

Prelude to the Edge

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Prelude

Mara De Luca's *Talisman*, a new body of work from 2017-2018, occupies a shifting space of landscape, abstraction, scenography, and an expanded sense of composition. Balancing intimate studies with dramatic expanses of color, De Luca's exhibition embodies the emotional highs and lows of a symphonic composition. Holding a tension through longstanding techniques within her practice—the cut, the break, the layer and the reveal—the series creates an intense psychological mood grounded in, yet departing from a sense of place.

Icons, or talismans, allude to a layered narrative. Resolutely non-autobiographical, De Luca works as if for a theatrical production. The paintings embody a particular elsewhere, or, more acutely, create the scene for a drama—the city of Los Angeles itself—that unfolds slowly across and within the work.

In the 1945 film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the sinister protagonist seduces the young cabaret singer Sibyl Vane. Following a performance at the decrepit theater at which the chanteuse sings, he beckons her from her dressing room into the now empty bar room. Seated at the piano as he plays Chopin's *Prelude #24 in D Minor*, Gray quietly tells the innocent Vane, when she asks what the music is called, simply “a prelude,” explaining that it was written for the composer's wife. This implied tenderness is contrasted, for the viewer, if not for the naïve Vane, with Gray's malevolent gaze and the mood of the music itself, which, in spite of Gray's contextual description implies, in its crashing chords, a sense of trepidation, a pause before committing oneself to a fate more tragic than romantic. Earlier played for Vane in Gray's elegant townhouse as a narrative moment of foreshadowing, the brief composition instead compels a sense of impending doom that we, as witnesses to Gray's true self, are allowed to foresee. Rather than a courtship sonnet, the piece is a fatalistic prelude to a doomed culmination.

In De Luca's film, *Talisman: Snake* (2017), this sense of anticipation is given an embodiment in the coiled body of a rattlesnake, the species found in wilderness areas in and around Los Angeles, including the slopes of Griffith Park where the artist often hikes. A flashlight, or spotlight perhaps, roves in the darkness around the sandy trail terrain before landing on a coiled snake that retracts and rises. The presence of the snake

hiding underfoot confronted with the dramatic vistas of the city, (unseen in the Super 8 film yet vividly present in the mind of anyone who has visited the park) creates a geologically founded, psychological tension. The snake's movement is threateningly sensual, close enough that, if she desired, could strike a fatal blow. De Luca captures, in the coiled dance and roving light, a dark anticipation. The tension of something about to happen, which, in the loop of the film never actually culminates but continually builds, eases off and returns again, falling into a rhythm of breathing.

In 2016, the iconic Sixth Street Viaduct was demolished, part of a seemingly overnight re-generation project in Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles. The makeover of the neighborhood turned a shanty town into the glamour of a new Arts District east of LA MOCA and the Grand Avenue projects downtown. Following four years of historically severe droughts, the return of water to the Los Angeles River itself brought a shift in its relationship to the city, and, incidentally to the homeless encampments that had, in its absence, populated stretches of the embankment. De Luca embodies such tensions in her paintings, echoing Los Angeles as a city that, perhaps even more so than cities like New York, has witnessed seismic shifts in social, geological, and economic realities that have historically battled with its geography. Although Angelinos readily embrace opportunities to appreciate nature, their access to the city's wildness is largely commodified through a controlled environment. Pockets of inhabitable canyon that offer solitude to multi-million dollar homes along the west side also threaten devastation as breeding grounds for wild fires that annually destroy dozens of properties. The Los Angeles river, originating in Canoga Park, and arcing southward to empty out into the Pacific in Long Beach, is a long-suffering example of the city's fraught relationship to its terrain. Relied on as an intrinsic source of water until population growth necessitated the construction of the Owens Valley Aqueduct, the river's essential role in the development of the city is masked over, as with makeup on a Hollywood actress.

Talisman: Snake then, embodies the almost extinguished element of wildness within Los Angeles, portraying a creature which city residents are familiar with from the yellow warning signs that signal its *potential* presence along the trails of Griffith Park or Topanga State Park, signaling a dramatic event that rarely, if ever, materializes. The snake is thereby, in the reality of contemporary Los Angeles, a fatalistic flash. As in cinema, its strike is only a work of dramatic fiction, detached and aestheticized at arm's length from reality. In this way, Los Angeles promotes a skewed dramaturgy of its natural reality, using water, sand, natural plant life and animals as scenic props even as the dramatic reality of yearly destruction unfolds through wildfire and flood, threatening the region's future.

Meditation

De Luca is deeply connected to this idyllic yet contemptuous environment. Since 2005, she has worked out of a shady cement studio space off the recently constructed Expo line in Culver City, to which she can easily commute from her Jefferson Park bungalow. Shaded by kumquat trees, and the selected home to a resident (not quite stray) feline, De Luca's studio is a place of focus. In its perennial verdancy and lush simplicity, her studio embodies a California lifestyle more consistent with old Hollywood films than the asphalt strip mall reality of my own experience with the city. De Luca has called the city home since

earning her MFA at CalArts in 2004. Observing her environment, and alluding, as in *Talisman: Snake*, to images and icons of the region, she also circulates icons close to home. For instance, in *Talisman: Buddha*, the statue depicted rests in the garden courtyard directly outside the studio. While offering a meditative calm in balance to the threat of the rattlesnake, De Luca holds the space in between, the never to be completely explained power of an icon or talisman.

De Luca understands, perhaps more than native Angelinos, the unique meteorology of the region, including the weather patterns’ interaction with the landscape that so much defines, yet is so little portrayed in images or memories of California.¹ Unlike Tacita Dean’s *A Concordance of Fifty American Clouds* (2015) (produced during the artist’s eighteen-month stay in Los Angeles), which capture the dramatic white cumulus, usually rare in Los Angeles other than following a rain, De Luca alludes to the near daily presence of a moisture-laden marine layer, a weather pattern that produces the effervescent light effects unique to the city’s coastal region. Studies of the distinct meteorological atmosphere of the region, *Dusk Haze* (2018) and a series of three *Moonrise* paintings, eschew a Turner-esque *en plein air* format of landscape painting in favor of a study of light and mood. In *Moonrise*, the larger-than-life “supermoons” of July 2017 can barely be distinguished in the late sunset-ready sky where, as anyone who has lived along the California coastline knows, the sky turns peach-pink-blue in otherworldly increments before deepening to blue, and finally black.

As meditations on landscape rather than landscapes themselves, the series revisits lunar imagery that has been a recurring theme within De Luca’s practice. A universal symbol of cyclical change but also a reminder of society’s connection to cosmic forces, in De Luca’s paintings the moon hovers between an indicator of landscape and a geometric form. In *INDIO* (2015), for example, eight moons encircle a rich black and mahogany sky, producing patterns impossible in nature but reminiscent of a new moon circle chart. The form untethers from its cosmic referent and is free to multiply. This vacillation between representation and geometric abstraction recalls Wassily Kandinsky’s shift from *Rising of the Moon* (1903) to compositions such as *Several Circles* (1926), in which different-sized colored orbs burst upon a night-sky black canvas, abstractions of heavenly bodies as much as color studies in abstraction. In De Luca’s series, the moons appear, geometrically, as in *Cut Night Sky*, but more often largely obscured behind clouds, which veils a more direct reading of their form. Hovering like apparitions, the moons dwell behind clouds or within the whorl of threatening night skies, as in *Corona (Moonlight)* (2017) where an orb-like moon creates a cut within the sky, unmooring itself from landscape and opening upon a poised abstraction that is entirely De Luca’s.

Crescendo

Moving from the obscured moon to the stormy, cloudy skies of saturated color in which they rise is at the heart of De Luca’s approach to composition. A former ballet dancer and avid connoisseur of opera and dance, De Luca understands the methodologies of the stage. Her work is imbued with an acute understanding of stage design and production, and, more specifically, the use of color, material, image and gesture to beckon a mood. In this approach, she often looks to writer Joan Didion who established,

with the autobiographical novel, this method of creating drama and mood. Where Didion muses through language, setting a scene in which her characters play out aspects of melodrama turned existential observation, De Luca positions these forces temporally, creating studies of a single moment that implies a building into, or falling away from climax. Even as they embody a coming together of color, material and image in a single composition, her paintings are not, definitively, something to be *moved through* as are Didion’s mnemonic depictions of endless Los Angeles freeways, but rather held, as a breath. They hold to the moment before, the *becoming*, the pause before rupture, the moment at which the curtain stirs with movement. This strategy is made perhaps most evident in De Luca’s use of the scroll, a technique she began using in her *Angel Beach* series. With *Pyrite* (2015), for instance, a cloudy black canvas curls away to the right to reveal a fiery field of ground giving way beneath. In *Dusk Scroll* (2017) De Luca makes this reveal even more emphatic, as the color field seems to literally ascend, unveiling the foreboding strata of roiling sky beneath. Elegant yet restless, the canvas layers simultaneously reveal and conceal, mimicking clouds, which become characters in an abstract drama.

Here it seems fitting to provide a counterpoint via a similarly brief composition, namely Duke Ellington’s *The Anticipation*. Recorded in 1972 and released posthumously in 2017, the etude ends abruptly just as the melody seeks a subtle conclusion. Or not so much an end, but a break, like a scene change in an early Godard film. Where the scroll works rely on a technique of the reveal, De Luca’s diptychs, a format she began working with predominately in 2015, apply a compositional method that underscores her acute perception of space, constructed from how it is navigated and utilized in the spaces of Los Angeles.² De Luca’s use of the break in *Talisman* is used both intimately in *Talisman: Buddha* where a stone gray canvas is paired with the portrait of the stone statue and in works such as *Midnight Diptych* in which gestural storm clouds abut an expanse of blackened blue. The anticipatory tension established in *Talisman: Snake* reaches a near crescendo in *Crimson Sky Split* (2018). A fiery red skyscape, in which blood-red smokiness recedes from a smoky terrain below, the curtain appears to open. And yet an inverse curtain opens as the two canvases literally peel away from each other top to bottom. The widening gap between the diptych’s canvases brings a dimensionality to the cut, a movement through and beyond. It is here, in these expanses, that De Luca’s work takes on an epic scale, recalling Barnett Newman’s zip and stretching it, holding it open into what poet and theorist Fred Moten refers to as “the erotics of the cut.”³

Softly consuming the spatial landscape of Los Angeles, De Luca’s large-scale abstractions—*Corona (Moonlight)* and *Crimson Sky Split*—play effortlessly off the striking billboards perched above the city’s freeways, which, at times on a slow afternoon heading south of the 405, can melt seamlessly into mist-heavy skies. The paintings do not, however, mime such moments but put them in tension with a history of painting detached from the landscape of the city. Her work recalls a history of “hard edged painting”, a term used by ARTnews critic Jules Langsner in 1958 that was “bandied about,” as California sculptor John McLaughlin remarked, in relation to pre-minimalist work.⁴ As with Newman, who understood the impact of color across a large horizontal scale, De Luca’s paintings can easily depart California altogether to fit into a discourse of New York abstraction. Importing aspects of the flatness and seamlessness of California abstract painters, it is equally possible to consider De Luca’s work in dialogue with a constructed, layered

² The sprawling city has been a source of structural inspiration for dozens of artists from the postwar period, including, to name one, Claes Oldenburg, who began working with flat surfaces and structures representing the freeways and signage of his temporary hometown of Los Angeles in 1964.

³ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 26.

⁴ Robert C. Morgan, ‘Hard-Edgeness in American Abstract Painting’, *The Brooklyn Rail* March 2011.

¹ D.J. Waldie has perhaps best articulated the natural light and atmosphere of Los Angeles. See his *Where We Are Now: Notes from Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Angel City Press, 2004) and *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

approach to composition, as in the color block canvases of Charles Hinman, or in Harvey Quaytman's geometric formal layering and study of the edge.

It is worth considering Newman more deeply here, not only because he, as De Luca, experimented with lunar forms as a method by which to move from representation to abstraction. But also due to less-acknowledged intimate works, such as 1946's *Genesis—The Break*, which vacillates between a landscape of a moon rising through mangrove trees and the abstraction of a circle between pillar-like verticals.⁵ In the years following these works, Newman became preoccupied with the notion of the break, the literal interruption of the field of color that supposedly made up a *painting* at that time. As defined by Newman over an intense two-year period, it was the “zip” that came to light, breaking the color field canvas into typically uneven sections, interrupting the sublime expanse of color as something into which the viewer could fall, but perhaps most essentially anticipating the importance of the edge.

In this way, De Luca's paintings anticipate the edge, applying cuts within layers of canvases, and as discussed above, even scrolls, where canvas curves under onto itself. These techniques construct almost-landscapes in De Luca's work, as does her understanding of aspects of set design where the proscenium's edge can be reached, even highlighted. In *Milliken* and *Night Slice* (both 2017), mirrored hardware frames, extending a few inches on either side of the stretched canvas, reflect the drips of paint along the painting's sides. The color field / night sky of the painting does not only fall off abruptly onto the gallery wall, but the signs of its manufacture, its process of production are reflected, underscored and laid bare. The effectiveness of this type of hardware element to the construction of the painting, an element De Luca has used in earlier bodies of work, is realized with additional intentionality in this pairing. In *Milliken*, for example, a midnight blue canvas backed with silver reflective frame is literally wrapped with a creamy black canvas, leaving only the lower fifth of the main canvas visible. Emphasizing the edge of the painting, and edges within the painting, further support an encounter with the work that is durational, capturing a moment in time, a moment prior to.

In relation to this deep-rooted understanding of scenography and the importance of rapture and rupture within De Luca's work, I turn in closing to briefly consider a work discussed numerous times with the artist: *Serenade* (1934), one of choreographer George Balanchine's first works for the New York City Ballet, set to Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings in C Major, Op. 48* (1880). As the curtain rises, the empty stage is washed in a hazy blue light, only enough to cast gentle shadows of the bodies of twenty-eight dancers as they stand, nearly motionless in configuration, heads turned, looking offstage past their extended right arms into a distance. Anecdotally inspired by the company shielding their eyes from the rising sun just prior to an opening *port de bras* during weekday morning *barre* class, the calm beatitude of the dancers exists almost as an affront to, or in spite of the stirring opening bars of Tchaikovsky's composition. The serenade, which opens with a crescendo, and then melts into a meditation, is matched in Balanchine's work, whose choreography here holds a simplistic lightness which simultaneously underscores and holds tension with Tchaikovsky's resolute composition. It is in returning to this work for stage, that is perhaps most illustrative here. De Luca, as did Balanchine, holds a deep understanding of the space, construction of the canvas, layer and edge, of the illusionism of theater, and superficiality of landscape. She supports these at times conflicting formats of drama to create an experience, often simultaneously within the same painting, of anticipation, meditation and crescendo.

⁵ Yves Alain Bois, 'Perceiving Newman' in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 105.