



VILLA MAGDALENA

HYPERALLERGIC

The Beauty of the Ephemeral World

by John Yau
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Lucy Mullican, *Through The Clouds*, 2021. Watercolor on board, 12 x 12 inches. (All images courtesy Olympia gallery).

Whereas the creators of landscape abstractions generally believed their paintings were impervious to time, Lucy Mullican makes artworks that are exposed and susceptible.

Olympia gallery's mission statement reads: "Olympia is dedicated to dismantling the cis-male centric art canon." This means making a space for women artists at the beginning of their careers, which is a good reason to visit. Another reason is to support a DIY space that is on the opposite end of the real estate spectrum from the warehouse-sized galleries displaying their expensive wares. As much as they might claim otherwise, blue chip galleries do little to alter or challenge the status quo. They are too busy preserving the steady flow of money in the global economy.

Lucy Mullican: Sensed As Well As Seen at Olympia is the artist's first New York solo show, and should not be missed. Her materials include watercolor, colored pencil, and naturally dyed string, which she applies to board, plywood, paper, and muslin. Accompanying the works Mullican has made are a few sets of shoes she found in different places she has lived and worked, which include Glasgow, Macedonia, New Zealand, Australia, and Germany.

What connects the washes of pale grays, greens, and blues, the watercolors, drawings, and embroidery, and the shoes set on tables, like sculptures on pedestals, is a sense of impermanence and vulnerability. No longer used, the shoes evoke both an absent life and the enduring of



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materials that exist in time differently than us. Looking at an unusually shaped pair of swamp boots that I was told Mullican found in Chinatown, I was reminded of the last lines of Tomas Tranströmer's poem "After Someone's Death": "The samurai looks insignificant/ beside his armor of black dragon scales" (translated from the Swedish by Robert Bly).

What survives and what is lost seem to be among Mullican's preoccupations. Knowing that time will eventually subsume our creations and us, she makes no gesture toward the unchangeable. By working in semi-transparent watercolor on modest-sized wood panels with visible grains, she pulls us past the image, and leads us to scrutinize the relationship between the watercolor marks and the lines of the wood grain.

Mullican seems to have no set approach to her use of watercolor. Shapes can be outlined by the wood grain or be completely independent of it; or, using semi-transparent color, she incorporates it as another element in the composition. Additionally, the density of the colors change from solid to transparent and saturated to pale. In every work it appears that the artist interacted with the wood grain, rather than regarded the support as a blank surface.

Mullican works with a simple but flexible vocabulary of tubular shapes, cloud-like stains, ellipses, and irregular shapes, and moves between abstraction and representation. At no point did I feel that her painting became predictable. In one of the exhibition's larger works, using a palette of blues and greens, Mullican depicted an irregularly shaped, cross-like form, which extends beyond the wood panel's four edges. In the interior of the rolling-edged cross, or blue water, the artist laid down green islands, whose shapes echo the visible lines of the wood grain pattern. Within some of the islands is a blue shape that transforms it into a flat, donut-like form. The relationship between the watercolor and wood grain is one of acknowledgement. In this way, their interaction is part of the meaning, as is a feeling that it could all fade, that everything is in some sense ephemeral in the face of time.

While Mullican's work both extends from and revises landscape abstraction and the work of artists such as Arthur Dove and John Constable, I also feel that her interaction with the wood supports and her commitment to watercolor sets her in a category all her own. Whereas the creators of landscape abstractions generally believed their paintings were impervious to time, Mullican makes artworks that are exposed and susceptible.

Existing separately and alongside these abstract, often enigmatic works, Mullican makes aerial views of landscapes populated by trees, roads, and fields — inspired it would seem by naïve art. In "Untitled" (2022), the centrally located abstract form, an irregular red ellipse bordered by a thin band, resists being deciphered. What is it a sign of?

In works that explore the phenomena of light shining through water, evoke the Northern Lights, depict clouds reformulating their shape, or convey the layers of the earth's strata, Mullican applies the watercolor differently or draws with colored pencil. On a large vertical sheet of cream-colored muslin she has sewn sections of naturally dyed string, whose pale brown and tan hues are apt to remind the viewer of earthworms.

Mullican, who is under 30, is a young artist, but her vision and sensibility suggest the maturity of her experience. If anything, I feel that she has defined the basis of a career whose trajectory will likely surprise and engage viewers who follow her work, which is what I am going to do.

Lucy Mullican: *Sensed As Well As Seen continues at Olympia (41 Orchard Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through May 21. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*