

SHADES OF THE CITY

Painter Mara De Luca finds inspiration in the layers of Los Angeles—the landscape, the light and the illusions.

BY **CECILIA LATIOLAIS**
PORTRAIT BY **CASSIE HUNTER**



Mara De Luca is driven by the beauty and the complexity of Los Angeles, working intensely with color and form to distill the relationship between the wilderness within and around the city and the urban sprawl that inhabits it.



ACROSS THE STREET FROM THE LOS Angeles Metro Expo Line, next to a nearly 70-year-old plumbing company and tucked behind a heavy metal gate, is Mara De Luca's Crenshaw studio. When De Luca drags back that gate, you're greeted by a warm smile and kind eyes that clearly sit in front of a potent mind. There might also be a slightly feral cat behind her, ready to walk with you back to the garden that surrounds her studio. The scene, a gritty yet verdant microcosm of the city, is a befitting way to encounter the artist's work.

De Luca's minimalist paintings can be seen either as abstraction or stark representation, which is part of how she plays so delicately with the notion of illusion. Trained as a dancer, she has long been invested in the ways in which space or movement can beget a new sense of space or movement—not exactly fictional, but not entirely

tangible either. Her process includes layering and cutting canvases, building metal frames that only sometimes surround the entire painting and using multiple canvases for a single work. De Luca describes her palette, meanwhile, as the most important and highly specific part of her practice. It shifts dramatically depending on the series—from charcoal blues and smoky reds to silky yellows and shades of grey. "My work is a 'color story,'" she explains. "I create a color relationship between works of a series, within works themselves and with very specific inspirational sources."

Having lived in LA since 2004 when she arrived to study at CalArts, De Luca mines the city itself for inspiration. "I wouldn't know how to talk about my work without taking the city into consideration," she says. And everything is fair game: the weather patterns, landscape, vast skies and especially the contrast between the



De Luca's *Untitled (after Cedric Charlier)* (2016). Opposite, *Milliken* (2017)

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TOTAH, NY

native wilderness in which the city is constructed and the markers of human interference, such as the city's tar pits, billboards and the glossy veneer of it all. "I'm interested in the underlying anxiety that's hidden by this Hollywood perfection," De Luca explains of what drives both the conceptual and aesthetic decisions in her work.

De Luca's canvases "softly consume the spatial landscape of Los Angeles," writes art historian and critic Mary L. Coyne, in a recent exhibition catalogue. "The paintings do not, however, mime such moments but put them in a tension with a history of painting detached from the landscape of the city." In other words, LA may be De Luca's muse, but it is painting itself—the history of the medium and its own complicated relationship with representation and illusion—that drives her practice. Take, for example, the way in which she constructs Rothko-like color blocks in order to depict the

LA skyline. As with any sort of abstraction, one person might see a slightly textured color gradient while another sees thick clouds across a stormy horizon. "I am interested in the tension between material and illusion and the ways in which abstraction can paradoxically behave as representation," the artist explains. "The cuts in the canvas are both a representation—horizon, sky, or moon—and raw, material canvas."

De Luca was recently called a "light bridge" by a seasoned psychic. This idea is certainly befitting of her welcoming and luminous demeanor. It also is a fitting description of her work (and, aptly, is the title of her most recent series): Illuminating, even in the darkest hues, associative in its movement between broad source material and technical rendering and offering access to something personally radiant.