

Emotion Recollected in Tranquility

Robin Clark

In recent years, Lærke Lauta has been primarily focused on painting, bringing to that practice many of the themes and techniques that are hallmarks of her earlier work in video: crepuscular light, a lush palette, and undertones of unresolved suspense. In the new paintings, strong female protagonists, elusive storylines, and chromatic delectation still pertain. They have been realized as separate yet closely related bodies of work on canvas: figurative paintings; large multicolor and multiform abstractions; smaller, nearly monochrome squares; and pigment-stained veils suspended from the ceiling to form diaphanous environments. On close inspection, these categories are themselves somewhat porous. In one sense, a work like *Harmony Passes Unnoticed* (fig. 1) has the quality of a film still, or an afternoon idyll, although absent the figures and their canoe, the image would be an amber and umber sibling to one of Lauta's layered veils (fig. 2). The untitled works similarly seem to be enlargements of details from the more narrative paintings. Compare, for example, *Dark Was the Night* with *Untitled #9* (pp. 16-17) or *La Reina* with *Untitled #20* (pp. 34-35).

The aqua, teal, and scarlet hues of the former pair and the magenta, tangerine, and lavender passages of the latter signal a kinship that transcends their varied compositions and range of sizes. Resonances between the figurative works (which are often poetically titled) and the abstractions (which are identified as numbered *Studies*, *Layers*, or *Untitled* paintings) are not limited to tonal rhyming. Particularly when paired by the artist in an exhibition installation or across a spread in a publication, abstract and figurative works also inform each other in terms of mood and potential narratives. In the juxtaposition of *Eyes Are Heavy and the Weather Is Getting Ugly* with *Untitled #1* (pp.28-29) the abstract work may suggest the shared dream of the two sleeping figures, while placement of the pastoral *Study #10* beside *Balancing Present and Future* (pp. 46-47) perhaps alleviates some of the hazard implied by workers navigating their way through billowing clouds of alizarin crimson.

If the untitled abstract works may be considered samples from the compositions of the figurative canvases, this



Fig. 1 *Harmony Passes Unnoticed*, 2020 (p.23)



Fig. 2 *Layers*, 2019 (pp. 105-112)

dynamic is even more extreme in the group of paintings simply titled *Colour* (Fig. 3). The *Colour* works include two or more square canvases of matching size (some are 35 x 35 cm, others 80 x 80 cm). Each painting comprises one dominant hue in the process of being suffused by another, and is nuanced by the irregularities produced by the paint having been thinned, poured, and absorbed into raw canvas. These are the most minimal of Lautá's paintings and may be thought of as building blocks or perhaps even "genes" with the possibility of being sequenced or recombined. The cumulative effect of these works recalls the Charles and Ray Eames film *Powers of Ten* (1977), which explores relative scale and repeated forms in nature. The Eames film opens with a man sleeping on a picnic blanket. At a rate of 10-to-the-tenth meters per second, the camera's point of view pulls back to show the earth in space and continues out to the starry "edge of the known universe." Reversing direction, the point of view plummets back toward earth at dizzying speed. When it reaches the sleeping man, viewers see through his skin in exponential increments until discovering the matter of which he is made, at 10-to-the-minus-tenth meters. The patterns of his physical being at an atomic level are not unlike those of the cosmos. As in Lautá's paintings, figuration and abstraction morph in and out of focus depending upon one's perspective.

Shifts in scale and tempo appear throughout Lautá's work and can be effective exhibition strategies as well. An example of this is her solo show at Kunsthall Rønnebæksholm in spring 2021, *Meditations in an Emergency* (pp. 93-104), in which Lautá installed seven enfilade galleries sequenced to invite such comparisons. The introductory room features vibrant figurative works in dynamic conversation, while the second gallery contrasts a large semi-abstract painting with more narrative canvases. *The River* (2017/2020), one of the few videos that Lautá made in the last few years, screens in the third gallery. In it, people are seen crossing a river by stepping and hopping across uneven paving stones.



Fig. 3 *Colour* #18, 2020/*Colour* #20, 2020 (pp. 115/117)

Birds of prey circle overhead. Three speeds operate in the piece: the steady current, the casual pedestrians, and the languidly gliding raptors. The hypnotic quality of the work is accentuated by a slow, psychedelic guitar soundtrack. Compared to earlier video installations which often include multichannel projections and tangential story lines, *The River* is notably austere; a haiku rather than an epic poem.

In Kunsthall Rønnebæksholm's fourth gallery, visitors encounter a suite of large abstract paintings whose passages of flowing pigment resonate with the looping guitar melody and river current experienced in the previous room. The next space is laid out with modular *Colour* panels, evoking a workshop, a laboratory, or indeed a studio. A sixth gallery features luminously tinted polychromatic veils suspended in space, untethered from the walls. The final room contains *Meditations in an Emergency* (2020), the work for which the exhibition is named. It is a projected video that has been created by animating still images of individual panels from the *Colour* series, each slowly dissolving into the next. Variegated jade green morphs into something like patinated bronze; this is followed by rose blush, lavender, maroon,

mulberry, and so on. Each frame contains not one but several pulsing warm and cool tones. After providing fifteen minutes of chromatic bathing, the work ends where it began, a jade field shot through with indigo and liquid metal. The exhibition as a whole also ends where it begins, because the linear organization of the galleries requires visitors to exit the way they came in. This review in reverse offers a changed perspective on now familiar artworks and their arrangement in space, a journey from immersive environment back to the first gallery where color and light are again bound to the human figure.

Meditative and reflective states are common leitmotifs in Lauta's works, something that is expressed in titles like *Time Moves in a Special Way in the Middle of the Night* and *Everything I Know About You Is Nothing More Than Memories*. Similarly, a painting like *Drifting* (fig. 4) explores the liminal condition of dreaming. In it, a central figure reposes in a chair, his head tilted back and to the side as if drifting off to sleep. Other aspects of drifting are represented as well: the chair in question has no legs, the cocktail tables have no bases, and the lounge he occupies has neither floor nor a roof. The retro-futurist architectural space is defined by a curving wall of plate glass windows through which semi-transparent ghostly figures, some perhaps dressed as astronauts, can be seen. The window casements resemble the frames of celluloid film, suggesting that the spectral images may be a movie playing behind his eyes. If this is an airport lounge, perhaps he is experiencing the condition that sci-fi author William Gibson describes as "soul delay," the time it takes a spirit to catch up to its body during long-haul travel.¹ The unfinished quality of the work allows generous space for interpretation. Like *Meditations in an Emergency* (both the exhibition and the video), and many of Lauta's paintings from the last few years, *Drifting* both embodies and invites reverie, functioning much the way that William Wordsworth described poetry, as "emotion recollected in tranquility."²



Fig. 4 *Drifting*, 2017 (p. 86)

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She has organized solo shows with Lærke Lauta at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and the Saint Louis Art Museum, USA.

¹ *Powers of Ten* may be screened on the Eames Office website www.eamesoffice.com

² William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2003).

³ William Wordsworth, preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800, collected in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Fourth Edition, Volume 2 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 173.