

Koak

Breaking the Prairie

December 15, 2018 - January 19, 2019

I first saw the sketch in New York, a study for a mural to be completed later. It was a triptych, a wide central image bookended by two narrow panels. In each side panel, a man chopped down a tree. The axe swung up, the axe swung down, and in the breadth of the central panel sprawled a story of men at work, plowing the field to sow with seed.

The placard beneath read:

When Tillage Begins, or Breaking the Prairie

It was the second title that caught my eye, for *Prairie* is not a term that seems to need breaking, not some bit of grassland, unknown and freshly wild, but rather a thing already tamed. To me the Prairie is barely a place of nature at all, not a field of today's land that we could visit. In fact, it seems barely a place of the physical world. Instead, the Prairie is a vision, a fictional utopia of Americana or the long dead dream of vacancy waiting to be grabbed. The Prairie is a thought with its back already broken.

The long history of men breaking nature came to mind. And then I thought of what was built from all that broken nature—the constructs, confines and amnesias of American society. From the dead bones of a wild nature were built domestic boxes that drained women of their own wild nature. Traps of homes, things to clean, little objects of a maddening ilk that kept us busy and exhausted our breath. Wilderness pruned became the prison of spirit.

I imagined this home as a heat-trap filled with centuries of clenched jaws and crossed legs, little gasps and grabs. Like hissing teakettles no longer mothered cordially for guests, years of women frothing behind clasped lips, ready to explode. And from this, another version of the breaking of the Prairie emerged: the boards crumbling, doors burning, pushing hard against the seams until the cracks became new gateways, new openings with unexpected edges, portals agape to the flooding of all that was told to keep hushed. It was the feeling of everything overflowing, of absurdity and laughter, of tenderness and joy—for other women, for oneself, for nature.

Again I thought of *Breaking the Prairie*, and for the first time it was the wilderness untamed.

Koak (b. 1981, Lansing, Michigan) earned her Masters of Fine Arts from California College of the Arts, San Francisco in 2016. Her work in painting, drawing, and sculpture has been exhibited at Alter Space, San Francisco; American Medium, New York; Union Pacific, London; and Museum of Sex, New York, and has been featured in print in *Spike Magazine*, the *New York Observer*, *Vault Magazine*, and *Cultured Magazine*. *Breaking the Prairie* is her first solo exhibition with Ghebaly Gallery and her first in Los Angeles. Koak lives and works in San Francisco.