Spring 5-21-2017

Light and Space

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Light and Space

by

Lindsay Burke

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art, Hunter College
The City University of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor:

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Introduction

I make visceral images that are simultaneously elusive and confrontational. They are in dialogue with the historical tradition of figurative painting and drawing, but also aim to subvert those conventions. I want to catch and retain, as long as possible, the attention of my viewer by creating a familiar space that is slowly undermined. In my works the human body is dispersed in space; plants and tree parts are stand-ins for human desires, and gender is assigned to fragments of the body and to objects, then withdrawn.

The Beginning

Light and Darkness

In my large-scale drawings I was able to produce an experience of space by creating a clear and believable articulation of light. The human mind has the ability to travel and project; guided by the eye and the accumulated instances of seeing and reading space. As I discovered that light could legitimize my invented spaces, I also realized that it has the ability to establish emotional and psychological tone.
In *Moon Meets Earth*, Fig.1, a drawing from 2015, light is a narrative and symbolic tool. In this drawing, a panoramic swamp scene is illuminated by a glaringly bright moon, floating down
from the top left passage of the composition. Formally, the solidity of the moon is in contrast with faster, more gestural marks just in front of it. This drawing is the first in an attempt to depict motion, where vine charcoal, compressed charcoal and spray paint create various speeds of mark making. The scale shifts between the moon, the figure, the center tree and the tree in the foreground contribute to a sense of instability. These elements keep the landscape space oscillating between harmony and impending doom.

Most of the drawing is experienced in shadow and darkness. After the announcement of the moon, however, other narrative elements begin to unfold, including legs grasping for stability around a tree trunk, a figure barely visible under water, hands praying, and ripples in the water from a dog’s alarming bark. This theater of light and shadow is playing between fast-forward and slow motion, never normal speed.

*Lassos the Moon*, Fig.2, utilizes speed of mark making in a similar way and also follows *Moon Meets Earth*, chronologically. The moon, this time, is a shrunken orb of light that centers the drawing. A male figure clutches the moon with claw-like hands as his body and nondescript dashes swirl around the composition. The crisp quality of the orb and the emptiness in the male figure’s eye create a scene of distance and avoidance. As light continued to play a major role in the black and white drawings, it became apparent that I was actually describing the lack of light, or darkness.
In *Hair Play*, Fig.3, the light source is a candle that allows for both the literal inspection of body and a more metaphoric introspection. Similar to *Moon Meets Earth*, light is providing a point of contrast and is operating symbolically. In this work, it is accentuating the divide between what can be seen and what dissolves into darkness. A female figure’s hair dips dangerously close to the light of the candle leaving the narrative in suspension. When is the hair going to catch on fire? Is the figure attempting to burn her own hair? Does the candle enable the inspection of self? Is the hair shielding the figure from the directness of the candle’s light? The darkness eats into the forms and creates grotesque and disturbing shadows.
Plant material and landscape settings are often present in my drawings created prior to *Hair Play*, but this work contains the first use of flowers as a symbolic element. The flowers and candle existing in the foreground create a flattened space in comparison to the more atmospheric background. The vase alludes to a more feminine domestic scene, and imaginably, a private moment in a bathroom. The flowers create a connection to a religious tradition of symbolic fertility and purity, as well. In this drawing fertility, mortality, and purity are called into question, as the drawing’s darkness wins out.

High Noon

Interaction with light and an attempt to create a complex and ambiguous space are goals that continued to guide successive drawings. Although the bodies deployed continue to interact with the landscape, the body itself becomes the primary subject matter of the drawings. Additionally, there is a shift in the time of day; it is high noon.
The Pluck, Fig.4, is an erotically charged and relatively reduced image. In addition to the erotic tone, the drawing is humorous in its play with internal scale and ambiguous reading. As described above, the light has shifted, shining on an impossibly flat torso. There is an active confusion between the body and the landscape. Plant material has transformed into an extension of the body, albeit an unwanted extension. A flat arm casts a shadow across the torso as a pointer finger and a thumb position themselves to pluck a piece of hair, or flora, off the naked torso. In earlier drawings, flowers had moral symbolism; however, in this work, they speak more openly and directly to sexuality and to the abject.

The moment just before the pain of a hair being plucked keeps the narrative suspended in a moment of tension. Gender is assumed male, due to the awkwardly tiny nipples and flat chested lump of a body. The viewer is implicated in the scene by the downward and fairly intimate perspective, and the viewer is left to decide who is doing the plucking. Is the person belonging to the torso plucking hair off his own body or is a second figure assisting? Just as light continues to play a narrative element, so does contrast. In The Pluck and Girls, They Gossip, Fig.5, the contrasting dark hand and the dark shadows around the girl’s eyes symbolize misbehavior, violation, emotional distress or malice.

This contrast highlights emotional tension like a heat map would show the location of increased temperature.
This body of work culminated in the drawings *On the Blanket*, Fig.6, and *Between the Legs*, Fig.7, in 2016. These two works continue the juxtaposition of the body existing in the landscape but with a distinctly feminine perspective. *On the Blanket* references inspection of one's own body, similar to *Hair Play*. In this drawing, a central and nude female figure is positioned on her knees and her shoulders in a fenced garden. The elongation of her body and pose create a dramatic arch in the center of the drawing. Her face, with excess chin fat and blushed cheeks, peers through her breasts to unseen genitalia. Light shines on her back but the drawing appears to also be lit from the negative space within the arch created by her body. This interior light is somewhat theatrical, highlighting a moment of discovery or confusion. A second figure, male, is suggested by a shadow on the fence. The shadow has almost no weight, whereas the female figure is highly volumetric.
Between the Legs was made shortly before On the Blanket and is similar thematically but pushes scale and perspective further. Made with airbrush, the drawing is framed by two legs and the silhouette of butt cheeks at the sides and top of the drawing. Through the frame of the legs, an upside-down face looks back, not at herself, but at the viewer. Two flowers sprout from the ground replacing her eyes and heightening the gaze.

These two drawings are the culmination of this body of work. The moment of light shining through the arch of the body acts as a spatial portal in On the Blanket. Pictured in the portal is a drooping flower. This wilting flower, positioned in close proximity to the sexual discovery of
self, becomes a symbol for the inevitability of death, the decay of the body, and the termination of youth.

Influential Works

Figure 8
Balthus, The Mountain and Time

A figurative artist in an age of abstraction, Balthus is a practitioner of rendering complex psychological states, and a master of social transgression. The painting *The Mountain (Summer)* Fig. 8, is difficult and peculiar and not easy to read. Three figures inhabit in the foreground of a mountain top vista and four others are seen in the middle distance and background. The three central figures each assume contrasting body positions; one figure kneels, a second stretches in a cocked position, and the third lies asleep. This is a painting with seven figures yet all are in isolation, having little to do with each other or the landscape around them.
The painting has two gaping holes, the first created by the stretched arms of the central female figure and, the second, the cliff’s edge spilling into a deep mountain chasm. These holes charge the image with a certain eroticism. The hole created by the negative space of the female’s stretching arms is very active and gaping, while the cliff’s edge and the steep depression of the valley only create an implied hole. Another moment of drama in this painting is the light that cuts across the scene. It slices the space in half, separating the foreground from the rest of the space but also calling attention to the female figure’s skirt and stretching torso. Because of this light and the resting figure, the time of day in unclear. Is the sun is rising or setting? This question feels connected to the figures’ fate.

Balthus has a way of contradicting space in this painting and others. We read depth and recession of space through the scale shifts in this painting. The rolling flatland of the foreground is challenged by the sharp, jutting, mountain topography. Balthus’ mountains feel newly formed, painted like waves of emerging tectonic plates rising and falling, pushing up into existence as if only moments ago. The mountains in the distance resemble the budding breasts of a female figure. Several phallic-shaped rock formations spring erect from the cavernous valley in the center. This landscape is aggressive, not pastoral. It is dangerous and exciting; however, only two very small figures in the middle ground acknowledge the excitement.

There is an awkward exchange happening between the three central figures and the objects around them. Various states of being—rest, extension, sleep, longing, isolation, performance, growth—are being negotiated. Their exchange leaves so many questions unanswered. Is the figure in the bottom left gazing as the central figure stretches? Or is he avoiding the interaction? Is she tempting him with her body as she stretches out vertically before him? Is she a stand-in for
the painted image stretching out before the viewer? Why is the third figure asleep? The sleeping figure holds her cane as if in protection, but her legs spread slightly making her seem vulnerable. Because of the light, the interaction of the figures, and the depiction of the landscape time is a major theme in this work. Because of how Balthus combines light, figures and landscape, time and its many possible sequences of cause and effect become major themes in this painting. This combination and what results are directly relevant to my own work.

**Bronzino, Sweet then Sour**

Like Balthus, Bronzino takes a very charged but chilled approach to his subject matter. As we read this painting further there is both direct and indirect symbolism operating within the narrative. Bronzino’s overly sensual description of the body is a usual characteristic of mannerist painting. Hairless bodies and elongated limbs wrap and twist around each other culminating at the moment of Venus and Cupid’s juicy-to-the-point-of-grotesque kiss. The pale and luminous flesh of Cupid and Venus radiates outward while most of the other figures are in shadow. A gleeful cherub runs into the picture plane, about to throw flowers on the lovers, yet the look on his face suggests the malice of a practical joke. The painting, at first glance, looks to indulge in the sweetness of love, but a few subtle elements bring darkness to the image. Father Time, in the upper right corner, and what is believed to be the image of Truth, in the upper left corner, move to pull a blanket over Venus and Cupid. The screaming figure to the left of cupid is described as Jealousy and shows physical traits of a body infected with syphilis. These are symbolic elements that subtly complicate a narrative but also create a strong dynamic composition. Bronzino’s mastery of symbolism and detail create a painting that unfolds very slowly. In his work, all these
elements are interacting within a very shallow space, which is a formal strength. He allows you to enter through the seductive and familiar and then makes you loose your footing.

Recent Work and Thesis Exhibition

My thesis work aims to break down what had been the fully realized body in earlier drawings. These new works zoom in on elements of both the body and the plant forms found in the earlier work in hopes of expanding their meaning. In addition to the dissection and re-examination of the body, new drawing materials were explored and color re-introduced.

*Side Eye* is the first work in the thesis installation. Two or three eyes, depending how you see it, are striking a glance to the right. The right eye is drawn to the very edge of the composition while the left eye is sliced in half. Vertical blades of hair rain from the top of the paper and meet sharply with a banana smile, which takes up the bottom quarter of the drawing. The space in the drawing is extremely shallow, inviting the viewer to simply read, rather than enter, the work. Materially, the gap between the weightless quality of the black and white airbrush and the chunky application of the oil stick is vast. The strands of hair are clunky and aggressive and evoke a sense of urgency. The negotiation between calculation, precision and lack of control is visually apparent.

The eyes in *Side Eye* lead directly to *Butt Hurt and Out the Door*, the next drawing in the exhibition. This work is a narrative and driven by a main figure, although other figures exist in the space. The figure is backlit by a bleached-out sunlit sky. Other figures that assist both
narratively and compositionally are the bulb-less central flower, the sharp stick over which her right foot is hovering, and the sunflower that wraps around her back leg. The cropping of the figure is a tool to create compositional tension and fragmentation of the body. Her torso folds over and out of the picture plane as her head wraps back around, locking eyes with the viewer. There is a contradiction between motion and stillness in the depiction of the figure. The figure is caught in the action of leaving the space we occupy, which we see in her stride, the swinging strands of hair falling from the top of the picture plane. The butt and the hand are darkened, creating high contrast and emotional effects of shame and anger. The contrast in the feet, one pushing off and the other in forward motion, call attention to what is about to unfold in the moments to come. On that note, the division of space suggests the figure very directly leaving one scene (the one we occupy along with the blanket) and a space unknown to us—possibly off a cliff.

Panting Pro-V and Snip Snip complete the long wall of the exhibition space. Snip Snip looks to an earlier work, Between the Legs, as far as composition and scale. The work is in some ways a male counterpart to the earlier work, however it seeks a different sort of confrontation or trauma. The moment of ‘trauma’ is the depiction of freshly cut stems framed within a massive red arc. The tops of the stems are frozen in motion as they fall. A diagonal line shatters the entire picture plane mirroring the newly cut stems. The image is left fragmented by this cut.

Enough Wood for the Two of Us is hung on the wall running perpendicular to the other four drawings in the exhibition. Like Side Eye, this drawing also operates within an extremely shallow space. The scale of the work is somewhere in between monumental and body as well as
the objects within the picture plane. The paper is heavy with material as the surface treatment switches between airbrush and chunky oil pastel. The complexity of the composition and building of texture with airbrush and oil stick makes the drawing busy with activity. A razor blade is used to find shapes and small cuts are left visible in the paper.

Fragments of wood are warped and layered, swirling into the center of the composition. The origin of the repeating wood in this drawing is pulled directly from looking at the cane in Balthus’ painting, *The Mountain (Summer)* at the Metropolitan Museum. The peculiarity of the erect cane in Balthus’ work and the way it was hidden in the composition spoke to me. The cane is a symbol of stability, support, and also mortality. Wood, as a symbol, takes on masculine connotations, which I find myself working with and against. This drawing began as a portrait of a single cane but soon led to greater accumulation and then to suffocation of limp wood. The scale shifts in this drawing felt akin to the jutting mountains in the Balthus painting, although the wood in my work is offloading some sort of sad energy. Tension comes from the over-stimulated knotting of the wood, the moment where the tip hovers over the stump on the left hand side, with the open eye in the bottom left corner. The body in landscape space continues to examine human fears and desires; however, in fusing a greater range of materials and color, my hope is to further extend and problematize the symbolic representations that fascinate me.
Images List of Work Exhibited

1. *Side Eye*  
   2017  
   Acrylic (airbrush) and oil stick on paper

2. *Butt Hurt and Out the Door*  
   2016  
   Acrylic (airbrush) and collage on paper  
   59 x 80 in

3. *Panting Pro-V*  
   2017  
   Acrylic (airbrush) flashe, oil stick and pastel on paper

4. *Snip Snip*  
   2017  
   Acrylic (Airbrush) and oil stick on paper

5. *Enough Wood for the Two of Us*  
   2017  
   Acrylic (Airbrush) and oil stick on paper
Images of Works Exhibited

Side Eye
Butt Hurt and Out the Door
Snip Snip
Enough Wood for the Two of Us
Images of Exhibition