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For Immediate Release:

Sally Cook: Where Fantasy Has Bloomed Painting and Poetry since the 1960s

Eric Firestone Gallery

40 Great Jones Street | New York, NY

May 20 – June 30, 2023

Opening Reception: Saturday, May 20 | 3:00 – 5:00 PM

Eric Firestone Gallery is delighted to announce *Sally Cook: Where Fantasy Has Bloomed, Painting and Poetry since the 1960s*. Opening on May 20, 2023, this is the Buffalo-based artist's first solo presentation in New York City since 1963. The exhibition spans the prolific career of the 91-year-old painter: from her Abstract Expressionist canvases conceived when Cook was immersed in Manhattan's postwar art scene; to her geometric abstractions laden with symbols; to her figuration that resonates with the dreamy tableaux of Florine Stettheimer and the magic realism of Frida Kahlo. Cook's fantastical approach to abstraction, portraiture, still life, and poetry—which she has been writing since the 1980s—reflects her observations of the world. Whether with a paintbrush or a pen, Cook captures the absurdity and whimsy of ordinary life.



Sally Cook | *Gypsy At The Carnival of Life* | 1976
acrylic on canvas with hand-painted frame
30h x 40w in.

Sally Cook: Where Fantasy Has Bloomed, Painting and Poetry since the 1960s is curated by Julie Reiter Greene with support from Robert Scalise, Director, University at Buffalo Art Galleries. This exhibition revisits and expands on *Sally Cook: 1960–Present*, which the University of Buffalo Art Galleries mounted in 2020 yet displayed virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Eric Firestone Gallery presents paintings on loan from the University of Buffalo Art Galleries and the Burchfield Penney Art Center as well as examples from the artist's collection and important Buffalo-area collectors.

Sally Cook (b. 1932) has been a fixture of the Western New York art community since the mid-1950s. After graduating from the Albright Art School, the artist audited classes at the State University of New York at Buffalo with painter Peter Busa who inspired her move to downtown New York. She took up residence on the Bowery—two blocks from Marcel Duchamp and Franz

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Sally Cook pictured c. 1975 with her painting *Self-Portrait Five Images*.
Photo: Bob Flisk

Kline—and became embedded in the Tenth Street co-operative gallery scene. In 1959, Cook was featured in *Downtown/Uptown* at Marino Galleries, which was the first opportunity for Tenth Street practitioners such as Elaine de Kooning and Ed Clark to exhibit together. Cook’s old haunt was the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village where avant-garde artists would spend evenings discussing how to land an established dealer. “It was all about how to get from Tenth Street to 57th,” she recalls.

While she was drawn to representation—and particularly the output of her contemporary, Alice Neel—Cook became part of the

Abstract Expressionist movement that dominated New York at the time. She developed her own eccentric style defined by mushrooming organic shapes in vivid earth tones. Ranging from the intimate to the epic, her early paintings evoke natural elements and landscapes. Yet the compositional dynamics between Cook’s abstract forms are otherworldly. Her feathered marks whirl toward a central point, as exemplified by the monumental canvas *Opalescence* (1960) and its analogue *Liver of Roses* (1960) from the University of Buffalo Anderson Gallery collection.

Cook became a member of the Phoenix, Camino, and Feiner galleries, presenting her work in four solo exhibitions as well as numerous group shows in the 1950s. She was also elected to join “The Club” that included Kline, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Motherwell, among other giants. Despite such recognition, Cook found the emphasis on critic Clement Greenberg’s formal principles to be limiting. Her peers advised Cook to use less color and avoid painting to the edge of her supports. By the late 1960s, she had grown restless with the reign of the New York School. “They would talk about whether there was a new academy,” Cook explained. “They were it and didn’t know it. I felt Abstract Expressionism was for me a dead end. It was too narrow. Everyone had to work in the same way.”

Cook returned to Western New York, earning an MA in American Studies from the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1971. Another genre crept into her practice: geometric abstraction. She began making hard-edge compositions with blocks of color. According to Cook, “There has to be tension. You have to wind up a painting almost with a key.” Indeed, there is a psychological intensity to the relationships between her triangles, circles, and rectangles.

Eschewing Greenbergian dogma, these geometric shapes are not purely formal but rather

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symbolic. They are hieroglyphs in a language that can be decoded. For example, *The Bird Who Died from Sleeping Too Much* (1967) emerged from a dream that a friend, Carol Hope, once shared with Cook. Here, a deconstructed black bird appears in a coffin at the top, followed by a flash of rage rendered as a bright reddish-orange horizon line, and then an engulfing depressive darkness beneath. Other more lighthearted examples from this body of work convey flowers, rainbows, and flags.

Cook's abstractions not only set the stage for her later representational pieces, but also appear illustrated within them. As a writer, Cook had always gravitated towards narrative—and so her practice naturally transitioned to portraiture and still life. Starting in 1965, Cook began creating sensational folk tableaux of figures, animals, and objects. They teem with marks, vines, flora, and other patterns that even spill out onto the frames themselves. Cook has frequently portrayed herself, her pets, and members of her community. Her late cat, Liver, and her husband, Bob Fisk, recur in her oeuvre that is at once autobiographical and allegorical. Characters hovering above the ground signify those who are disassociated from their environments. Tables overflowing with food—yet missing silverware for consuming it—represent the nourishment of recognition that is too often withheld from artists.

Cook conveys how life can be stranger than fiction. Reality and fantasy blur in her works. In one self-portrait, *I Go to Africa* (1971), Cook replaces lions on the savanna with domestic cats in a landscape with invented vegetation. The artist herself appears levitating in the air, holding “the flag of the individual; a symbol of creative power.” In *Self Portrait Five Images* (1975), Cook portrays herself five times, each from a different decade of her life, within her mother's parlor covered with bright pink wallpaper with giant white flowers. This imagery arose from the painter wondering whether she would recognize herself across time: “How can you know yourself from ten years ago, or ten years from now?” Thus this exuberant funhouse picture is also a vehicle for introspective questions about identity and mortality.

Cook's reveries become art historical records through her output as evident with *In the Backyard With Some Friends* (1971–72). In this mesmeric scene, Cook painted herself—with three arms, no less—into an Édouard Manet-like picnic. She appears beside Gertrude Stein (holding the “umbrella of absurdity”), Pablo Picasso, Henri Rousseau (whose masterpieces Cook especially admires), and Margaret Kittinger Batson. Cook claims a place in modern



Sally Cook | *I Go To Africa* | 1971
acrylic on canvas
36h x 46w in.

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art history for Batson, a fellow underrecognized painter from Buffalo, as well as for herself. With its exhibition, Eric Firestone Gallery likewise illuminates Cook's legacy—continuing the gallery's mission to reexamine the postwar canon.

Cook is also an accomplished poet whose verses have been published in numerous journals. Since the turn of the century, she has trained remotely with Dr. Joseph S. Salemi, a professor at New York University and Hunter College. Among other scholarships and awards, Cook received a grant to research Emily Dickinson and T. S. Eliot, which culminated in her series of Dickinson portraits. Her literary and painterly practices tend to cross-pollinate. As Cook writes in her poem called Hive: "I say there is poetry in everything."

Sally Cook: Where Fantasy Has Bloomed, Painting and Poetry since the 1960s will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue. A booklet with a selection of the artist's poems and line drawings will be available at the gallery. Readings of Cook's verses will be performed during the exhibition's run.

Sally Cook: Where Fantasy Has Bloomed
will be on view through June 30, 2023

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For further information and images, contact press@ericfirestonegallery.com