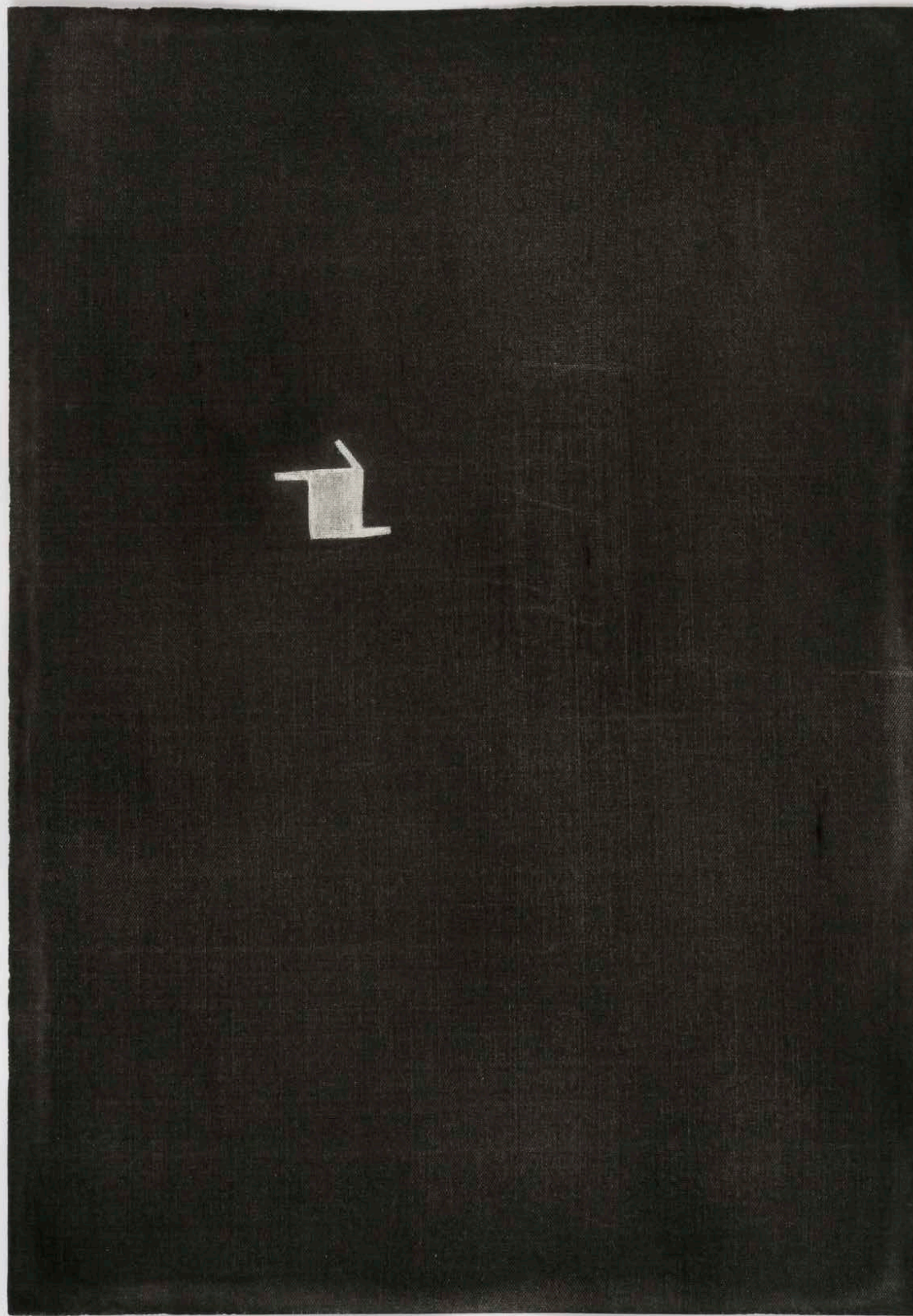


On the Edge of Visibility

LÉONIE GUYER WITH SIMONE KEARNEY

Léonie Guyer (b. 1955, NY) is an artist living and working in San Francisco, California. Her work deals in minimalist abstraction and consists of painting, drawing, installation, and artist books. Having whittled down the visual and material elements of her work, her practice functions as an exercise in distillation. In and through the compression of these elements, a spaciousness arises. This is perhaps not unlike what I experience when I read poems: I discover that scale is relative. The pressure is the passage. And yet that is where the work's analogy with poetry ends, since Guyer's shapes are very much outside the realm of the nameable. Guyer has created her own silent alphabet of forms that are equally compact and ambiguous; forms which shift slightly, or sometimes greatly, from ground to ground, both in terms of their shape as well as where they reside in relation

to the edges of the surface on and in which they reside. Her alphabet consists of the following: 1) Sometimes the forms manifest as opaque solid shapes, sometimes as contours made up of one or more superimposed lines. 2) The forms are placed on a horizon-less ground, either singular or in pairs. 3) Her palette is comprised largely of white, black, and red, or variations on these colours. Sometimes she mixes primaries to generate various complex greys that border on violet-grey or green-grey. 4) The colour relationships between the form and the ground are either close tonal range or high contrast. 5) The surfaces consist of marble, paper, panel, silk, window, or wall. 5a) On pieces of marble, she incises the form to create an indentation, and then paints the form, leaving the remainder of the ground untouched. 5b) On found antique paper, she



uses either graphite, coloured pencil, charcoal, ink, or watercolour, and sometimes a combination of these, to conjure the form, leaving the rest of the ground untouched. 5c) On panel, she prepares her own chalk ground, wiping and reapplying layers of oil paint until the form and the ground become the painting. 5d) On walls, windows, or books, she makes site-specific forms, responding to the context of the space in which the form(s) exist when working with a site, or, when working with the books, responding to the printed text the form is in conversation with.

What I love most about Guyer's practice is how it makes visible a possibility of and for form: tracing its ever-renewing variations, while also insisting on the intense presence of each unique instance of form's fluctuation. As Guyer repeats her gesture of painting, drawing, or incising a form onto her ground, those forms appear differently each time, either in terms of composition or shape: from ground to ground we can witness forms swerve or wiggle this way or that, one curves this way slightly, the next has a tuft that emerges, a limb, a puff, a wisp, a splinter, a nick. It is in this movement that we feel form's specificity and multiplicity become actualized. The forms are the ethereal pressed into time by pigment or incision. They leave an impression, are instilled, and in turn instill in us. As if part of an elusive prism, each form is a facet, and each new instance of the form is like a cross-section from a reel that is capturing the exquisite unfolding of shape itself. Meanings collect in the creases made visible from such unfolding. But her repeated gestures of conjuring the forms, while similar in kind, are never self-same. As Gertrude Stein writes: "the difference is spreading."¹ The form, flitting from surface to surface, is arrestingly present, each one like a kind of molecular epiphany. And indeed, when looking at Guyer's work, I feel I am looking at bare life. But in this case, bare life is not

bereft, but full. Whatever this bare life is, movement is everywhere, and everything is alive, and alive with the vibration of relationship. In her work, I see what happens in the spaces between the bare minimums. I start to see the less discernible. It is what is coming into focus.

Simone Kearney: In thinking about your work, I stumbled upon a passage in *The Book of Margins*, where the poet Edmond Jabès writes: "Words born of the missed possibility and felt impossibility of others. ... Silent words that mark the silence only to break it, but which, O despair, can never break or even touch it ... words of emptiness ... already more easily grasped *through what cannot hold them.*" Although he's talking about poetry, I see this as resonant with how your forms are apprehended through what cannot hold them with words — they are grasped in and through a friction of possibilities for naming, possibilities the forms ultimately resist, it seems to me. And so I'd like to start by asking you: how do you think about the relationship between language and silence in your work?

Léonie Guyer: I think my work concerns that which eludes language. But language can be a touchstone for me in thinking about the work. A book I love and keep returning to is *The Life of Forms in Art* by Henri Focillon. As I understand it, the thesis of the book is that form is alive, the life of forms is a mystery, and that form holds within it the possibility of new form, of transformation. He titled his chapters "Form in the Realm of Matter," "Form in the Realm of Time," "Form in the Realm of Space," and so on. I had an exhibition at the Wattis Institute and had to title my show, which is never easy for me. Borrowing from Focillon, I made the title *form in the realm of*. Leaving a space, a silence, within the phrase seemed right.

1. Gertrude Stein, "A Carafe, that is a Blind Glass," in *Tender Buttons: Objects — Food — Rooms* (Chicago: Project Gutenberg, 2005), 8. EPUB

SK: And as the forms arrive into being and become located on your ground, as alive with possibility as they are, how might they relate to the terms "fragment" or "remnant," that is, to a kind of history, and to wholeness?

LG: I find particular fragments and remnants compelling to work with as support/surface and context. The presence of a fragment evokes the absent whole. Its object character is resonant with an awareness of time, vulnerability, and mortality.

In every drawing and painting I'm working toward wholeness — in the sense of the word "integrity," which means wholeness, the thing in itself or the thing behind the thing — the *Ding an sich* as Kant referred to it. And hopefully it comes alive, and hints at the possibility of transformation — that's what I'm going for.

SK: Do you see that ripeness for transformation, where the form is latent with other forms, as being connected to this idea of "the thing behind the thing"?

LG: Yes. I work on the drawing or painting until it looks right, knowing it may have to transform at any moment. There's a dynamic tension there, between the form being fully realized and something perhaps unattainable. That tension is really key to the work.

SK: And does this tension disturb the form's intactness? Or is this just something that should be part of how we understand wholeness — that it is rife with what is not yet present?

LG: Maybe both, as the form's intactness is precarious, mutable, and holds an intimation of something unseen. This goes to the thing behind the thing. Behind the thing we can see, and perhaps within it, is the thing we cannot see — the invisible energy field.

The Heart Sutra refers to forms continually arising from and dissolving into formlessness, moment by moment. The work is a navigation between the invisible and the visible, formless and form. An impulse or fragment of thought arises from the realm of the invisible, the mind, which one tries to give visible form.

SK: While honouring the qualities of the invisible from which it emerged?

LG: Yes, and that's why it's really hard to make art.

SK: And the process then is about drawing the visible out from the invisible?

LG: Right, and some works I've made want to exist at that edge of visibility. For example, at the Wattis, I made a group of wall drawings. They were quite subtle. Sometimes I would walk into the space and even I wouldn't see them for a while! If a viewer was curious to enter into that place where something is really hard to see, once they discover it, then it's not hard to see. A magical moment occurred when Yvonne Rand, one of my dharma teachers, came to the gallery and the first thing she noticed was the least visible drawing. A capacity for discernment can be cultivated. I think art offers this.

SK: I love the "edge of visibility" you describe in your work. This teetering between the discernable and the indiscernible is something that happens both in terms of the visual but also on a level that I feel relates to language, as I mentioned earlier. Since once something is nameable it's maybe more recognizable, or it more fully emerges. Sometimes the dissolve into namelessness is a dissolve into formlessness and invisibility.

LG: To be present at an edge concentrates awareness and heightens perception. It's not



Untitled working drawing, 2021, pencil and coloured pencil on tracing paper, 8 1/4 x 7 1/2 in.

an easy place to be. Think about mainstream culture, everything is supposed to be bigger, newer, shinier, faster, sexier, noisier. I'm so not interested in that! Here's where we get into the politics or values, let's say, embodied in the work. When I think about my affinity for quiet, for slowness and spaciousness, I think about the music of Morton Feldman, especially his compositions for piano. I have this recording of Morty playing, and when you think of him and his physicality, his big paws as Philip Guston painted, when you imagine him making the most delicate sounds, I mean, nobody played his music the way he played it. When he makes the sound of that note, it emerges out of silence and then it dissolves back into the silence.

SK: "Elision" is a word that comes to mind, although it's not really about omission, it's more about that gap of silence stretching out.

LG: Elision has a sense of the space in-between, what can be named and what is unnameable.

SK: And that literal space that's created between those things.

LG: Yes. Silence and space, visually and conceptually, are central concerns of my work.

SK: I'd love to talk more about the politics and values embodied in the work you mention. Or here's my question more specifically: I know you're not making work about symbols or narratives, but I wanted to know if you saw gender and sexuality as playing a role in your investigations in some shape or form, or how you see these as figuring in the work?

LG: Growing up, I felt a sense of being "other," as many artists and queer people do. My

father was a painter so I was aware of art before I could talk. I had crushes on girls from the time I was five. I became an activist in the anti-Vietnam War movement when I was twelve. At fourteen I read "Sisterhood is Powerful" and identified as a feminist. I regard abstraction as a space of freedom. The formal and material choices I make embody my values, which tend to be in opposition to, or subvert, mainstream cultural values, as mentioned earlier. I'm interested in ambiguity, subtlety, simplicity, the humble, intimacy of scale, imperfection, edges, the liminal — qualities that are not cherished or promoted in contemporary culture. I suppose this is informed in some way by navigating the world in a female queer body, but I leave it to others to examine this question.

SK: Speaking of ambiguity, the shapes on your grounds feel very specific, and yet they cannot be located or pinned down: your forms are almost this, almost that, but not those things, and yet they are here, arrestingly present. Could you talk about the characters of the shapes themselves?

LG: In the mid 1980s I made some drawings that seemed to me at once familiar and mysterious. I've been working with related shapes ever since. Each comes from a kind of excavation, drawn forth from an interior realm in rough or incipient form, then subject to countless adjustments. The specific character of the shapes springs from a tension between rigorous simplicity and eccentricities of form. They conflate the geometric and organic, symmetry and asymmetry. Tension may emanate from a contraction or expansion, a twist, angle or curve, a point of intersection, a slight instability — imparting to the shapes vulnerability, gravitas, humour.

SK: I read somewhere that Lawrence Rinder

said that your forms “attend to shape as a kind of powerful reverse explosion.”

LG: Yes! Like a kind of ur-form, a vital presence. They are not symbols or signs, nor do they refer directly to anything other than themselves — though they may refer to myriad things obliquely. While specific and individuated, they resist being named and invite an open reading.

SK: You also are very selective about your colours — how do you set the parameters for how you deploy colour in your work?

LG: I work with few colours — ochres, iron oxides, mineral blues — the “ancient” versions of the primaries, as in fresco painting — and spend a lot of time mixing paint. I’m always thinking about colour in relationship to the primary colours. If you have the primaries, you have all the colours. Limiting the palette helps me attend to nuanced shifts in hue, colour temperature, value. I’m interested in the infinite possibilities within restricted parameters, and I’m drawn towards simplicity. Of course, simplicity is the hardest thing of all.

I think of red as the first and last colour. The colour of blood. And there’s the ancient Greeks, whose polychromed sculptures have faded over the centuries except for the occasional trace of red. After black and white, I turn to red. And I’m obsessed with subtle variations of whites, blacks, greys. The way they can hold complex layers and admixtures of colour within. How colour creates space.

SK: Yes, that space is generated on so many levels —

LG: And what is held in that space? How are multiple meanings concentrated into form? That’s really the investigation. There’s another quote from Focillon, where he talks about iconography ...

SK: I wrote that quote down! “Iconography may be understood in several different ways: it is either the variation of forms on the same meaning or the variation of meanings on the same form.”

LG: Yes, that’s it! And here’s the situation in contemporary life, or at least since modernism. In the past, there were distinct iconographies — Cycladic art, Buddhist art, Quattrocento Siennese painting — that artists had to work with. In Egypt, it went on for thousands and thousands of years. Then in Western art all of that is shattered in the 19th century—and then there’s modernism! So here we are, and we don’t have an intact iconography. I feel a longing for that, but not in a nostalgic way, because you can’t have that if you’re a contemporary person. We have to make our own meaning.

SK: So how does that longing play itself out? How do you stumble upon new iconographies? And does memory play a role here?

LG: I think there are fragments of memories, of experiences, going back to the beginning of one’s life. I was born with a hungry eye. Growing up surrounded by my father’s paintings and artbooks was a terrific foundation. I often hung out in his studio while he was painting. We lived a half hour from midtown, so I was frequently taken to all the great museums and to galleries and was actively looking at a vast range of art from a very early age. I’d seen so much art and had such a highly developed critical awareness as a young person, it became kind of paralyzing — I think when I got to art school I had to “unlearn” to find my own path as an artist. And the shapes were/are generated by this desire to begin from a place of not knowing.

If you’re a visual thinker, you can sit here and look out at the river or be at the grocery store and you’re paying attention to visual

experience. Countless moments of visual awareness are held in one’s consciousness. If you come to my studio, you won’t see postcards or other visual references on the walls—I can’t have that, I find it distracting—and I have very few books in the studio, but many books elsewhere in the apartment. The studio is the size of a postage stamp, but it’s very beautiful. There’s a bay window and cove ceilings; I imagine my thoughts floating around up there. I need silence to do my work. Regarding memories, there may be an echo of a contour, space, colour seen a long time ago or the other day or in a dream. It’s in there. But I’m not making any direct references. All this seeing has to be digested and become part of me. Sometime later a fragment or trace may be excavated and generate a new form.

SK: Well often the work does look like something unearthed from the ground.

LG: The ground of being, the psyche. Memory is there, not in a narrative sense, but in the field of consciousness. I’ve been reading Proust for some years. My parents were great readers, and my father read every translation of Proust including the most recent one. After he died, I took his Proust books and a few months later started reading the novel. I wish I could’ve called him up to say, “Pop, I’m reading *In Search of Lost Time*, it’s one of the greatest things I’ve ever read, let’s talk about it.” But as my brother said, “we just don’t have his number anymore.” Now I’m going to cry, because I went to see *Cézanne Drawing* at MoMA this morning, and he was so important to my father and is to me. I felt my father’s presence and absence so intensely as I was looking at the late watercolours, especially when the Mont Sainte-Victoire nearly breaks apart.

My father was born in Philadelphia and grew up in the Bronx. He went to CCNY and

the Art Students League. He was a WPA Federal Art Project artist, then a New York School artist, then moved to California where he continued to paint mostly landscape-based abstraction till 2012, when he died on Valentine’s Day. As he got older, his eyesight became impaired, yet he made some of his best work late in life, in his 80s and 90s. He’s a role model for me; a true artist meets the challenges.

SK: Strangely, sometimes it’s the deprivation that somehow —

LG: Ignites the creative response!

SK: I have another thought about Proust. I was thinking about the madeleine moment, and how you’re talking about the digestion of memory and how something comes up to the surface — like the kind of involuntary memory that Proust describes — the epiphany of form.

LG: When I was reading the novel, I would also be reading a lot of other things, and sometimes I’d put it down and come back to it, so it became hard to keep track of what was going on, who this aristocrat is and their lover or whatever. Someone told me that Proust himself couldn’t keep track of all the narrative threads! He’s really not writing a narrative, he’s writing about consciousness and perception, like when he talks about the patch of yellow wall in the Vermeer. It’s that moment when you’re seeing Vermeer seeing. It’s the Rembrandt self-portrait in the Frick, which I’ve been looking at my whole life. The humanity of Rembrandt is so deep, fathomless. All my life I’ve been scolded by museum guards for getting too close to paintings. I was scolded when I was seven and again just the other day for getting too close to a painting—but I have to get as close as possible to see what the paint is doing.

And here's what moves me about Cézanne's self-portrait, like my favorite Rembrandt self-portrait at the Frick: it's the same gaze. He's looking at himself and trying to see what it means to be human.

We're looking at the East River now, and the rain is just ending, it's five o'clock in late September, and there's all this grey-green-blue light in the sky and the water, and there's the bridge, there's New York — it's sublime. The dharma teaching says "the world is its own magic."

SK: Is it unlocked by seeing?

LG: Yes — just pay attention! To me, there's a connection between Feldman and the silence between the notes, the spaciousness in his music, which hovers at the edge of audibility. Pauline Oliveros had a band called The Deep Listening Band and I love the idea of deep listening because it's like deep seeing, close seeing. It requires you to slow down, to be quiet and to focus your awareness. I'm drawn to experiences which invite this quality of attention, works that unfold gradually, offer something new each time you encounter them. I aspire to this in my work.

SK: I find that the silence of your forms creates the conditions for visibility.

LG: Silence and spaciousness open onto potentiality.

SK: Your work is in many ways a form of response — the forms you generate are responses to the surfaces you choose, old paper, etc., or are transferred from one surface to another with tracing paper — they are forms of negotiation, quite simply, negotiating other surfaces, previous forms. And so I'm wondering what the terms "transcription" and "translation" mean to you in relation to your practice? And how

does the fact that you're responding to the ground shape, or inform, the form?

LG: I think of each mark on the surface as a response to what is there — the support as a site, a space, a specific object. I'm drawn to the traces of history in old paper, marble remnants, walls, and windows. The presence on my drawing table of a scrap of paper which has survived centuries is a kind of small miracle. I always hope I won't wreck it, though of course, sometimes this happens — you can't create without destroying!

Regarding translation and transcription, you know how artists make up rules for themselves, and then break them at some point? We create parameters for the inquiry. So I had this rule for a long time to never repeat a shape. I wanted to pick up a pencil or a brush and make a mark on a surface while being fully present in the moment. One day I was in my studio staring at the wall and I thought, why not repeat the shape? You can't step twice in the same river, as Heraclitus said. It's a different moment and context. Your awareness is not the same. The form will be new and different.

I've recently made an artist book, *Archive*, published by Land and Sea Oakland, a project of Maria Otero and Chris Duncan. The book is comprised of selections from an archive I wasn't intending on making, which accumulated over decades. Twenty years ago, I was invited to make site-responsive work for an exhibition in Düsseldorf. I was a bit nervous about the trip and decided I needed to take some images of my work with me to reference. In those days, the work was documented in slides. I had some slides scanned, which I then cropped and photocopied. When I returned, I kept these in a folder. As my process continually generates what I call "working drawings" on scraps of paper — iterations, tracings, revisions, photocopies — an archive formed. It's a



source in my studio work and site-responsive projects, and in turn the works, the drawings and paintings, are the source for the archive.

SK: I love this idea of the accidental archive! And thinking about the monumental scrap, but I want to loop back to what you said about how shift in context is shift in form, and the impossibility of achieving true sameness in the act of repetition.

LG: Repetition and variation have come to interest me. In 2009 I collaborated with Franck André Jamme, poet and scholar of Tantric painting, on a limited edition book. Franck asked if I could make a drawing, then make variations of it. These would be called “multiple originals.” The edition size would be determined by the number of drawings I made. He suggested 24. I had never worked with repetition in this way, but of course I said yes. I spent a summer making the suite of drawings. Each contained two shapes in subtly entwined red and graphite pencil lines. While there was repetition in materials, scale, and shape, each drawing allowed for compositional change — the two shapes moved around in the visual space. About six weeks into the project, I realized this was like saying a mantra. Franck’s title for the book was Mantra Box, but I didn’t approach the process with the idea of making a visual correlative to reciting a mantra — I’m not the kind of artist who has a preconceived idea and then executes it; I work intuitively — every decision I make has to emerge from an inner imperative. I just tried to be true to the spirit of the poem, one chapter of Franck’s seven-chapter love poem, and it worked out.

SK: How do you discern that inner imperative?

LG: You know when you’re being truthful, or honest, or not. It’s the same in the work.

SK: So the form was exactly the same, but it was positioned differently in relation to the ground in each work?

LG: Yes, I use a very basic technique learned in kindergarten! That is, you make a drawing, take some tracing paper, trace it, turn it over, scribble on the other side, then position it on another support and redraw it. When I first had the realization that I could reiterate a shape and it would never be the same, I called up my best friend to tell her. She said, “yeah, they’re your shapes. It’s like you’ve been depositing them in a savings account for quite a few years, you’ve got hundreds of them in there, you can withdraw a few.” So this expanded possibilities for my work — in revisiting shapes, deciding whether one merits reconsideration, revising, transmuting. And when I redraw it, I’m careful not to press too hard because I don’t want to make the form complete, I just want some tiny marks which guide me to draw it anew.

SK: In some ways, it’s not a complete tracing because you haven’t transferred all of the information, there’s some line-stuff that’s lost in translation.

LG: Yes, and what’s lost or missing is somehow part of what’s there, implied. It goes back to the idea of the fragment, or a trace of something in that sense—tracing a pathway, which a line does, moment by moment. Line, which I’m obsessed with, traces the flow of energy. You can make the same shape once or a thousand times, and it can be new if that’s your intention and you’re not doing it by rote, but you’re doing it like your life depends on it.

SK: And what is the difference between tending to one particular surface versus another, whether it is stone, paper, panel, wall, or window?

LG: I’m very specific in choosing and preparing supports. The ground has to function as a space where the shape can be located — it doesn’t work if the shape appears to be on it, it has to be in it. When using a piece of antique paper, marble, a wall, I like to leave most of the surface as is and only draw or paint what is necessary to transform it. But when using a traditional support such as a wood panel, I have to develop the surface until the ground has an energized presence, then I can invite the shape in. The process often involves a lot of change — a shape may get painted in and out, move around, or a completely different shape may be required.

SK: And those form’s mutations are written into the surface even if it’s not visible to the naked eye.

LG: Yes, and sometimes I’ve been working on a painting for a really long time and I’ve been committed to that shape and then I walk into the studio one morning and realize it doesn’t look right. Even if I thought that painting was almost done, I’ll have to paint it out. That’s the only way I can see what needs to happen next. Sometimes there’s a trace left of the earlier shape, a ghost, and that becomes part of the work’s history and meaning.

SK: It goes back to this question of visibility, where it might not be immediately discernible to the eye but it might be sensed, which is another kind of visibility.

LG: The question of scale is key, as well. Years ago, there was an extraordinary exhibition at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco of celadons and paintings from the Goryeo Dynasty. I didn’t know much about Korean painting at the time, and they were a revelation, because of course there are connections with Japanese and Chinese painting but I experienced these Korean

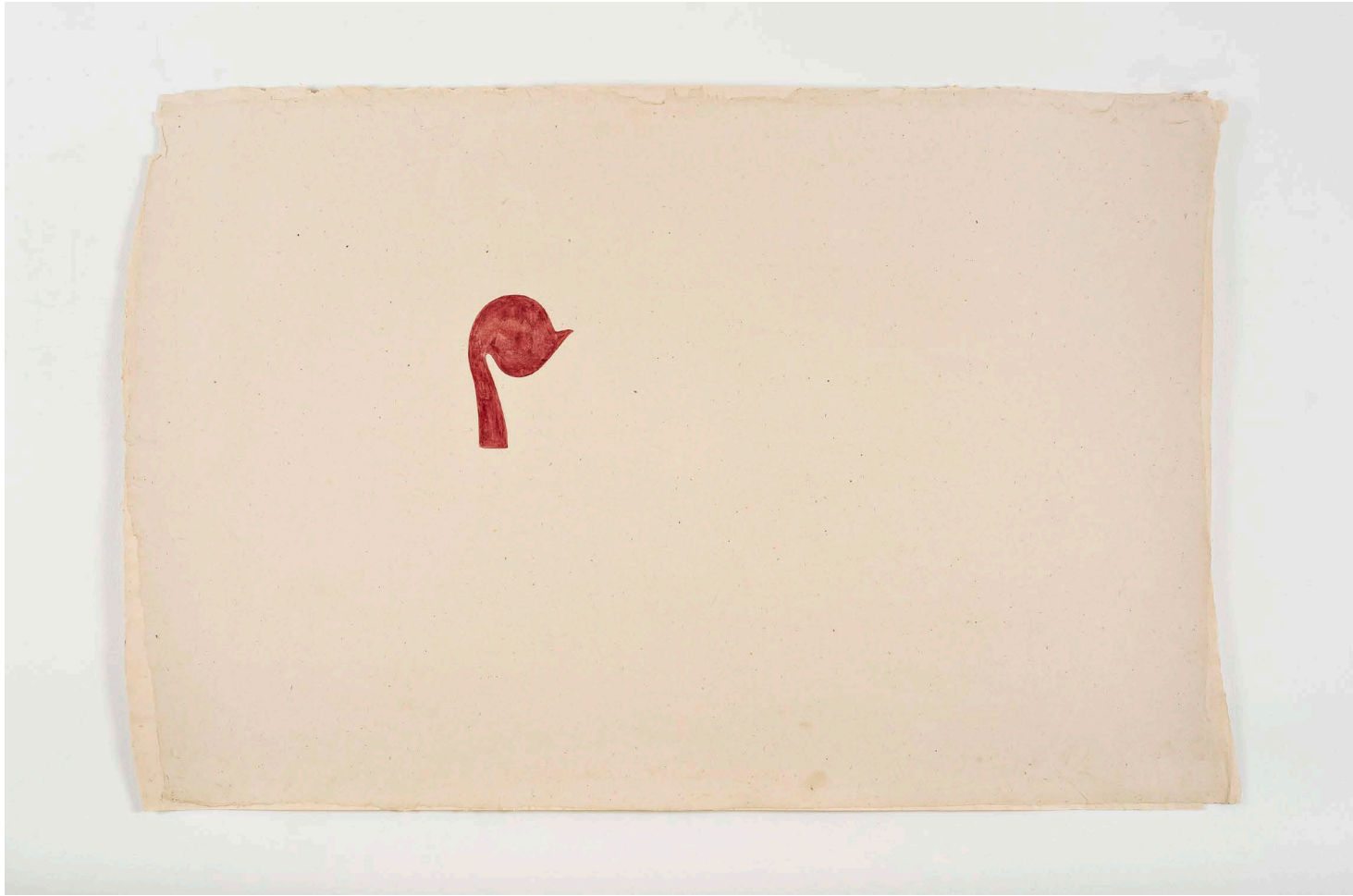
paintings as distinctly different — uniquely rigorous, refined, intellectual, and at the same time intimate. There was a painting in the exhibition that was so monumental they had to build a special wall for it. The subject of the painting was the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. While huge in dimensions, it had an intimacy of scale. I’ve also spent a lot of time looking at small landscape paintings from the Song Dynasty, where there’s a mountain and sea dissolving into sky and space — from form to formless — and it’s all happening within something that’s ten or so inches high, and it’s infinitely expansive. I’m interested in the relationship between intimate form and expansive space.

So, back to the celadon works of the Goryeo Dynasty. They’re the most mysterious, mutable, elusive colour, with recurring motifs of cranes, stylized clouds, etc. And I was urging a young artist friend of mine to see the show, how these are the most sublime objects, and I wished I could just spend my life painting celadon grounds, cranes, and clouds. She said, “You can. You can do whatever you want.” And I thought, no, I’m not an artist in Korea in the 14th century. You can’t do that, like you can’t paint the way Giorgione painted.

SK: It’s like your description of memory and how it relates to what forms end up emerging. I know we also have to be selective about what we absorb, as you say, but what we do absorb has to be “digested” by our interior.

LG: Or else it’s not authentic. I remember in the 80s terms like “authentic,” “sincerity,” became verboten because of postmodern theory, but I never bought that. You can be authentic, otherwise, what are you doing or offering?

A memory has to really become part of you. It’s like my father at age 95 telling me he was thinking about late Cézanne and decided



Untitled, MHK-16 (2019). Gouache and coloured pencil on paper (India, handmade agate-burnished jute), 21 3/4 x 33 3/4 in.

to make ink drawings on some paper he'd had for fifty years. He had been thinking about Cézanne for seventy years or so and this had become part of him. Certain works are touchstones for me: cave paintings, Cycladic art, Shaker gift drawings, Tantric paintings — many of these works, I should note, were made by women — and Morandi, Myron Stout, Forrest Bess, Agnes Martin, Fred Sandback, amongst others. It takes time to become part of you, and you can't make it happen.

SK: There's a rate of absorption that can't be forced.

LG: I believe in going where the energy takes me, and that the painting has to tell me what it needs to be. I'm not interested in imposing my will. I had a teacher years ago in art school who said don't try to make the painting happen, allow it to tell you what it needs. This involves a lot of standing around and staring at the painting. I had a profound art school experience at the San Francisco Art Institute, which sadly is now in crisis. I'm grateful for my SFAI education. We were thrown into the deep end of the pool there.

SK: And it was there you met the poet Bill Berkson?

LG: Bill was one of my teachers, and later a beloved friend, colleague, and collaborator. We made a book together, a limited edition letterpress book, *Not an Exit*. As Bill wrote, it's important to protect the mystery. To me, that's the mantra. I'm not trying to be difficult in the work, but I think that everything truly meaningful in life is a mystery—love, art, life, death.

SK: Is this question of mystery the crux of your interest in the Shaker drawings?

LG: Yes, mystery hums through the line. The first time I encountered a Shaker gift drawing

was in 1997 in a group show at Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco, hung salon style, and way high up on the wall there's this drawing, something between writing and drawing. It wasn't until a few years later that I learned more about them when there was a show at the Drawing Center with an accompanying catalogue. Then I was invited by the director of The Shaker Museum to do a project there. I made wall paintings and a window piece in one of the oldest Shaker buildings that exists, which was a peak life experience. The installation is permanent, but few people have seen it. The gift drawings are a visual correlative of speaking in tongues. When you look at them you might see woven in a few recognizable words along with words that are in no known language, musical notation, geometric forms, a little bird, a candle. It's as though the energy cannot be contained by any singular mode of language, visual or verbal. They attempt to transcribe these very specific energies that came in dreams, messages from the spirit world. That's why they're called "gifts." Most of the gift drawings were made by girls and young women — 13 women and three men that are known.

SK: I feel like you're also describing your own work when I hear you say that, because there's a way in which I do see your forms like obscure shapely ghosts of glyphs, at once distinctly vague and clear.

LG: I'm interested in written inscriptions, alphabets, glyphs, musical notation as shapes, because if you think about calligraphy, ideograms, hieroglyphics, it all began as drawing. There was another exhibition at the Asian Art Museum called *Arabia*, and there were three ancient steles so old that no one living has been able to translate any of them. I was reading them, I had no idea what they said, but I could read them.

SK: Your talking about writing as drawing, and thinking about your paintings that are literally incised into marble, makes Vilém Flusser come to mind—how he describes writing as a kind of incision: in writing, you’re removing substance — it’s subtractive rather than additive—in the earliest forms of writing, but even on a typewriter, you penetrate the surface, scratch out or dent the surface.

LG: Yes, incising is an act of removal, of transformation, but I see it as both subtractive and additive, as absence and presence. I’m obsessed with the visual presence of writing because the letters of an alphabet are something human beings have made, so writing derives from and refers back to the body. The experience of inhabiting a body is encoded into the script, the text, the notation. We each have our experience of inhabiting a form which has integrity through which we navigate the world. I think this is how we know when a form is right — we recognize it.

I have no interest in rendering the human form. I’m interested in making something visible that’s connected with my experience of inhabiting a body — from the inside out, as it were. This takes me to Myron Stout. His work is sublime. It must be seen in person. When looking at his work, I feel like I’m seeing with my whole body. And he wrote something revelatory, something I’d known for a long time, but didn’t know that I knew until I read his writing. I can’t quote it exactly, but it’s something like, “the edge of a shape reveals what is within it.” As with Focillon, this is a touchstone for me.

SK: The word “vessel” comes to mind. Edge generates an inside — suddenly it contains.

LG: And you can’t fix on it, it keeps shifting, fluctuating, an edge is complex. It’s not an outline. For me, articulating an edge begins

in the moment of contact with the surface. It’s a charged moment. The mark — be it drawn or incised line or brush stroke — is a negotiation of visible and invisible, inside and outside.

I once heard Richard Tuttle talk about when you’re making art, “it” is out there, and you’re trying to get to it, but it’s in the space between where the work happens. Of course “it” is never in one place, never fixed or stable.

SK: I’m reminded here of the Jabès passage I quoted at the beginning!

LG: I think what is left out relates to rupture. And this is essential to art, as in the great prayer rugs from the 13th and 14th centuries, about which Morton Feldman wrote. He relates the patterns of the rugs, their symmetry and asymmetry, to his music. There are breaks in the patterns of the rugs, without them they wouldn’t come alive. In Hopi pots, it’s been said there has to be a break in a geometric pattern in order for the spirit of the pot to be released. What I care about in art is energy, wholeness and presence, which are all connected. That’s the power of Tantra paintings, mysterious small objects with vast presences.

SK: I suppose, to go back to poetry as an analogy for the kind of painting that you’re describing: it’s a distillation or concentration of experience.

LG: Yes, I love these terms: distillation or concentration, or a compression of experience.

SK: Well maybe related to this idea of presence: I wanted to ask about your forms as they relate to a kind of singularity of presence: Why the singular form? And sometimes you include two shapes on a ground, not just one, so what is the difference for you?

LG: My intention is to construct a situation in which a form and the space it inhabits invite focused awareness and concentration. Simply put, these forms need to breathe. Whether they do breathe has to do both with their intrinsic character and context, the ground. The drawing or painting tells me what it needs. Almost always it requires the shape to be singular within the surrounding space. On occasion, two shapes may occupy the space together — an “I and thou” — or in an installation, for example, wall drawing/ painting, if there is enough space, three or more may exist in relationship to each other, to the surface, architecture, light, etc. I don’t think of negative space as “void”. I see the space within the work as emptiness and presence, an energized field, formless ... in which forms arise and dissolve (as I mentioned earlier).

Here’s a memory which has stayed with me since I was a child, maybe five years old, when my mother took me to see the Bolshoi Ballet at Lincoln Center. It was the first time they came to N.Y.C. during the Cold War, and it was a big deal. The ballet was *The Firebird*, its star the great Russian dancer Maya Plisetskaya. The vast stage was completely bare and dark, the atmosphere hushed in silence. All of a sudden, she appeared, a lone figure lit by a single spotlight surrounded by shadow. Her costume had a long tail which extended across the stage. The poignancy of her aloneness in the space touched me deeply. And then, suddenly she leaped across the dark space!

SK: I think that sounds like a good note, or rather image, to end on. To let it breathe.

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