

## **INSIDE THE IMAGINAL REALM:** Barbara Strasen New Works 2026

by Joanna Kiernan, [May 13, 2026]

In a career spanning fifty years Barbara Strasen is known for bringing together a wild array of subjects that she juxtaposes in intricate tapestry-like paintings. Despite the complexity of the works the diverse elements miraculously cohere, seeming to naturally belong together. Her unlikely juxtapositions may suggest dream logic, but the feeling of strangeness associated with Surrealism is absent. The paintings often depict consumer objects and motifs with subversive wit, yet they do not summon the ironical stance of Pop Art; and though suffused with fantasy, her pictures are not purely phantasmagorical. I would suggest rather that the works belong to the 'imaginal world,' a concept in the Persian tradition that describes a confluence of the visible 'real' world, with another ethereal realm that is intuited and felt by the open human subject, and entwined with the real.

In this new collection of [fifteen] works Strasen forcefully summons the imaginal. *It Loves to Happen II* is a composition that emerges from a center of block-like shapes, shaded like the planes of a Cubist painting, hurtling outwards and haloed by radiating straight lines of brilliant color. The lines quote conventions of representing light, velocity, or noise, while covering the entire surface is a lattice of pointed leaves, curlicues, and bubbly, fruit-like forms. Strasen describes this scrim as an enfolding nature that calms a moment of violence or breakage, yet the color palette of gold and pink creates a mood of exalted excitement, rather than disaster.

*It Loves to Happen II* directly embodies the governing idea of the series as a moment of dynamic change within the immanence of nature—but the other works in the series take a different compositional route. Rather than radiating from a center, they are structured by floating horizontal bands that can resemble clouds or mist or rock, and sometimes just bands of color. Strasen says she wanted to create a pliant, up-close surface that recedes, sometimes into deep space, and then returns, working like memory that fades but may also pinpoint significant moments of the past.

The images that run through the series are primarily from the natural world—water and waves, plants and leaves, mountains, birds, and clouds. Occasionally a jet plane can be seen, and also the outlines of continents, evoking deep space. The subject matter is consistently of nature, however Strasen signals the presence of social culture through the diverse styles of representation she employs. Over the years she has collected a tool box of forms and motifs that she uses throughout her practice, drawn from art

history, advertising, cartoon, decoration, mythology, animation and almost any other source you can imagine. Many of the shapes and outlines are distilled and refined so they become a more abstract armature, but still echo with the original codification.

*Respire* is a mediative composition of sea, mountain and cloud painted in subdued tones of greenish blue. Threading through it are winding, curling threads of cloud forms, which she renders so they simultaneously suggest writhing intestine, an image Strasen developed from her deep study of Albrecht Durer's etchings. She pulls a rough brush over the entire canvas creating a texture in the paint like the warp of fabric, bestowing a tangible materiality to the work while simultaneously creating the illusion of mist and moisture.

In other paintings the clouds are drawn like the simple outlines in a child's coloring book, as in *Euphoria*. The little sparrows who peep through or perch on layers in several paintings—especially *The Dream and Real are Same*—have beady eyes, suggesting a playful, anthropomorphic relation to wild life. The arching, curving lines in *Aperture* that suggest storm clouds or waves banking are inspired by a Japanese Shinto clan symbol, *Migi Mitsutomoe*, a swirling design echoed through many ancient cultures.

Mutability is a constant in Barbara Strasen's work, yet the forms still resonate with memories of visual languages embedded deep in our collective brains. In *Sky Passage*, a picture of a desert-like landscape where a plane disappears into cloud, slanted dotted lines of thick yellow paint dash across the surface, recalling drops of powerful rain, a connection supported by zig-zag lines that telegraph lightning.

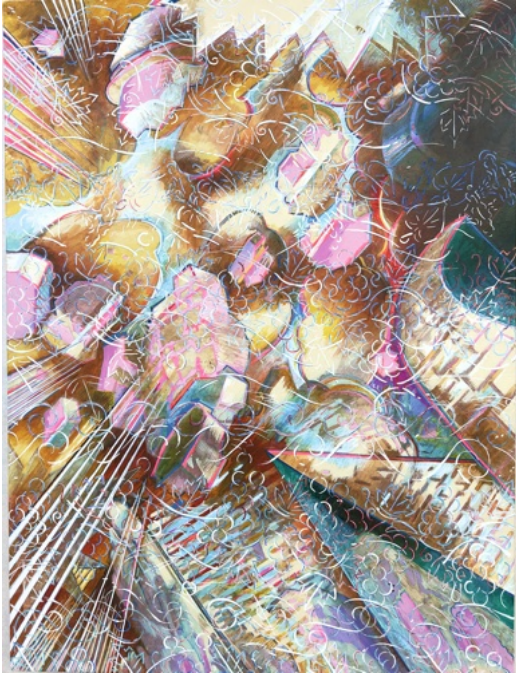
The works collected in **Inside the Imaginal Realm** display a great affection for the world—natural and man-made. The overall atmosphere is one of nurture, and deep pleasure. To be enjoyed.

Joanna Kiernan, [May 13, 2026]

Joanna Kiernan is a filmmaker and critical writer.

Checklist of paintings discussed below

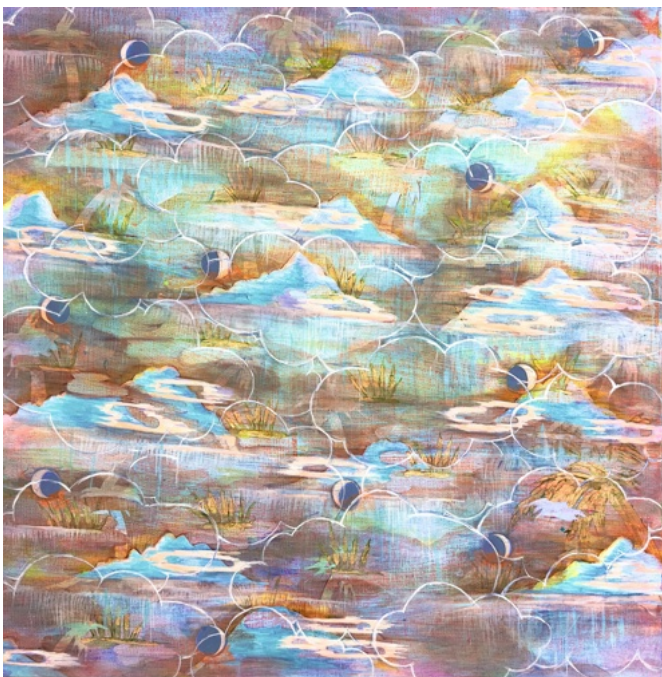
IT LOVES TO HAPPEN NOW



RESPIRE



EUPHORIA



THE DREAM AND REAL ARE SAME



APERTURE



SKY PASSAGE

