

## A Maypole Dance for Dogs in Queens

Night and day converge, fantasy and reality, humans and animals, rigor and play in this exhibition that feels like a transportive and unfettered elsewhere.



Gregory Volk March 5, 2024



Installation view of *Emilie L. Gossiaux: Other-Worlding* at the Queens Museum (photo courtesy Queens Museum, credit Hai Zhang)

While I had vaguely heard of the Maypole dance over the years, the first one I experienced in person involved schoolchildren in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. My son had enrolled as a fifth grader in Brooklyn Waldorf School that year. Throughout the world, the Maypole dance is an annual Waldorf school rite.

I never imagined how much this joyful celebration, often on May 1 or "May Day" — with uncertain but likely pagan European origins — would affect me. Garlanded with flowers and clutching the colorful ribbons gently arcing from a towering maypole, children and some adults danced and paraded in a circle. For me the event inspired rampant emotions, a lump in my throat, surprising tears. Those festive dancers, some tiny, others much bigger, were achingly lovely as they connected with cyclical seasons and the springtime promise of regeneration and renewal.

Through all my years of engagement with contemporary art, I have never encountered an exhibition based on a Maypole dance, until Emile L. Gossiaux's transfixing "White Cane Maypole Dance" in her Queens Museum

exhibition *Other-Worlding* (all works 2023).

Using sundry materials (papier-mâché, polystyrene foam, PVC pipe, matte gel varnish, acrylic paint, wire, tape, epoxy resin, Tyvek paper, and tablecloths), Gossiaux has expertly crafted, by hand, an indoor version of a colorful Maypole dance in a bower, but with a major twist. Her dreamy and delightful sculptural installation upends the biases and hierarchies that endlessly favor sighted over non- and low-sighted people, the non-disabled over those with disabilities, and also — very important for the show — humans over nonhuman animals.



Installation view of *Emilie L. Gossiaux: Other-Worlding* at the Queens Museum (photo courtesy Queens Museum, credit Hai Zhang)

In the middle of the gallery is the 15-foot-high white maypole, stretching upward toward the ceiling. Behind it are eight enchanting trees below a simultaneous sun and moon. This maypole is a fantastical, elongated version of the cane that Gossiaux uses on a daily basis to navigate the world. When she was an art student at Cooper Union, she was struck by an 18-wheeler while riding her bicycle, a traumatic accident that left her blind. Now, years later, her sculpted version of a cane has grown in size and force. It has become assertive and majestic. It embodies not restriction but independence and transcendence.

Instead of people, three dogs dance around the maypole — or rather three unique, gleaming versions of Gossiaux's white guide dog, London, each human-scaled and upright on hind legs, each seemingly a cross between a female canine and human. These Londons are marvelous, and deeply touching; the usual maypole ribbons are now felt leashes, one lavender, one gold, and one red. Instead of being constrained by leashes, these liberated Londons casually hold them in a paw/hand.

With eyes closed, one dog — the six teats on her belly exposed — looks peaceful and blissful. Another, with one raised hind leg and a half-smile, looks jaunty and happy. A third, with eyes wide open and a determined expression, gazes directly at viewers as they enter the space — a quasi-confrontational London, a force to be reckoned with.



Emilie L. Gossiaux, "Londons Dancing with Flowers" (2023), ballpoint pen and crayon on paper, unframed: 23 x 35 inches, framed: 27 1/8 x 39 1/8 x 1 1/2 inches (courtesy the artist)

This exhibition allows viewers to recognize London — which the artist surely does — as not just a helper but a complex being with a big life and robust consciousness. Gossiaux greatly honors and respects her companion dog.

The wall text announces that the maypole and three Londons are on a circular white “pedestal” strewn with pink, peach, or red handmade flowers but I was also reminded of a carousel. Instead of sculpting carousel animals for humans to ride, Gossiaux has sculpted three versions of London making her own decisions, choosing how to be and move.

The wall text also reveals that the title *Other-Worlding* is from feminist scholar Donna Haraway. It comes from Haraway’s great book *When Species Meet*, which concerns interspecies cooperation and especially the author’s profound relationship with her dogs who, among other talents, are athletes who excel in the sport of agility.

What Haraway and Gossiaux challenge is the prideful anthropocentrism that habitually leads us, as humans, to perceive animals both domestic and wild as lesser (usually far lesser) and lacking, and not as sentient beings involved with, in Haraway’s words, “their own doing, thinking, feeling.”

Then there is the magnificent bower. It is stunning from a distance, intricate, and absorbing from up close. Eight nine-foot-tall trees in light and dark green on three walls encompass half of the gallery. These ersatz trees look innocent, playful, even childlike, suggesting a fairytale setting, a picture book scene writ large, or perhaps the charming backdrop of a theater set.

Each tree is formed from individual leaves and bark affixed to the wall. Gossiaux fashioned every leaf — and everything else in the installation — during an artist residency at the museum. While richly visual, her installation accentuates touch, materials, and the sensory knowledge gleaned from physically interacting with things. She also intermittently conducts a **“touch tour”** of the show for six blind or visually impaired people and eight sighted ones.



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High up on one side of the far wall is an orange-yellow sun made of a painted tablecloth (Gossiaux makes wonders from humble stuff). On the opposite side of the wall is a blue crescent moon. Night and day converge, fantasy and reality, humans and animals, rigor and play in this exhibition that feels like a transportive and unfettered elsewhere. Other-worlding indeed.

Upstairs is a related exhibit primarily for children — but well worth it for adults too — where visitors can hold and explore examples of Gossiaux's handmade leaves and flowers. I suggest doing this with eyes closed, registering the slopes and ridges, textures and intricacies of each eventful object.



Emilie L. Gossiaux, "Flowers for London" (2023), ballpoint pen and crayon on paper, unframed: 23 x 35 inches, framed: 27 1/8 x 39 1/8 x 1 1/2 inches (courtesy the artist)

Completing *Other-Worlding* are three exuberant ballpoint pen and crayon drawings on paper. They visualize what Gossiaux saw in her mind as she imagined and planned the exhibition, trying out different possibilities.

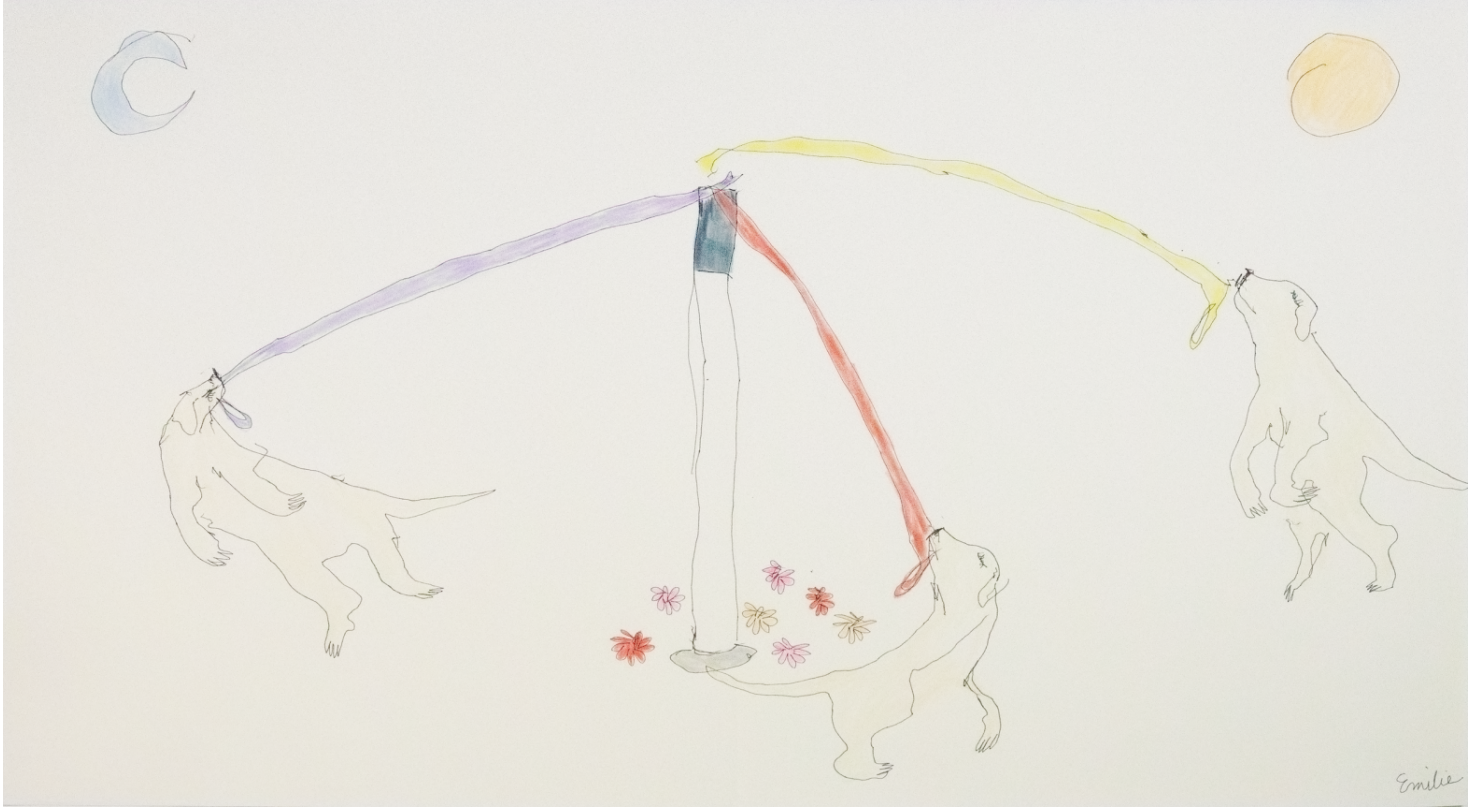
In one, three Londons, their eyes closed, hold the colorful ribbons/leashes in their mouths as they dance, glide, fly, and float around the towering maypole/cane (“Dancing, Again”). They seem serene, even beatific. In another, one doesn’t see the maypole but does see three Londons, flowers beneath them, reaching high up — perhaps ecstatically — to hold the colorful ribbons in their paws (“Londons Dancing with Flowers”).

The title of the third, “Flowers for London,” clarifies the purpose of the flowers on Gossiaux’s pedestal. They are a gift for London, a sign of adoration and respect. Each drawing is signed simply “Emilie.”

I spent a long time in Gossiaux’s spirited exhibition and had a tough time leaving. It feels uncommonly nutritive. It radiates generosity and love.



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Emilie L. Gossiaux, "Dancing, Again" (2023), ballpoint pen and crayon on paper, unframed: 23 x 35 inches, framed: 27 1/8 x 39 1/8 x 1 1/2 inches (courtesy the artist)

**Emilie L. Gossiaux: Other-Worlding** continues at the *Queens Museum (Flushing Meadows, Corona Park, Queens)* through April 7. The exhibition was organized by Queens Museum Assistant Curator Sarah Cho.