

## FUGITIVE ABSTRACTION

MARA DE LUCA *in*  
*discussion with*

FIONN MEADE

Sitting down in Culver City in late winter 2018 ahead of Mara De Luca’s first New York solo exhibition at TOTAH, the following conversation includes a prompt-by-agreement to begin with a shared interest in the at-times-stark, at-times- emotive tactics of late modernism put in relief with the backdrop of today’s image-saturated digital flow. From De Luca’s first institutional exhibition *Stations* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (2010), to still-fresh paintings awaiting a final layer on the studio wall, we agreed to allow ourselves to stray in and out of time. This included a bit of homework in the form of re-reading Georges Didi-Huberman’s text ‘The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, The Then, Modernity’, which takes up the double labor of abstract painting’s attempt to speak with metaphysical immediacy and representational elusiveness.<sup>1</sup>

What follows is a wide-ranging dialog regarding what could be termed ‘fugitive’ rather than ‘figurative abstraction’ as it rises, waxes, and wanes in De Luca’s vision, one comprised of New York savvy, having lived formative years on the East Coast, and an acute view onto her adopted hometown of Los Angeles—including its seduction of light, ecological fragility, and the daily respite and demands of the studio. Our considerations below look to step past ‘fourth wall’ discussions and enter into a twenty-first-century directness regarding painterly inheritances and a more expansive and personal awareness of what abstraction can do today.

—FM

FM Let’s start with the hovering presence in the room. Can you talk about this remarkable painting behind us?

MDL I want this piece, the central piece of the show, *Crimson Sky Split* (2018) to function at once as both image and subject. I’ve been working with this idea for a long time, whereby you look at the painting and you’re wrapped up, you fall into the illusion and then all of a sudden you run off the edge or the cut and it’s the rupture. It’s like having your cake and eating it too, the deconstruction along with the sublime. This relates quite a bit to the ideas articulated by Didi-Huberman though he discusses those terms (the sublime vs. deconstruction) as being in opposition rather than existing in collaboration.

FM That’s partly why I thought it could be an interesting piece to read together ahead of meeting up in the studio. What’s interesting about that text in particular in relation to your work is how Didi-Huberman talks about the decline of the aura, which means that it’s an inclination toward the viewer that invites them closer and pushes them back simultaneously, something your work does constantly, even here in the studio. For Didi-Huberman, and his discussion, he’s referencing Barnett Newman or Ad Reinhart and that period of abstraction, but he is also talking about the vertical as a descending or hovering, an inclination toward that can also be related to the poet, critic, and philosopher Friedrich Schlegel and the “hovering imagination” that he and the Jena Romantics were so keen on, one that allows for the place of intuition in tension with reason and referentiality.

MDL In my reading of the text he was also talking about the aura as a confrontation between the making of an image and the viewer. I remember this because I’m trying to do both, creating pictorial depth and material depth of space that becomes experiential depth. For instance, where you see the rips in that period, as in ‘Arte Povera’, or where Newman takes the tape off and you see the edge of the tape and brush marks evident. I see it as a confrontation. He talks about it that way. Where all of a sudden space becomes not only pictorial but a distancing.

FM In *Crimson Sky Split*, the crack open is not what Didi-Huberman is talking about though. He is writing about the supposition of modernity and we’re not in modernity anymore. When you are doing this, it’s rather coming as much from the pineal gland as you’ve said, as the history of painting. That is, your work departs from the art historical and starts to have a different kind of motivation.

MDL In a way. How I see my work as being contemporary is that I am interested in both. How the aura historically, say, in a religious fetish object is where you couldn’t see the hand of the maker and the mystery of that and how it’s made doesn’t come into the picture—it’s a believable illusion. Then in the modern object, the aura comes from the production of it, the evidence of the tape being made visible. I’m interested in both. You have the illusion and then all of a sudden you have this exposure.

FM In the last show you evoked Joan Didion, and in a prior show you evoked Rilke’s *Elegies*. Can you speak to this consistent literary interest and dialog with a metaphysical line of reading?

MDL It always comes from what I’m fascinated with at the time. Things align and all of a sudden what I’m working on ties into what I’m interested in intellectually, but also propels forward internally. It has to get to a deeper place or I don’t move forward. So, it’s not an artificial construction. With the Rilke work, I had been reading those poems, over and over again while I was working on the *Stations* and I worked on those for five years. It was a time when I was going through difficult things and had to emerge back.

Those *Stations* paintings took a really long time and were very labor intensive. I’m actually recalling some of the techniques from those paintings in this new body of work. After I finished that series, I went through a transition period where I wanted to find a new way of making a painting, where it could be immediate and my hand would be visible, as with some of the new works. This immediacy, drama of gesture and expressionism related to the Rilke poems, and perhaps even came from absorbing the poems on a deep level, stylistically and in terms of what they expressed.

---

<sup>1</sup>Originally published in *Negotiating Rapture*, edited by Richard Francis, 48-63. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1996.

FM It's interesting that you were reading Rilke's *Elegies* where he says, I'm paraphrasing from memory, "will the angels hear me amidst their hierarchy?" And the answer is . . . probably not (mutual laughter). And that's what makes it have such an effect as a poem and series of poems. I think most people have felt that way at some point in their life, which is why Rilke captures a very important, relatable expression. But in your reading at that time, in making the *Stations* series, the work itself that results is arm's length, and actually explores the pyrotechnics of the film industry and the power of the moving image to seduce and manipulate the viewer. Can you talk about that? You're in this turbulent moment personally, but you're finding a formal distance through actually framing the effects, even special effects, of film and cinema.

MDL The emotional part hadn't caught up with the painter part of me. The painter part of me was reading a lot of theory, a lot about the history of fascism, the aesthetics of fascism. I had just left CalArts and I don't think I was ready to bare my soul in that way. After that series, by 2013, I was figuring out how to include more evidence of my hand with the techniques I had developed in the *Stations* series, and put them in dialog with the ecological fragmentation of Los Angeles that circulates in the more recent work.

FM To stay here for a second, there is something very important that happened in that show. You work almost exclusively in series or bodies of work. *Stations*, for example, can't exist without the ensemble of the works. Each one requires its siblings if I can use that term. And you've continued to work that way. You titled it *Stations (After Barnett Newman)*. And Newman of course took that title from the stations-of-the-cross (Laughs).

MDL I was also thinking of stations as in television stations.

FM Exactly, and the effects you were capturing in these paintings were filmic but made in the digital, televisual age. It's like you are saying here's the special effects of Hollywood and film, but it's not film anymore. It's the televisual. We watch it in a way that is very distanced, and can never be simply the romance of cinema again. The abstract fragments in the paintings bring back these effect fragments to a landscape scale where you have to look again.

MDL I was reading so much about modernism and how it was an anti-propaganda tool. That abstraction had so much supposed political meaning. The discourse and scene had a reason for making an abstract painting. Illusion was manipulative. Abstraction was supposed to be honest and pure and have spirituality. So, I found that really interesting to think through in our age now. What happens when you take all the hyper-manipulative effects of cinema and reproduce them using techniques from late modernism, and attempt to bring them back to auratic capacity? The making versus the illusion? Because in the discourse of modernism, for the most part, the aura couldn't exist if there was a given manipulation, or visual seduction or trick laid bare. I was trying to do both. Conflate the two and make it a political gesture.

FM To approach what you are doing in that series through painting is important; you can't reproduce those paintings or rinse and repeat a series in the same vein. They are too invested in the techniques and their very exposure, which is what Didi-Huberman is talking about perhaps.

MDL I wanted *Stations* to be really evident that they derived from reproductions. Within the series there was *Tiepolo Dusk* and then *Tiepolo Dusk (black/white)* (both 2007), so you can see the value shift of color in the works. It's about reproduction but also there's a paradox within the painting. I was also thinking about Rauschenberg's *Factum* paintings from 1957 where he repeated versions of the same painting. So I did two of the camouflage cloud paintings, testing out how working from a reproduction of a painting could operate, while simultaneously thinking about gesture and how far can you distance your hand but still have it be an action painting. How can I make it using the means of a heroic gesture but have that means be an antithesis?

FM That work, formally has things that you are still doing, but conceptually is so far away from what you're doing now. *Stations* is emotionally distanced yet seductive, which makes the tension in that work very good. But you've carried the techniques through to what you're doing now to a very different place. For instance, you're working in ways that still look at and borrow from the effects of light, advertising, and fashion even, but you take those fragments and bring them into a very direct experience of phenomenology or observed phenomena, as the practice has morphed into a spiritual, meditative aesthetic even as it has referentiality within it of course. Can you talk a little about that?

MDL That's true. I was talking with someone who came to the studio the other day about Archie Rand, who I studied with at Columbia University as an undergrad. Archie would always talk about 'belief' and I honestly didn't know what he was talking about but I knew that I connected with it. In a way, you become a believer in the ritual of painting and in the image as secular icon. The intellectual part of me is very interested in theory but then there's enjoyment in making a picture and having it seduce, what Didi-Huberman referred to in the text as something that you can't have your fill of looking at.

FM Exactly, "The supposition of the aura is that of which you cannot have your fill." That's what makes Didi-Huberman so relevant. You can talk about Benjamin's age of mechanical reproduction all you want but Didi-Huberman's point moves us forward, which is that the aura will always incline towards you and desire for you to look at it. The Greeks called it '*ekphrasis*', which means the writing in response to an image. It was about sculpture and not just painting. Ekphrasis means when you look at something and it says "speak back" which was the concept of a viewer being present enough to realize the artwork is trying to speak to them and that they could even speak back and not be ashamed. From the Greek ek and phrasis, 'out' and 'speak', it means "to proclaim or call an inanimate object by name", quite literally. That is happening in the way you approach your work. You want the viewer to feel as though they could speak back to the paintings.

MDL Definitely. One thing I was doing back then, was I had this compulsion to make small easel paintings. And there was no justification for it. At CalArts there was no outlet. I had a studio visit with Charles Gaines where I had a small cloud oil painting with a target on it that was a 'representational' version of the large "station" that I was making at the time. I explained that I was interested in the relationship between the small painting and the two larger ones, one was an objective faded monochrome, the same color palette. And the conceptual painting was this small easel painting. And Charles said "why would you ever want to relate a small painting to a large one?" (Laughter).

But now I am making those small pieces and directly relating them to the larger throughout the series. For instance, in this and my last body of work, the large abstract paintings are informed by small 14 x 11 inch representational oil paintings, done on an easel, with small brushes, a traditional palette, birds in flight and all. For instance, *Crimson Sky Split* directly relates to the small oil painting on panel included in the show, *Blood Skies*. The color palette and drama of the small painting are translated into the large piece, though it's a much more abstract image and a conceptual process. Similarly, *Night Slice* is a large abstracted version (with cut canvas and poured gesture) of *Black Cloud with Moon 2*. *Sky Split (Cielo)* relates to *Dusk Haze* and the *Moonrise* pieces. The relationship between these 'types' of painting is important to the narrative I'm trying to build.

FM Can we talk about this small one? *Talisman: Buddha*? Those two panels were brought together, but they were not made to go together.

MDL I had done a piece for another small *Stations* show that was all representational works in San Diego and there was one where I had the small black reflective panel next to a self portrait of myself. To me, the black panel had the same depth of feeling as the portrait. It was part of the meaning of the painting.

FM When you approach it, you see yourself and it is very beautiful, very effective, but then there is the Buddha. And it's like you have to ask yourself, how much Buddha am I or can I take in?



MDL Yes, when I started this project David Totah told me it was a time to retreat and go deep. I took that very seriously. I was already doing meditation but I took the invitation seriously and now I am reading about *kundalini* and really interested in what that means, "to go deep".

FM Well there are two images here placed side by side. Some would say that it is "new agey" to talk about being attuned to making such alongside decisions but that's not true. We talked last time we visited about the constrictions of Frank Stella, Rauschenberg and Johns being friends and knowing the distinctions of how they are in the studio. For instance, in the documentary film *Painters Painting* (1973), the contradictions are intense. Stella is in the studio and he's explaining his work and breaking it down analytically step-by-step. And then it's a cut to Rauschenberg drunk on a ladder in the studio, saying how it's the making things at the same time that is freedom, akin to "I make stuff all the time" and then relate it, become a bystander to the work by letting the materials do what they want to do, that kind of thing, and he's okay with that. But in that manner Rauschenberg is perhaps the spiritual artist that Stella strove to be but wasn't. When Stella becomes friends with Jasper Johns, for instance, it's close but competitive, as Stella again wanted to do what Johns could do, but he couldn't.

Johns and Rauschenberg are good examples here because they influenced each other in the regard that their shared motivations for painting move beyond painting: it can be cultural, personal, political, sensual, and mnemonic in its formal procedures. If you don't see the distinction there then you aren't paying attention.

MDL Jasper Johns is that combination of acute intelligence with deep spiritual attention. There is no difference between the two for him. They are not opposed to each other. They are one. His late paintings are very moving.

FM In this whole discussion of a larger frame of painting within your interests and mine that we agreed to, I think Jasper Johns is a good touchstone for why you do what you do. I don't know his entire story and he's kept his life private for good reason, but we do know enough about his life through the work to say this is a guy you can continue to learn from and look at about painting, and about life.

But I wanted to go back to your work from 2015-2016, which to me, very much speaks directly to Los Angeles. In particular, the *Moonlight* painting and *Moonlight Clouds*.

MDL It was a chance for the black-plated metal to become an illusion, an image of moonlight.

FM *Chino Montclair* first of all, a great compressed title, comes from bringing together two places in the L.A. area, places you had to drive for teaching gigs if I've done my research right. They capture that L.A. experience of freeway driving to get anywhere so beautifully.

MDL Yes, exactly. I was teaching at Riverside for an extensive period of time and there was something about the drabness of the freeway vs. the glamour of the names. Like the paintings *Diamond Bar* and *Etiwanda*, I wanted to make them a fantasy, to transform the observed sky into "where-I-want-to-be" instead of the freeway. Like *Alice in Wonderland*. If you think life is only gray reality, no! There's

a place filled with color and gold and light and sunsets that are hyper sensual called Los Angeles. So, I was trying to do that, and also do all the things that were interesting to me in painting. *Chino Montclair* has a cut, for example, and you can see the painting underneath.

FM What I love about that piece is how with L.A. and its desert climate you get to see the sun setting and the moon rising and vice versa (sometimes simultaneously) in ways you don't always get to see in other parts of the world. This is a freeway painting of the sun and the moon trying to meet.

MDL Yes, I would see the moon rising ahead of me and the sun setting behind me and it stays with you. Bringing this back to Jasper Johns and his device paintings, there is one, where he has one device-generated gesture on one side and one on the other side, half circles, one upper left and one lower right. In the case of *Chino Montclair*, my reference to Johns was just about the half circle shapes and placement – I mimicked his device painting in the positioning of the half circle moons on either side of the painting.

FM It reminds me of Jack Whitten's recent passing. Having worked with him and getting to know him a little, he was doing those device paintings on the ground, where he created rakes to work down on the surface before Gerhard Richter, and arguably better. His was a very successful career. He had a great life, went to Greece every summer, and inspired so many through his work and spirit, but to say that he had the opportunities he should have? It's not the case. For an artist that is as good at abstraction, if not better than Richter, it calls things into question regarding the value of painting.

MDL Jack Whitten is such an interesting artist. The shape of these split paintings, kind of comes from Jack. He did these paintings that were two panels, slightly trapezoidal and I thought in seeing them "it feels like an altar," what he's doing. There is something mystical and interesting about that shape and many of his choices.

FM In his studio he had a collection of things that were like altars. He would say that the terms of abstraction don't apply to why I paint the way I paint. He would say if you want to skip past that and talk about the abstraction that I'm doing, let's do that. But I'm not going to go back and rehash Greenberg. He would say things like that a lot.

MDL Talk about aura.

FM Yes, Jack Whitten was direct and didn't suffer too much small talk. But to get back to the work here in the studio, the confrontation of oneself and Buddha is very intense, and there's this quality from where you were in your last exhibition to now that feels as if it sort of moved into a personal philosophical space and stance. Can you talk about that?

MDL I was thinking that last body of work, including *Chino Montclair* and *Ramona*, was kind of similar to what Jack Whitten's saying "don't talk to me about abstraction" in that there is a lot of geometric abstraction and a lot of surface in L.A. as is. So, I thought "here's your geometric abstraction!" in making it mystical, about the universe, atmosphere or clouds. Let's put meaning back into the given surroundings. It was a very deliberate way of taking circles, squares, and color blocking, and also

fashion color blocking, blue versus black, and putting feeling to it. But again in that project and the one before, I had these very specific aesthetic sources and color palettes going in. And that's where Joan Didion comes in, as she works so much on the surface, but all the feeling is lurking. That's what I wanted the paintings to do. I wanted the anxiety to be in there.

FM And it is. But you've gone a little further.

MDL I'm not using the references anymore.

FM Isn't that freeing?

MDL It's definitely freeing. I don't think I had the confidence or the experience to get there before.

FM It's only partially a confidence question as you've accumulated techniques and brought them with you. And herein lies another false divide you've maneuvered around, as one could ask—are you making work that is conceptual here? And the answer is yes, but with emotional ballast.

MDL Yes and that is important to me. I feel a freedom to show this work here and in New York as well.

FM A key for your work is the durational theme in the work. Before we started recording I was joking about "Sweetie" the studio cat. But I wasn't really joking. Your work from the *Stations*, five years in the making, but also in these works, involves a precise labor in order to create its distancing illusions. So that aspect of painting is, to hear you talk about it, not unlike a daily *kundalini* practice. You have to be able to step into it and orient yourself through it. And the cat gets that. Which is why, as you were saying, the cat is always outside the studio every morning watching your routine.

MDL Well you recall I was saying how in addition to art criticism and theory I have been reading a lot about switching the quantum fields in the fifth dimension.

FM The fifth dimension being?

MDL It's basically part of *kundalini* yoga, moving the 'kundali' up your spine to create energy and pressure that when it arrives to the brain as a fluid it activates the pineal gland. And when your pineal and pituitary glands are then both working together they create an electromagnetic field that allows you to be open to experiences that are outside the normal space/time experience. It's basically what happens when you have a mystical moment except it's all biological in basis.

FM I'm familiar with it a bit as my sister practices it. She was telling me about it as well. And in observing the breathing, it's a very intense practice.

MDL Yeah I've practiced Kundalini for ten years. Basically, you're putting pressure on the body to have this energy rise up your body and activate the pineal gland up here. It's a very physical thing that you're doing and usual breathing includes it but to a lesser degree.

FM If I can I'd like I use that to transition to the snake painting right behind you. In that painting there is a verticality of the snake as if it is rising upward in the painting. Can you talk about the notion of rising and descending in your work as most representations would have a snake moving left to right or downwards, in my experience as a viewer? For a viewer, it's hard not to see this work as an ascendant image even if there's a possible bird's eye view reading of course.

MDL Well actually I was reading just last night that the snake has a special significance within kundalini as the snake is tied to the rising of the kundali energy up the spine, the way that it wraps up the body.

Sometimes I do things without quite knowing where the connections lie. I made the painting a year ago and wasn't consciously thinking about kundalini in relation to the snake at that time. I feel like some of the techniques are a lot slower. With this other painting here, *Midnight Split*, there is a great deal of layering and only through the layering do you get that kind of confrontation, while with others, like the diptych, one side has that durational quality and the other side has the immediate gestural quality. So the viewer brings their own experience of time when they are looking at the painting. In the end, I don't care if they can tell how fast it was made as long as the rupture and depth occur.

FM That's because the painting is supposed to be grasped. When Walter Benjamin said, again paraphrasing, "how will the aura live on when you suddenly had the shock of film?" and its ability to grab you—as with Instagram or Snapchat today—he was talking about the inevitability that for all of that, we still have auratic relationships to objects. Which is again to Didi-Huberman's point that is often misread in citing Walter Benjamin's point, it is the aura that is dissipated but not disappeared that is being talked about in modern and contemporary life. The aura that is inclined, dispersed, and becomes a supposition. It's shifting.

MDL It's interesting with Instagram as so much of our time is spent on it now in the visual arts, or at least mine is, so where is the aura in that. It's interesting to think about how Benjamin would have thought about that.

FM To bring this line of thinking back to Didi-Huberman and the text we both read, he really is the only theorist and student of art historian and iconologist Aby Warburg's thinking to take Warburg's ideas seriously. I think Didi-Huberman would say, and I think he was correct, that Warburg predicted this culture in his creating a remarkably contemporary methodology for comparing images. Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* project, 1924-29, argues that the pace with which we consume imagery is changing our psychology, down to the chemistry of how we look at things, arguing that the visual analog of things would supplant the dominance even of the linguistic. And he was right.

Amazon is not successful because of its manipulation of language. It is successful because of its ability to predict what visual people will buy, and return a visual analog that appeals. The reason Warburg was able to see this happening was due, in part, to how he was paying attention between the wars, closely following the media coverage of destruction during and after WWI. He was saying "look at these images," compare and contrast the iconography of fascism as it has existed then and previously, or we are headed towards another disaster.

Instagram isn't leading us to destruction of course, but has it surpassed other things we used to do? Like read the newspaper or study the comparative depth of an image across cultures or even within daily life, as the cut up, collage and serial image is not currently on trend as it can't compete with the constantly updated image flow and feed that re-routs attention.

MDL These images land in your brain in a way, and you can pick and choose from them. It's an interesting thing.

FM To bring it back to your work, and why this is relatable, the early techniques of L.A. and Hollywood that you were working on in the *Stations* project were the special effects made by many people who were displaced to L.A. For example, Oskar Fischinger, who wound up in L.A. due to fascism. He did most of the truly spectacular effects in *Fantasia* but was fired by Walt Disney as Fischinger believed what they were doing was an art form. Or, even Bertolt Brecht who also wound up here in Los Angeles.

MDL I was very interested in Bertolt Brecht when I was doing *Stations* but mostly it came from watching the news. How does this coverage of the Iraq war relate to cinema? Because it was really one and the same at that point. It seemed like it. All of the titling like "shock and awe" with the light bursts behind it. It was really bad Hollywood effects, this advertising of the war, appealing as if it were a really basic movie campaign. It felt very much like the kind of thing that Brecht was arguing with in his time. So when I was thinking about the paintings, I was thinking how can I confront the viewer with the manipulation but also rupture the fourth wall?

FM Rupture the fourth wall to get the fifth dimension?

Duchamp was really fascinated by that. The fifth dimension. Everyone thinks he is the father of conceptual art, and he certainly is, but one of the main reasons he became a conceptual artist was that his brother, Raymond Duchamp-Villon was a much better artist. And he knew it. Duchamp-Villon had a circle of very interesting friends and Duchamp would go and hang out and realized he wasn't as good at the plastic aspect of making art as he wanted to be. Really, Duchamp was looking at the Italians and futurism, literally talking to Picabia and in all of those discussions. But it's after the notoriety of all that, when he makes the move to "conceptual art" even though he never termed his art such.

As when we were talking about Jack Whitten, for Duchamp it was the readymade and for Whitten the device was the rake he concocted. The desire is a shared one, to use an implement that already exists in order make a metaphysical object. In the end, I think that is one of the misnomers of Duchamp. *The Large Glass* is not a dry piece. To say that Duchamp was a dry individual is to miss Duchamp's work. If you read Calvin Tomkins' *Afternoons with Duchamp* interviews, Tomkins asks him "what do you think of the young artists? Rauschenberg and Johns?" and Duchamp is really funny, as he says he loves their work, and indeed he was a huge proponent and advocated for them, but he says offhandedly "they just make so much work" or something like that, adding that he had no idea why they were in such a hurry to do so many shows. They should just relax. He had that kind of humor.

MDL That's a very American thing, the rush to make more. Back to Archie Rand, he basically taught us the daily practice of painting and felt that productivity is what makes you an artist. He would have us make six paintings per week. He would not critique them, and there was no discussion of the aesthetic of the paintings. I was so confused, but what he was teaching us was the daily practice of painting. At the end of the semester, finally, he says "now you know what it is like to be a working artist and you can call yourself a working artist and that was the point of this semester." We had studio space as undergrads, so that's what we were always doing, just being in there working.

But they were not very good paintings. I remember asking him if they were good paintings and he just kept saying, "you're good, you're good!" It's you that's good, don't worry about the paintings. A very important point for me. He was talking about how to find your voice and I was questioning him and asked "if I just painted a canvas white it would be ok?" and he said "YOU wouldn't but maybe someone else would." That struck me and I thought ok "anything is possible."

FM Going back to this notion of conceptual painting, when Didi-Huberman writes about Fra Angelico, he talks about the "whack of the white." What he talks about is the white of the spaces too that allows these images to blow you away. Not just the painted image but the space wherein the image resides. He was making a site-specific work before anyone called it that. And that "whack of the white" is what Didi-Huberman points to as conceptual painting *avant la lettre*.

MDL Those were paintings that hugely impacted me. I lived in Florence for a year. Those paintings and Donatello were my favorites.

FM But to bring this back to *Talisman: Buddha*, when you realize the Buddha depicted comes from the courtyard outside your studio where it's leaning askew just over there, in the painting you've actually brought it upright. The "supposition of the aura" is to be found in that which is inclined or leaning, something you observed every day for a long time, fourteen years in that statue. But then there is a readiness to now turn it upright and have it go out in the world, reconstituted.

MDL For this show I wanted to make some small paintings from photographs, still lifes from photos. And the only representational image I ended up really wanting to include is this Buddha. The other small works in the show are representational in a different way; they are oil on panel, pictorial, layered and atmospheric, and done from my imagination, almost a surrealist approach, whereas the Buddha is a flat brush representational still life painting. I guess it's another layer to the narrative, both in terms of the image and in terms of how it's made, its technical construction, which is almost academic. There is a second part to the Buddha, a film, which is still on the Super 8 roll.

FM I want to see that. But it's also nice that it's not in the show. Something that lives in your practice that isn't in this exhibition but holds a place in a future show.

MDL That's true. It's gestating.

FM To me, in terms of the joke about the cat, the cat and the Buddha are right outside your door waiting to make it into your imagery.

MDL I'm going to make a cat painting! Before you got here I was sitting outside with her and thinking that this creature, her soul is so connected to me.

FM That which lies outside your door is literally in some ways present in the work, including the ever-observant cat. I think Sweetie's aware of your paintings, the movement, the gestures, the time it takes.

MDL We have a bond.