



Eccentric Architecture

by Julia Felsenthal

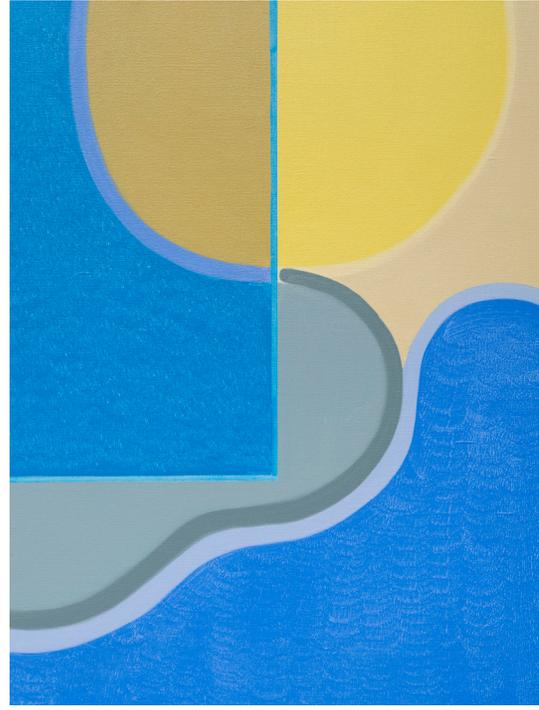
I was a writer on the culture desk at *Vogue* in 2015 when I first encountered Lily Stockman. She had just published a dispatch from her part-time home in the Mojave desert on the magazine's website, an essay that, all of us in the office agreed, was unusually good—dismayingly good once I realized that writing was only Lily's side hustle; painting was her main event.

Knowing Lily as a writer before I knew her as an artist no doubt shapes the way I receive her paintings: as acts of translation between the world of words and the world of images, made by someone who savors and delights in language. Speaking with her about this show, I'm not surprised to learn that when she gets stuck making her own paintings, she'll sometimes read about, rather than look at, another artist's work. Or that an unfinished canvas in her studio, radiant with magenta, apricot and vermillion, emerged from a note she jotted down, describing, rather than sketching, the blazing colors of the pre-dawn sky.

In one of my favorite poems, "A Myth of Devotion," Louise Glück depicts a lovelorn Hades "watching/ Persephone in the meadow./ Persephone, a smeller, a taster." I have always been jolted by that line, the way Glück tweaks perception from something one does, to something one *is*, but it clicks when I look at Lily's canvases. In this new body of work, she paints from her recollection of *Camellia Japonica* flowers perfuming a nursery in the mountains above Los Angeles, and from her homesickness for the scent of verdant Timothy and orchard grasses, redolent of her childhood in rural New Jersey. "Attention is the beginning of devotion," Mary Oliver wrote, a quote I heard Lily invoke in an interview. To me she describes—attentive, devoted—the experience of walking through a glade to the edge of the woods and coming across a wallow of grass crushed by a sleeping deer—the ghostly, negative impression of the animal's form more interesting to her than the deer itself.



L: *Trumpet Vine*, 2022



R: *Cadillac Mountain - Detail*, 2022

In Glück’s retelling, Hades builds for Persephone “a duplicate of earth” in his subterranean kingdom, but it is airless and hollow, like a landscape painting that faithfully captures the view while entirely missing the point. Lily, a self-described “nature painter,” works from an inverse impulse: skirting representation or narrative, but endeavoring to “insert the first person into the landscape” through an alchemical marriage of color and form. Her canvases riff on a set structure: a central shape floats within a series of frames, outlined and underlined in freehand brush strokes; each form, plane or border its own tightly tuned color note, so that each painting sounds a distinct chromatic chord—and the best ones seem to thrum audibly. These are synesthetic paintings, showcasing their maker’s nose for color, her eye for sound. But they are also, literally, literal. The curvilinear blips and blobs that often center the compositions read to me like glyphs, letters in a secret alphabet. “Nouns of the paintings” Lily calls them, but they are signifiers attenuated from signification, seductively inscrutable. You think you can read them, but you cannot. Like poems, they evoke sensation and recognition but deflect direct interpretation.

Lily often describes her work in terms of poetry: canvases hang on walls in the rhythm of iambic pentameter, a show like a sonnet, each painting a couplet. As a kid she read her mother’s favorite poets and learned the Latin names of plants, a salve for her dyslexia, a structure for organizing language. Now, she sends me Marianne Moore’s “Poetry,” underscoring the line in which Moore compares poems to “imaginary gardens with real toads in them.” It helps me understand why she paints the way she does: erecting eccentric architecture according to invented conventions to house the imprint of sensory memories that call back to real places. I know from my own painting practice that seemingly arbitrary guiderails serve to narrow the crippling intersection of possibilities into a single lane of forward motion. All artists are gardeners defining the borders of our tiny plots, then planting them to see what takes root.

Fittingly, Lily titled this show “The Tilting Chair”, in homage to a socket mechanism invented by the Shakers that allowed their ladderback chairs a slight recline. It pleases her that the chair design accommodated an adaptation that permitted the very thing you weren’t supposed to do in the chair—lean back—and in true Stockmanian fashion, she’s digested this factoid as permission to bend, if not break, her own rules. In recent paintings she’s relaxed chromatic symmetries, allowed her shapes a jail break from the central axis of her canvas, and introduced earthier colors into once pastel palettes. What interests me most, though, is the way she has begun to worry her surfaces, inspired by Albert Pinkham Ryder’s atmospheric late 19th century landscape paintings. Using an old brush, Lily is “scumbling back over” her canvases, removing pigment in places so that regions of color once solid and fixed now fizz and churn, betraying dimensional depth, confusing what is object and what is space. It is a rich vein to tap. Like texts that reveal themselves only after many re-readings, these new paintings are cracking open, inviting us in.