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LISA ADAMS

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UNTILTED GOUACHE 001 2010, 9.5 X 7.5 INCHES, GOUACHE ON ARCHES PAPER




The viewer's gaze unhinges the schism between a utopic past and a dystopic present, whose wrath is concealed by an arsenal of exacting moves executed invisibly by the hand of artist Lisa Adams. By implementing a set of painterly techniques of her own creation, which includes the meticulous use of sponge rollers to create mosaic patches, abstract and intricately layered backgrounds and tentative lines achieved by dipping paint along the edge of an illustration board, Adams achieves a visual tug and pull that requires acute attention. Her works operate on a cinematic level as the canvases are imbued with an optical luminosity akin to the rack focus applied in cinema. For a single moment the background and foreground converge to form a cohesive narrative, but only for a fleeting moment, and then the viewer must reconstruct the narrative after the vision fades. The works of Lisa Adams are breathing entities that reconcile the remnants of a world walking the balance between decay and possibility.

"Kristy heart Ryan" appears carved into a fractured tree stump while sparse weeds with illuminating buds growing from the rotted wood. Their names represent a couple of the apocalypse that have left their mark on an object rooted to the soil. Perhaps their love will endure for as long as the tree



LEFT: *PORTRAIT OF LISA ADAMS* BY FIELD SELLS
 RIGHT: *A MORASS OF CONTRADICTIONS* 2010,
 48 X 40 INCHES, OIL AND SPRAY PAINT ON PANEL

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stump bears their names, as *A Morass of Contradictions* points to the endurance of humanity and physicality. Adams reflects that the subjects are, “a very accurate representation of real life, because you’ve got a lot of real sadness and destruction, but then on the other side, you have joy and happiness, albeit fleeting.” She continues that they “have some relationship to each other in the same moment. As I get older, I really get a sensation about that.”

Working in the studio for her forthcoming exhibition at CB1 Gallery in December 2011, Adams finds herself in front of canvases of a more manageable size, very different from the experience of creating *Convocation* and *Given That All Things are Equal*, the largest pieces she has ever made. “When you’re working with that amount of square footage,” Adams explains, “you have a body presence rather than a brain presence.” Thus the canvases compete for more than just physical space in the studio but overwhelm the mind and are testament to Adams’ rigorous work ethic. Among the works in progress, a blank canvas hangs on the wall across from her bed, soaking in the daylight from the oversized windowpanes and capturing dreams in the evening hours. The blank canvas, much like the blank page is a vessel of projection onto which we can hope for what has not yet been created. Adams accepts the blank canvas with great respect as it projects ideas much like the myth of Plato’s cave. She emphasizes the possibility in a clean canvas, a literal clean slate of the imaginative process as being “most available for projection, because there isn’t something that you have to work against.” She continues that once she begins painting she will “start with anything. It could be wrong, it could be right, I don’t make any judgments about that.”

Having recently completed a commission for the LACMTA Metro that will appear at the future Chatsworth Station, Adams realized that the size of the canvas might not necessarily dictate the tedium involved. Studying native flora and (re)presenting the minutiae of each specimen in excruciating detail on a panoramic canvas with a very small brush, required that she paint representationally hour after hour. In her thorough investigation Adams discovered an organizing principle that governed the indigenous flowers depicted. The bucolic landscape surrounded by rocky mountains of Stony Point Park, made famous by John Wayne Western films decades before, is characteristic of Adams’ practice because the inner-workings of the painting comment on a larger world which continues to exist and persist.

Adams’ work has evolved and developed tremendously over the course of the past decade. After graduating with an MFA at the age of twenty four, Adams realized that she “wasn’t a very good artist and wasn’t a very good painter. I just didn’t know enough and I didn’t have enough life experience in life to be able to do that.” She painted abstractly because she never learned how to paint in any other style, until she began to run into themes that were representational. Once she made the transition from abstract to representational, the pieces progressed from what Adams calls “mediocre,” and after continuing to chip away at it, she felt that she had achieved the two styles in a manner that was evenly integrated. Now her style fuses abstraction and representation and makes subjects believable in a rather unbelievable world. Adams constantly pushes her own boundaries to create new techniques to satisfy her curiosities. “You’ve got to be brave,” Adams declares. “In painting you’ve got to be brave. If you’re not brave, what do you got?”

There is a palpable energy injected into *Convocation* now in the permanent collection at the Robert V. Fullerton Museum of Art on the campus of Cal State San Bernardino and *Given That All Things Are Equal* in the permanent collection at the San Jose Museum of Art. The overlapping paint swatches weave a visual tapestry, which plays with the figurative renditions of aviary and plant life. Adams’ hand is meant to remind us that the works we are presented with are remnants from the spectral illumination of a past that may or may not have ever existed while mediating about the present.

While the birds and flora are handled in a representational manner, the panoramic backgrounds are characteristic of Adams’ tendency to construct landscapes that she says have “no relationship to reality whatsoever.” By including abstraction in her works, Adams’ imagination is free to present a re-colored Mourning Warbler in the same work as a Regent’s Bowerbird from Australia. The world is fractured, changed, amalgamated, or boundless and abstraction allows for birds of different species and from opposite ends of the Earth to come together in the same visual plane, while securely anchored on lush and thriving kelp, just as the artist is rooted in a figurative practice. On the surface, Adams’ works are beautiful, delicate, and blossom in their own sense of wonderment. They are living and breathing organisms, as though an umbilical cord runs through them connecting a narrative and rigorous practice.

The works are vessels that are activated by the viewer whose innate present-ness enlivens the narrative once more. The driving narrative in her works may be that life is driven to persist despite the destruction imparted by the hand of man and decay of nature, but the vision of life will change from one day to the next.

In *Convocation* (a declarative call to come together), a blackened, barren, and gnarled tree with arthritic limbs manages to remain upright despite the swamp-like environ that has surrounded it. The fruitless tree is a departure from Eden where knowledge could be consumed, therefore the tree is an artifact of what remains of a fruitful world written. Five amicable (and fiercely independent) Finches appear in the crooks and crannies of the twisted branches and have been re-colored by Adams to appropriate their appearance in an otherwise lifeless locale. For a brief moment we can almost hear them singing, distracting us from the ominous and smoking volcano in the background that has either just erupted or will erupt very soon. The manipulation of the lines, which appear in varying lengths dripping down from the tree as if to mimic rain, creates a tentative moment and a literal divide in the composition. As they fall into the water, the lines become paint drips, which might literally signal rain or figuratively indicate the artist's awareness of the artifice of paint and is calling attention to her technique.

To examine *Given That All Things Are Equal* is to gaze in a reflective pool where time is fleeting and the viewer can momentarily capture the artist's consciousness. As in *Convocation* the use of sponge rollers blocking off variations of the sage green color in the kelp integrates the overlap between the abstract and the figurative. The scene can neither be firmly identified as a pond or an ocean, therefore this hybrid state of being allows for abstraction to dominate the figurative. A lily pad is presented on a horizontal axis above the water and an exo-skeletal rendering of a bug-eyed fish on top a chemical cesspool may indicate that each item in the work is like a fish out of water. A Mourning Warbler is represented in a white oval plane separate from the rest of the composition and appears diagonal from the blossomed lily that hovers on a disc-like pad. The colors of the Warbler have been re-invented by Adams to satisfy the reality of the painting, that is the ambiguous location and pairing of two species that live on opposite ends of the world. A black and yellow Regent's Bowerbird is perched on a spiraled vine, its arched body mirrors the foliage underneath it which seems to suggest a symbiosis and that some order has been retained in the natural world. We are granted visual access to the workings of the aquatic underworld and we can view the growth of the kelp and visually dissect the strange fish that seems to be on top of the water rather than underneath it. The paint patches compress the pictorial plane, thereby stretching the water line further into the background of the work, and justifying the position of the lily pad. If the title has any indication on the composition then *Given That All Things Are Equal* suggests that subjects can be represented figuratively, while their relationship to each other remains abstract.

Adams' works ruminates on the past and anticipates the present because the techniques she has devised do not allow the work to exist in a single temporal space. Past and present are viewed in the cinema of the brain, where one projects over the other, but often never align precisely. Because we cannot return to the past we seek it, much like Proust's narrator who longs to return to Combray, the site of his childhood curiosities, however the memory of a place so loved can only be remembered involuntarily. Adams' work captures the subtle decay of time and in our efforts to celebrate the present it soon becomes past, and the past too becomes older still.





TOP:
CONVOCATION 2009,
72 X 120 INCHES, OIL ON PANEL

RIGHT:
*BETWEEN INFRARED AND
ULTRAVIOLET 2010*, 34 X 30 INCHES,
OIL ON PANEL

LEFT:
*GIVEN THAT ALL THINGS ARE EQUAL
2009*, 60 X 144 INCHES, OIL AND
PAINT PEN ON PANEL



LISA ADAMS *PRIVILEGE ENTAILS RESPONSIBILITY* 2010, 36 X 30 INCHES, OIL ON PANEL

