Olga Volchkova: *Forest Communities*
October 14 – November 28, 2026
Artist Reception with Olga Volchkova: Friday, October 16th, 5:30-7:30 p.m.
Remarks by the artist at 6 p.m.
First Friday ArtWalk: November 6th, 5:30-7:30 p.m.

Karin Clarke Gallery is pleased to present *Forest Communities*, a large exhibition of new paintings by beloved Eugene artist and nature advocate, **Olga Volchkova**. With her training in Eastern Orthodox iconography and traditional icon painting, Volchkova celebrates the communities of native plants and animals found in the Pacific Northwest and calls attention to the interconnections between flora, fauna and humankind. This selection, thrilling for art- and nature-enthusiasts alike, features eighteen new works and is notable for its variety of approaches to its subject matter. The pieces in this series vary in size and include, for the first time, a taller vertical format. Prints of the artist's new and previous work are also available.

Volchkova has for many years been renewing the highly codified genre of Russian Orthodox icon painting, in effect subverting and reappropriating its iconography to canonize plants and nature's living creatures, while remaining mostly true to the style and techniques of this religious artform, which she studied formally. The passion for plants and botany that inspires her work is rooted in her experience of rural life, her own gardening, and in the precise observation of the bounties of nature while hiking in Oregon.

Volchkova isn't just moved by the beauty of plants, but also fascinated by their uses and properties, their benefits and dangers, how we relate to them, and the mythologies we weave around them – in short, by the ways in which plants belong to a cultural as well as a natural ecosystem. Volchkova also documents how plants interact with other life forms (fungi, lichens, insects, fish, birds, mammals…) and seeks to represent the symbiotic relationships between living organisms, highlighting their interdependence. A tireless artist for whom a twelve-hour painting day is not unusual, Volchkova never paints the same thing twice. Continuing to honor endangered natural habitats, she has now turned her attention to the ocean in pieces such as *Saint Kelp Forest* and *Miracle of the Ocean Community*.

"Others write stories, but instead I paint paintings," she says. Each of her pieces comes with its own story, and each is a visual narrative that combines erudition and humor. Often, they include visual metaphors, puns, and other clues about the creatures and plants depicted, as well as human tropes or customs associated with them, showcasing how the natural and cultural realms are interconnected. The anthropomorphic use of human figures to represent plants (*Saint* series), and the presence of animals standing in for humans (*The Spirit of the Redwoods*) or plants (*Saint Dogwood*), further blur the boundaries between the human and non-human realms.

Volchkova's compositions themselves constitute microcosms in which the living organisms she has assembled appear to live in harmony. Architectural and natural settings follow the pictorial language of the icon genre, providing both general structure and visual ordering around central figures. The use of borders further contributes to a sense of perennity. Every detail has been thoroughly researched and meticulously executed, rewarding close attention. Her vibrant colors are the result of much delicate layering, and retaining balance and harmony is crucial at each stage of the painting.

Volchkova's *Saint* pieces in effect function as visual speech acts, performative utterances that enact rather than describe, whereby she says: "I'm canonizing plants," and does. This is something, she notes, no one had dared before, and which she has now expanded to, "I am canonizing all the living creatures of nature." As with traditional images of saints, this expansion of the concept of sainthood and personification of other life forms is meant to rekindle our sense of awe and wonder, but here it is our spiritual bond with the natural world that is at stake. It is also a reminder, at once playful and earnest, that our entire living environment needs, more than ever, to be respected and protected.

Volchkova grew up in Tver, in the former Soviet Union. She studied chemistry and art, and was trained in art restoration as well as icon painting. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, most recently at the Museum of Russian Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Sylvie Pederson