

FICTION • POETRY • ART • ESSAYS • REVIEWS



# takahē

91

DECEMBER 2017



# Marie Le Lievre

## Inside the Visible

To avoid receding the subject and object of art itself into some generic corner of the orthodox review, this essay fuses unrealism with datum, composing an interview-like setting for a concentrated exploration around the creative practice of this Canterbury painter. During discussions with the artist, the conjectural and ontological philosophies of the US/Canadian painter Agnes Martin (1912-2004) arose repeatedly. As a result, it seemed fitting to have Martin play the “voice” of the interviewer—for her to posthumously query and respond to Le Lievre’s approaches and productions. The ensuing text provides an outline and a backdrop. Whilst the anthology provides some critical survey of the work: its discourse, aesthetics, and practice, it does not intend to act as any kind of explanation. Instead it probes its findings to generate a reflective commentary, albeit amalgamated within an unconventionally more spacious narrative system.

*To be an artist, you look, you perceive, you recognize what is going through your mind. And it is not ideas. Everything you feel and everything you see and everything that your whole life goes through your mind, you know. But you have to recognize it and go with it and really feel it.*<sup>(1)</sup>

It’s 2017. There is no lack of conceptual or political art.

*Everything is contemplated in the mind without meditation. We make a very complicated response.*

Conceptualism has been an officious movement in contemporary art since postmodernism. Represented across art fairs and museums, biennales and dealer galleries, there is vast access to the experience of it, and if you want to dig deeper (you’ll almost always need to), there is an invasive glut of earnest commentary about it online, in print and elsewhere. Undeniably, there is plenty of justification for investment in these hot topics.

Yet, conceptualism has left a gap.

*You can’t be in an unconscious state and paint. Because whatever is in your mind, and not the subject matter, but the feelings that you have related to that subject matter, is what you’re going to paint.*

Contemporary art, in this country at least, lacks a fuller update on the chief axiom exhibition mode that was the staple of the museum experience of 20<sup>th</sup> Century: the large-scale, intoxicatingly indulgent and sexy abstract painting show. Marie Le Lievre rises to meet such a challenge by refusing to pander to the trending state of the conceptual arts.

*To be an artist, you look, you perceive, you recognize what is going through your mind. And it is not ideas.*

Indubitably (and fortunately) there are crucial differences between Le Lievre’s approach and the *pale male stale*<sup>(2)</sup> / coldly logical modernists who dominated and, like their outsized paintings, enjoyed such lengthy profitable runs through the gallery systems. Contrastingly, Le Lievre’s work is psychological. It’s unclever. It is refreshingly recklessly untrendy.

*And it’s irresistible.*

One of her chief concerns is the visible tension between so-called realism and abstraction. Consider the monumentally abstract formations in *Under High (Volumes)* (2017, *Under High* / Jonathan Smart Gallery) versus the smoking human figure we witness in *Charm Lore* (2016, *Bulletproof Falling* / Bartley + Company). It is her distinctive instinct that allows her to mess with, and apprise the traditions of abstraction and the figurative for her own ends, which are, at least on these surfaces, those of a diviner. This said Le Lievre’s first love might easily be the conspicuous quality of paint itself. Her art has a visual energy that rewards further observation of the work over relying on intricate backstories to endorse it. The effect of this approach is prompt and aberrantly handsome. Irrational, emotionally supercharged and aesthetically heady, here is a compelling display of highly intelligent intuition—acting out.

*The artist must slow all this down, mentally. It is this mental experience that makes the representation of beauty possible.*

To produce such a persuasive counterweight to the intellectual, Le Lievre doesn’t pull any huge surprises. Her work arrives in two humbly predictable releases: drawings and paintings. The

# Marie Le Lievre

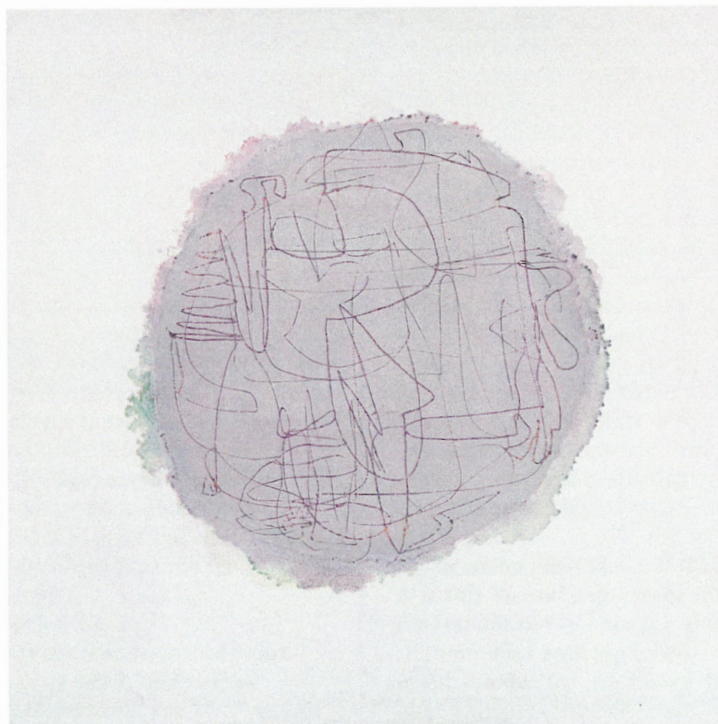
---



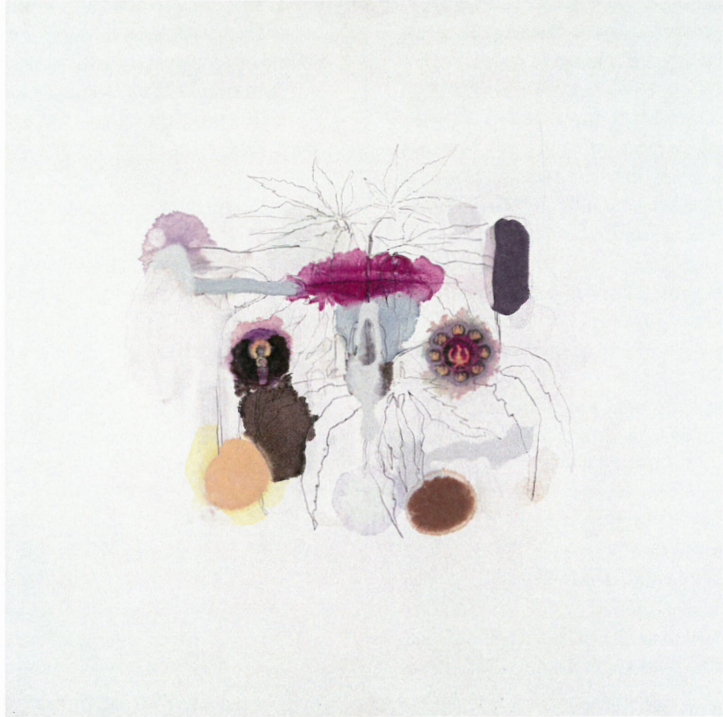
*Amongst* (Panel) Oil, graphite, inkjet print, gesso on wood panel [600 x 600mm], *Bulletproof Falling series* (2016), Bartley + Company Art, Wellington.



*Soothe Sayer Oil*, graphite, inkjet print, gesso on wood panel [600 x 600mm],  
*Bulletproof Falling* series (2016), Bartley + Company Art, Wellington.



*Playing Again Oil*, graphite, inkjet print, gesso on wood panel [600 x 600mm],  
*Bulletproof Falling* series (2016), Bartley + Company Art, Wellington.



*Jungle (Panel)* Oil, graphite, inkjet print, gesso on wood panel [600 x 600mm],  
*Bulletproof Falling* series (2016), Bartley + Company Art, Wellington.



*Fix Bag (Panel)* Oil, graphite, inkjet print, gesso on wood panel [600 x 600mm],  
*Bulletproof Falling* series (2016), Bartley + Company Art, Wellington.



*Bull Truth (Panel)* Oil, graphite, inkjet print, gesso on wood panel [600 x 600mm],  
*Bulletproof Falling* series (2016), Bartley + Company Art, Wellington.

two approaches are not inevitably allied by concept or even premise, yet ceremoniously they bind in a way that vibrates. Le Lievre's essential subject is the relationship between objects, and she renders those dealings forcefully. To engage with Le Lievre's peculiarly pleasing drawings one needs time and patience, and a tolerance for things that look like "art": for as rough drafts they aestheticise their own research.

***You have to recognize it and go with it and really feel it.***

A psychoanalyst's field day, these painted notes reconnoiter abstract exchange systems in conjunction with occasional motifs of almost realism—daggers, botanical forms, cutting instruments, forks and forms that may, or may not conjure excrement, anatomy, genitals and drug paraphernalia—take your saw-toothed pick here. Penetrating a mystical horizon the viewer is confronted with an intimation of represented things. This can be read as alternately hideous and beguiling.

***(...) the way to have the experience come right through is that you simply have to be able to clear your mind so it can get through.***

Yet, despite the smatterings of recognisable elements, these paintings are certainly not pictures. In essence, they depict nothing, state nothing, and repel tight categorisation. It relies on nil but its own fierce beauty at a time when her contemporaries are still turning out bright theories and clean concepts.

These arrays of brilliant rectilinear shapes give the most exhilarating sensation of movement. Like sketches channeled via some automatic writing process, her drawings appear as private attempts to 'work it out'. In psychology, "automatism" refers to involuntary actions and processes not under the control of the conscious mind—for example, dreaming, breathing, or possessing a nervous tic. These artworks mine stream-of-consciousness subjective thoughts—mostly bad-ass impure thoughts. (This is no preaching wagon.)

***The thing to do is to learn to accept the truth as it comes into your mind. Give up... Give up logic, deductions, and application and reference.***

As a result, these strangely ordered compositions are delightfully too much and uproarious, as if some chaotic rebel spirit was given paint and permission to indulgently explore itself in the studio whilst *The Motels* and *Empire of The Sun* <sup>(3)</sup> crooned on in the background.

***People are able to make a response to music very easily and very accurately.***

Then she cranks up the metal.

***I think it is the highest form of art, because with eight notes they express everything that we have ever experienced.***

It is Le Lievre's volumetric paintings that bring the big noise.

***By questioning your own mind, it is possible to have absolutely original thoughts.***

Le Lievre creates disturbance using an indeterminate form floating in the centre of the canvas. Like *colour field* paintings that break the rules of the genre by containing hyper-gloss within a frame on a matte background, it takes time to conceive of the shape drifting towards us. But once this possibility is grasped we become subject to the uncanny force of the painting's gaze.

***To have an absolutely original point of view.***

These are the thrashing resolutions of her loquacious drawings. They level up. This is the frenzy.

***We cannot make anything perfectly, but with inner contemplation of perfection, we can suggest it.***

Whilst she institutionalises spearmint green gesso backgrounds, grinds mauve pastels and uses graphite to cut lines of speedy ecstasy in her drawing rehearsals, it is her paintings that stack lumps of shapes set in the strongest heavy colours—regal magentas, emerald greens, too deep blues, sucking us into rich velvet portals and endless black holes. Le Lievre acts compulsively, impulsively admixing marine oil, pouring it into slicks and cavities with her unusually expert colour sense and formidably hands-on craftiness to create a densely replete happening on the canvas.

There is a flash of live energy, an atmosphere of announcement, which must surely reflect Le Lievre's own sense of defiance in making such work. These paintings are such essential reductions—intrepid colours, audacious shapes—yet all the elements unite to spawn knotty emotion. They are both maze-like and opulent. These could be elegiac, or blank, but instead they arc with buoyance. Across so many of these works the would-be possessor finds her or himself unwittingly possessed by the thrilling weirdness of it all.

These paintings command any room.

***Beauty is the mystery of life. It is in the mind, not in the eye.***

What this practice therefore achieves, is a sustained interrogation of the very status of art—it is incongruously wholly committed to the flatness of raw aesthetic *and* to soaring esoteric depths, at the same time. Le Lievre is clearly not primarily interested in portraying the 'reality' of things, but rather in the blurring of the division between the actual and reflected. Every one of her paintings unbridles like an explosive, each has agency and custody over itself. Le Lievre describes

her productions as, “*Works that make themselves*”. Thus, attaining the transcendent headspace required to manifest such accomplished splendid drawings is the core talent here. As the title of her 2014 Bartley + Company exhibition, *Nefarious: Flow State* hints, this is an elevation of the spiritual over the material, the disclosure of truth behind the veil of appearances, a triumph of the sensual over the rational.

***If you’re an artist, when you get finished with that, you will be able to sit back and say: It isn’t anything. It just doesn’t have it. It just isn’t anything. It’s just like a blank.***

Le Lievre’s art is an unusual and welcome non-academic index supremely channelled in paint.

***Do not give serious attention to what others think.***

Here is the lush sublime.

***Do not take under consideration the art scene.***

These paintings do not picture the world, they speak of (and extend) its infinite variety with a visual language all of their own. It is an art of utter originality. All that remains is this brief.

***You must have complete independence of mind.***

It’s deserving of a more open-minded, sharper wider audience.

***We have art so that we shall not die of reality.***

— Friedrich Nietzsche

Maria Walls

Endnotes:

The title of this essay is a reference to:

Krauss, Rosalind E. (1996). “*Agnes Martin: The/Cloud/*”. In *de Zegher, Catherine. Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art in, of, and From the Feminine* (2nd ed.). MIT Press.

(1) All quotations in bold, with the exception of the Nietzsche quote, are from *Soundcloud* audio files:

Agnes Martin. (2017, June 01). Retrieved August 21, 2017, from <https://www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/agnes-martin>

(2) Popular idiom “*pale male stale*” was first stated in:

Deborah G. Douglas (2004). *American Women and Flight since 1940*. (p.251). University Press of Kentucky.

(3) *The Motels* and *Empire of The Sun* are both rock bands.

# Alie Bengé

## Immigrant

**I’ve heard stories about Croatia all my life. The country shimmers in the background of the stories about my great-grandfather, Didie. There is no family story that isn’t, in some way, a story about Didie. In the stories, the rushing flame of his anger is set against his quiet afternoon kindness, the young immigrant stands in contrast to the old settler. Every time we get together, someone will say,**

‘Remember the time Didie had a tantrum at the orchard, throwing himself down, wailing, and beating his fists against the ground like a child.’

Another will say,

‘Remember the time his car broke down at Mt Roskill and he chased after the other cars, shaking his fists, saying, ‘You bloody bastards, you bloody

bastards. You won’t help an old man!’” My mother remembers sitting at the kitchen table, swinging her legs, while he made her arrowroot biscuits with jam and Ribena in milk. The stories of him are woven so neatly, into such a bright image, that on the week of Grandma’s funeral I thought I saw him at the mall. I nearly called out before remembering that he’d been dead almost my entire life.

He insisted everyone call him Didie, even though the Croatian word for grandfather is Dida, and the people who call him Didie are his children and in-laws. I was a teenager before I realised his real name was Ljubo. Didie is pronounced the same as ‘did he’, but as it’s said in the quick, lazy, kiwi way that skips over the ‘h’. The conversation often goes,

‘Did he?’