

“Kendra Larson: Otherworldly Light”, an by Richard Speer

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“Nature is a haunted house, but art—a house that tries to be haunted.”

—Emily Dickinson, Letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, 1876

From the nadir of the darkest cave to the cap of the vault of heaven, Kendra Larson’s landscapes, skylscapes, and symbolic vignettes transport us to realms of enigma and exaltation. In her sylvan vistas and tableaux of shooting stars and Roman candles, light itself becomes a shorthand for nature’s unadulterated beauty and the impenetrable veil that shrouds it. The aurorae borealis and australis, the miracles of bioluminescence, and the human-made fireworks that have sprayed the night effulgent since the flowering of the Song Dynasty all emit what Larson calls “otherworldly light.” Her paintings are celebrations of their mystery. They are recordings of rites. They are the luminous chasing the numinous.

The roots of this uncanny integration may lie somewhere in the Willamette River Valley of northwest Oregon, where the artist was born in 1981. Although her paternal grandfather had a home in the country, the bulk of her upbringing was far from pastoral. She grew up in Salem, the state’s capital, “in areas that were on the cusp of change,” as she recalled during a recent interview. “The first two houses my family lived in backed up to a field that was old farmland, but it was being built up into residential suburban areas. You could go play in the fields, but you saw the train of ‘progress’ coming your way.” She and the neighborhood kids didn’t care much for toys, but they had big imaginations, and they weren’t afraid to get dirty, skip class, hang out in ditches and under bridges, and wade through muddy creeks strewn with garbage and glass. In retrospect it was a poignant place and time, where the meadow’s reign yielded to asphalt’s encroachment and one paused and watched as nature was eaten alive.

In high school one of her teachers, Shirley Giesbrecht, steered her into studying art, which channeled her thoughts and energies into the estuary where reality commingles with the fantastical. She moved to Portland in 2000, earned an undergraduate degree in painting at Pacific Northwest College of Art, and found herself fascinated by the endless permutations of materials in motion. “I loved the magic of it, the alchemy of moving one physical thing into another physical form.” Initially she was drawn to portraiture, especially the work of Alice Neel, but over the course of two residencies—one at Caldera in central Oregon, the other on the North Island of New Zealand—she felt the gravitational pull of landscape. In her paintings, then as now, she retained a portraitist’s gift for capturing the relationship between figure and observer; nature has become her sitter. This emphasis intensified when she headed to the Midwest to earn her M.F.A. at the University of Wisconsin (Madison), graduating in 2009. In that endlessly flat topography, with its bitter winters and muggy summers, she grew homesick for the fir-blanketed Cascade Mountains of the Pacific Northwest, which have continued to provide subject matter for her paintings, drawings, and sculpture.

More so than any particular region, however, she is galvanized by the challenge of encapsulating a landscape’s essence. We might call a spirit; the French say *esprit*; the Germans, even more to the point, *Geist* (literally, “ghost”). Something that haunts. In her grayscale Visual Poetry series (2015-2018) she painted collage-like tapestries of organic, human-made, and astronomical imagery, developing a visual syntax for the inscrutable parallels between physical and metaphysical space. Among her historical influences are artists whose expressionistic sensibilities verge on magical realism—William Blake, Emily Carr, Charles Burchfield, Alice Neel, Katherine Bradford; or on sludgy, sinister materiality—Anselm Kiefer, Kim Dorland, Lucinda Parker; the dark romanticism of Caspar David Friedrich and contemporary Australian photographer Bill Henson; and the almost psychedelic intensity of Georgia O’Keeffe. Arguably, her most archetypal works to date are virtuosic depictions of sunbursts (as in *Rapture* and *The Hike*, both from 2020), starlit skies, northern lights, and fireworks. It is noteworthy that until she began wearing glasses in the third grade, her depth perception was off, her field of vision an amorphous miasma of color, which for all she knew could have been a thousand feet away or two inches from her nose. This is precisely what celestial events and fireworks do to our spatial

awareness: they create “thin places” where membranes separating earth from sky turn semi-permeable, and faraway objects take on in-your-face immediacy.

Subjects needn't be outwardly spectacular to appear in Larson's compositions. Even the common moth, a recurring motif for the artist since 2012, commands heightened significance. Unlike their cousins the butterflies, whose very names (Monarch, Viceroy, Gossamer-winged) signal nobility, moths flutter and thump about in search of wool sweaters to eat or flames to fumble into. In Larson's vision, though, they whisper secrets of the cosmos, superimposed before distant nebulae; with Kipling they could walk with kings nor lose the common touch; with Blake they invite us to hold infinity in the palms of our hands. So too the lowly worms that inspired her paintings *The Cave* (2008) and *The Abyss* (2019) were based on the glow-worm caves she visited in New Zealand—slime-oozing fungus-gnat larvae whose phosphorescence turns inky grottoes into constellation-pinpricks of the preternatural.

I suspect she would not express it this way, but I believe Larson is interested in transmutation. Taking something to a higher level. Seeing something prosaic and helping the rest of us discover the poetry and goodness within it. She doesn't just do this in her paintings. In many of her endeavors outside the studio she combines activism, social practice, feminist concerns, and curation, sometimes in collaboration with her husband, artist/musician Christopher Buckingham. Together they opened and programmed a music/art venue called *The Project Lodge* in Madison from 2007 to 2009, co-founded the *Stumptown Creative* art-rental business in Portland in 2014, and in 2019 started the podcast “*Art Gab*,” which Larson co-hosts with her sister, Ashley. A committed educator, she teaches at Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland State University, and Portland Community College. At *Disjecta Contemporary Art Center*, in 2012 and 2013, she curated the *Vestibule* exhibition space, an inventive and bracingly experimental adjunct to *Disjecta's* programming.

Since 2016 she has been represented by *Augen Gallery* (Portland), which has mounted three of her recent solo exhibitions, evincing her continuous refinement of surface and materiality and an increasingly subtle and complex handling of chroma. In these and subsequent bodies of work she explores themes of nature-reverence that strike a transcendentalist, pagan, or Shinto chord, but without reference to any specific spiritual creed. In this respect she shares an altar with Frank Lloyd Wright, who famously proclaimed: “I put a capital ‘N’ on Nature and call it my church.” With invention and discipline, Kendra Larson returns to universal themes: the evanescence of color, light, atmosphere, and our human capacity for wonderment in the face of the staggering, fierce beauty of the organic world. Her work reminds us of something too easily forgotten in the ironist/postmodernist din that dominates much of contemporary-art discourse: that mark-making can serve as a divining rod, a talisman, a totem, steadying us on the stairway that rises from the cave to the stars.

—Richard Speer is a Portland, Oregon-based art critic and curator whose reviews and essays have appeared in ARTnews, Art Papers, Artpulse, Visual Art Source, The Chicago Tribune, The Los Angeles Times, Salon, and Newsweek. His most recent book is The Space of Effusion: Sam Francis in Japan (Scheidegger & Spiess, 2020), a companion publication to the exhibition he is co-curating at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Sam Francis and Japan: Emptiness Overflowing (April-September 2021). For more information, please visit www.richardspeer.com.