

JAMES LUMSDEN – REFLEX - 2015

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James Lumsden's new series 'Reflex' is comprised of paintings that emerge from baroque curves of light and colour, which palpitate with energetic life. The artist manoeuvres acrylic paint mixed with a gloss medium by using tools such as squeegees to drag and pull pigment across the gesso canvas surface, layer upon layer, to create a mesmeric world for his viewer. Depth, which is engendered through veils of talismanic colour, draws the eye further into the beating heart of the painting. The artist enjoys 'the emotional charge of surprising colour'; indeed, his paintings exhibit bold and often conflicted combinations – such as Phthalo Turquoise next to Quinacridone Magenta - that either quarrel with fervour or unusually coalesce to result in smooth tonal gradations. As we look into the abstract fathoms of his work, visual narratives unfold in the history of the mark making. Each lamina, which is authored through the artist's labour-intensive process of chance and deliberation, appears capricious and unstable as one suddenly shifts into the next with an accentuated confidence and then shrinks back again from the surface. At times, we glimpse sheets of paint sloping gently down as melting ice does, or foiling into one another like the velvet grooves of a theatre curtain. Elsewhere, aquatic-like marks appear as sea anemones pulsating with the ebb and flow of the ocean undercurrent or resemble air bubbles trapped underwater, pushing towards the liberation of the surface. The artist comments that 'the transparency and the fluidity of the marks can give a sense of something caught in motion - an act of movement fixed'. Certainly, there is something positively animate about Lumsden's work; the films of paint tell a story of paradoxically constant metamorphosis, of conflict and change that perhaps equates to our own ontology and to our relationship with others.

The artist arrived at his latest body of paintings - which are the largest in scale that he has achieved using his distinctive technique - via a long journey of experimentation and research. Initially, Lumsden used oil paints and traditional brushes to explore 'the illusion of light as a metaphor for the impossibility of perfection' by masterfully using his materials to create the semblance of light within his work, while at the same time recalling the viewer to the reality of the painted object through mechanisms such as hard edged bands or bare linen surfaces. It is not surprising then that he draws his inspiration from artists that use the compositional properties of light as an emotional tool - from Johannes Vermeer to James Turrell - while also acknowledging the materiality of their work as part of their subject. In Lumsden's current project, we can still see this interest at play in the phosphorescent surfaces contrasted with the perfectly clean white lines of the canvas perimeter or a horizon line splitting the painting into two planes. Yet the surface qualities are very different - instead of matte oil paint the artist now uses a luminous composite medium that he conceived through trial and error during a residency at the Ballinglen Arts Foundation, County Mayo, Ireland during the summer of 2007. A Creative Development award from the Scottish Arts Council allowed him to develop tools and augment his technique to bring his work closer to what we see today. His latest series represents the pinnacle of this journey in terms of dramatic mark making and a profound ability with colour, as the artist attempts to create something with 'feeling, emotion and visual poetry.'

Indeed, one can feel this emotional content within Lumsden's work and associate his mark making with the characteristics of our own ontological evolution. Like the emotional development of a human being, as his paintings succeed, their historical substrata become increasingly differentiated. Essentially, as we navigate our own development, enabled through our mental processes and experiences, our spiritual fabric is necessarily broken, repaired, renewed, conflicted and unable to repeat itself perfectly so that we become multifaceted, opinionated and knowledgeable beings with idiosyncratic personalities. Lumsden's work reflects this - each layer of paint deviates from the next until the final and unique painting materialises. The artist comments that in his work 'the creation of a recognizable image is replaced by a search for resolution, which is determined by the act of painting itself; the process and final result are inseparably linked. In a sense, the process is the subject'. Likewise, we as human

beings are in a constant act of becoming - our very process is that which subjectivates us and constructs our selfhood. This is why we see something human in Lumsden's abstract work - as we look at these gestural and poly-surfaced paintings they still seem to be moving and developing, while nonetheless acting as a whole.

In 1850, the painter Eugène Delacroix commented of the then new medium of photography that, 'the edge of the picture is as interesting as the centre... the subordinate parts as dominant as the main subject' and that the most captivating photographs were those which were slightly impaired so that the 'imperfections of the process... leave rests for the eye'.^[1] This is also true in Lumsden's work; for example, when an under-colour subtly flickers for a moment or where a 'subordinate' mark quietly fizzles and feels as visually ascendant as the mark which succeeds it. It is the pauses and gaps within his paintings, the nuanced imperfections, and 'the rests for the eye' that we arguably find the most mesmerising. Once again, we find an analogy to ourselves and to our relationship with others: it is often someone's intricate caesurae that we find the most interesting, that we fall in love with or where we find contestation, in which we discover true dialogue. It is, perhaps, where genuine human relationships are founded. Lumsden comments that a 'sense of looking, questioning, and analysing what is beneath the surface of given 'truths'' is important in his work; similarly, a compassionate act of looking is relevant and essential to a productive and positive human society in and for the future. Ultimately, Lumsden's abstract paintings correspond to humanity on an individual and a societal level – they are 'brought to life, struggled for, worked, [and have their] own history... positive and affirming, which is filled with both light and moments of darkness, contrasts and possibly contradictions.'^[2]

^[1] Eugène Delacroix, "De L'Enseignement du Dessin", published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 15 September 1850, and reprinted in Christophe Leribault, ed., *Delacroix et la photographie*, pp. 153 - 155; and "Réalisme et Idéalisme," unpublished, collected in Eugène Delacroix, *Oeuvres Littéraires* (Paris: Crès & Cie, 1923), pp. 57 – 68

^[2] James Lumsden, 2013 interview with Georgina Coburn. All other quotes from James Lumsden in the text are taken from the same interview.