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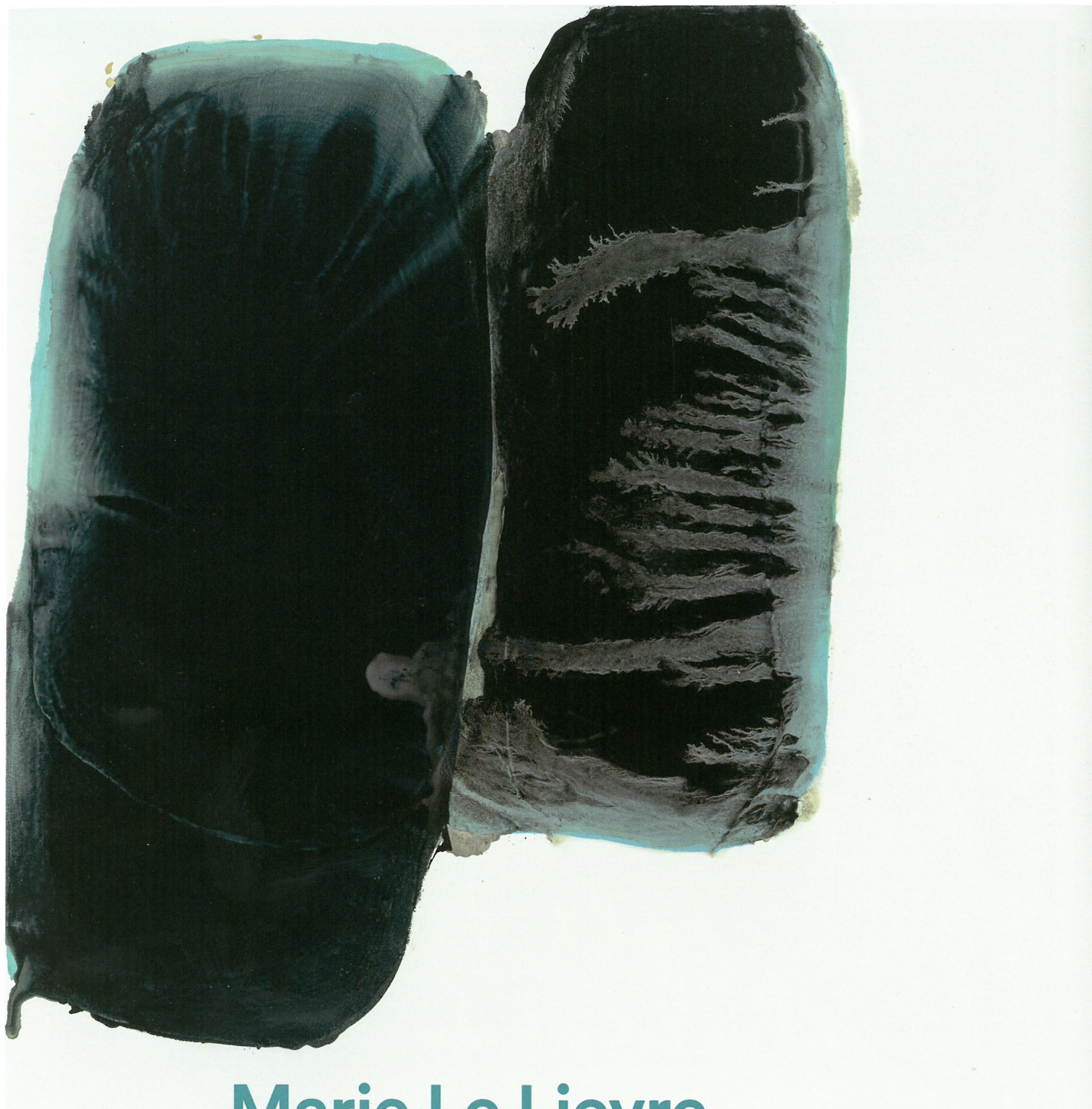
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ANDY LELEISI'UAO ♦ GORDON WALTERS ♦ JS PARKER ♦ MARIE LE LIEVRE  
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**Marie Le Lievre**  
7 February –  
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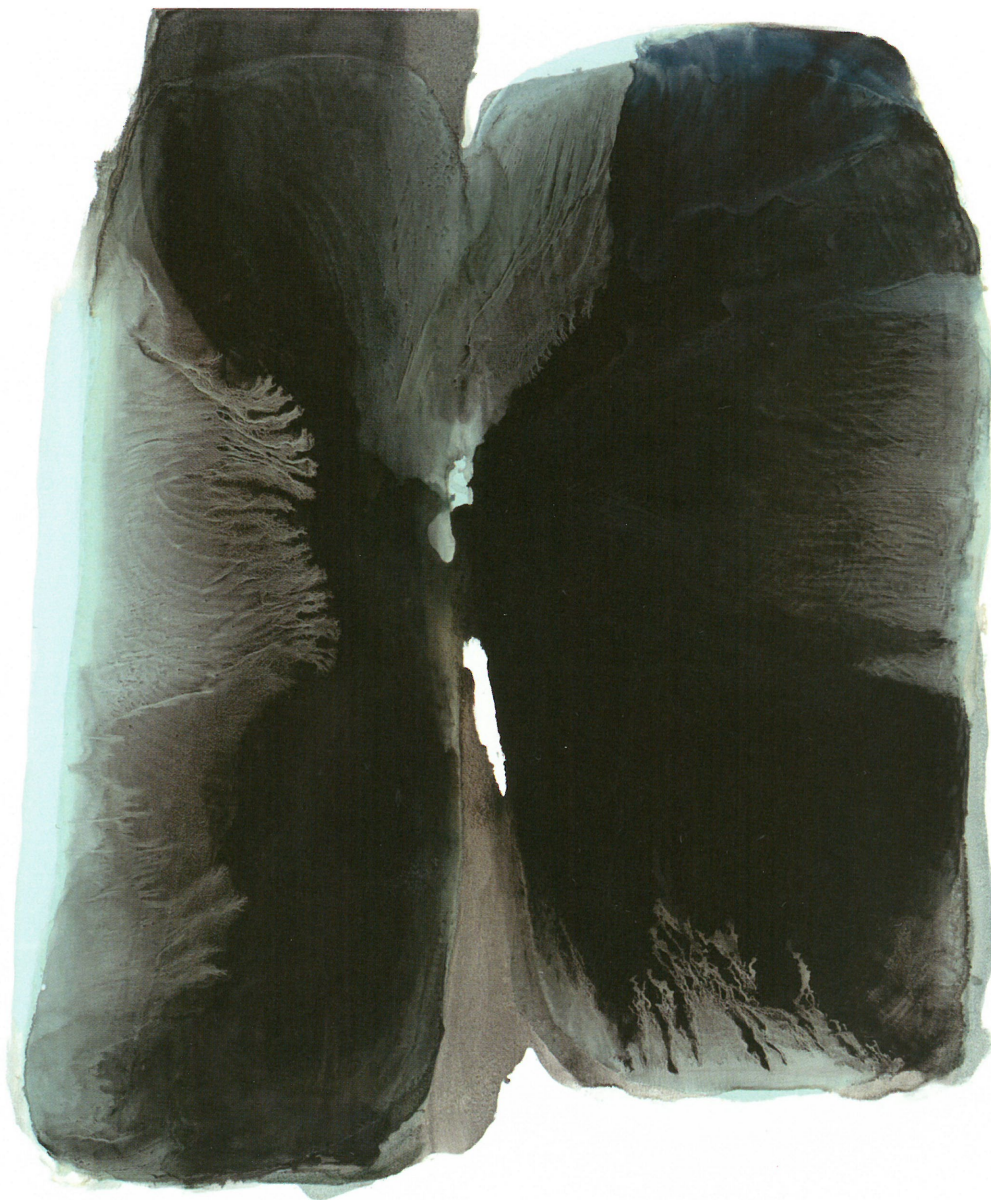
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# Drawing aside the veil

*A winding path led to Christchurch painter Marie Le Lievre's present celebrated practice. She talks to Andrew Paul Wood about her layered, abstract washes with their psychological depths.*

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All artworks by Marie Le Lievre

Opposite: *Nearly (Besides)*, 2017,  
oil on canvas, 1350 x 1350mm.  
Courtesy of Bartley + Company Art

Marie Le Lievre, 2017. Photo: Vicki Piper

Unlike many artists who go to art school straight out of high school, knowing what they want to do, Christchurch-based painter Marie Le Lievre took a more roundabout route before entering the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts painting programme and studying under painter Roger Boyce. She graduated in 2007 with a BFA with honours in painting, and completed an MFA with distinction a year later. Le Lievre now regularly shows in Christchurch and Wellington, and has exhibited at Peloton in Sydney and ParisCONCRET in Paris. Our interview takes place not long after her return from the 2017 Sydney Contemporary art fair.

"I was a rebellious teenager," says Le Lievre. "I never felt like I fitted in. All I wanted to do when I left school was to leave New Zealand and experience as many countries as possible, which is what I did. I trained as a kindergarten teacher and then took off to the UK for a couple of years. I lived and worked in Israel and Argentina and travelled in Europe and South America. Came back to New Zealand, studied criminology at Victoria University in Wellington. I transferred there from Canterbury where I'd been studying psychology.

"Every day at Canterbury, I'd walk past the art school and wish I was there. I'd done university entrance art at Wellington High School with [artist] Rob McLeod. He wrote on my report that I should go to art school, but that was not an option for me back then. When I did get there in my early 30s, older than most of the other students and with two young children, it was a relief to be among like-minded people. I felt I was finally being true to myself and had stopped running away. Overcoming the past played a large part in claiming my artistic side and the therapy around that continues to influence my work."

That sounds challenging but, embracing the paradox of what Ralph Waldo Emerson called the "restraints that

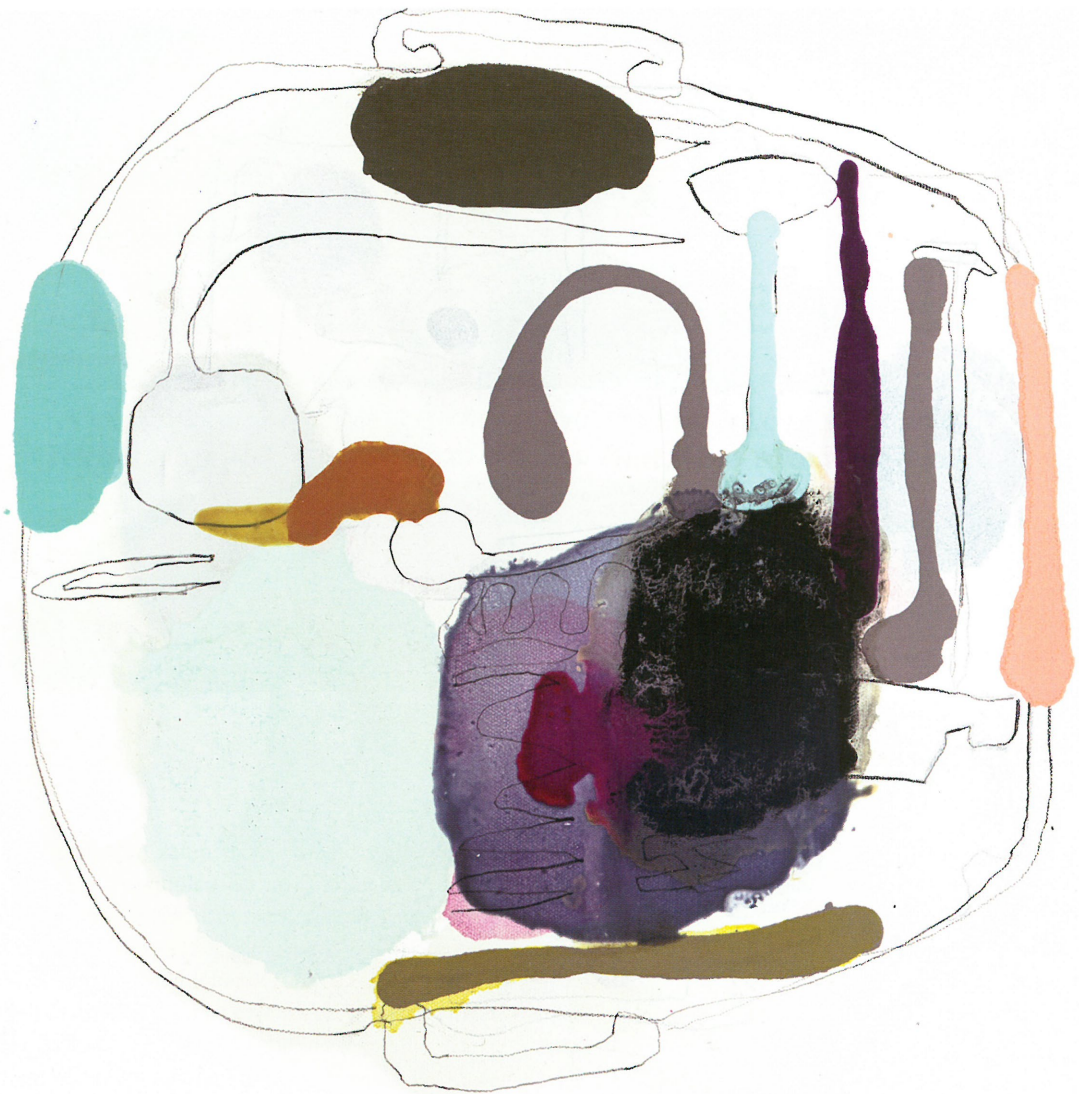
make us free", Le Lievre is quick to suggest that it was, in fact, a good thing for her painting.

"I feel all the years prior to art school were invaluable 'life research years', which means compelling subject matter is always close at hand. I found it harder to navigate a sexist, ageist art world as a single woman artist than being a solo mother. Being a mother is a privilege. My kids kept it real and gave my work focus by forcing me to use my time and energy efficiently. When my marriage broke up, it brought things to a head and I decided to get formal training to become a full-time artist. I had to make it work with part-time jobs and it was financially difficult, but I was fortunate that Judith Gifford – director of the former Brooke Gifford Gallery – "took me on straight out of art school."

There is, perhaps, an echo there of Virginia Woolf's observation that, in order for women to discover themselves creatively in a sphere dominated by men, "a room of one's own" is figuratively and literally needed. In choosing to explore abstraction, Le Lievre is taking on the most patriarchal bastion the visual arts have, a mode of expression popularly noted for the heroic posturing and demonstrative machismo of the canon of male modernists (with a few exceptions like Helen Frankenthaler and Lee Krasner) and its rejection of the domestic, intimate and everyday.

"I've always admired the language of painting as a means of expression," says Le Lievre, "and how paint and painting as a medium and a method of expression, and as a journey, embraces control and uncontrol, manipulation and happenstance. Studio work outweighs any preconceived ideas. You never really know what's going to happen. You can control many aspects and make good with the unpredictable occurrences too. Just like life."

Abstract painting mostly falls into two trends: the Old School, male dominated and all about expression and transcendence (Mark Rothko and Robert Motherwell



*Euphoric Tray #2*, 2017, oil and graphite on canvas, 455 x 455mm. Courtesy of Jonathan Smart Gallery

come to mind), and the New School of postmodern 'zombie formalism' which dryly and ironically attempts to reproduce the late mannerism of the Old School that ended up as décor for banks and law offices. Le Lievre doesn't really fit within either category, being neither dry and ironic, nor aiming for transcendence. Indeed it's the opposite of transcendence, it's an immanence that seeks to contain all within itself. It actively courts the rawest of emotions, and has more in common with the inner life and carnal messiness of Louise Bourgeois (one of Le Lievre's heroes) and Eva Hesse.

"Emotional and psychological readings are where it's at for me in terms of abstract painting," the artist says, "because I believe in a world where technology and design is prevalent that there is still a need for work that elicits feelings through the handmade, organic materials and processes and intuitive decision making.

"I was determined to do painting because I believe in its relevance as a medium given to a language of feeling. I'm interested in painting that is not homogenised, not anaesthetised, and which communicates and soothes our life anxieties as it was when the cave paintings of Lascaux were made, or when Rothko was painting in the aftermath of the terrors of the Second World War."

Le Lievre's big paintings start as canvases on the floor and her process is a physical and tactile one, pouring layers of opaque and translucent oil pigments and medium; working with the hands in movements that seem powered by the artist's entire body. The artist intuitively follows where the paint takes her, and what it spontaneously does, which is later edited and tweaked to achieve the desired effect.

"Revealing and concealing," she says, "the layering and veiling of translucent and opaque oil colours builds volume in the painting over time. It's a record of the process of



*Paint Shadower (Violet)*, 2017, oil on inkjet print, 200 x 300mm. Courtesy of Jonathan Smart Gallery

making and the final work has that sense of its history because you can still see the beginning there in the work. This gives it a sense of nostalgia to it. I want the viewer to think about and appreciate how the painting was made and what lies underneath, and for the painting to invite an emotional response and multiple interpretations.”

The effect is subtle. Most of the action is only hinted at, peeping like flamelets of colour around the edges of organic-looking monochromatic masses, or else submerged in the many-layered depths. Much of the beauty is in the random interactions of paint that Le Lievre permits, the mixing, the bleeding, the ripples and craquelure. They are oceanic pools you fall into, with as many skins as an onion – the longer you gaze at the glazes, the more layers are revealed.

“I studied criminology at Victoria University in Wellington,” says the artist, “because I had an interest in the sociological nature of crime, particularly in the area of addiction, so as subject matter I began thinking about the baggage that we all have, addictions, habits, and ways we have of dealing with them like consumerism, spirituality, as a package to deal with a fear of the unknown.”

The idea of ‘baggage’ literalised itself into a reoccurring motif in Le Lievre’s work, where the protean forms were adapted with intervening arcs and bridges of paint like handles. These, she says, “were a way of bringing an intervention into what would otherwise just be colour field painting, and I realised that was a metaphor for emotional and psychological baggage.”

So, while the paintings can be enjoyed for their gestural magnificence and the meditative beauty of their glazes, there is a rich vein of humanism, feeling and spirituality at play as well. And Le Lievre isn’t just all about big paintings.

In her drawings, the artist reorganises the patches and blobs of colour alongside pleasing scaffoldings of black lines that seem to be propping them up, or bristle out of them like sparse hairs. They have a stronger allegiance to biomorphic surrealism than abstract expressionism. If the big paintings are oceanic, the drawings are full of character.

More recently, Le Lievre has used digital prints of found imagery and photographs as media to paint and draw on. The effect is similar to spiritualist photography, a metaphysical reality of emotions and thoughts made visible as auras, shadows, ectoplasms and thought-balloon-like forms, with further resonances with the collages and automatic drawing of surrealism and dadaism. And yet, the abstract values of paint are still there, in fully resolved synthesis with the figurative elements.

“The artist,” James Joyce once said, “like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.” This couldn’t be further from Le Lievre’s practice, firmly anchored in her emotional and daily experienced life, which instead explores how human beings work inside and how to depict that in defiance of Wittgenstein’s “whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent”.

“Louise Bourgeois said that art isn’t about art,” says Le Lievre, “it’s about life. Francis Bacon said something similar, that when your sanity feels most in danger then art comes along as a ‘redeeming and healing enchantress’... Art has to connect with something bigger than you.”

*Marie Le Lievre has a solo show from 7 February to 3 March 2018 at Bartley + Company Art, Wellington.*