

Lily Stockman

The Waves

15.03.2023

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MASSIMODECARLO London is pleased to present *The Waves*, American painter Lily Stockman's first solo presentation with the gallery.

Lily Stockman takes her title from Virginia Woolf's experimental 1931 novel of the same name, narrated in soliloquy by six friends from childhood through old age. Woolf's refractive narratives driven by the characters' thoughts resemble something beyond the scope of a traditional novel - more a painterly poem of consciousness. The earliest memories of these friends even read like descriptions of paintings:

'I see a ring,' said Bernard, 'hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.'
'I see a slab of pale yellow,' said Susan, 'spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.'
... 'I see a crimson tassel,' said Jinny, 'twisted with gold threads.'

Reading their thoughts, we see how each character interprets the external world in a different way. These memories and modes of understanding punctuate the novel, looping and repeating like the ever-present waves breaking and receding throughout the narrative. Stockman's exhibition of twelve oil on linen paintings likewise summons a vivid sensibility, drawn from her own memories and the collective childhood memory of her three sisters. The group of works is conceived as a whole, with motifs and colours returning across the works, camouflaging, reappearing, and doubling like the bleeding edges of a collective sisterly memory.

Stockman often refers to the 'grammar' of her paintings; her range of biomorphic motifs define a distinctive visual lexicon deployed within the structure of radiating borders with the certitude of grammatical punctuation marks. Carefully mixing small works (which she likens to 'verbs') and large works ('nouns'), the artist creates a fluctuating visual rhythm across the exhibition, and a physical tempo as one makes their way through the galleries - walking up close to peer at details, striding back to take in the whole.

Stockman's works are riddled with ekphrastic allusions; the violet and gold diptych *Tyger Tyger* takes its title from William Blake's famous poem. Many of

the paintings in the exhibition also allude to their surrounding architecture, mimicking elements of the 1723 Georgian townhouse. Walking between the mirrored *Tyger* paintings through to the next gallery, you notice that their composition borrows from the rococo revival frames of the mirrors. The cornices, dentils and other decoration in MASSIMODECARLO's London home are replicated throughout Stockman's paintings, their forms and outlines a perfect foil for her soft interior subjects.

Having an overarching visual rhythm informing structure in painting recalls early twentieth-century French philosopher Henri Bergson's *élan vital* - the vital force - which took Paris, and subsequently London, by storm inspiring elements of Cubism and Fauvism and influencing Modernist, including Woolf's, stream of consciousness style of literature. The *élan vital* is an original, common impulse powered by an everlasting 'simultaneity of flows' or energy that runs through all living things: flowers, animals and humans - inspiring life, growth and creative intuition. Stockman's exhibition springs undoubtedly from this tradition.

The artist uses methods of structure to paint what she calls 'the experience of being in the natural world'. Not just painting nature, but the experience of being within, and at one, with *its world*. The small orange, mauve, and amber painting *Meadow Brown* mimics the wings of the butterfly of the same name, with a level of detail only possible from extended time studying the insect. The painting is repeated within the larger work *Great Dexter*, named after the beloved garden in the Kent countryside famous for its heroic topiary borders concealing a riotous wilderness of flowers, herbs, and wildflowers - and home to the common meadow brown butterfly.

As Woolf's characters age their understanding develops, and they describe not only what they see visually, but combine different sensory experiences into kaleidoscopic descriptions: *'Now the cock crows like a spurt of hard, red water in the white tide,' said Bernard*. Stockman's painterly world is created from such observations and recollections, taking something that was once a physical experience and reforming it as a synaesthetic description in her distinctive geometric abstractions: ants feeding on

honeydew in the scarlet whorls of a camellia (*Red Camellia*); bluebirds hunting on the wing in streaks of cobalt against drab granite cliffs (*Returning to the Island*); the sound of a bell buoy tolling in the fog (*Bell Buoy*); the delicate pink welts left by clothing on her newborn's skin (*New Mother*).

There is subtlety and agility to Stockman's handling of paint; she thins the opacity of each layer so that underpaintings radiate through from below, such as the film of ochre over the pink lobes of *Dutch Tulip*. Though, from a distance, her works present a seemingly precise bilateral symmetry, up close the very painterliness of the surface surprises when straight lines wobble or the scumbling effect caused by the bouncing of a springy brush across dry paint, leaving the individual mark of each bristle on the brush-head.

Stockman's natural world is housed within her own architectural rules. The metre of her verse, singular and radiant, beguiling and mysterious, rings through as we read and muse on her painterly compositions.

'This is our world, lit with crescents and stars of light; and great petals half transparent block the openings like purple windows. Everything is strange. Things are huge and very small. The stalks of flowers are thick as oak trees. Leaves are high as the domes of vast cathedrals. We are giants, lying here, who can make forests quiver.'

The Waves, Virginia Woolf (1931)

Lily Stockman

Lily Stockman was born in Providence, RI, in 1982. She lives and works in Los Angeles and Yucca Valley, CA.

Drawing from nature and its grammar of symmetry, camouflage, and repetition, Stockman plumbs her familiar landscapes (Los Angeles, the Mojave Desert, a remote island in Maine) for her distinctive palette of glowing, tertiary colours— crackling orange, red earth, Holbein brown, and Fra Angelico blue. In a review of Stockman's most recent exhibition, The New Yorker art critic Johanna Fateman describes the artist's biomorphic compositions as "both diagrammatic and vaporous, a combination that calls to mind the spiritualist abstractions of the American modernist Agnes Pelton. Although they're more lyrical, Stockman's nested shapes also have the meticulous magic of Josef Albers's squares." Stockman's paintings emerge from a wide range of references, from the prosaic — seed catalogues, topographic maps, birdsong, skating on a frozen pond — to the archaic — Shaker gift drawings, mediaeval hocketing, portable Renaissance altarpieces, poetry metre.

After concentrating on painting at Harvard, where she also studied art history under Yve-Alain Bois, Stockman continued her studies in two important apprenticeships which shaped her lifelong pursuit of abstraction: Buddhist thangka painting at the Union of Mongolian Artists in Ulaanbaatar, and later, traditional Mughal miniature painting in Jaipur. From there she went on to pursue her MFA at New York University.

Stockman's work is in the permanent collections of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., Institute of Contemporary Art Miami, Phoenix Art Museum, and Orange County Museum of Art, where she was recently included in the California Biennial 2022: Pacific Gold.