer to consider issues of racial injustice, Indigenous rights, and abuse of power.

Ambreen Butt explores the complexities of contemporary global politics, female identity, and life as a Muslim in the United States. Evocative of an Islamic rug or a tiled mosque wall, the 20-foot-wide relief sculpture *I am all what is left of me* is composed of hundreds of small resin casts. Locks, keys, and coat hooks appear in vivid blues, reds, greens, and yellows, creating a field of repeating forms. Butt's collaged works on paper espouse the radiant aesthetics of sacred geometries and Islamic ornamentation, but with the urgency of cutting, ripping, and staining. Butt often draws on text-based sources — the names of children lost to war, transcripts from terrorism trials, and quotations from the news. Her works are grounded in some of the most challenging moral questions of the 21st century. Rather than offer answers, her artworks exist as meditations on the human condition.

Angela Fraleigh's monumental paintings retrieve women from the margins of history, offering alternative, empowering visual narratives. Borrowing imagery from the Allentown Art Museum's textile collection, the two works in this exhibition present women as makers with the potential to craft meaning and magic as well as cloth. Her compositions weave together global textile designs once invoked for blessings, protection, and abundance, recasting these patterns as a secret language and a talismanic force. Building on the layers of meaning embedded in her work, and with incantation-like intent, Fraleigh incorporates unconventional materials like moonwater, ground crystals, and paint made from gemstones that hold supernatural significance in various traditions.

Also revisiting Western art history, Dinorá Justice's series of works "after" renowned nineteenth-century European male artists examines the placement of women in traditional landscapes across the canon. For example, *Portrait 79, after Manet's Olympia* draws upon the artist's long-standing interest in ecofeminism, which critically considers the ways in which femininity and the natural world have often been linguistically and culturally conjoined. She layers verdant greenery, colorful Brazilian fabric designs, and hand-marbled canvases to remix these quintessential art historical forms, giving them new cultural resonance. Ultimately, Justice's work questions the power relationships between artists, their subjects, and the wider world as stand-ins for our own relationships with gender and nature.

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith frequently contrasts symbols from Native American culture with elements of advertising, American Pop, and neo-expressionism. In this series of monoprints, she fuses two traditional motifs (rabbits and androgynous figures) with bold colors, geometric shapes, and graphite scribbles. Creating a dynamic dialogue between past and present, each work is titled in a different Indigenous language: *Enn Parsonn* (Human in Michif), *Gah* (Rabbit in Navajo), *Neechie* (Friend in Cree), and *Waabooz* (Rabbit in Ojibwe). Through printmaking, drawing, and painting, Smith weaves powerful narratives that challenge stereotypes and emphasize storytelling's role in cultural preservation and evolution.

Orkideh Torabi's latest body of work shifts focus from gender-segregated spaces (a signature theme in her practice) toward the privileges and advantages held by men in power. *Sunny Side Sorrow* humorously juxtaposes the authoritative appearance of a regal figure with an unexpected display of vulnerability. The melancholic character, dressed in a military-style uniform, is seen wiping away tears while having a simple meal alone. Inspired by the tash'ir motifs of Persian miniature painting, the decorative, patterned background serves as an ornate frame that further showcases the central figure and ponders the hidden emotional struggles of those typically seen as stoic and unyielding.

Blankets play a central role in Marie Watt's practice, equally as sculptural material and conceptual foundation. In Indigenous and other communities, blankets are given away to commemorate important life events — they receive us into this world and accompany us when we depart. In her work *Skywalker / Skyscraper (Flowers In A Field)* from the ongoing series *Blanket Stories*, a column of forest green Army blankets rises upward, interrupted by a band of patterned floral quilts. The juxtaposition transforms familiar domestic textiles into a monument of memory and resilience. As a classic piece of Americana — inherited through service, sold at thrift shops and Army surplus stores, and finding their way into family homes all across the country — the blankets here are sublimely elevated as they hug the steel I-beam rising from the cedar base. For Watt, cedar and steel carry the legacy of past generations forward into the present and future, similar to how blankets are sites of ongoing stories and symbols of our connectedness.

Taken together, the works in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live* reveal how artists transform narrative into form, whether through folklore, ornament, history, or material inheritance. Each demonstrates that storytelling is not merely descriptive but generative, shaping how we see ourselves and our communities. By bringing these voices together, the exhibition affirms the enduring role of art as a vessel for memory, resilience, and connection, reminding us that stories are how we live and how we make meaning.