

Katja Seib, photographed in her studio, will showcase her surrealist paintings—often described as “dreamlike”—at a solo show at Château Shatto this September.





DREAMSCAPES

Katja Seib
paints
dreamlike
realities that
probe the
personal in the
ubiquitous.

BY **EMILY WELLS**
PORTRAIT BY **CASSIE HUNTER**

AS I ENTER THE STUDIO OF German painter Katja Seib, now based in Los Angeles, I am struck by one of her works in progress leaning against the studio wall: a depiction of a surreally lanky alpine woman, enveloped in fabric, who immediately reminds me of LA's iconic "Lava Lady," a gloriously eccentric, elderly woman who lived in a lava rock-covered house and was a fixture in the Melrose neighborhood area of LA in the mid '90s. The Lava Lady wore enormous platform shoes and sumptuously draped, lengthy fabrics, exaggerating her expansion in a vein similar to that of the figure in Seib's painting.

My free association highlights one of the fundamental characteristics of Seib's work: her use of symbols and narrative—ubiquitous enough to elicit a sense of familiarity, and specific enough to be grounded in a scene—that are generously left open to the viewer's interpretation. "Just like you thought of 'Lava Lady,' something I haven't heard of, it's so interesting to see what people bring to the paintings," she confirms, "and it makes me really happy."

Seib's enigmatic motifs present a welcome deviation from the contemporary figurative painting landscape. She combines figures, or perhaps characters, in the midst of everyday thoughts, meditations, and situations (cats lounging, men and women reclining on their beds in sleep or basking in the glow of their iPhones) with sinister, surrealist elements (serpents, apples, myth-like clothing) that either obstruct or enhance the figuration.

Her paintings are often, not incorrectly, referred to as "dreamlike," due to their capacity to blur the boundaries of situated time. In one painting shown at her aptly titled solo show, "dear diary" at Sadie Coles HQ last November, two women sit across the table from each other, one clad in drab black garb that feels of another era. She is gesturing authoritatively, like a fortune teller, toward the other woman, who is wearing contemporary, brightly colored clothing and has her arms crossed, resistant, perhaps incredulous. Above the two women is a flying baby angel, likely a design on a curtain, but possibly a symbol emerging from their interaction. Eventually the viewer's eye finds the punctum of the painting: the fortune-teller's hand lightly resting on a white iPhone, not quite aglow, but somehow active, ignited, a play of light and color. The dream-logic of the painting feels familiar, even though the viewer has almost certainly not dreamed of this specific scene before.

I ask if Seib consciously explores dreams in her work—which can be a slippery slope into sloppy interpretation. "So many things are dreamlike—it just happens," she says of the recurring motifs. "Even though I don't try to make it happen, it always does. Everything is in dreams. You cannot avoid it. Then I wonder, did that really happen? Is it reality?"

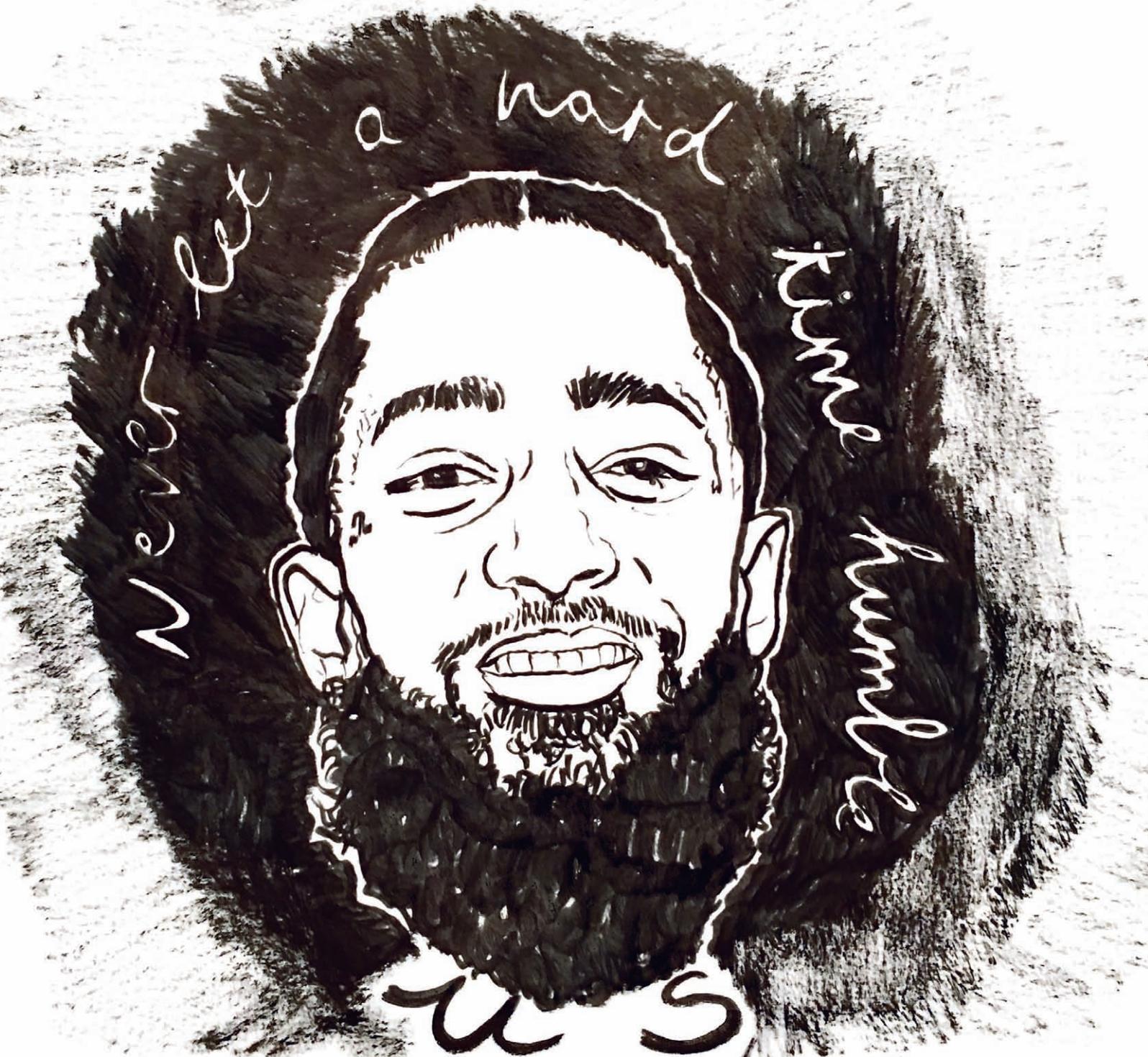
What is certain is that the dreamy motifs in her paintings begin from an intimate reality; she first takes photographs of friends or hired models (or her cat, as is the case with one of the other works in progress I notice in her studio) and then adds in her own elements and symbols as she paints. "Sometimes I really want them to look like the people, and sometimes I don't," she explains. The most explicit expression of the former is in the 30 small, square paintings



Above, Katja Seib's *Eve's curse*, 2018.

of friends—reminiscent of the requisite photo format of Instagram's more restrictive age—that she showed at "dear diary."

Seib's work has been shown mostly in European galleries, but she has lived in LA for a year and a half and feels at home in the city. In the Fashion District, a short jaunt from her Montecito Heights studio, she scours for fabrics, one of which is spread upon a canvas, a conspicuous background for a piece she is working on in anticipation of her upcoming solo show at Château Shatto in September. The show will feature mostly large-scale paintings, similar to one she has just finished for Art Basel—titled *Why Would I Want to Be Kim if I Can Be Kanye*—of two tuxedo cats perched on the back of a white minimalist couch, in front of a whitewashed wall in an overwhelmingly minimalist room. On the cats' black backs are moons and stars, hovering between illusion and symbolism, blending signals of different eras. The cats are seemingly at home in Seib's simultaneously nocturnal and psychological world, where the viewer is invited to confront their own presuppositions and deliberations.



For her first solo show at Sadie Coles in London last November, Seib made a collection of 8x8" paintings of people from LA. In that vein, *Never Let A Hard Time Humble Us* (2019) is an original drawing made by the artist for this issue of *LALA*.

"My work is inspired by people and what it means to be human. When *LALA* asked if I wanted to do a drawing about LA, I thought about the people who define the city. Nipsey Hussle is a role model who inspired so many beyond his community. He was a father and a husband, a well-respected musician and a big, important part of LA. May he rest in peace."

-Katja Seib



Katja Seib's paintings often start from photographs; she weaves in her own elements as she paints.



PHOTO BY CASSIE WINTER