

Rachel Lumsden: Splitting the atom

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As the twentieth century dawned, Dutch writer and psychiatrist Frederik van Eeden was busy recording hundreds of his lucid dreams. In his subsequent novel, *The Bride of Dreams* (1913), he wrote, ‘He who dreams is more awake than he who sleeps,’ concluding, ‘The solution of the secret of our lives lies in our dreams’.<sup>1</sup> Rachel Lumsden’s paintings seem directly connected to the potency of dreams and their intangible promises. With their spectral figures, rich spectrums of colour, unruly patterns and claustrophobic interiors her paintings impact on the mind with a similar intensity to memorable dreams, offering an emotive network of connections whose overall meaning nevertheless remains tantalizingly out of reach. Each painting fills the viewer’s field of vision and overwhelms the senses, transporting us elsewhere, to places with their own internal logic, places that feel strangely believable despite often including fantastical elements.

Haruki Murakami – a novelist Lumsden admires and whose novels have a shared hallucinogenic intensity – encapsulated the emotive power of dreams in his short story ‘Sleep’. The narrator describes a ‘dark, slimy dream’, explaining: ‘I don’t remember what it was about, but I do remember how it felt: ominous and terrifying.’<sup>2</sup> In a similar way, Lumsden’s paintings appear not as clear-cut narratives but as states of mind, as affecting experiences.

Lumsden moved to Switzerland from England fifteen years ago. An occasional motif reflects her Swiss surroundings – the snow poles in *Rope Walk* (2015) for example – but Lumsden’s landscape is overwhelmingly an internal one. Childhood experiences, fairy tales, dreams, paintings and photographs all impact on her work as she draws on memories and asked them to coalesce on the canvas. Her deep knowledge of painting, both historic and contemporary, is much in evidence in her recent paintings. In *The Return of the Huntress* (2016) the echo of Pieter Breughel the Elder’s *Hunters in the Snow* (1565) is self-evident, but now the hunter (the artist) has become female and hunts alone. She walks away from the viewer towards a vertiginous snowy bank that overlooks a contemporary urban landscape under a viridian and magenta sky. Paint leaches between the branches of the skeletal trees, pinning the image to the surface of the canvas, forcing the eye to oscillate between following the huntress down the bank and tracking the aurora of paint across the surface.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederik van Eeden, *The Bride of Dreams*, 1913, extract in *States of Mind: Experiences at the Edge of Consciousness*, ed. by Anna Faherty, ex. cat. (London: Wellcome Collection 2016) pp. 112–114

<sup>2</sup> Haruki Murakami, ‘Sleep’, in *The Elephant Vanishes* (London: Vintage, 1994), pp.105–106

In several recent interiors, such as *Anti-Chamber* (2015), *Here We Go Again* (2014) and *Red Room* (2016), Lumsden's repeated use of mirrors and frames questions where the viewing experience begins and ends. In *Here We Go Again* a gilt-edged mirror dominates the picture plane, creating doubles of the ornaments on the mantelpiece, bringing into view a woman's head, a partridge on a perch, a lively blue shadow that threatens to break free from its domestic source. The ambiguity of Edouard Manet's *A Bar At The Folies-Bergère* (1882) collides with the cluttered interior of Walter Sickert's *The Mantelpiece* (c. 1906–07), as mementoes from Lumsden's life – a ceramic dog, porcelain pugilists, a statue of a Storm Trooper – crowd into the frame. In *Red Room* a similar mirror reflects a room we cannot see for ourselves. The parrot on a stand morphs into a hook-beaked crow, its ominous shadow reminding the viewer that all is not as it seems. Perhaps the conjured crow alludes to Plato's shadows on the cave wall; is the domestic world not to be trusted? The flame-red and charcoal-black room seems charged with possibility, with latent change, as if it could spontaneously combust or dissolve when the dream ends.

At the epicentre of Lumsden's work lies the figure, whether as an amorphous form, as in *Sailing to Byzantium* (2016), or more clearly delineated, as in *Flagpole* (2016). (In *Red Room* the figure is absent but an empty chair suggests the possibility of presence.) The figure is never a direct portrait but is put to work to serve the painting as a whole, at times reduced to a suggestive shape or presence, at other times obliterated by a bold surface gesture (as in *Flagpole*) to ensure tautness between three-dimensional subject and two-dimensional painting. For while many of Lumsden's large paintings have discernible subjects – figures, interiors, city skylines – there is always a sense that the paint on the surface has the upper hand.

Often Lumsden is drawn to unusual motifs, such as the doppelgänger in *Leap Minute* (2015), the goggled figures in *Crow Tribe* (2016) or the anthropomorphic bear in *Highway Gamblers* (2008). There's more than a hint of what Sigmund Freud called the *unheimlich* or the uncanny at play, but ultimately it is the paint that encodes this reading. As Lumsden says, 'You go on an adventure when you paint. In one sense you think, don't do too much, leave some areas open, but then there's a sense that if the subject is known, what is beyond that?'<sup>3</sup> In *Leap Minute* Lumsden ended up painting out the girls' faces, renouncing their identity for a more unsettling experience where their heads swivel untethered and the wallpaper behind them becomes surface pattern and slides over the couch. Lumsden wants to retain slippage in each work, space for the viewer to enter and form their own opinions. She doesn't want to pin

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<sup>3</sup> The artist in conversation with the author, 29 November 2016

things down too much and allows paint to have its head, trusting decisions made while working rather than adhering to a rigid plan.

This approach has been pushed to the limits in her recent paintings, particularly in the interiors that threaten to disassemble into a flurry of abstract marks. In *The Elder Flower* (2015) a woman in a dark dress stands up from a chair, slats of sunlight illuminating her face. However only in reproduction is such a clear reading possible. When you stand before the painting the surface almost entirely breaks down: the sunlight becomes a creamy white fluorescence; the shadows of pale blue, cobalt and aubergine run like railway sleepers across the surface and the face – if we can even call it that – comprises white and taupe patches over a scumbled blue ground. A solitary circle of white tethers the facial marks so we intuit an eye, a brow, a chin. This symbiotic relationship between subject and surface is something Lumsden calls ‘splitting the atom’, asking the paint to ‘moonlight’ as subject while the subject itself explodes into loops and whorls, patterns of colour and form.<sup>4</sup> The point at which both are possible and simultaneously present charges the work with a crackling energy.

Ultimately the paint drives Lumsden on, whether to create the sherberty-orange glow in *End of a Short Day* (2015) or the bold borealis in *The Return of the Huntress*. It is sparse and dry in *Think Tank* (2015), scratchy and highly-strung in *Leap Minute*, fiery and wraithlike in *Red Room*. Paint, in her hands, catches in the throat of the viewer, its myriad colours infusing our minds and connecting directly with our hearts. These are not paintings to be read from afar, or in reproduction, but to be physically experienced, to be felt – and to be dreamt.

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<sup>4</sup> The artist in conversation with the author, 29 November 2016