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AT: Where are you from and how/why did you start engaging with art?

LS: I was born in and have lived in England my whole life, growing up in the gentle suburbs of Berkshire. I was a kid who would always draw: I remember becoming completely obsessed with step-by-step ‘realistic’ animal drawing books, which I’d copy until I became competent enough that I’d start splicing together different animals into one. Then in secondary school, art became increasingly fascinating to me, and after taking it for GCSE oil painting became a very real obsession. I will always remember the pre-Raphaelite exhibition we were taken to on a school trip at the Tate Modern and being absolutely gobsmacked by the luscious textures and narrative abilities these paintings exuded. I was hooked, and from that point have aimed to constantly improve my artistic knowledge and practice.

AT: When did it become serious?

LS: I really started to believe in my abilities after being chosen for the Royal Academy’s online summer exhibition that they hold for A-level students. I remember carefully writing up my submission after

following year also. After finishing school, I also had the incredible opportunity of being the youngest ever exhibitor in the National Portrait Gallery's BP Portrait Award (2015) at 18 years old, and that's when it really hit me to take it as a course of study in higher education.

However, never did the idea of being a *contemporary painter* ever really seem like a reality that would occur for me. My practice always felt very based in portraiture, a habit I really challenged myself to get out of during and following my foundation course in 2016. It was only after finishing my degree and getting bought by a collector (Claus Risvig) and then getting shared on his Instagram did things become very serious in terms of making a career out of painting. I would say, over the course of the latter part of 2019, with the amount of opportunities that were opened up for me this year I realised I really had a genuine opportunity to make a career as a painter.

AT: Are there any person who has been significant in your breakthrough as an artist?

LS: Claus Risvig, as mentioned earlier, who has been a social media warrior constantly sharing my work, which meant Kristin Hjellegjerde found me and offered my debut solo show that just finished last month (October), which I have been very grateful for.

AT: What is your first approach to the work? How would you describe your practice?

LS: I don't like to 'look' for inspiration. I find if I'm actively walking along a street trying to find starting points for a painting, I'm in the wrong headspace and trying to force an artificial collage of elements that don't really mean anything to me. I think my acting craft not only patently informs the theatrical quality of my paintings, but also encourages an emotional honesty in my creative process, meaning I like ideas to organically grow in my mind, before I draw them down on paper, where new things or undefined elements become more concretised.

My tagline in describing my practice that I came up with last year was: 'a sardonic rumination on the chronic boredom that comes from growing up in suburbia.' However, I feel, particularly as a result of my solo show, the work has developed beyond that fairly specific description. I think it has become a broader exploration, an intertwining of personal and macrocosmic mythology, where idiosyncratic, painterly characters find themselves presented within a rich and complex world.

I find liminality a crucial aspect of my practice. Patterns, balloons, windows and hands often appear in my work, as they can bask in the comfort of being loosely defined; painterly; abstract, whilst also having a recognisable, definable place in the 'real' world. By establishing this rubric of liminality in the way I'm using the paint to 'describe' objects and beings, I can allow myself the license to have great innovative freedom: inanimate objects can be brought to life, characters can have other-worldly abilities and situations can have seemingly no logical explanation, whilst still existing in a common language we share as human beings living on this Earth. Magical realism, essentially.



Balloons in Red and Pink, 130 x 130.3cm, Oil, Oil pastel, watercolour and oil bar on canvas with painted ash frame

AT: What do you aim to reach with your work?

LS: At the end of the day, I make paintings, so my aim in the process of creating a work is to achieve an aesthetic balance: an abstract whole. However, the more work I make, the more loosely defined abstract whole becomes for me. Rather than a formalist 'balance' of elements within the frame of the canvas, I find a painting can become whole even if it's somewhat lopsided in literal composition terms, if relating

However, I also find prioritising the abstraction over the narrative story telling a very useful method, as it encourages an openness in the end result, inviting many different and interesting meanings from viewers, which often bring the paintings I've made in the past back to life, and something I find the most fulfilling as a painter. I rarely have a message, I find my hand to be fairly porous with my emotions, so usually there is evidence of struggle, excitement and anguish in the resultant painting, and if there's anything I want people to experience with my work, it is a sense of emotional engagement, whilst also hopefully inviting some cerebral inspiration as well...

AT: What are your favourite tools and materials for working?

LS: I use oil paints predominantly, however my paintings almost without fail also include Sennelier Oil and sometimes soft pastels. I am really enjoying these: the oil pastels are extremely soft and buttery and leave such a strong mark. I also sometimes use Windsor and Newton Oil bars, usually in the earlier stages of creating a piece, as they provide quite rough and ready areas of textured colour, which when dry or still wet can provide a really interesting surface to paint on top of.

I also discovered wax medium this year, which has completely transformed my paintings. I would get really frustrated that after several days work, a finished painting would never look good in any form of lighting because there would always be glare in the areas that contained a lot of stand oil. Wax medium matts down the paint and fastens up the drying speed, meaning when dry, the paint is still nice and textured and one can view the whole painting easily in most lighting conditions.

I've also really gotten into using scraping tools, like window cleaning squeegees and palette knives etc. I find I will layer up paint in a complex area quite quickly, which when scraped back, provides a thinned down version with a lot of the complexities that I'd discovered on the way, meaning I can add more discoveries on top of that without it becoming over-worked.

AT: What do you feel while you work? Do you usually think about the final outcome beforehand?

LS: Aside from 'this isn't working aagggghh!!': I always begin with a sketch on paper. This is the first time the composition for any painting comes into physical existence, and looking back at these drawings I often find, due to the huge creative task of bringing an entire world to life, I'm unaware of how much nuances of body language, expression or composition appear that are so crucial to giving each painting its own specific character. Therefore I always have these drawings right next to the canvas when I first start mapping them out with my brush, making sure I make notes of those little special moments.

Once this preparatory work is done, however, much like acting, I kind of need to forget everything that I've just done and just stay in the moment of spontaneity when starting to layer up the paint. The less aware I am of specifically putting paint on to reach a final image, the more varied, layered and interesting the end result comes. However, once there is enough paint on the canvas, my process becomes less spontaneous and more like a form of trouble-shooting or like putting a puzzle together. Once I've played enough to discover the language of the paint in the work, I'm then aiming on defining the narrative elements in a way that keeps the painting pulsing and visually engaging, making sure there are enough different colours all over the surface in describing each part of the composition.

I can often have moments where I stand back and think, "yes – I see where this is going now!" But then, I have to eradicate that quickly from my mind and dive back into the problems and stay in the frustration of putting together the work as a whole, otherwise I will begin preciously trying to finish what I believe the painting should be at a premature stage.

AT: How do you understand that a work is finished?

LS: Once I feel like I've spent enough time with each part of the painting, I will do a sort of scan from top to bottom, or left to right, or both, quite literally 'cleaning up.' Sometimes I will dedicate an entire day, particularly to larger paintings, just cleaning up all the little areas that get missed when having to keep an eye on such a large surface area consistently. I know I'm done when I'm able to look at it from any angle and not find gaping issues with anything. It's quite a practical process, really.



Element: Air, 2020, Oil, oil pastel and oil bar on canvas, 170×150 cm



Element: Earth, Oil, oil pastel, soft pastel, leaves, soil and wax medium on canvas, 170×125 cm

AT: Where does the inspiration for the work come from?

LS: It comes from so many places. I enjoy that I never really know where inspiration for the next piece is going to come from. Most often an image or vague outline of something will just pop into my mind, such as something jumping through parting curtains, or a man throwing up flowers... and then I start adding more elements to that starting image when drawing it down on paper. Other times these starting elements can come from something I've seen in real life, such as a person in a strange position, or an interesting set up in a play that I've watched. And then it can be as simple as a photo I see when scrolling on Facebook. I would say in general the thing that I gravitate towards with these initial snapshots into an upcoming painting, is the potential to incorporate an element of dark humour: which can be something initially morbid, or, more interestingly, something very mundane and innocuous that I could add to in order to turn it on its head and bring it more into my uncanny universe of slightly bizarre events and encounters.

More recently, I think after the largescale ambition of my solo show, I'm allowing inspiration to come more directly from my emotional state; images I'm beginning to note down feel like they have more direct symbolism to the darker elements of how I feel on a day-day basis...

AT: Are there any artists who influenced your works? Why?

LS: Many artists have influenced me on my journey to what I produce to today, and I hope many more will continue to influence my evolving practice. I've always really admired contemporary painters who have the boldness to conjure up whole worlds within their paintings and unashamedly present these. Charles Avery, Neo Rauch and Apostolos Georgiou are a few of these guys, often weaving fairly everyday scenes and characters into something bizarre, dark and otherworldly.

I remember at university really struggling to find a visual language that I could employ to actually express all these ideas and narratives I had swirling in my mind. Particularly in my first year I felt like a pressure cooker about to explode, like I was repressing all these ideas I just didn't have the means to describe in a way that was direct and explorative enough. I have to thank Sanya Kantarovsky's incredible body of work as my starting point in opening up a language to finally describe all these ideas. Since then, I have been researching and toying with the techniques and languages of many others, including Richard Armitage, Peter Doig and Andrew Salgado.

AT: How important is the role of social media for you?

LS: I wouldn't have the career as a painter I have today without Instagram. It's interesting when I describe this to people who aren't in the visual arts and their initial reaction is that of pessimistic disappointment. They often see it as a real loss compared to the traditional method of seeing and engaging with art. I usually respond by defending the positives of social media: I think whilst it does encourage a very quick, consumerist attitude, it's far more accessible and engaging in a way that makes me far hungrier to go to exhibitions when I can easily access the artist's previous works as well as the other artists they may be showing with, not to mention some tantalising detail shots the gallery may have pre-released! I currently view my Instagram as a social archive. I like the way I can see all my work easily in one place,

why not! I don't see social media as such a huge deal and the be-all-and-end-all, rather something that aids with the fluidity and ease of engagement, that serves as a more exciting archiving platform, over say, a website.



Slingshot in Viridian and Cerulean, 99.9 x 160.5cm, Oil, Oil pastel and oil bar on canvas with painted ash frame



Cherry on the Cake in Apricot, 85.5cm x 60.4cm, Oil, Oil pastel and oil bar on linen with painted ash frame

AT: As an artist, what is your point of view about the contemporary art system?

LS: My current views on this are very amorphous and unsure, so I don't have the words to answer this right now!

AT: What do you find to be the most challenging or daunting thing about pursuing art? What is the most rewarding part of working as an artist?

LS: The more I'm learning about the art world, the more it freaks me out. It seems to me like a contemporary art career is like a glass house balancing on toothpicks. I also find it increasingly absurd that these strange little ideas I have that I put into a canvas in an ever-changing style is something that can last, not only for (hopefully!) years into the future, but for greater artistic posterity... Like where is all this work going to end up?!! I find the more I think about it the worse my anxieties become, so I'm trying my best to solely focus on evolving my practice and keeping my awareness on a leash for the time being! I think creative expression is something an artist can take for granted. I have occasional moments where I realise just how lucky I am to have a platform and opportunity to have ideas, be able to express them, and have an audience and client base that are willing to support and invest in that. Without an outlet to express the tumultuous tidal wave of emotional intensity I experience in life I would quite literally go insane, which I don't necessarily need a professional means to do so, but it definitely helps! I find it so rewarding just to hear the various different ways people interpret my work. It always surprises and amazes me that these various splodges of paint can spark different stories in different minds; it feels profoundly human due to its individuality, which might sound a bit wanky, but it's the best way I can describe it.

AT: What do you do besides art?

LS: As you can probably tell, I have another strong interest in the performing arts. The two disciplines of painting and performing I really feel compliment and cross-pollinate each other. I have always had a desire to move people through story-telling, but I've also loved art and painting. It was during my degree at the Ruskin, though, where I really discovered where my place was in the two. I acted in a lot (some tutors may say too many) plays during my time in Oxford, which really satiated my desire to bear an emotional and honesty when engaging with narrative material. This meant when engaging with my visual practice, I was able to let go of a need to really *tell stories* through painting, and rather *conjure a sense of narrative*, which could be playfully obfuscated through allowing the paint to be paint. I think I find humans too fascinating and so I feel the need to examine them from as many artistic avenues as possible!

AT: What are your goals and expectations for the future?

LS: To carry on! I want to continue growing, learning more, incorporating more, and hopefully get to a

space, of time and of skill, of personal confession. I don't really want to know what the future looks like: at this stage I'm happy to keep going and seeing how it all pans out!



Into Yonderland Installation view | Kristin Hjellegjerde London, 2020

Lee Simmonds (b. 1996) is a British painter currently living and working in London, UK.

Simmonds is a painter exploring the boundaries between abstraction and narrative, the personal and the macrocosmic. By channelling everyday experience through the genre of magical realism, he strives to create uncanny situations, rendered loosely enough to invite the viewer in to extract and relate their own personal experience. Growing up in suburbia, Simmonds was drawn to any form of artistic expression that would provide escapism out of the general drabness and boredom that surrounded him, features that he has absorbed into his visual language: patterns, foliage and jarringly subdued or oversaturated colour palettes contrast and create a sense of tension against the content of each scene. An avid learner and apophenic, Simmonds' approach to painting is ever-changing and always on the move for new styles, ideas and ambitions.

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