

MARIE LE LIEVRE

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Andrew Paul Wood

New Zealand artist Marie Le Lievre understands the material of paint. Her canvasses seethe with bleeding and agitated skins of translucent and opaque tints on a mat finished ground. She is an empathetic and instinctive colourist. From behind protective blankets of dark, rich, subtle colour, little rainbows of pure colour emerge to flicker like flames at the periphery. The scale of the paintings ranges from domestic and intimate, to the heroic. In the latter especially, the effect is oceanic, and sublime in the Romantic sense – the viewer enters the painting. The eye is attracted to all the little complexities and puncta of interest: the complex patterns of textural rippling, the emergent islands of opacity, and the almost Rothko-like ambiguous fades. There is, perhaps, a closer relationship with the lyrical abstraction of European Tachisme than the action bravura of American Abstract Expressionism.

Firmly anchoring this experimentation is a carefully formulated compositional sensibility. A central,

biomorphic-organic self-contained visual mass, a sort of mandala often incorporating a galaxy of complex and allusive interplay between colour and texture, forms the basis of each painting. These are not exclusively abstract. With the complex construction of each mass addition of drawn elements, a playful figuration is implied in the naive-primitivist traditions of Art Brut and KoBrA.

Colour is increasingly strident in its own right as a compositional device, highlighting Le Lievre's dedicated working and reworking the luscious painted surface into something, though flat, is almost sculptural with intensity. Alternatively it can be a more simple dark cosmic egg, a black hole from which Stephen Hawking assures us only damaged information can escape. When Le Lievre chooses to work up the ground of her paintings, the Shiva-like dance of figure and plane is almost palpable in a glorious retinal richness.

Although primarily interested in colour and form, Le Lievre chooses not to abandon the figure entirely, but anchors figure and ground with specific motifs. Prominent among these symbolic forms is the handbag devolved to a basic oblong and the suggestion of an arching handle. While on one level this can be read as a feminist response to the idea of abstract painting as masculine, it also carries much of the significance of Anna Karenina's red handbag

in Tolstoy's novel – a container of worldly desires and an anchor to consumer society.

Another reoccurring motif is a sort of crude biomorphic phallus. Again this can be read as a feminist statement, a symbolic castration of painting's patriarchy, but it can also symbolise the procreative nature of painting. Another recent intervention is the inclusion of hidden text, either as gestural calligraphic mark in the paint, or as bristling drawn cilia and hairs, emphasising the organic nature of Le Lievre's forms. We are encouraged to see them as living amorphous, amoebic entities with their own distinct personalities.

The paint is poured, layered, worked by hand, and tempered. The intended effect is that which Baldassare Castiglione in his *Il Cortegiano* (1528) termed *Sprezzatura*: “a certain nonchalance, so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it.” – although the artist clearly wants us to see this defensive irony as the distancing mechanism of an unreliable narrator. There are sufficient signposts to suggest the effort and toil behind the implied randomness. This means that the work has many connotations, tension between reality and abstraction, chaos and control and ultimately defies final analysis.

Marie Le Lievre completed her B.F.A and M.F.A (Painting) Degrees at the School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury, in 2008, and a B.A (Criminology) Degree at Victoria University, Wellington, in 1996. Le Lievre has exhibited work in public group shows and with dealer galleries in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland. Her work is included in collections such as the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Whaiwhetu, University of Canterbury and Fletcher Challenge Corporation and in 2011 she received the Canterbury Arts and Heritage Trust Award. This catalogue documents work created between 2009 and 2012 and was produced to accompany exhibitions in Australia and France.

Andrew Paul Wood is a New Zealand art writer and critic who is currently completing a PhD at the University of Canterbury.

Jennifer Hay has a M.A Degree in Art History. She was a curator for several years at the Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna O Whaiwhetu and has recently completed a post graduate diploma in arts management from the University of South Australia.

Design: Ella Sutherland **Photography:** John Collie

Printing: Rainbow Print

mariele@xtra.co.nz

BLOOD ORANGE

Jennifer Hay

Marie Le Lievre's *Black Script* contains unbidden emotions that strain at the edges. Frustration is articulated upon moody layers of bruised colour through a mirrored profanity etched grid-like into the surface. Although kept within her subject matter of the bag motif, it threatens to spill out and to spoil its pristine background. *Bitch Bag* has similar explosive contents. The neat word repetition that creates a ladder from the letter 'H', presents the possibility that the Bitch might escape.

The sacred and profane in Le Lievre's work is apparent in a myriad of ways. Her application of oil colour that employs chance and chaos upon perfectly prepared canvases; her use of evanescence and darkness, drawing and painting, pleasure and pain, has been tested and refined to hold in tension a query of the known against the unknown. Countering the sensory vividness of her paintings is the formality of the often white-grey background. This neutral void provides an uncluttered

juxtaposition or a point of silence that serves to heighten the dominant visual impact. It is a means by which Le Lievre can also play with spatial and temporal demands inherent within her working methods. Paintings such as *Iron Lady* and *Baggage* have beneath layers of grey, a seething excess of colour but only just visible at the edges. There is an almost perverse restraint in these compositions where Le Lievre has obliterated tantalising colours, but in others such as *Lady Swine Bag Painting*, there is a pervasive punch of colour reminiscent of her art historical predecessor, Helen Frankenthaler. Beyond staining her canvases in the post abstract expressionist or colour-field traditions however, Le Lievre's (seeming) randomness of intense colour combinations with their whorls, bleedings, ridges and ruptures creates a three-dimensional textural quality and the sensation that the intricacies of these paintings could have been formed by biotic phenomena. This can be ascertained in the networks of phalluses of *Sunned Down* and *Black Script*. Similarly, *Slipping* with its rivulets, veins and swift little legs takes on the appearance of an organic entity in the process of becoming.

The dialogue between painting and drawing is one that Le Lievre employs to relay gestural and literal connotations, as seen in *All Sorted* and *Orange Blue Head*. Her drawing entitled *Fixed*, and others in this series,



1.

provides evidence of this underlying architecture in her work. It is with the subject matter of *Fixed* though that Le Lievre conveys both a sense of empathy and detachment. The female figure in *Fixed* is a supplicant to the lure of induced sedation. In *Barbiturates*, the candy-coloured shapes, or pills as the title suggests, appear almost burnt onto the canvas, its bitter sweet effect quite beguiling and tactile; recalling the words of Baudelaire who described drugs as an ‘exciting poison’, the effects of which he described thus;

Colours will take an unaccustomed energy and smite themselves within your brain with the intensity of triumph. Delicate, mediocre, or even bad as they may be, the paintings upon the ceilings will clothe themselves with a tremendous life.²

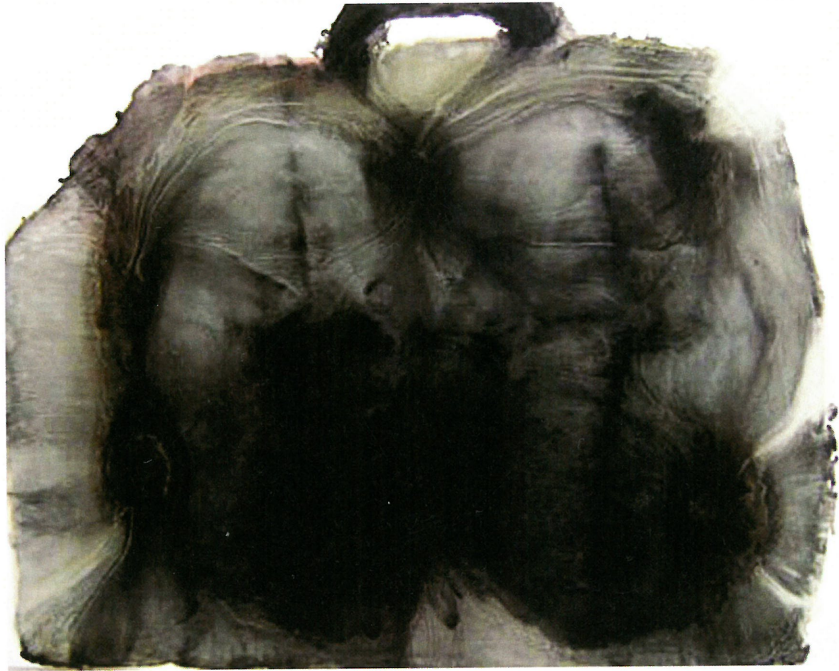
Barbiturates and *Rugged (in Harewood)* though, with their suggestion of both transfiguration and heaviness, are a

cathartic rendering for the artist, the very mechanism of painting being her own poison of choice.

The motif of the bag, with its connotations of physical and psychological baggage, is one that appears and reappears in different guises. It is a way for the artist to project her motives, be it arising from desire, repugnance or anxiety. As such, the ‘bag’ also morphs into rugs, screens and objects; they reveal a storm of suggestive possibilities, veiled and not so veiled observations. *P Bag #2* and *Pistol* for instance, intone potential violence while *Halcyon* and *Slipping* are more mercurial. Le Lievre’s bags while eminently desirable are not facades but are the stuff of visual and unconscious thoughts. They have views inside, their linings and contents are depicted in some, and for others she has made a protective skin. Her titles transmit ideas attached to these ‘bag’s, whether it is a plea; *Hit Me*, or a declaration built into the image itself. The pull both toward words and away from them is a painterly paradox; *Orange Smoke* then is no accessory for an old bag, *Bitch Bag’s* double entendre suggests something beyond the exclamation of one’s wrath and *Iron Lady* will hold sway behind its monumental exterior its orange provocation – but you can still take it with you.

1. *Fixed* (2009) charcoal and acrylic on paper, 500 x 400mm

2. Charles Baudelaire *The Poem of Hashish* (1895)



Storm In A Teacup (2010) Oil on canvas, 2400 x 1750mm



Rugged (in Harewood) (2011) Oil on canvas, 1620 x 1850mm



Baggage (2009) Oil on canvas, 2400 x 1750mm



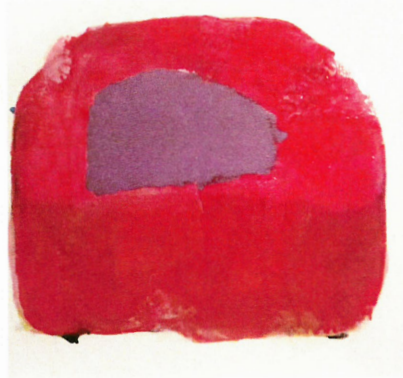
Courted (2012) Oil on canvas, 900 x 900mm; *Iron Lady* (2011) Oil on canvas, 910 x 910mm
mariele@xtra.co.nz



Halcyon (2012) Oil on canvas, 900 x 900mm



Bitch Bag (2012) Oil on Canvas, 780 x 780mm; *Orange Blue Head* (2012) Oil on aluminium, 600 x 600mm



Sunned Down (2012) Oil on canvas, 850 x 850mm; *Lady Swine Bag Painting* (2012) Oil on canvas, 710 x 760mm



Black Script (2012) Oil on canvas, 900 x 900mm
mariele@xtra.co.nz



Wing (2011) Oil on canvas, 1200 x 1200mm



Blue Dream Target (2010) Oil on canvas, 900 x 900mm

New Zealand artist Marie Le Lievre's paintings seethe with bleeding and agitated skins of translucent and opaque tints on matt finished grounds. She is an empathetic and instinctive colourist. From behind protective blankets of dark, rich, subtle colour, little rainbows of pure colour emerge to flicker like flames at the periphery.

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Les peintures de l'artiste Néo Zélandaise, Marie Le Lièvre grouillent de saignements et de couches agités de teintes translucides et opaques sur des

supports mats. Le Lièvre est une coloriste instinctive, empathique. Sous de sombres couches, d'une couleur riche et subtile, émergent de petits arcs en ciel d'une couleur pure qui scintillent comme des flammes à la périphérie.

La dimension des peintures s'étend de domestique et intime à héroïque. Pour ces dernières, l'effet est océanique et sublime dans le sens Romantique – le spectateur pénètre dans la peinture. L'œil est attiré par toutes les petites complexités et les *puncta* d'intérêt: des motifs complexes de texture ondulante, les îles émergeant d'opacité, et le changement de couleurs ambigu rappelant l'œuvre de Rothko. Il y a peut-être une relation plus étroite avec l'abstraction lyrique du *Tachisme* européen plutôt que le verve de l'Expressionnisme Abstrait américain.

Un sens de composition soigneusement élaboré ancre fermement cette expérimentation. La base de chaque peinture incorpore une masse centrale, organique-biomorphe et autonome, une sorte de mandala présentant souvent une galaxie d'interaction complexe et allusive entre la couleur et la texture de l'œuvre. La couleur est de plus en plus déclarative de sa propre position comme un dispositif de composition, qui souligne le travail dédié de l'artiste de travailler et retravailler pour transformer la surface pulpeuse peinte en quelque chose, certes plat, mais tendant vers le sculptural chargé d'intensité.

Lorsque Le Lièvre choisit de travailler le fond de ses peintures, la danse Shiva de la figure et la surface plane est presque palpable dans une glorieuse richesse pour notre rétine.

La peinture est versée en couches successives, et travaillée à la main. L'effet recherché est celui que Baldassare Castiglione dans son *Il Cortegiano* (1528) appelle *Sprezzatura*: « d'une certaine nonchalance, qui cache l'artifice, et qui montre ce qu'on fait comme s'il était venu sans peine et presque sans y penser » – même si l'artiste veut clairement afficher cette ironie défensive en tant que mécanisme de distanciation d'un narrateur invraisemblable.

Il y a suffisamment de signaux pour suggérer l'immense effort derrière l'ala suggéré. Cela signifie que le travail a de nombreuses connotations, de tension entre la réalité et l'abstraction, de chaos et de contrôle, et en fin de compte il reste imperméable à nos efforts d'analyse.

Andrew Paul Wood (2012)

Marie Le Lievre

Education

- 2008 MFA (Distinction) Painting, University of Canterbury
2007 BFA Honours (First Class) Painting, University of Canterbury
2006 BFA Painting, University of Canterbury
1996 BA Criminology, Victoria University, Wellington

Selected Awards/Scholarships

- 2011 *Canterbury Arts and Heritage Trust Award*
2009 *Highly Commended Prize*, Anthony Harper Award
2008 *Masters Scholarship*, University of Canterbury
Ethel Rose Overton Scholarship, University of Canterbury
Graduates Scholarship, University of Canterbury
Selected Finalist, James Wallace Award
2007 *Bickerton-Widdowson Scholarship*, University of Canterbury
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Solo Exhibitions

- 2012 *Orange Smoke*, Bartley and Company, Wellington, NZ
Marie Le Lievre, Peloton Gallery, Sydney, Australia
2011 *Day Tripped*, Antoinette Godkin Gallery, Auckland, NZ
2010 *Chamber*, Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, NZ
2009 *Baggage*, Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, NZ

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2012 *Post-geometric Organisms*, ParisCONCRET Gallery, Paris, France
Sendai Project, Birdo Flugas Gallery, Sendai, Japan
2011 *35 Years in the Red Zone*, Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, NZ
Poste Concret, ParisCONCRET Gallery, Paris, France
Auckland Art Fair, Antoinette Godkin Gallery, Auckland, NZ
2010 *Group Show*, Antoinette Godkin Gallery, Auckland, NZ
Four Artists Traveling in the World, Bartley and Company Art, Wellington, NZ
2009 *Cloud Nine*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, NZ
Masters 08, SOFA Gallery, Christchurch, NZ

- 2008 *The Pretty Show*, High Street Project, Christchurch, NZ
2007 *Contemporary Emerging Artists Show*, COCA Gallery, Christchurch, NZ
2006 *Graduating Artists Show*, COCA Gallery, Christchurch, NZ
2005 *Four Painters*, SOFA, University of Canterbury, NZ

Selected Public Collections

- Untitled* (2005) University of Canterbury, Christchurch.
Geographical Baggage (2009) Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
Tack Bag (2010) Fletcher Trust
Blue Lady (2010) James Wallace Art Trust

Selected Publications

- 2012 Bartley and Company Art, 'Marie Le Lievre', 24 April, URL:<http://www.bartleyandcompanyart.co.nz/exhibitions.php?year=2012&exhibitionID=241&exhibition=MARIE%20LE%20LIEVRE>
2011 T.J. McNamara, 'Pure Abstraction has it's assertive place', *The Weekend Herald*, B16, July 23.
Andrew Paul Wood, 'Grouped to thrill', *The Christchurch Press*, 9 September.
John Hurrell, 'The Pleasures of Thin Agitated Glazes', *Eyecontact*, 20 July, URL: <http://eyecontactsite.com/2011/07/the-sensuality-of-thinagitatedglazes>
2010 Chris Moore, 'Marie Le Lievre, Lure', *The Christchurch Press*, June 4.
2009 Jennifer Hay, 'Cloud 9: New directions in contemporary painting', *The Bulletin*, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, June.
John Hurrell, 'Eight Plus One Painters', *Eyecontact*, 24 September, URL: <http://eyecontactsite.com/2009/09/eight-plus-one#painters#ixzz1kutwxcji>
Jamie Hanton, 'A Masterful Exhibition', *The Christchurch Press*, 4 March.

Design: Ella Sutherland

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