



Raven

*Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there,
wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal
ever dared to dream before.*

The Raven, Edgar Allan Poe

Raven – a ballad to darkness

The 1966 image of Ad Reinhardt peering into his own painting, appears to show a mid-20th century version of Caravaggio's *Narcissus*... however it wasn't vanity that drew Reinhardt to peer into the dark recesses of his painting... it was the reverse. As it had been for Kazimir Malevich, the opportunity to lose oneself in the desert of the non-objective, rather than to locate one's reflection, to admire its contour, acknowledge its blush, would be the true opiate of abstraction.

When Mark Rothko said that a painting is not a picture of an experience, but is the experience, he asserts certain shared obligations for both the painting and its viewer. That judgement is suspended in favour of feeling, that we allow an encounter with (his) painting to approach transcendence by simply being open to it, even when the painting signals some kind of closure. This metaphysical state, something that painting has long wished to attend to, was central to Rothko's aspirations, as indeed it was to Malevich, to Turner, to Casper David Freidrich. These painters trusted that painting could shoulder the burdens of theosophy, the devotional clout of divinity and through their material depictions they might bring forth a 'nonmaterial', numinous episode.

Whilst some artists may harbour equally grand ambitions for their work's reception, Rothko's temerity in expressing his desire for his own paintings' capacity to be experienced in such a way, given the correct conditions - a dedicated chapel for example - demonstrates both the intensity and passion he had for orchestrating his paintings reception.

I don't think for a minute that any of the painters in *Raven* wish to emulate such cravings but what each of them do seek I'm sure, is a distilled and open reception for work that speaks quietly and sincerely to a sensate register in us that has been reduced, subjugated by the clamour and white noise that popular culture fertilizes.

I recall the sensation of an important trip to MoMA in the early 90s where, clouded by jetlag, I found myself standing in a magnificent room, face to zip with Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*. The best efforts of one of Newman's grandest paintings left me feeling neither sublime nor heroic. Of course it wasn't the painting's fault, it was melatonin and circadian arrhythmia. Sleep-walking on past Rothko and still I headed for coffee, or what passed for it in those dark times, but on either side, flanking the exit sign, in arguably more minor positions, was a black totemic Ad Reinhardt and a large Robert Ryman from the 1960s. At that moment I think both paintings offered a hushed and welcome antidote to the overwhelming drama and scale that the other figures in that room were offering. Both works presented a sublimated, palliate blanket that suited my own wearied state. It is certainly not the case that either demands less from you than Newman or Rothko, or even Still for that matter, but they don't proselytize or defend their belief system with the same visual commotion.

Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting 57* has stayed with me ever since and perhaps a part of me has always been seeking out paintings that deliver some version of the intangible, rarefied experience I had with them then. Lowered resistance, heightened emotion, alone in NY, what more could I have wanted out of that moment... good coffee I guess but that was equally rare in the early 90s.



*I hardly think a few birds are going to bring about the end of the world...
The Birds, Mrs Bundy, 1963*

*My painting represents the victory of the forces of darkness
and peace over the powers of light and evil.*

Ad Reinhardt



The more a picture is enclosed within itself, a visibly assembled hermetic something arises outside our presence. This is a construct, a conceptual structure, something conceived within hierarchies.

I call that a self-assertion of the picture.

But we cannot appropriate a picture. It is instead an opening up of itself, an outflowing, an inflowing, a self-extension. That is an unlimited movement of coming closer, a yearning for tangibility, a wish for interaction.

Günter Umberg

As seldom as it occurs, however there are paintings in this exhibition that offer the rare esoteric encounter that makes it clear how accurate Rothko was - that a painting was an experience and how discreet this encounter could be – witness Reinhardt & Ryman.

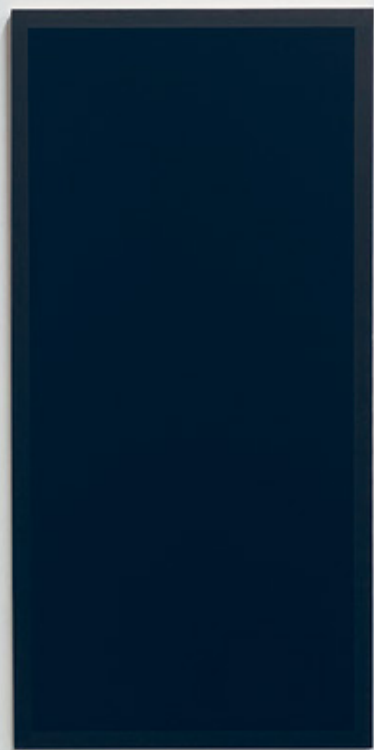
For the profound level of stillness and quiet that Gunter Umberg's paintings transmit they can induce a disequilibrium in our senses that unexpectedly feels more acoustic, more phonic than ocular. Umberg's paintings have always been less about the seeable and more about the discernible. As containers of conspicuous darkness they work via a kind of sensory deprivation, appearing to drain form of any evident signal, but by so doing only heightening our reception of the faintest discernible broadcast.

In recent years Umberg has opened himself to other colours beyond black, the pigment for which his work is most closely associated. These colours are invested with a similar astasia, their weight and body both profoundly visceral, their skin, their membrane strangely vaporous and illusive. But it is Umberg's black paintings that have established my own yardstick for measuring absence, and in so doing understanding my own presence. For these paintings are a blind mirror held up to our soul. Despite their scale and disposition being so finely calibrated to the body, these paintings record the extent or otherwise of our after-image.



Günter Umberg
Ohne Titel / Untitled, 2010
poliment, pigment & dammar on wood
38 x 36 cm







When, in 1913, in a desperate attempt to rid art of the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the form of the square... the critics... sighed, "All that we loved has been lost. We are in a desert"... But the desert is filled with the spirit of non-objective feeling.

Kazimir Malevich

Imi Knoebel is without question one of the great colourists of our time. Whilst many of his paintings give spatial dimension to the architecture of Modernism, Knoebel's palette extends well beyond the fundamentalism of Newman's *Whose Afraid of Red Yellow and Blue* or Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* for example and embrace the unbridled joyfulness and range of Matisse.

Extravagant colourist that he is, Knoebel's spiritual DNA is equally tied to Malevich, and at regular intervals he has made works that rekindle the reductiveness and poignancy of Suprematism both in terms of form but also by his specific use of black. In Knoebel's hands, colours enjoy a speed and luminosity that feels utterly particular to him. When he chooses to set colour aside one has the sense that there is a deeper philosophical reset taking place and by looking back to Malevich, to the 'desert of the non-objective' he reminds himself of the capacity painting has to speak to the craving for an otherworldly experience, for 'non-objective feeling'.

Only the middle panel of Knoebel's triptych *Nummer 37-39* is black, flanked as it is by a white and a golden panel. These shallow reliefs seem to hug the wall closely, implicating it as an extended spatial field in which these forms are invited to exist. Their shaping and binary palette (plus one) recall the reduced architectural houses that Malevich painted later as Suprematism disguised itself in a field of wheat, rather than a desert of the non-objective.

0,10 Exhibition, Kazimir Malevich

A section of *Suprematist works*

Installation view: Petrograd, Russia, 1915

Imi Knoebel

Schwarzes Kreuz, 1968

black emulsion paint on linen over hardboard

215 x 165 x 51.5 cm

Their shape, though not faithfully architectural certainly implies a dwelling, a habitation for the mind and the spirit, if not for the body.

Each of the faceted shapes retains a variable raw edge that catches slivers of light, giving the work a shy luminous halo. On the white panel this edge becomes the dominant element as the centre merges with its surround – white on white, casually ethereal and transcendent.

The left hand panel most closely resembles an architectural structure with its peaked 'roofline'. The gilded surface, serving as it did in Byzantine and Romanesque architecture as a conduit of light rather than colour.



At the triptych's centre is the black panel. Without a flat base and with its irregular form it feels less tied to the earth, more otherworldly. I am resisting reading this work in terms of the inferred Christian trinity, but ghosts and light, holy or otherwise seems to be invoked. I suppose I prefer my Knoebels ecumenical, but however one pursues a sense of the intangible, it is most important that we try (in this world) to be mindful that "in art (and politics) there is a need for truth, not sincerity" (KM)

To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth.

Kazimir Malevich



Imi Knoebel
Nummer 37-39, (Three Parts) 2012
acrylic & aluminium
32.8 x 113.8 x 1 cm (overall)

I felt a little lost between the blue and white of the sky and the monotony of the colours around me- the sticky black of the tar, the dull black of all the clothes, and the shiny black of the hearse.

The Plague, Albert Camus

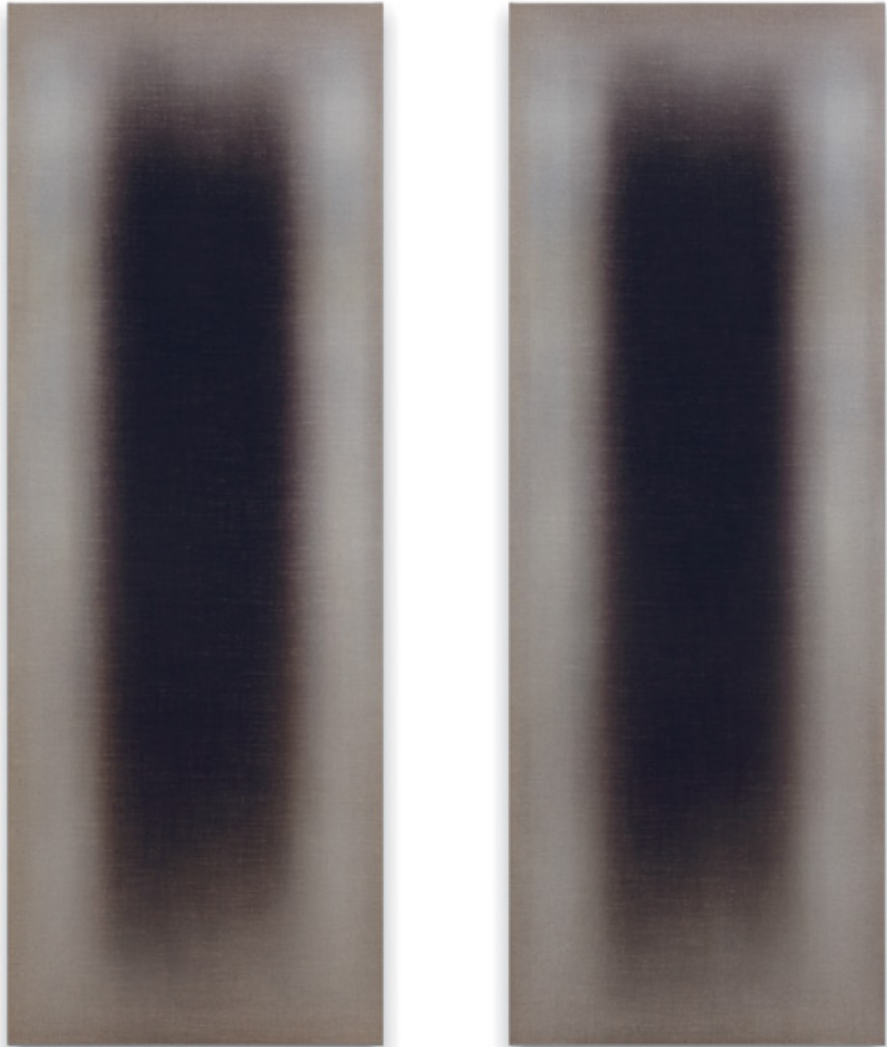
I would not suggest that Hanns Kunitzberger's feelings about a blue sky approach the funk that Camus suggests he feels when confronted by the monotony of colours, for much of Kunitzberger's paintings celebrate a sensitivity to colour's magical and dreamlike behaviour they exhibit and can elicit in us.

Having said that Kunitzberger, makes paintings where colour is perpetually at risk of denouement. Depending on how one experiences his paintings – from the outside towards the interior, or the reverse, it is his nuanced transitions that signal either the crescendo of diminution in the colour's volume.

I have said before that my experience of his blooms of colour feel utterly sonic to me... like a note that starts on the fringes of perception, imperceptible and then builds almost without cognizance to become irrefutable... only to dissipate again.

Colours denouement at the flanks of the painting might be felt as a dysphoria – beside the looming presence of his sensitively built interiors absence can feel... well, empty. In *MITTE 2021 - PAAR* Kunitzberger gives us two contradictory versions of emptiness – one where the interior darkness is synonymous with absence or perhaps where the pigment so gracefully dispels, and we are left only with the smallest traces in the weave of the linen.

Conversely, both the areas I describe might also be felt of as full. This paradox is a constant in Hanns Kunitzberger's paintings. Paintings that speak to the evanescence of existence embody so much dimension, through patient accumulation and touch.



Rothko Chapel, 1971
Houston, Texas.
Photograph: Paul Hester

Hanns Kunitzberger
MITTE 2021 - PAAR, 2021
oil & linen
180 x 65 x 4 cm (each)



Helmut Federle's paintings belong to a tradition of romantic symbolism that is rooted in the introspection of northern Europe's meteorological and philosophical conditions. Federle himself is also somewhat prepossessed by a personal yearning for a time where the ritual of making imbued both object and maker with purpose that was as mystical as it was pragmatic. Ceremony dignified both participant and instrument, and in Federle's view, any forfeiture of our capacity to make has led directly to a deeply lamentable loss of meaning.

Both of his paintings in *Raven*, like many of the series that he has patiently made over his idiosyncratic painting career, exist as sonnets to loss, ballads to the onset of an inescapable, yet not uninvited, darkness.

The disrupted geometry that has simultaneously established and humanized the architecture of his paintings over the decades has in *Informal Multitudes (Doppelbewegung des Geistes 2) Schifflied (Nature)* receded to the point where we are left with an axis insinuated only by a dissipating convergence of gestures, one where landscape reaches up to a darker tempestuous sky.

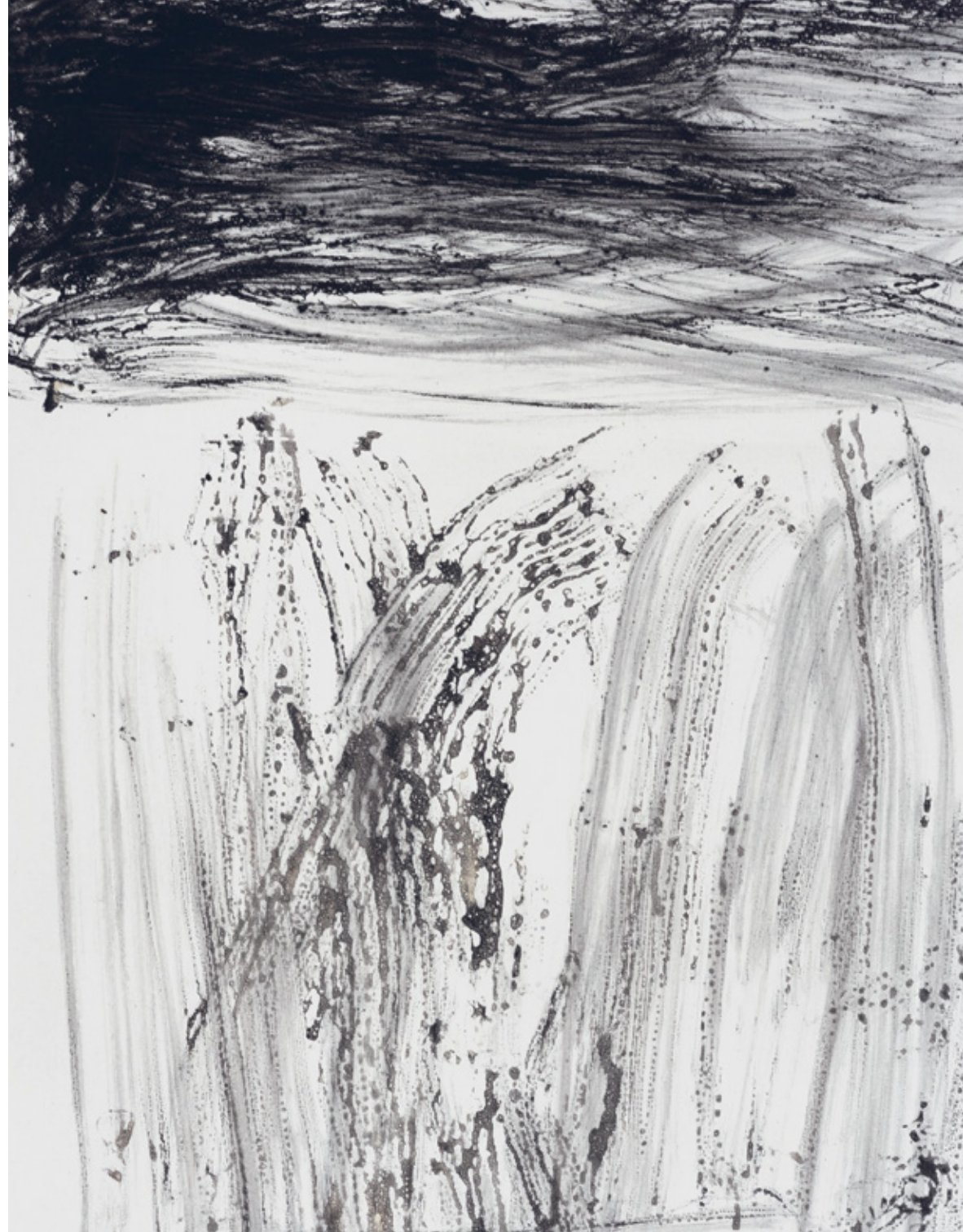
These brushstrokes may be the most evanescent I have seen him make. Even in the gauzy gestures that enact *Death of a Black Snake*, the latticework establishes a structural weave that gives the painting a reticulation and composition that is complex and materially substantial.

Here however, Federle seems to be painting a vision of tumult and delicacy. Like many of Federle's paintings they persist like a repeating koan – an elegiac paradox as to the deficiency of reason and desire for enlightenment.

Like Helmut I too have been seduced by the esoteric symbolism of other cultures - by the existence of multiple vocabularies that seek to express something of the *Delphic Mysteries* that we believe we share, despite our extrinsic differences. Two early and significant exhibitions mounted by the gallery, *Six Degrees of Separation* (2000) and *Points of Orientation* (2001 & 2011) were my fledging attempts to investigate this inter-connectedness. Yet despite assumptions that they would reveal a universal, albeit obscure voice that would link them, it was ultimately the nuances of difference that rose as the central fascination of these projects.

Federle has said that "there is not a painting that does not arouse some climatic associations with something else" and though this statement might insinuate the existence of a communal foundation I remain struck by the endless variation and mutation that exists even within his highly concentrated series. One need look no further than to his emblematic series *Basics on Composition* where despite a mantra-like approach to composition, each of these works are highly individuated – alone.

Helmut Federle
Informal Multitudes
(Doppelbewegung des Geistes 2) Schifflied (Nature), (detail) 2020
acrylic & vegetable oil on canvas
70 x 50 cm





I still regard composition as an essential element of painting because the picture in its environment consists of this dialogue, this balance of forces between the picture and the space, between the paint mass and the object quality of the base material. [...] The same applies to the question of content: to my mind, there is no such thing as absolute non-referential painting. There is no painting that does not arouse some climatic associations with something else.

Helmut Federle

Helmut Federle
Informal Multitudes
(Doppelbewegung des Geistes 2) Schilffied) (Nature), 2020
acrylic & vegetable oil on canvas
70 x 50 cm

Following page: Helmut Federle

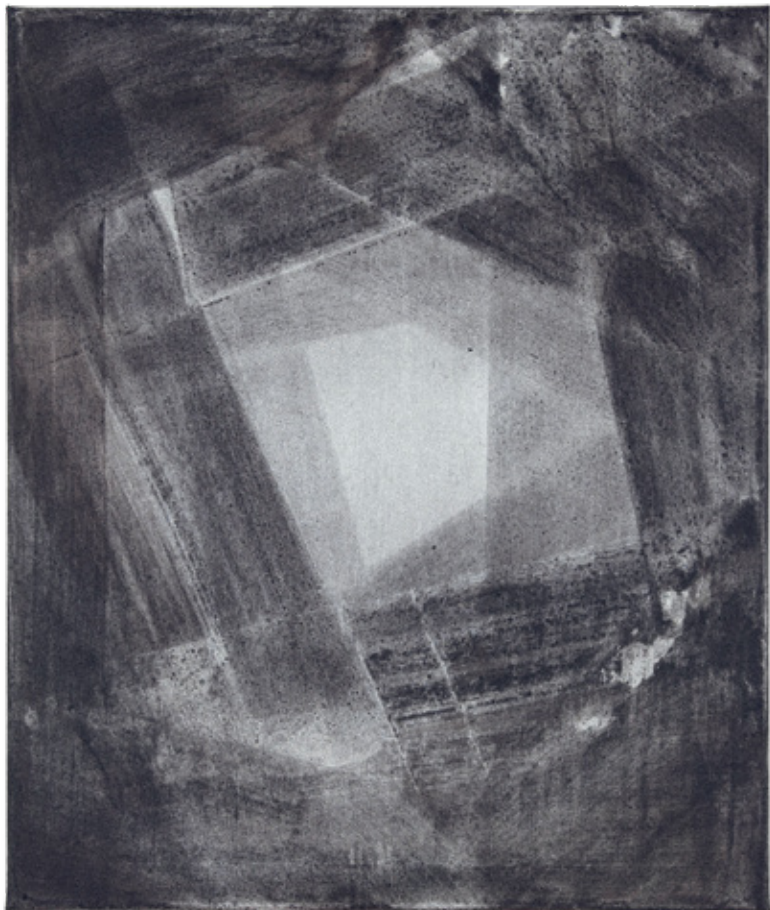
Death of a Black Snake, 1999

oil on canvas

320 x 480 cm

Installation view: *6 Large Paintings*, Helmut Federle
Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland, 2019





Unidentified artist, marked E/A.
Cape Dorset, Nunavut (Canada), c. 1975-1980
h 33 cm / w 19 kg
Depicts the Inuit mythology / figure and raven
Private Collection, Helmut Federle

Helmut Federle
Painting for Lee Harvey, 2009
acrylic on canvas
60 x 50 cm



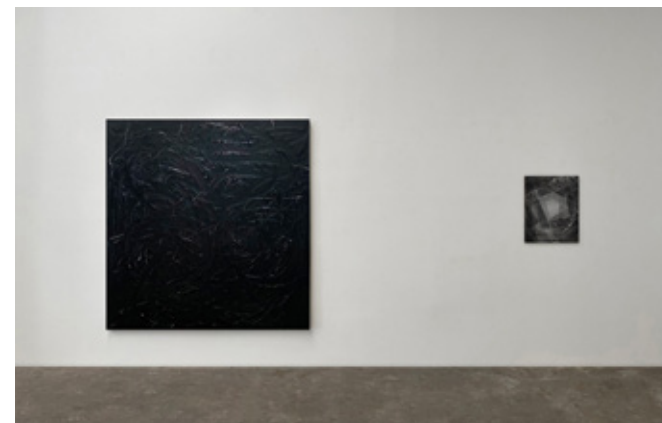


At first sight, Liat Yossifor's paintings may seem to be less about colour and more about a sweeping gestural map. At almost two metres square, they chart a Vitruvian scaled, swirling waltz, one for which she comes to take us by her hand. Initially one might think of Pollock's rhythmic automatism or perhaps more exotically, Carolee Schneemann's acrobatic suspended-harness drawings, but critically Yossifor's gestures are ones that cut and excavate, in as much as they weave and assemble. These paintings feel directed towards a deliberate uncovering of larger, trans-personal histories, rather than entwining narrative with personality.

Colour, beyond the viscous blacks, grey and white that Yossifor returns to regularly, emerges only in the deepest ravines and gullies where the pressure of her hand is such, that shards of colour from pigments, form part of the sub-strata of the underpainting, and become visible in the fissures and rents in the surface.

Yossifor's allowing these records of performance to exist within less chromatically contended conditions. Neither painter nor viewer are diverted by colour's unstable temperament, though it is true that she has introduced dense ochres and deep red in recent times, inviting in a level of volatility.

In *Wide Black* however, mere hints of blue and white are uncovered amidst the long arcs of her gesture. Ultimately darkness, like nightfall, prevails, and we cannot help but know that this is an overwhelmingly black painting. Though its proportion and 'self-possession' deliver considerable composure, there is tumult evident in Yossifor's 'melee of gesture and inscription' and it is this balance between assurance and disturbance that reaches out to touch us.



Liat Yossifor
Wide Black, 2020
oil on linen
203 x 198 cm

Liat Yossifor
What Passes Doesn't Fall Into A Void (IV), (detail) 2021
oil on paper
27.5 x 22 cm





If you don't know what color to take, take black.

Pablo Picasso

Jan Albers' sculptures are most often faceted, full of sharp edges, their saw-teeth feel cautionary. However, amidst this danger, there is elegance and seduction a plenty. Twin urges of attraction and uncertainty are further heightened in Albers' work with his embrace of high-on radioactive colours. This contradictory impulse runs through Albers' practice at every level. Construction only follows destruction, allure and toxicity exist, hand in (fox) glove, as they do in nature.



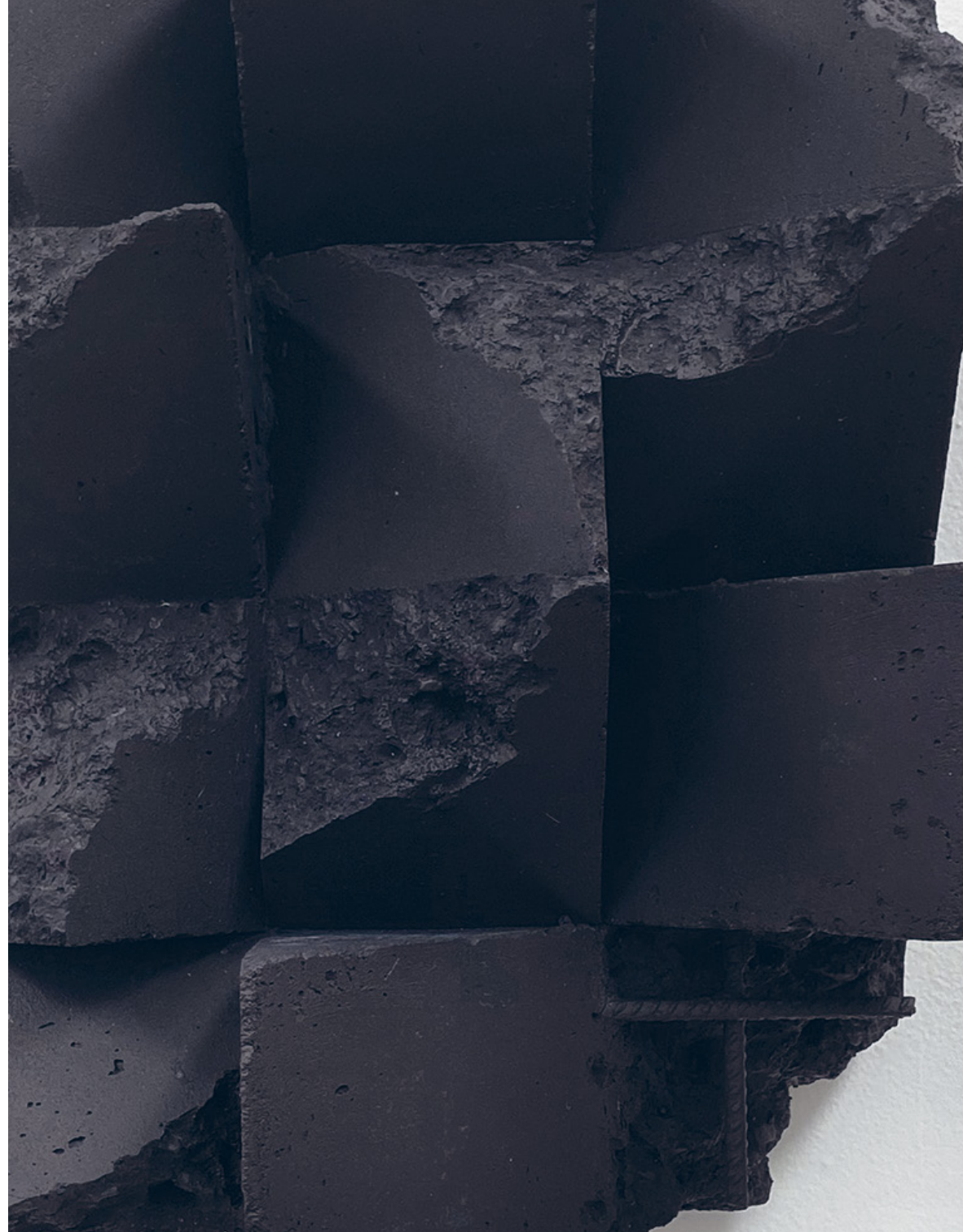
And one has the sense with Albers that, like Dostoevsky, he finds joy in the occasional breakage, planned or otherwise. In fact, Albers encourages this risk in most of his processes. In the black concrete works that Albers conceived for *Raven* there is his familiar composition using repeated shapes that establish a grid of wedge forms. Albers is fine that many of the edges are broken - revealing the reinforcing steel, simultaneously expressing both their substantial material skeleton and the fragility of the armature.

When these grid forms are painted in his more usual high key pigments, the colours become a critical element in the fluttering compositions and impressionist atmosphere he achieves. In the absence of the colour, the works take on a darker character both literally and metaphorically. Their 'remnant' quality is heightened and their playfulness diminished. Where Albers' bronze works catch and parry light, these darker works deal with ravines and shadows.

Roughly portrait sized, these decussated reliefs have an 'origami' meets 'cubism' quality to them. Sitting assertively out from the wall they have character and dimension that almost suggests a cubist mask. Without the distractions of colour and shimmering light we are compelled to focus more on their shape and density ahead of any other characteristic. Less pristine, their raw form along with their affliction slows and humanises them.

Pablo Picasso
Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, 1910
oil on canvas
92 x 65 cm

Jan Albers
brEakingbEttEr, (detail) 2018
spray paint, concrete & steel
40 x 30 x 20 cm





In Lawrence Carroll's paintings, black seldom existed as a pigment, at least out of a tube... the truth is, for Lawrence, pigment seldom exists as a 'manufactured' pigment. Paintings were exquisitely stained with colours and patinas that emerged through time and handling – along with the regular intervention of an entropic universe.

Yes, there are paintings that were 'kinda blue' and there are soft yellow paintings, paintings that immediately put me in mind of an indeterminate sky, or a blanket of pollen. One could appreciate these paintings less because of their conformity to colour and more because of their atmosphere and their diligent avoidance of the deceit of depiction. Carroll's work is defiantly abstract and yet I know of few artists whose work is so invested with the real.

I recall Lawrence saying, that as he sat patiently in his studio, the accumulated dust in the corner of the studio started to look pretty interesting... what might such an accidental accumulation of particles contribute to his emerging surfaces? Even if nature seemed to have temporarily discarded it; before it was reabsorbed into the cosmos, Lawrence was always ready to give it a second life in his first life.

I didn't know Lawrence for nearly long enough. The brief time I did spend with him in his studio though, showed me that he didn't need colour to explain or justify itself and he didn't wish to rely on materials that hadn't lived at least some kind of life before meeting him.

At its core, his practice was wrangling with the cyclical trajectory of life; whose curve we step on at some point, only to step off around the bend. Along the way he would find materials, or they would find him, and he'd use them to build a painting. The found object alone would never suffice in Carroll's work as he was so deeply invested in touch and adjustment. Everywhere in his work one can sense the handmade, not the ready-made.

Often, they were large and unruly objects, raw and dismissive of the orthodoxies that make for elegant painting. They function like discarded architectural elements... complete with recesses, and cavities where parts of the painting were stored because at some point, they might find a new, perhaps even better expression. I always imagined him going up to one of these grand works and quietly unfolding the canvas sheet that is tucked into a recess in the structure, laying it on the floor and thinking... this might be the start of a new painting right here... This is of course me indulging myself in the painful absence of not knowing, and never being able to.

This acknowledgement that life extends out both ends of our brief tenure; and that his paintings are also temporary accumulations of material and process we are drawn to, perhaps value, mostly ignore - or often couldn't care less about - is deeply stained with a sense of loss.

The small portrait painting in *Raven* is in fact black - but of course I would've justified any of Lawrence's other works in the context of this exhibition because of their sentiment. However, this small oval work, one which embodies all the material humility and understatement that is synonymous with Lawrence's paintings, manages to affirm, partly through its Victorian mirror form, a deep sense of reflection and absence. As you peer into the mirror all you can hear is "nevermore".

Lawrence Carroll
Untitled (Black Mirror Painting), 2014-2017
house paint & wax on wood
40.5 x 30 x 2 cm

Koen Delaere's work, even more than Erin Lawlor's and Liat Yossifor's 'alla prima' performances, emphatically reveal the progress of the stroke. In both paintings included in *Raven* we see Delaere using two dominant gestures, both guided by the central vertical axis of the painting.

In the first, each brushstroke gathers up viscous pigments and drives them in opposite directions – one north, one south, like ships passing perilously close in the night leaving calmer waters in their wake. Behind the bow-break, traces of colour remain, mostly in dark, bruised Ravenesque pigments. The procedural and material dualities that exists in this painting, with its raw yin-yang symmetry might imply balance but Delaere's works are entirely too disrupted and geological to feel quite that placid.



William Rockwell
Black Raven Mask, 2019
leather and acrylic paint
18 x 15 x 17 cm

Koen Delaere
Gold Is The Sky III, 2021
pigments, ink, acrylic medium,
oil paint medium on canvas
80 x 60 x 3 cm

In the second painting, both principal brushstrokes are determined by physical pulls of pigment along that same vertical axis, but here, both travel south, then gather at the bottom edge of the painting. Though more akin to the terminal moraine post glacial retreat, one suspects that there is nothing glacial about Koen's coercive gesture. These are paintings made under pressure, with force and risk – their geological process in hyperdrive.

These darker more brooding works of Delaere certainly feel like a counterpoint to the boisterous physicality and wondrous chromatic excess of his larger paintings, and their portrait scale and proportion invites us in, rather than sets you back on your heels as the large colourful paintings can do. Their scale is necessarily more intimate and their atmosphere more visceral. As portraits, one is compelled to ask whether the resolute brushstrokes are made so as to uncover the last vestiges of image or in fact to remove them?



The Colour of Darkness

Is there a darkness that isn't really black but just shades of red, blue, yellow, green, a kind of shade that sucks, screams, whispers and wraps.

Looking into darkness we see small specks of floating light,

are these the tiny stars of our dreams, reminding us of the light, guiding and offering a stairway, a lifting from the sunken mattress absorbing every pore?

Just release and float and be taken to the ceiling as a vapour rising from the heat of the tea bowl.

The space between touch is dark, as one string saws another the darkness dances, wildly, frantically then stops, abruptly, holding the dark, then, releases gently and the darkness unravels like a black silk scarf around a lily-white Filly.

*The John quartet said -

In darkness I dwell...

my breath is shallow ; my kiss is deep, I hold breath to hold you.

I couldn't see the castle but somehow, the darkness seemed to change, become denser and I knew it was there.

'Light thickens and the crow makes wing to the rooky wood' And the night is caused by black air.

Darkness does exist, but only if there is no one to see it

I said

That place which is dark and hollow, where the back of the throat feels a swelling pressure and makes no sound, a black that sinks, covers and gently suffocates softly like velvet.

Then almost, the almost black..

Coffee and cigarettes, holding little secret pieces of dark time, to be released slowly as the pale zinc white smoke and steam waltz to the rhythm of the lightless night until it disappears along with our breath consumed by the darkening.

Playing with darkness is not for the faint hearted for just as the night suffocates the day, the day steals the night.

Jane Bustin, 2021



Jane Bustin
Black Glazed Bowl, 2019
Raku fired ceramic
12 x 13 cm (diameter)



*Death makes angels of us all
And gives us wings
Where we had shoulders
Smooth as raven's claws*

An American Prayer, Jim Morrison



Todd Hunter
Sleepy Head, 2021
oil on canvas
183 x 320 cm



There was a fashion a few years ago initiated by Eric Clapton to make so called *Unplugged* recordings. Frankly the less said about 'Slowhand' these days the better, but what Clapton undeniably possessed was considerable dexterity as a guitarist and a feel for the note that many felt, including Clapton himself, was only surpassed by the young Hendrix.

I don't know nearly as much about music as Todd Hunter does – a trip to his studio makes this abundantly clear, with its libraries of vinyl situated in every room - but what I do recognise is dexterity when I see it. And yet for all the proficiency and finesse which Hunter clearly has as a painter, he carefully and appropriately sets it aside once he starts to paint. It's occasionally there in the drawings almost 'cos he can't help himself, but even then, it is never overcooked... I guess it too is 'unplugged'.

The drawings are almost always executed in black and they are fast and urgent. I once wrote they were closer to Joe Strummer's forceful playing, but now, I'm overcooking the analogy. It's just that his paintings have an unexpected synaesthesia. You can almost hear the colour, feel the vibration in the brushstrokes.

There is a wilful distortion and reverb in his gesture as he searches for the relationship between the elements.

So what happens when he consciously removes colour and paints with only black and white? Well, 'unplugged' is what happens.

*I see a red door
And I want it painted black
No colors anymore
I want them to turn black*
Paint it Black, The Rolling Stones, 1966

There is still amplification and torsion in the paintwork, but it no longer competes against the wilfulness of colour. Suddenly colour feels like that needy saxophone player waiting for a chance in the spotlight. Actually it works without it - so as Mies Van der Rohe said... "leave it out". That's what *Sleepyhead* does. Not exactly painted for *Raven*, it has however elbowed its way into the second Sydney exhibition because it is an irresistible expression of the metaphysical escapism Jim Morrison constantly flirted with, albeit tempered by Hunter's increasing understatement and clarity.

Hunter will return to colour in quick-time, I'm sure. He favours its thickness and emotive capacity but whilst he is painting fundamentally in *Raven* black, we get to see just how potent and connective a black line can be. *Sleepyhead* and *Waiting on a Song*, especially (the small painting from *Raven* in Auckland) have something of the spontaneity of mid-Marden, but both works share in the vigour and edge that feels more the stuff of de Kooning and Mitchell. Marden is perhaps just too elegant for Hunter... too Carlos Santana...

Cover art from *Paint It Black* (Mono Single Version)
The Rolling Stones, 1966

Todd Hunter
Waiting on a Song, (detail) 2021
oil on framed found canvas board
51 x 37.5 x 4 cm
Private Collection, Sydney





Wherever Winston has worked, he has fundamentally turned his vision inwards. I'm not suggesting for a moment that his lexicon of colours, the sensate reservoir that feeds his approach to consciousness is immune to either Maine's nor upstate NY's autumnal bounty, nor in fact that the crispness of a summer sky where he lives on the Dutchneck Creek arm, doesn't provoke a blue painting like *Resource*. It is just that I have never felt that Winston wishes to illustrate colour per se. He doesn't wish to uncover colours' 'actuality', rather he seems more delighted by its inexactitude, its endless variability – perhaps its humanness.

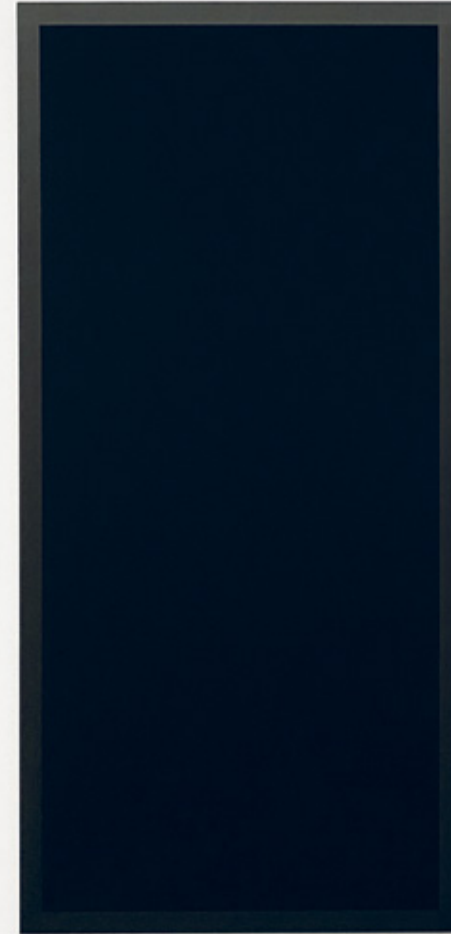
There have been moments when I have looked at *Ambition Wanders Blind* when I have had this beautiful, uneasy feeling that I have been struck temporarily colour blind - as if the lights have just flickered off and I am sensing the memory of a painting.

No longer confronted with the actual, we are experiencing a version of retinal afterburn. Yet in the apparent lack of colour the painting remains utterly complete with its unlocatable interior and fast borders. I briefly panic that the colour doesn't feel absent in the painting, rather in me.

Of course this work can't help but put me in mind of the totemic Reinhardt I described at the start of this blind, wandering text. Form and colour may've drained almost entirely away and yet without its competing clamour and seduction we are freed up to feel in a new and uncertain way. If there is one thing I can say about Roeth's work after all these years, it is that it is relentlessly generous and though *Ambition Wanders Blind* does not appear to be offering us the kind of beguiling charm we have come to expect from him, in this beautiful painting he is helping us see in the dark.

And as I stood close to *Ambition Wanders Blind* after installing it I was also reminded of Morris Berman's sobering text *Dark Ages America* (2006). His prescient book foreshadows what Gore Vidal described as the "cultural death-valley" in front of America. These are bleak thoughts offered in bleak times to be sure but in this cultural twilight there is possibility, and though Berman doesn't see it, the beautiful optimist that Roeth is does, because like Umberg, like Federle, like all the painters in this exhibition, Roeth finds unreasonably small grains of luminosity wherever they can be measured.

Winston Roeth
Ambition Wanders Blind, 2019
kremer pigments and polyurethane dispersion
on honeycomb panel
215 x 102 x 3 cm



We live in a dark and romantic and quite tragic world.

Karl Lagerfeld

Tomislav Nikolic paints from the hip. This has less to do with the speed of his wrist and more to do with intuition - for as much as he is undoubtedly a scholar of esoteric colour theory, and as much as his painting process is shaped by patience and judgement, Nikolic is guided by emotion and encouraged - even inflamed by ardour - his own and that of other artists to whose work he responds.

Most often I regard Nikolic as a portrait painter. It is true that many of the works correspond with landscape painting and as such follow the convention of being horizontally disposed, but it is the character of his work, the way that colour doesn't just create and impose atmosphere on the viewer, but that it always seems to have an inescapable personality... and then there is the frame. These devices, be they slim or libertine always amplify the identity and temperament of the painting.



Titian (Tiziano Vecellio)

Self-Portrait (c. 1567)

oil on canvas

86 x 65 cm

Museo del Prado Collection, Madrid

Tomislav Nikolic

Making our lives in the shadows of the past, 2021

synthetic polymer, marble dust, 24ct gold leaf, Caplain gold leaf,

copper leaf & museum glass on linen, composition & wood

77 x 57.5 x 11 cm

Nikolic's integration, seamless or otherwise, of the frame into the composition, is a vital strategy in his approach to the object. One thinks of Howard Hodgkin and more recently, Katy Moran, who view and treat the frame as part of an overall structure, all which request's attention. In *Making our lives in the shadows of the past*, the proportion of the painting and the depth and volume of the frame suggest much more than boundary. The frame is not just consequential, here it is a statement of eminence. In Nikolic's more irreverent and bolshie juxtapositions of colour, there can be irony and delight, but here one has the sense that Nikolic is painting this work as an elegant, even sepulchral response to loss. It may seem a long bow to draw but in *Making our lives in the shadows of the past*, Nikolic draws alongside Gunter Umberg. Umberg's esoteric paintings also exist as highly distilled expressions of body - physically manifest in the most conspicuous way and yet for all their gravity, become immaterial and weightless. Here Nikolic gives us all the trappings and celebration of identity, but it is his rare use of black that signals that this painting addresses the incorporeal, more perhaps than ever before.





... last night I felt the approach of nothing. Not too close but on its way, like a wingbeat, like the cooling of the wind, the slight initial tug of an undertow.

Cat's Eye, Margaret Atwood

As has already been made clear time and again, nearly all the artists in *Raven* are devoted to colour and Erin Lawlor is certainly no different. Whilst Lawlor's performative paintings hinge hugely on the generosity and compulsion of her gesture, and its undisputed capacity to lead us forcefully by our senses into and through a vortex of colour and turbulence, buffeted on all sides by memory and association; colour has a major role to play in this too. It conspires with movement, helping to further describe the uncertain orienteering ahead, with its fast-sweeping arcs and multiple U-turns.

So, when Erin removes most of the apparent colour it can feel as if we are navigating at night, worse still, driving at night with the headlights turned off. The risk rises as the chromatic threads we rely on to find our way through and out feel invisible. Like Hansel and Gretel, we'd feel happier were we able to confidently retrace our steps. Certainly, colour and light would contribute to this ease.

Night Flight (Raven) is amongst the darkest painting that Lawlor has made in some time. Whilst red and blue, along with quiet earthier pigments emerge amidst the roiling eddies, the nagging sense one harbours is of the undertow – simultaneously dangerous and appealing.

Titian (Tiziano Vecellio)
Venus and Adonis
(Italian, Pieve di Cadore ca. 1485/90–1576 Venice)
(c. 1550)
oil on canvas
106.7 x 133.4 cm

Erin Lawlor,
Night Flight (Raven), (diptych) 2021
oil on canvas
180 x 130 cm (each)
detail overleaf

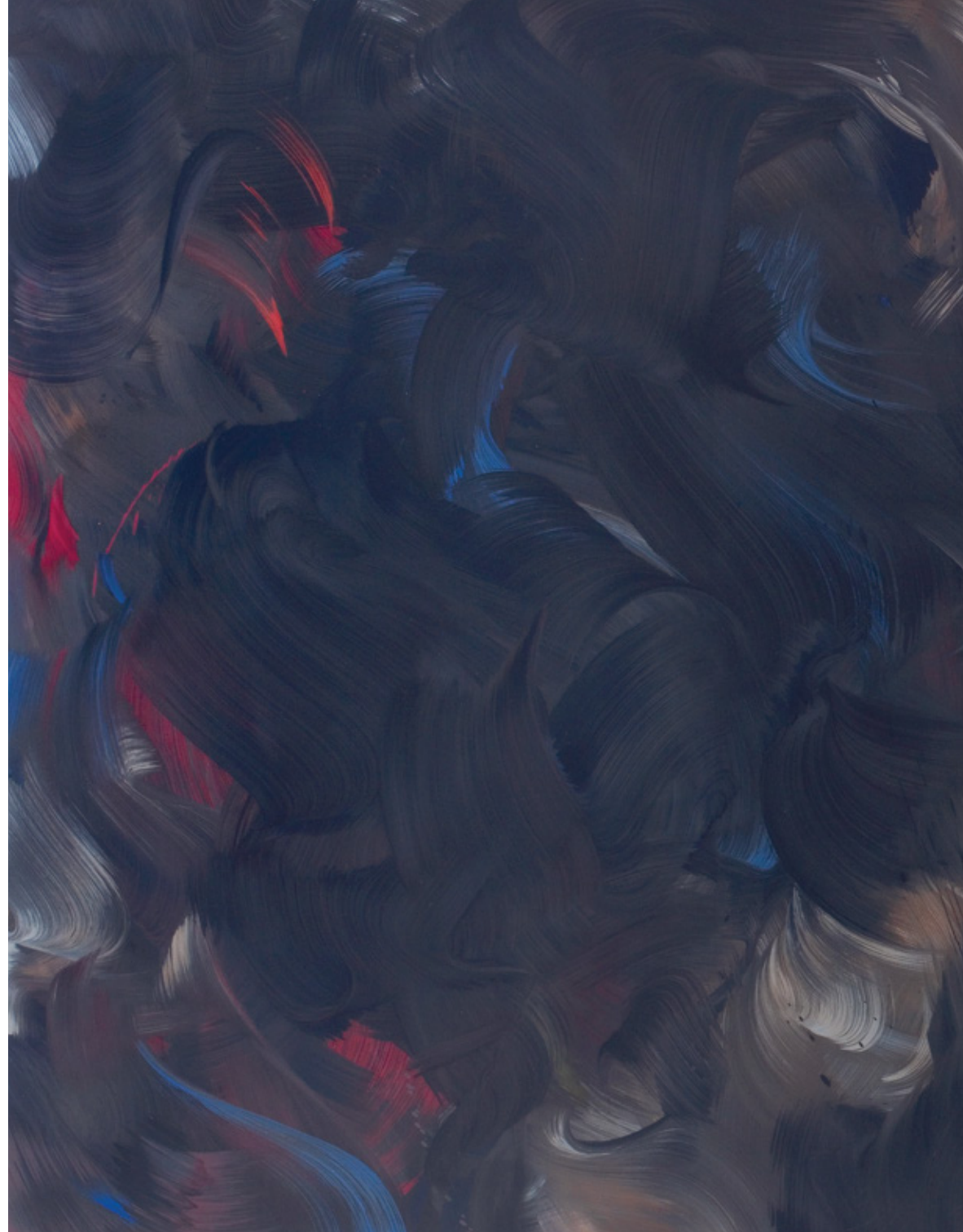
There is much of this natural, even meteorological force in Lawlor's *Night Flight (Raven)* – be it undertow or turbulence – it is a painting that jostles our senses, reminding us that we are all partially determined, squeezed by forces – some of which are in our control and some simply not.

Ultimately Lawlor exerts just enough sufficient control over the contingencies of painting. She is capable of driving paint with such persuasiveness and efficacy, that at times we can feel suspended, held up by its strength and influence, so that we might wilfully deny the existential challenge it poses. Ultimately it is Lawlor's capacity to hold these seemingly competing desires in balance – to allow painting to be both celebratory and uplifting and be simultaneously ruminative; to paint with a depth of memory and to not be trapped by the recital.



*I slept all day, face down in the pillow, a comfortable
dead-man's float only remotely disturbed by a chill
undertow of reality—talk, footsteps, slamming
doors—which threaded fitfully through the dark,
blood-warm waters of dream.*

The Secret History, Donna Tartt



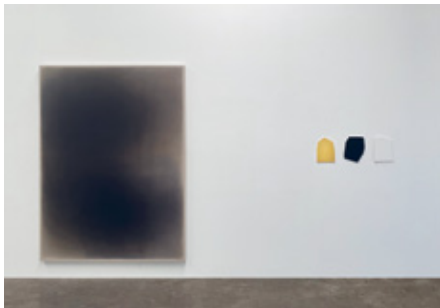
If I could find anything blacker than black, I'd use it.

J. M. W. Turner

Marisa Purcell's recent paintings demonstrate a clarity of purpose and with that a growing assurance in means and process. As with many of the painters in *Raven*, it is light and its mysterious collusion with colour, that drives much of Purcell's work. Amidst her more familiar soft blushes of pigment, some seductive and demure, some just hot... together with her careful judgements about light, colour becomes a vehicle for an emotional survey of herself and of us. However, she is not wanting her paintings coerce or pressure the audience, rather Marissa is increasingly making paintings now whose physical delicacy gives room for a slower reckoning.

I sat with Marisa in her studio in early autumn and watched as her works responded to the diminishing light. These paintings didn't announce themselves in any demonstrative way. Their body was discreet, their hue in quiet, semi-contented flux.

The open joyousness of her more familiar colour-field paintings, the organic traces that could be found in earlier series was entirely absent. Of course it was hard not to see these paintings as being borne of our bleak Covid time, her rejoinder to our shared conditions.



But like most swift readings of paintings such responses tell us more about us than they do about the painting. This was certainly the case with *Closed Eyes Open*. The narcissian urge tells us we want a painting that reveals something about us... for all intents and purposes a mirror, in this case a floor to ceiling reflection of the uncertainty of our times.

However for all these paintings new approach to luminosity, I began to feel that more than its jauntier cousins, this work depends on a deeper intuition that colour sometimes doesn't allow for. Colours can elbow room inside a composition to exist, jousting for space and dominance. No such contest is evident here. There is simply the most beautiful sense that as colours do in the last light of day, as cones replace rods, that colours diminish into shadow. We know they're there, but light or lack there of is giving them and us a rest.

If I had stayed on as the light continued to diminish, then perhaps all of the works would've taken on the reduced attitude of *Closed Eyes Open* - that moment when light ceases to carry colour and instead becomes subservient to shadow. The mechanics of our vision shift from rods to cones and depth is measured less with our eyes and more with our bodies and intuition. This is the moment that *Closed Eyes Open* seeks to record.

Marisa Purcell
Closed Eyes Open, 2021
acrylic on linen
240 x 180 cm





Right in the middle of Kemal Seyhan's majestic *Untitled* there is a black vertical band of pigment whose thickness and material body are directly established by multiple layers of paint that have accumulated over time. The composition itself is a series of dark vertical bands that germinate at the flanks, gaining density and complexity towards the middle where they finally coalesce in this heavy viscous zip. There is a robust material culture to many of Seyhan's paintings – one has the sense that they are made in a sophisticated yet unexpectedly tangible fashion. Of course, there is nothing prosaic about them at all, it is just that they have a sinewy, visceral character that feels very much as if it has been absorbed from the atmosphere of his home in Istanbul. It felt to me that when we visited Kemal in 2019, that the patinas of competing civilisations were written everywhere in Istanbul. The historical faultline of East and West geographically, psychologically and emotionally was evident in the most unexpected ways.

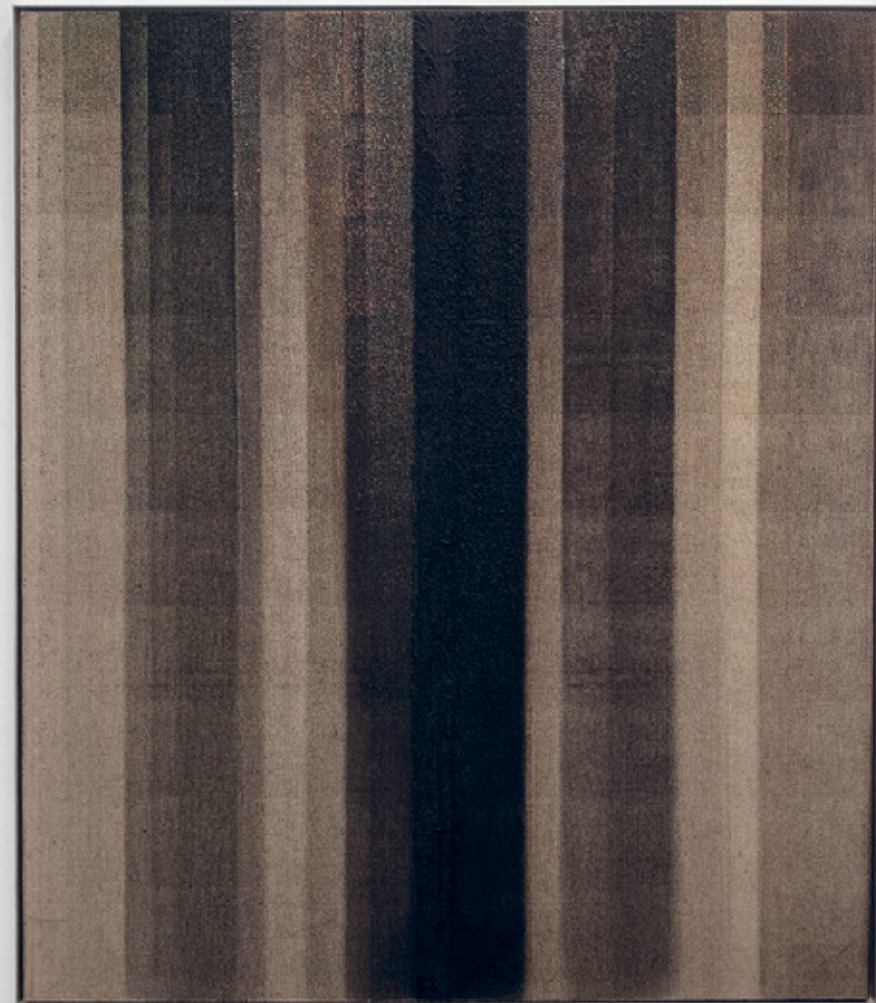
We arrived mid-way through a major local election campaign – raspy overtures from candidates and their hustlers, speeding vans temporarily camouflaged by images of desperate politicians and outsized megaphones bolted dangerously to roof-racks. And when that died down it was replaced by the evening call to prayer. None of this felt necessarily unsolicited nor impolite, rather it arose from a fusion of passion and appeal - by and for Turkey.

On our visit to the Süleymaniye Mosque, I was enthralled by the description of the process by which the smoke from the vast candelabra is harvested to provide the jet-black pigment used for the exquisite calligraphy; whose elegance and form I adore but don't understand. Through an act of architectural and scientific genius by architect Mimar Sinan, the smoke is coerced along the rising ambient air currents towards a single room, where its sooty residue adheres to the ceiling so that it might be collected and turned into pigment. This alchemy feels entirely too beautiful and imaginative for what amounts to text on a religious billboard, but its material, its scale and its gesture is more than sufficient alone (at least for me).

Every one of the painters in *Raven* chooses their own blacks; but given the candelabra/smoke narrative I want to believe that there is something pre-ordained about the blacks that Kemal Seyhan uses. The notion that colours choose the artist - not the other way around - can feel a touch too 'special' to me at times, but with Kemal I get it. *Untitled* is a painting whose colour and sooty disposition feels shaped by organic forces and gestures that don't come from a tube or a 1" brush. Seyhan's work enfolds the very tones and patinas that have built up around him and those before him. The paintings deliver a powerful material synthesis of that history and experience and therefore his use of black feels both profoundly aesthetic and deeply cultural.

The Süleymaniye Mosque
Istanbul, Turkey

Kemal Seyhan
Untitled, 2017
oil and graphite on canvas
230 x 190 cm



A project such as *Raven* is seldom if ever conceived in advance of the experience of most, if not all its constituent parts. Somewhere between the experience of these works individually and their coalescing into an exhibition, there are unexpected conversations that arise between the works, exchanges that transcend any I initially imagined they might enjoy.

It is these unforeseen agreements that artworks can make with each other that becomes so immersive. Often it is, as it ought to be, that one artwork is more than enough to consider for a period and I am not suggesting for a minute that the whole of *Raven* is greater than the sum of the parts, it's just that here, the sum that we arrive at is made by a different set of algebra.... one I still don't quite understand.

I have sat with *Raven* in two rooms, in two countries, over two time periods on either side of Covid lockdowns and their damned restrictions, and at the sad end of it I am left lamenting absence yet again. No surprise in that of course. It is just that these expressions of absence have been so profoundly present and this has always been, for me at least, the ineffable joy of painting... knowing that something elusive and magical was directly in front of you - if you took the time to feel it and grasp it briefly.

Once again I want to give my sincerest thanks to the artists whose works I have had the pleasure to be with and to share those with the masked and distanced individuals who came to see *Raven*. If you did then thanks... if you didn't then bad luck.

- Andrew Jensen, 2021

Gustave Doré
"A stately Raven of the saintly days of yore.
Not the least obeisance made he;
not a minute stopped or stayed he." (detail) 1884
Poe, E. A. (1814) *The Raven*. Dover Publications (1996)



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Design: Andrew Jensen & Tane Andrews

P. 1 (inside cover) Walter Jensen

P. 2 Tippi Hedren as Melanie Daniels in *The Birds* (1963). Photograph: Rex Features

P. 4 Ad Reinhardt in his studio, New York, July 1966. Photograph: by John Loengard
The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images

P. 6 Günter Umberg in his Studio, Corberon, France, 2017

P. 8/9 Günter Umberg, Winston Roeth & Tomislav Nikolic
Installation view: *Raven*, Fox Jensen Alexandria, 2021

P. 15/16 Photo: Laurent Ziegler, Bildrecht Vienna

P. 19 Photo: Markus Wörgötter

P. 25 Liat Yossifor & Helmut Federle

Installation view: *Raven*, Fox Jensen, Alexandria, Australia, 2021

P. 30 Image courtesy of The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts

P. 36 *Kimono-clad woman preparing for the chanoyu Tea Ceremony*, c.1900
Pictures from History / Granger, NYC

P. 37 * Jane Bustin

NB. John quartet consists of the four 'John's' I've collaborated with:

John Dowland - c.16 composer

John Hull - blind writer and theologian (unseen project)

John Woolrich - c.20 composer (Darkness visible)

John Snijders - c.20 pianist, composition lecturer (Nijinsky project)

P. 43 Winston Roeth & Todd Hunter

Installation view: *Raven*, Fox Jensen McCrory, Auckland, New Zealand, 2021

P. 47 The Jules Bache Collection, 1949

P. 50 Marisa Purcell & Imi Knoebel

Installation view: *Raven*, Fox Jensen, Alexandria, Australia, 2021

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