

AND IN THAT SENSE ANNIHILATED

Karma 2020 Online Viewing room

By Darla Migan

Marley Freeman's *And in that sense annihilated* presents thirteen paintings made at the artist's kitchen table in existential anxiety. The tightly arranged compositions in bright watercolor are bracing in their anticipation, following curiosity into our most primordial intuitions. Painted this spring in the Berkshires, the former textile designer's abstractions open up worlds, and tug hard at the always-loose threads of representation. The title work moves from top to bottom between translucence and shadow-play, with a suggestion of landscape greenery broken up by short, stiff cascades of diagonals in velvet-burgundy, paste-white, and river-bend blues. Freeman's bold composition plots out an inner sensorium in the tight space of a pressed cotton surface.

Existential anticipation—a sense of dread with no object, alternating with an ecstatic verve for life—grounds our very participation in what is necessary for concrete existence. In a time when patterns of commute and communication within and around the artist's studio are being interrupted and reworked, watercolor has been treated as a stopgap for the exigencies of life. However, watercolors are also the chosen form for early botanists' illustrations; and in the nineteenth century atelier, watercolor held an important prefatory function—sitting above the drawn sketch and below the oil painting.

The creative act likens itself to the fundamental question of metaphysics: why is there something rather than nothing? And if art, like being, involves both the large and small acts of creation, then artists are also asked to make a dwelling for creation. *The thing* (all works 2020) dynamically turns on this 'nothing insisting on being something' quality, as we partake in its craggy overflow and our eyes hopscotch between electric pink daubs. The illusion of speed and the pockets of rest are heightened by a tumbling pointillism, but ultimately we are left suspended in animation. As it turns out, abstraction is never truly empty, color is no accident (being a decision full of substance), wealth is not an antidote to death, and freedom is actually quite terrifying.

Thinking already happens in the look, and as we observe the world today, our bodies intuitively respond with anxiety, provoking some mix of mania and subtle planning—all makeshift actions for what will turn out to be only a failed escape. Creation keeps us curious about interpreting what may escape prediction—anomalies of all kinds—which keeps us attuned to the possibilities within our finitude, but just outside the frame. This is the tug of the two-fold, a pulling-apart that also threads the needle, opening us afresh after reflection, or guiding the dreamy haze necessary to ground whatever comes next.

In *Nestling, malleable, pliant, compliant, nimble*, cloud-forms sit low on the horizon, much too close for comfort, swallowed up by foliage and crunched in by the riverbed. Nature's expanse is already locked in, ever limited by this earthly atmosphere. A small blue fence shows fields further stifled by agriculture, and then finally compressed down to the size of the page. Insofar as we know that clouds are subject to dispersion, they offer no hope for eternal grace. We stare up and come to expect their betrayal of our representations.

Shapes will break our faith, rains come rolling in.

Distancelesness, with its burnt orange, molten red, and neon yellow, comes in like a torrent of fireballs, already committed to overtaking gloomy hues for this inquiry into the mysteries of existence. Whether due to ongoing wars or for those whose pre-existing vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the pandemic, fear is never general. However much anxiety arrives closer to our shared horizon, it still refuses to make itself known in an equivalent way. In this sense, that restless, searching sensation perhaps can be understood as both universal and singular. It is the thing that ties us to our mortality, but is uneven in its descent—a private abyss necessitating as many motifs. Still, we do know that major transformation will show up unexpectedly, like a siren, a wake up call, tearing into and melting the fabric of the familiar.

Freeman admits to having a “dry brush crush,” and uses watercolor here like acrylics to create contours with a “chalky” appearance, instead of working up the hard layering of plastics onto plastics. And yet, even as we are reminded of one of the oldest forms of mark-making, Freeman's watercolors do not shy away from the coloration familiar to popular culture or its nostalgic revisiting. In *The building barrier* we see an elongated Rubik's Cube in the foreground—not quite a staircase and not quite a Tetris block—stepping out of the frame like twenty-first century pixilation distracted from its algorithmic function.

Hallelujah! “We cannot step into the same stream twice,” says the ancient pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. Change comes whether we like it or not, and an encounter with art enables us to discover what is meaningful to us. As an artist, Freeman has now accumulated enough confidence to know that a painting can reach completion, even if it may not be clear when that moment will come, or how the life of the work will go on. Walk away, close the eyes, feel the picture still vibrating. Insofar as we do not know who will experience it and what consequences it will reap in the world, works of art go on about their business of creating worlds.

The point is that at some point—we don't know when—we might trip. *And in that sense annihilated* takes a cue from the feelings that spring forth in dire moments—sometimes creeping up on us, seemingly from nowhere, or taking us down into a lightning storm of emotions. Stretching into a brief flow or tuning in to a fractured rainbow overtakes the nebulous haze of not knowing. In their indecipherability, Freeman's paintings vibrate with anticipation in ecstatic service to life.