

Looking at bright things

Tor Maclean

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STABLE

*The inner—what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.*

— Rainer Maria Rilke

*sitting at work, watching the white building across the road
illuminated by the bright afternoon sun. I stared at it for about a
minute then closed my eyes tightly, placing both palms over them
to securely comfort the burn and focus intently on the imprint that
would slowly fade. The photographic quality to this imprint was
notable as something that my eyes were able to produce. My mind
does not recall photographic details, in fact when I do recall things
its blurred as though all the edges are softened.*

— from the artist's notebook

For a sighted person, the retina is the light sensitive layer of their eye which captures incoming light particles and transmits them along neuronal pathways to create visual perception. The function of the retina is often compared to an image sensor in a camera, however what happens behind a lens of a camera and the eyes differs vastly. A photograph is an image written with light – a moment recorded on a surface that can be replicated and returned to. A prompt for enlivening (or fabricating) memory. Perhaps the same could be said of human visual perception. An image is written on the retina with light and a moment is interpreted and recorded as memory. But is every past moment retrievable? Where do all of the images from our daily lives go? How long are they stored before they disappear? Are they forever embedded into our brain, our cells, waiting for some kind of reigniting stimulus?

There are certainly scientific explanations for the relationship between sensing, perception and the formation and recall of memories. And there are also artists, like Tor Maclean, who choose to explore the mysteries of human inner workings through observing, feeling and translating embodied experiences through creative practice. For Tor, painting, photography, video, drawing and poetry are ways for making sense of her worlds – inner and outer.

She studies light interacting with surfaces and collects refracted and reflected moments with both her body and camera. The series of small paintings in this exhibition are derived from photographs taken over several years from interiors of places she has lived – from childhood homes, a transient adulthood, to her present residence in Maleny where she lives with her partner and their daughter in his childhood home. It is in her most recent home of memories and memory making where these paintings were created, often in the (almost) stillness of a sleeping house, when the roof is settling, and the hum of the refrigerator is a comfort.

These silent moments are alluded to in her paintings. Interior details are omitted or abstracted, and windows remain as reassurance of a world beyond her room. In the gallery, these windows and reflections of windows collectively become a tentative invitation into the artist's ways of seeing. They are a constant frame through which Tor senses subtle changes in seasons, a small smudge of sunlight moving across the wall and the gentle nod of leaves illuminated by a warm day. At times, the view is obscured, and light is still allowed through the cracks of curtains, shaped by dust into glowing shards. At other times, the view is fractured by mottled glass, dissolving clarity into an impressionistic colour field. This interior obscuring and blurring of the outside world is reminiscent of how Tor recalls details in her mind – blurred as though all the edges are softened.

Just like placing her palms over her eyes, she playfully softens the edges of the images she has captured on camera – through a manual development process of translating an image of a reflection through projection, photography and finally with these works, painting. Oil-soaked paper hovers between the viewer and painting, offering an opaque glimpse of what lies behind. Over time, the oil will dissipate and even less of the image will be visible. And yet, as the image fades the imprint of bright things remain. An inner sky intensifies – vast and worthy of exploration.

