Los Angeles Times

The sensual and the spiritual collide in the paintings of Faith Wilding
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February 26, 2019

There's a new painting called "Becoming Seeds" in Faith Wilding's invigorating show at the gallery Anat Ebgi, as well as an older one titled "Propagations." Generation, regeneration and transmission abound as ideas and images in Wilding's work, and an organic unity prevails between the botanical and the biological, human and animal, mythic and experiential.

What's alive is radiantly so, gem-tinted and luminous.

Wilding has been a force for 50 years, since her pioneering involvement with the feminist art programs at Cal State Fresno and the California Institute of the Arts and her indelible contributions to the landmark "Womanhouse" exhibition of 1972: "Crocheted Environment" and the searing performance "Waiting." As a teacher (my own, at Scripps College in the early 1980s), an activist and artist, she has planted her share of seeds while also propagating the visionary wisdom of her two key historical mentors: William Blake, whom she credits with leading her to socialist feminism, and Hildegard von Bingen, a 12th century abbess and extraordinary polymath.

The aesthetics of medieval manuscript illumination infuse the groups of work here, watercolors made in 2018 and mixed-media paintings on paper from the mid-'80s. Patterned borders frame some of the sheets. Shapes and figures are typically flat or shallow, distilled elements in an overall design that is frequently symmetrical. Colors are vibrant and anchored in the primary triad of gold, red and blue. Animate energy courses through works old and new; allusions to ripening and unfurling recur. What reads as a seed pod in one piece might invoke a chrysalis, womb or ancient Venus figure in others.

In "Propagations: Hildegard and I" (1985), Wilding integrates an image reproduced from the saint's volume of writings into a larger field of ecstatic motion suggesting rivers, spines, cells and nets. Two curled human figures opposite each other read as the twin hemispheres of a cosmic brain. Others with arms uplifted seem to dance in celebration and praise.

Several of the newer pieces invoke illuminated letters and stained-glass windows. The intimate landscape of the female body becomes pure visual rhythm. Tree roots spread into veins. The differences between sensual and spiritual collapse, as all becomes beauty.