

PARK CLOSES AT MIDNIGHT

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A RELATIONSHIP OF EQUALS

by Lauren O'Neill-Butler

Neither representational nor entirely abstract, Marley Freeman's paintings thrive in an in-between mode. By not adhering to one particular way of working, the canvases seem to follow their own internal logic, or a secret code. They conjure an unnamable mood: an affective, pre-cognitive, pre-verbal feeling, or vibe. This effect produces a frame of mind without dualisms, much like the unconscious. Are you looking at paintings or are you dreaming?

Marley's paintings are slow and patient, not rushed or shabbily provisional, but rather labored over, held dear. Made with wide smears and strokes of oil and/or acrylic on linen, canvas, or antique fabric, the works sometimes bring to mind landscapes through a shifting, destabilized perspective—perhaps there's a sunset in *Hairs of the Hole* (2019) or a topographic map in *Fleeced Paint* (2019). Some appear directly connected to a material source, as in *See Past* (2019), a portrait of a person gazing directly at the viewer, deep in thought. Through that direct confrontation, a tense psychological space opens up but it's roomy; there is space to breathe.

The various layers of paint on each canvas, and the building up of sculptural shapes through veils of hue and luster, creates an effect where illumination seems to seep through each work, pushing out from the back, like light flickering through tree branches. Other paintings—namely *Punting Strollers* (2016) and *Face to Earth* (2017)—do the opposite. They pull in the world, absorbing everything around them, in ways similar to Lesley Vance's small, untitled abstract canvases circa 2011, which are teeming with undercoats of paint that, though fixed, still seem fluid and mutable.

Freeman's father bought and sold antique textiles, and she has many memories of assisting him with his trade. Later, she worked for a mill, and ended up creating a library of aged fabric fragments for that business. Her working knowledge of relationships between textures, colors, shapes, and lines deeply inform these paintings. That familiarity might be evident in *Tall Grass* (2016) and *Sagacious Hose in the Alley* (2019), which resemble close-up views of flat, slack threads from frayed textile.

Pareidolia is a natural tendency to interpret a vague stimulus as something known from memory: The man in the moon, the Virgin Mary in a grilled cheese, Rorschach inkbot tests, and so on. Every time I look at Marley's *Erasure alert* (2019), my eyes are drawn to a kneeling figure with an orange bob and a green cloak in the center of the canvas—and now you might keep seeing it too. Pareidolia also seems to have informed some of the curious and coy titles of Marley's works. Her summer 2019 exhibition, "Park Closes At Midnight," marked the first time she decided to devise titles rather than appropriate them from books or movies. There's an interesting backstory to this: Marley had painted a portrait of the poet Anselm Berrigan and a conversation ensued about titles and titling. He then offered to send Marley a list of possible names, based on images of the works for the show—or

based on his observations on what seems to be going on in them. One Dropbox folder and a few weeks later, a list appeared, and Marley chose some for titles. It was “a collaboration,” as she put it, and a fruitful one at that. That sense of cooperation, of a shared and open mind, is an emancipating spirit you can nearly feel while looking at these subtle yet striking paintings.

Such tenacious, dreamy indeterminacy takes us a long way from a historical backdrop: The long-running argument abstraction is essentially one long, unending attack on figuration. Still, I can't help thinking about that bygone idea when I look at Marley's art—like us, these paintings have one foot in the past, and one in the present. Or, one foot in abstraction and one in figuration, and then they disco between modes of painting, and come together in flux, accident, and chance.

The historical argument goes something like this: Abstract painting is autonomous. It stands alone and not for something else. It is a thing onto itself, a discreet object. It is flat and shallow. It is unearthly. It eradicates perspective. It is reflexive. It only refers to itself. It doesn't project out but turns in on itself. Figuration, on the other hand, is the opposite, hence the binary. To mutate the two was once seen as unholy, but as we know, it's been done for ages. There's also been an active loosening up of this binary since the 1960s, particularly when Greenbergian formalism lost its sway. With hindsight, it now appears that forcing artists to choose a precise medium or style was just a classic way of keeping people in their places.

Photography has been the primary twentieth-century tool to fight back against abstraction, in always offering a re-presentation (and indeed a representation) of something else. Even when a photograph is abstract, as in the work of Barbara Kasten, for instance, it still points doggedly to something outside of it, since it must depend on the transmission of light between the camera and a given material. That's why it's commonplace to say photography is more “transparent” than other mediums—because it directly points to the world. Painting is different. It doesn't have to necessarily use a system of perspective. It doesn't have to project a three-dimensional space. It doesn't have to represent anything. It has more options and it doesn't have to participate in the binary: It doesn't have to be only abstract or representational; it can be based on photographs or feelings or, as it turns out in these works, memories.

Marley's works offer no contradiction between abstract and figurative modes of painting. They nearly seem to evade the historical problem altogether but still point at it, which is why I've spent these words unpacking the past. They bring together abstraction and figuration without abolishing distinctions or creating a hierarchy. It's more a relationship of equals. Each way of working points towards the other, and also seems to find itself within the other. The paintings are consequently invitations to see double.

Take, for instance, one of my favorite paintings from Marley's recent show: *Ampersand* (2018). As with all the works in the exhibition, the piece began with a layer of handmade gesso. Over time, color patches in oil paint accumulated: periwinkle, red, orange, mahogany, eggplant, greens, and more. Two figures and a grey cat casually sit on this choc-a-block scenario. On the left, beneath a thin veil of yellow, two ghastly eyes appear, while the rest of the person's face has been painted over in shades of blue. The figure on the right wears a striped shirt and their head is painted in striations of red. All the shapes making up

the work appear to hover, like pieces of a puzzle that could be moved around. There might be a bunch of levitating lemons around their legs or it might be a blanket. What's clear, however, is a relationship between the two figures: They are holding hands.

I asked Marley about inspirations and wasn't surprised to learn that a painting with a dematerialized, haunting doubling, or coupling, was offered up: Édouard Vuillard's *Self Portrait with Waroquy* (1889) from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On this work, she said, "Somehow having two heads next to each other makes me think of thinking itself. And Vuillard's paintings generally get me painting. They are so flat—like a textile. Everything is painted with a similar treatment except, in this painting, the bottle. They are so psychological. It's like watching a TV show in a painting."

Vuillard was only twenty-three when he painted this uncanny work, and he can be identified as the figure on the left, holding a palette and paintbrushes in hand. Behind him is his friend, Waroquy, a cigarette between his lips. Waroquy's ghostlike body appears unfinished, his face less defined, washed-out. A small, rounded bottle is placed at the lower right corner of the canvas, which is also doubled, and flattened. It then becomes clear that this is a mirror image, a depiction of a reflection. According to one of Vuillard's journal entries, he posed in front a mirror in his grandmother's bedroom to produce the painting. The work is indicative of Vuillard's move away from mimetically capturing nature and towards a more fluctuating, imprecise field of vision—between sensation and imagination—which would go on to become the lifeblood of his practice, and a major (if undervalued) crossroads in the history of art.

Another inspiration cited by Marley: Maine. Many of the works in "Park Closes at Midnight" are based on memories of the state's cold, crystal clear saltwater, and its rocky seashores bordered by pine trees and shrubs. For me, the paintings summon nostalgia for swimming in Lincolnville—namely, at a beach where the Ducktrap River flows into Penobscot Bay—and it was a pleasure to have the opportunity to be there while thinking through much of this essay. While in Maine, I caught a wonderful, if too small, show at Rockland's Farnsworth Art Museum: "Slab City Rendezvous." The exhibition took its title from a 1964 painting by Red Grooms, which depicts a party scene on Slab City Road in Lincolnville. The show brought together a group of New York-based artists who had been summering in Maine since in the 1950s and '60s, and the works on view, nearly all figurative and sometimes realist paintings, wrestled with the dominant style of their day: Abstract Expressionism. Among works by Alex Katz, Rackstraw Downes, and Mimi Gross, a painting by Lois Dodd caught my eye, because it was one of the only works to retain a sense of abstraction.

Dodd's *Clam Diggers* (1958-59), a jumble of shapes in muted browns, grays, and blues, at first appears entirely abstract. But on closer inspection, a figure emerges in the center of the painting: a hunched over person tunneling into the ground, silhouetted by the sea. The composition reminded me of Marley's work, particularly that aforementioned figure in *Erasure alert*, but also *Nikki* (2018) and *For the Night* (2018), where shapes of unmodulated color create a bold patterning and almost seem to turn in and churn, wavelike, into one another. Those paintings aren't quite seascapes—they are non-representational—but they find easy kinship with Dodd's work.

What does it mean to represent something? Increasingly, artists seem doomed to represent—their gender, class, race, and sexual identification are offered up in their works—and

“with this,” Aria Dean writes, they “condemn themselves to bouncing these representations around galleries and museums for all of eternity (or until the artist wises up and skips town, so to speak).” Marley’s works offer an alternative, an option to opt-out of signifying monolithically, an escape route from conventional expectations of painting. She knows that no representation is ever complete. The canvases begin with no specific agenda and they end in an indeterminate openness. Or maybe they don’t end at all.