

## Waves

Poetic and lush, Lauren Nickou's new paintings channel the serenity of an otherworldly nature. The colors are deliciously luminous. Whether large mellow waters or mysteriously dark waves—all is done in a palette that belongs to a different place. A saffron-yellow crescent moon hangs in the crimson sky; rocks are scarlet and washed in neon blue splashes, the ripples iridescent. A true indulgence in vivid contrasts and intense bold shades, Nickou's landscapes are full of life, although deserted. The very sea appears like a living creature with her shining body spreading and coiling under the sky ablaze. Where is this wonderful place? Is it deadly remote for the human, or on the contrary deeply within?

After the large sunflower series, the artist has turned to the sea. Since a very young age, it has been her source of inspiration and now evolved into the new "Self-portrait (doll)" body of work. Started with plein air sketching on opposite sides of the Atlantic—initially on the Connecticut Sound, recently across the ocean in Portugal's Algarve—Nickou transformed the beach drawings into celestially sedative and luscious canvases. The original pastels were distilled into pure colors and solid shapes. The rich purples contrasted with aquamarines, naïve clouds against the pink sky, smooth but strong lines, and fluorescent water conjure up some retrofuturistic spectacle blended with Paul Gauguin.

However, the supernatural aura they emanate is far beyond the setting for a cosmic marine saga. Nickou's paintings of the sea belong with re-enchantment of the world—steeped in magical light, they convey a sense of the vast powerful water. Soft brushstrokes paired with dense blocks of color, paint smudges, and almost black outlines—as if they were borrowed from graffiti art—give the paintings the dynamics of a poetic act of engaged gaze. Nickou manifests her awe not as a paralyzing romantic admiration, but as an impulse for contributing to the mysterious moment.

Re-imagining landscape painting today, young artists inevitably confront a complex ecological discourse. Despite the dominating somber context, many of them turn to re-enchantment and deeply emotional, imaginative forms. Jules de Balincourt, Shara Hughes, Yuka Kashiwara, and Nicole Wittenberg, to name a few, are developing a new language for the experience of nature within post-modernity. It acknowledges the situation of a mediated relationship with nature and embraces the failure of immediate contact. At this point dreaming becomes as important as observing; it helps the eye to travel through obscuring filters and perceive again.

Lauren Nickou as a part of this new generation of artists brings in her own vision for wonderful encounters. Already having appeared in her sunflower series, it developed towards an artistic statement in the sea paintings. For Nickou, the act of watching is always an introspective process that is suspended between recalling, yearning, conceiving, and actually registering. In *Waves*, the sea tells a story about the artist's journey, as well as a healing practice of belonging. Inhabited with personal memories and longings, it is a place that is first *imagined* and then *seen*. Enchanted transformations create a world where the borders between inwards and outwards are blurred and thin, and where one always represents the other.

In *Moon Music* the artist reaches a culmination in her pursuit of vibrant contrasts. Flame-red sky meets an icy blue sea that is all rippled and glows like a potion. Massive rocks—magenta and chartreuse-green—are bathed in moonlight. A strong graphical foreground frames the image like a stage performance; the glittering path leads right into the sky. It oozes magic. To achieve this, Nickou enriches the palette of the Fauves with a gleaming screen intensity, and even for the digitally trained eye the scenery is spellbinding. The black spot next to the cartoonish moon could be interpreted esoterically, if not so flirtatious (like a beauty mark on the fiery body of the sky). And yet the moon is gone, new day begins—the triptych *Whale Song* is full of sunlight, warm and joyful. The sky is candy pink, big yellow rocks bask in the sun, and water almost sizzles in this midday heat; sweet languor steals over everything.

The fellow painter Nicole Wittenberg shares: *"I was very excited to see these new works by Lauren, which have such a strong line and rhythmic drawing language, I can also see a color emerging that is all her own. Situated between modernism and symbolism these new paintings are original and bold."*

Separated from the seascapes, in the second room, is a portrait *Sea of Love*. An emerging (or submerging?) figure seems to originate from the sea. A mermaid or maybe a water spirit, is protected by her native element. Anxiously staring at us, semi-open, she feels exposed and threatened—her entire body seeks to be devoured by water, to disappear back into its depths. Rocked by the waves, flowing freely, she will be carried away in the currents. Faraway and unknown, it is a desired refuge for this vulnerable creature.

-Liudmila Kirsanova

Liudmila Kirsanova (b.1988) is an independent curator and writer based in Vienna. Her curatorial practice is focused on storytelling, autofictions, and politics of belonging.