

Reassigned Dignities: Iterative Imagery in *Second Spring*

by Laurence Ross

One by one objects are defined —
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

—William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*

In 1923, William Carlos Williams published a slim volume of poetry and prose titled *Spring and All*. The hybrid work contemplates the relationship among nature, imagination, and art. Referencing artists such as Monet and Cezanne, Williams takes up the question of whether realistic representation in art is a truth or a lie. “The only realism in art is of the imagination,” he says. “It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation.”

100 years later, in a digitized world, discerning the truth or lie of an image is an increasingly entangled task. Brian Michael Dunn and E.E. Ikeler play with this entanglement in their two-person exhibition, *Second Spring*, in which both artists side-step realistic representation in favor of abstraction. In his paintings, Dunn uses the graphic elements of packaging and construction to metamorphize serialized imagery into shapes that echo nature. Ikeler collages vintage magazine-cut flowers as the underlying design principles of more explicitly human-drawn lines: constellations, diagrams, and grids. Both bodies of work ask how iterative imagery might escape the pitfalls of plagiarism and instead awaken into something new—again. It is a big ask, to imagine the natural world in a manner that springs surprise.

Dunn’s *Passage* (2024) is black and blue, not as the colors of a bruise, but as if the pitch of night were interwoven with the color of daytime sky. The invisible lines of a graphing paper-style grid serve as the scaffolding for a much more organic wonder here: shapes of diverse foliage, dew drops, and plump pods ready to split. The presence of a chain-link fence complicates the image; there is in fact an obstacle present. But where that fence ends, the sky continues to the canvas’s edge. Dunn’s composition is suggestive of a breeze that will uplift the fluffy pappus of the dandelion, rendering the manmade attempt at enforcing limitation ineffective.

Similarly, the manmade symbols Dunn adopts to make this work (a child’s toy, an old comic book advertisement, a security envelope pattern) are not restricted to their original commercial purposes. Painted in distinct acrylic layers, *Passage* calls to mind the otherworldly, not only with the whimsy of five-pointed stars with rounded rays, but the starbursts that don’t adhere to the physical logic the fence should enforce. Are these will-o’-the-wisps meant to lure the viewer into a trap or lead them into safety?

No Cross, No Crown (2024) reads as *Passage*’s opposite. Rather than suggestive of a way around or through, the gates positioned on the left and right borders of the canvas impose confinement. The viewer cannot see far beyond these limitations; there is certainly still life here, but the organic shapes bathed in red revise the previous tone. The same teardrop stencil that

read as dew in *Passage* now reads as a drop of blood, as though to be bracketed in this congestion is to suffer. Here, one might not only be cut off from heaven but also cut off from earth.

In contrast, *Cricket Disco* (2024) feels jubilant. While the canvas is still dense—with lavender circles, orange diamonds, sepia triangles, and strands of rose-pink teardrops—the wavelength is celebratory, musical. Rather than bars that block the way, these shapes can create harmony when repeated, linked, and arranged. Ultimately, the message here might be that we—humans—are the ones tasked with arrangement, though the natural world has queued up plenty of models. Will we set in place yet another border to fence us in? Or will we compose a bridge that might serve to unite us?

A clear throughline runs between Dunn's paintings and the mixed media works of E.E. Ikeler: an assemblage of thick lines, pattern play, an exchange between the terrestrial and the celestial, and the structures humans tend to superimpose on the natural world. In *'Tis Folly To Be Wise* (2025), Ikeler, like Dunn, also uses the image of a five-pointed star with rounded rays, a shape one's likely to find dangling above a crib. At first glance, the piece and its title seem to long for the better days of childhood, where the worries of the adult world might not reach us, when our highest purpose was to romp in a flowered field. But the poem collaged across the work is no nursery rhyme; the narrator of Thomas Gray's "Ode to a Distant Prospect of Eton College" (1774) reflects on his distant youth after feeling ravaged by "slow-consuming Age." Infamous for a piece of one of its final lines, "ignorance is bliss," the full text of the poem complicates nostalgia for *simpler times* by suggesting labor can actually sweeten liberty.

And there is a great deal of labor that Ikeler has put into *'Tis Folly To Be Wise*. The mosaic that surrounds the shape of the star demands far more devotion than a scribble. These Aqua-Resin tiles don't line up automatically like the grids one scrolls through on a cellphone. This framework is more unruly. A mosaic, puzzled together and rough around the edges, shows the human's hand.

This isn't the first time Ikeler has explored the tension between a simple, child-like viewpoint and the more convoluted rationale adults tend to attempt. In the center of *Flat Earth Cube* (2024), concentric rainbow-colored rings might evoke a rubber ball or a hula hoop that rotates on the axis of the hips. A diagram of a cube and a bifurcating plane, rendered in comparatively sterile white lines, seem set on top of the circle, enclosing the colorful shape and limiting what might otherwise radiate outward. This diagram is taken from a drawing by an active flat-earth influencer, inverting what on the surface might seem like sophisticated math or sacred geometry and leaving the viewer to question the principles we buy into without vetting the sources.

But imagination itself is not meant to be the enemy; the subject of *Ophiuchus* (2024) is the constellation of the same name, which is the only constellation that crosses the ecliptic plane left out of the traditional twelve zodiac signs. Imagine how a 13th zodiac sign, hidden in plain sight, might shake up astrology—and the millions of Co-Star horoscopes that attempt to decipher us each day. Graphed onto a blue sky filled with flowers, Ikeler connects the stars of Ophiuchus using not the minimalistic lines of ancient astronomers but the more fleshed out

reimagining of H.A. Rey, the author of *Curious George* who took up the task to re-illustrate the constellations using more stars and more lines so we might better see our myths come out at night.

Spring is a season of reappearance, of watching the natural world become animate again. Spring does not start from scratch each year; the season builds progressively off the spring before, creating a pentimento in which a revised image is layered on top of the old. William Carlos Williams writes of bushes and small trees approaching spring: “They enter the new world naked, / cold, uncertain of all / save that they enter...” Dunn and Ikeler grapple with this uncertainty in *Second Spring*. How should we enter this new world? What knowledge, what narratives, have we shed in our wake? What light will we seek to warm our roots, ignite our imagination, and drive us to create? A second spring might be a second chance to get it right this time around, to embrace, as Williams says, “...the stark dignity of / entrance...,” which might also mean the stakes have been raised.

Laurence Ross is a Baltimore-based writer and educator. He received his MFA from the University of Alabama where he served as the Creative Nonfiction Editor for *Black Warrior Review*. His essays have been published in magazines and literary journals such as *Pelican Bomb*, *The Georgia Review*, *Brevity*, and *The Huffington Post*. In 2014, Ross served as the Director of P.3Writes, an educational program in conjunction with U.S. Art Triennial Prospect New Orleans. In 2020, he curated his first visual art exhibition at Woodland Pattern in Milwaukee, WI.