THE BROOKLYN RAIL

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Portrait of Mara De Luca, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

MARA DE LUCA with Tom McGlynn

Mara De Luca is a young painter of great promise. De Luca was a resident artist at the Monira foundation in 2022 and has presented solo exhibitions in Los Angeles and New York. On the occasion of De Luca's upcoming exhibition at TOTAH, artist and *Rail* Editor-at-Large Tom McGlynn paid a visit to De Luca's studio. They engaged In a wide-ranging conversation about the "critical core" of De Luca's work, the influence of the West Coast on her practice, and by what means the painting can invent itself.

Western Gate
TOTAH
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TOM MCGLYNN (RAIL): Good to meet you. You've mentioned in the past the significance of the inheritance that we share: postwar American abstraction, Barnett Newman's work, Color Field painting, examples like that. But in my research, you also were interested in pop references.

MARA DE LUCA (M.D.L.): Good to meet you, too. Oh, for sure. Yes.

RAIL I thought we might start with a quote of yours in which you connect your painting to an art historical continuum: "I generate ... stylized illusions, *de-asserted* picture planes representing a range of lighting effects and color fields with each recurring motif ... The viewer thus encounters poured clouds, action-painted skies ... deeply spatial objective monochromes representing light and atmosphere." This refers to one of your earlier shows, in 2010 in San Diego, in which there was a whole constellation of references. I was curious about that constellation of references, not just from the art world, but I believe you were looking at advertising, movies, etc., and maybe you can clarify where your head was at the time?

M.D.L. I'm happy that you found that quote about the "de-asserted picture planes." [*Laughs*] I feel like that's a concept—I was saying how I feel the paintings are representational, like they're spatial, they're atmospheric, and they refer to light and clouds. I started by thinking about deconstructing those concepts of very hardcore abstraction and thinking about illusionism. I lived in Germany for about five years before graduate school—when I came back to the US, I went to CalArts, and it was during the Iraq War—somehow the televised news was extremely visually seductive. So you had the Iraq War and all of these kind of lighting effects and everything that was manipulative in a way, like advertisement or propaganda from the early twentieth century. I started reading about visual seduction, different tropes in different eras of history. So it sounds complicated, but—

RAIL Not to me.

M.D.L. [*Laughs*] Yeah, so I was in Hollywood, so I thought, well, when you go to the movies, the first five minutes are like you're floating through clouds, and then you see the light coming up, and then the movie house logo appears. So it's basically a remake of Riefenstahl light and shadow. Or if you also look at Italian Baroque painting, or Bernini, there's always some kind of lighting effect or theatricality, basically. The seduction of fashion advertisements, they really want you to buy that handbag! I started to think, "Oh, that's the antithesis—that's what modernist theory reacted against." So, my first big project was this one that took that dynamic into consideration.

RAIL You're referring to your *Stations* project that resulted in a show in 2010 in San Diego at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

M.D.L. Exactly, and that project basically formed, in a way, like a thesis project, even though I was out of school. I conceived it as one piece—just like the Newman "Stations of the Cross" (1958–66)—and it's fourteen paintings, meant to be seen as all of the lighting effects and all of the visual seduction without any of the ideology. So emptying out Columbia Pictures' icon or Fox News' logo and just using the lighting. Or even if you look at any kind of Catholic representation—Tiepolo's atmospherics for instance.

RAIL The aura, right? Like the Virgin of Guadalupe.

M.D.L. Yes, and the way that color is used. So that project formed a lot of my imagery ideas. The other aspect is: how are these paintings going to be made? Well, they're not easel paintings, in the sense that they're not oil paintings at the easel. I was trying to think of a conceptual reference back to abstraction, so they're drawing from all of those postwar works: Kenneth Noland's "one-shot" paintings, but they're "cloud one-shots" [*laughs*]; Jackson Pollock's Action paintings, but again, "cloud Action paintings"; Helen Frankenthaler's pours. My pours are done with unprimed canvas, just in the kind of cliché, Morris Louis pouring of the paint. But what I do is I strategically manipulate how the color works so that you get an illusion of light and shadow. It looks like the sky, basically, depending on how I manipulate it.

RAIL Because of that hinge between the outer-directed and the inner-directed, or maybe even just a different relationship to the world, there's a phenomenological relationship to the sky and the sea and the sand, and then there's that inculcated, behavioral manipulation by cultural graphics. There's this two-dimensional world that we inherit, that's a combination of the inheritance of postwar abstraction, but also like those stylized, laterally-spreading desert landscapes in Road Runner cartoons, or Hollywood too. I can't help but think—in relation to all this—about Ed Ruscha.

M.D.L. For sure, and a lot of people did mention that with this project. I was in a bit of a post–grad school bubble where I wasn't thinking, "Ed Ruscha." Like, "No, these have nothing to do with that!" [*Laughs*] But actually, yes, Ed Ruscha, for sure. A stronger reference was the work of Joe Goode.

RAIL Regarding the LA mise en scène, did you study with John Baldessari at CalArts?

M.D.L. I didn't. I studied with Michael Asher and Tom Lawson. And one of the more formative experiences I had was with Anoka Faruqee, who's now at Yale, in the early 2000s. She really took painting and showed us how color could be theoretical, which was so important, as every aspect of that stance, especially at CalArts during that time, would be considered maybe "arbitrary," or "subjective," you know, all those bad words—"decorative"—

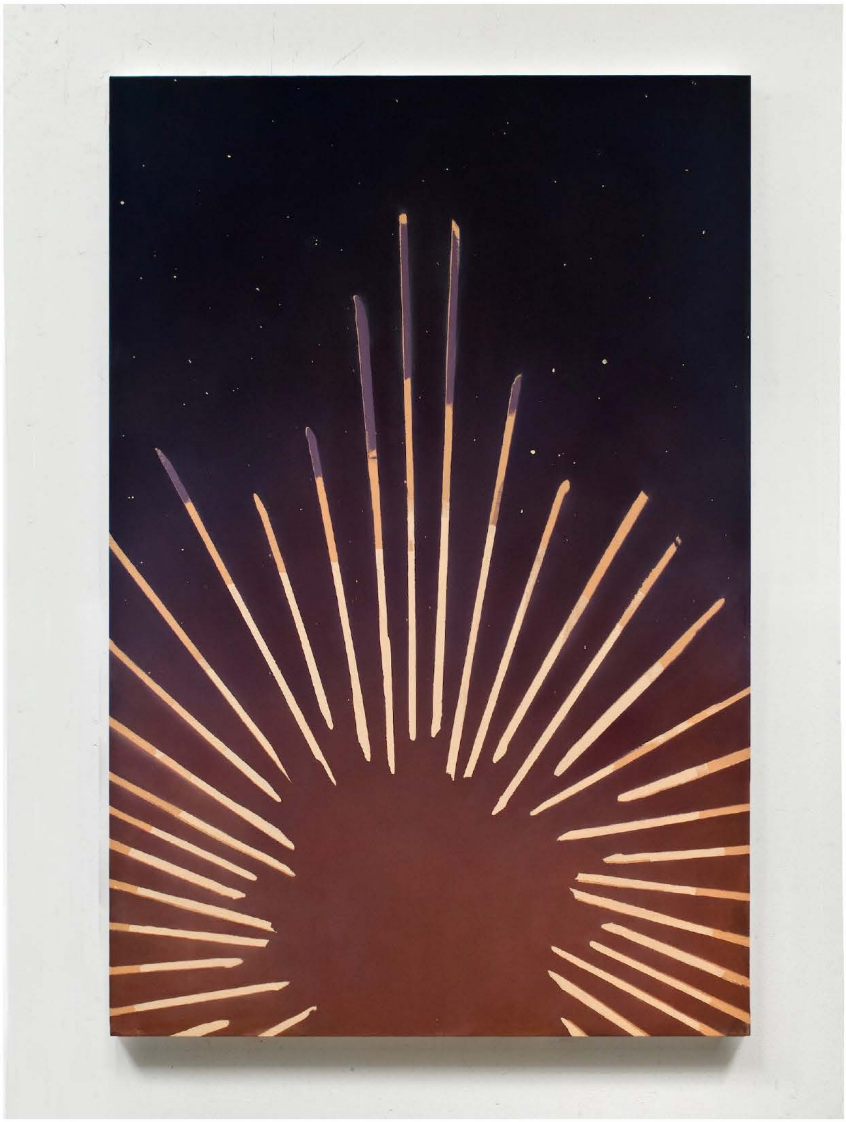
RAIL "Anecdotal."

M.D.L. [*Laughs*] Yes, all of those bad words. She said, first of all, to make a painting is a political act.

RAIL It wasn't relegated to an effete gesture, it was actually a political act.

M.D.L. Right, to make a painting, and beauty, and color. So she had us really think about the importance of all of our decision-making in painting, and thinking about, like, heroism, you know—everything. The whole bag of tricks. [*Laughs*] It was all really exciting. So when I was in grad school, before this project, I did a similar cycle that was also thinking a lot about a neomodern idea of abstraction and representation. So it kind of came from there.

RAIL There's an acknowledgment of what I'd term a "painterly atavism" in certain artist's work that has to do with epigenetic formal traits and their repetition and mutation. It seems like that's also what you're involved with. It's not necessarily the anxiety of influence, it's more like those traits come up in the



Mara De Luca, *Station 4: Technicolor Explosion*, 2009. Acrylic and screenprint on canvas, 72 x 48 inches. Courtesy the artist.

work and then they become self-evident as a historical continuum. As a painter myself, I'm painfully aware of the daily confrontation with materials in the studio—wrestling them into something inevitable in itself—but then there's other influences that come in, genetic recurrences of the history of painting.

M.D.L. I think you're right. Because if you look at Romanticism, with this early project—also later in 2015, and generally always—I was initially looking at Turner, and thinking about, again, light and shadow. And he actually interested me quite a bit, just because he almost had a shtick, in a way. [*Laughs*] It was very Bob Ross, you know? His gesture—immediately, he would have a sublime effect. So, because of CalArts and thinking about deconstructing the notion of the sublime, because the sublime was another one of those taboo subjects, I have this idea of a "facile" sublime.

RAIL A shallow sublime.

M.D.L. Yes, or like a picture of the sublime. So that was another idea that came into play later, with these "cloud Action paintings." But that's something that comes into how the paintings are made.

RAIL Like in the postmodern period—do you know the work of Jack Goldstein?

M.D.L. Yes.

RAIL I'm thinking about not just Ruscha's simulated environments, but also Jack Goldstein in relation to movies and the whole Pictures Generation—you mentioned Thomas Lawson. In the eighties when postmodernism was in its big efflorescence, there was a counter criticism of that kind of shallow quotation—often considered a cynical endgame. There was this strong critical pushback against historical quotation, which was kind of weird, because it also goes along with this whole idea of the death of irony. So there's a repressive reaction you can come up against when you actually start playing with irony. Some think it's too clever by half. And there's a weird relationship between that and sincerity, right? Like, are you making a sincere painting, or are you just making a quote of a modernist trope?

M.D.L. Well, to me, because they ended up being and are romantic paintings about landscape, light and shadow, emotion, mood—all the things that I love in terms of sincerity in painting—I felt that the kind of "critical core," let's call it, or the conceptual irony that I find humorous and that keeps me excited, is how the paintings are made. So if I'm quoting modernism—I called it a "have your cake and eat it, too" painting philosophy, which is what I live by. Because I was criticized quite a lot in grad school by—you know, I won't name names. [*Laughs*] In critique classes, I would say, like, "I'm interested in visual pleasure," and all the sincere things. And I was kind of cut off at the knees... the atmosphere became very didactic in a sense. To me, it felt like the irony and the humor is like, "Oh, I'm going to take this cliché idea of the heroic Action painting and turn it into a picture of sublime effects." Which is the opposite of what was expected.

RAIL In a funny way you were actually the ideal student, subsuming that conceptual core into an embodied manifestation in paint. By elevating the whole idea of irony and appropriation and cliché, you're taking it to this whole other place; what happens when you start maybe with a broadly specific quotation, and then it mutates and morphs into something completely different.

M.D.L. You're right. You know, at CalArts, they weren't able to discuss the part of the spiritual, which—actually, the last time I talked in depth with a writer was for a catalog essay, and we were talking about that, and how important that is to me. Like, that's the sincere part. Not that there's no irony, because the spiritual can comprise intellectual ideas and ironic ideas. But it's like the part of you that is almost channeled, or the part of you that you don't know what's going to come out. So you can start with your conceptual structure, but then in the end, the painting invents itself as you're making it.

RAIL So what you're talking about—setting up to make a shallow sublime, or the fact that Turner had a shtick—it's really interesting to me because it's like: is that an aspect of your personality? Would you consider yours a skeptical personality?

M.D.L. No, actually, I think it comes from an entirely different place. I think it comes from love of the theatrical, and going to the theater. I was just at the opera last night, and we were remarking on the sets. You know, you turn the set and all of a sudden it's an entirely different time of day and location, everything. It's not what you were referring to as coming from skepticism, it's more like suspension of disbelief, and then also looking behind the wings and rupturing the fourth wall. It's kind of a love of constructed illusion. [*Laughs*] Of the theatrical. In between Columbia undergrad, and grad school at CalArts, I went to Berlin, and in Berlin I did these little paintings that I called "Sissy Paintings." That was one project. So I was already starting to think: what is the heroic? Because Pollock and Newman—most of my heroes were men. So I was already trying to think about my place in this history.

RAIL What's curious to me about the title, "Sissy Paintings," is how that relates to theatricality, because that also refers to a queer attitude, right? Like in drag culture for instance. And, as you said, you can go to an opera and say, "Oh, that's so cool, because that's how they make that illusion," and it's okay, it's not exactly insincere, right? There's a performative aspect to it.

M.D.L. I was in my twenties when I made the Sissy Paintings, and I had not gone to grad school, and at Columbia, like I said, it was more about almost the ideology of painting, and subscribing to that. I was kind of naïvely in the dark, searching for a criticality in a way. They were tiny pink paintings, all stenciled gestures, and I titled them all after lipstick shades, because it was a big thing to be a female painter at Columbia in the early nineties. [*Laughs*] Isn't that weird? And you know, it was a discussion, to "paint like a man," or, "Oh, these paintings don't look like they were done by a woman." And I know it's like very late in the game to have that in the air, but it kind of was.

Mara De Luca, *La Jolla Shores*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas with copper plated element, 77 x 119 inches. Courtesy the artist.

RAIL I can recall Anna C. Chave's 1990 essay, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power" being a big deal at Hunter, where I was in grad school around that same time. Most of my fellow students were women and I remember that being a really important turn for them, because all of a sudden here was this woman taking to task the ostensibly taken-for-granted history of male dominance in painting.

M.D.L. A lot of women painters would leave painting and turn to video or sculpture or something that had less historical baggage, and with which it was potentially easier to discuss feminist ideas.

RAIL The performative aspect, rather than the kind of calcified painterly inheritance which was considered moribund back then. I was focused on painting at Hunter then, and I thought the moribundity was interesting. [*Laughter*] I felt like, well, this is an exhausted medium. I could really do something with this.

M.D.L. I didn't even question that. I just knew I was a painter. But somehow some part of me questioned my role in it, even though I was so naïve, like I said. So the Sissy Paintings came from that thinking. Even that early on, the role of process came into play, and how I could make it political in a way.

RAIL Well, that's interesting, because it totally relates to what we were talking about previously, that there's this critical core that winds up being a kind of counterpoint to the more phenomenological aspects of painting, or the more seductive, or beautiful, or whatever you want to call that.

M.D.L. It's true.

RAIL But I personally find it really interesting when artists like yourself can maintain both, and that it's not just about a claim towards remaking a belief in painting, but it has an attendant critical stance together with a phenomenological engagement. So it's kind of both, and not just, "Okay, I'm making a claim for beauty."

M.D.L. Well, it's the "have your cake and eat it too" attitude. [*Laughs*] At CalArts, they were pushing me so hard to—I don't know if I already said this—but, I was told, "If you want to make entertainment, you're in the wrong business." So I thought, "You know what? I can make entertainment in terms of beauty."

RAIL That's funny, considering they're in the crucible of the entertainment business in LA, right?

M.D.L. But I think that's part of why they're so anti–visual pleasures, right? At least back then it was like that. And at CalArts, you weren't allowed to talk about Robert Irwin, and Light and Space. And then when I started showing in San Diego at Quint Gallery, I really mined that relationship between California Light and Space and my work, because Mark Quint shows Irwin, Mary Corse, Helen Pashgian, Peter Alexander. And here in New York, David Totah recognizes the poetic and narrative dimensions of my work. His program also provides a really exciting context—international and diverse.

RAIL Let's go back to the whole idea of LA as a sense of place for you. The titles of your more recent paintings are related to place names, such as *La Jolla Shores* (2021).

M.D.L. Well, I was in LA for twenty-two years. There was the element of the landscape and the sky, which you cannot avoid, because you go outside and it's there. I remember coming out of the building right after sundown, and the sky was a deep, potent blue like you've never seen before. Or like Ed Ruscha's sunsets—all of those visual conditions. But then there was also the aspect of being on the freeway so much, on this dusty, gray concrete. The show that's opening at TOTAH is kind of about the last gasp of the California dream for me. It's the illusion of the dazzling light, and this sun worship, and the paintings are kind of a heightened color palette that has to do with that fiction. But for me, I spent so much time on the freeway, going and teaching far away. You know, UC Riverside, UC San Diego. I would see a sign on the freeway—and all you see is concrete gray—and it would have the most glamorous name, like "Diamond Bar." So that spurred a whole body of work just thinking about the fantasy of place. There are different aspects to a picture in your head. There's the fantasy, there's what you see, there's what you read—

RAIL One aspect of the West Coast being the context for artists like Ruscha and Irwin is that they were doing their work at the Ultima Thule of Manifest Destiny. An anachronistic place—there was still a sense of American dream wonder. It was Tinseltown, but there was also this hope that it was the last frontier and like it still had some residual modernist possibility.

M.D.L. Yes, I know exactly what you mean.

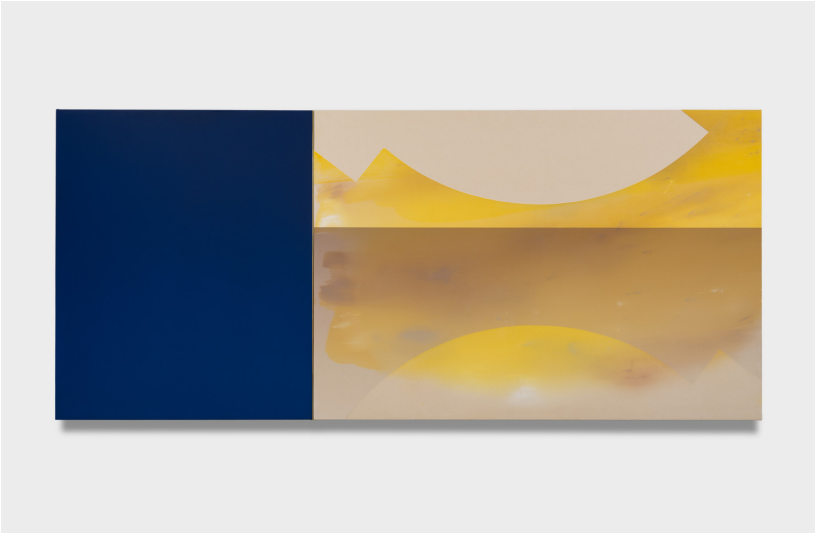
RAIL A modernist possibility with some glamorous palm trees. It makes me think of those Baldessari palm tree images, you know. But I noticed that you have also quoted Joan Didion in the past, which I think is really relevant to this turn in the conversation. You quoted Joan Didion in relation to your work, an author who is so intimately tied to LA—the specificity of her descriptions of the city in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, for instance. This quote, in which she conflates a natural phenomenon with the sociological traits of the city: "So the violence and unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, it's unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are."

M.D.L. Yes, I know that quote. [*Laughs*] Well, it's almost like they want to shut out nature and have their perfect Hollywood, but it won't happen, because you go for a hike wearing your lululemon outfit and there's a rattlesnake in your path. My first show at TOTAH was about that. The downstairs room was a projection of a rattlesnake. I went to the source, which is the Hollywood reptile handler, who would rent out snakes to the movies. [*Laughter*] So it's perfect, actually. I had a friend who helped me film it, and we were like six feet away from the rattlesnake, which was terrifying. It was like I was facing my fear. It had a very spiritual impact.

RAIL There's this Western relationship to the land that's also kind of fraught with fear and anxiety. When you think of, say, a series like *Breaking Bad*, there's a connection to the critters in the desert, and the desert itself, and the very dark things that are happening—with people getting murdered. It's a Darwinian kind of analogy, like survival of the fittest. You see this beetle scrambling across the desert and then someone's getting shot in the head. The macro is usually the horrible thing that the humans are doing, and the micro is just nature kind of doing its survival thing.

M.D.L. I spent the last couple of years reading a lot. I actually read a book by an environmental activist, and he was talking about Western expansion and the way that the country was plotted. You know, the Jeffersonian plan—disregarding topography and natural elements like rivers and mountains—just to cut up the entire country into squares and all of the implications of that, and the monoculture of growing corn and chemicals, everything—amazing book. And then I read the Joan Didion book about California, *Where I Was From,* her memoir of locale—both its perceived reality and its actual one. I was also reading other books about the changes brought by the violence and rape of the natural world in this country in the last couple of years. And I think the paintings for the show, even though, again, they're a celebration of beauty and that glimmer of utopian hope that is looking westward, there was a lot of that reading that came into making the paintings. So they're almost like too bright, or too horizontally expansive, or something. You know, you can't ask a painting to do too much.

RAIL That's an excellent point. You can't ask a painting to do too much. I also think that people probably don't give enough credence to the artist maturing. Maybe the inclination to do too much is a youthful thing.



Mara De Luca, *Untitled 2*, 2023. Acrylic on canvas, 48 × 84 inches. Courtesy the artist and TOTAH.

M.D.L. No, so you want it to give a feeling. And I think that was, in that *Stations* project—I was really trying to get the painting to do a little too much. But now it's like what you were saying: what you bring to the studio when you're making a painting is your subjectivity, and what you're thinking about.

RAIL Because you want to really make your mark.

M.D.L. Yeah, you have the professors on your shoulder.

RAIL Well, not just that, but even yourself. Like you know you want to make your mark, and that tends to engender trying to do too much in one painting, or even in a series of paintings. And then, when you move through that phase you realize what painting can't do.

M.D.L. Yes, for sure.

RAIL It's the constant evolution and rebirth of one's authority, like being seriously atavistic about a genetic inheritance you made up yourself.

M.D.L. You're right! [*Laughter*] It's like your vocabulary, your language, your everything. It gets refined. I think that comes with age, also. Maturity, I think, is the better word. And having that freedom, also.

RAIL Sometimes that subtlety is kind of lost in art writing. You know, if one doesn't have that kind of, "Well, this led to that, and then this," you can pay more attention to their critical core and to their journey. You also don't want to use it as a determinist straitjacket for the artist, especially with abstraction. It's way too representational.

M.D.L. It's very didactic in the way that—some of my experience at CalArts felt like I was being fed a very didactic point of view, like an art-making procedure, this had to be this accounted for, that had to be accounted for, you know? I think it's less important to me now to be able to retrace and say, "This color comes from there." With maturing, I'm not as afraid of pure sincerity, because my implicit conceptual core, critical core, is always there. And what we're really talking about here is continuity. There's a Philip Guston quote: "All a painter needs is continuity", and that's exactly it. I mean continuity in terms of being in the studio, but also years of continuity, where you have that luxury of looking back and developing and thinking. It's like a wealth of experience.

RAIL I think in personal terms it would be called character, right?

M.D.L. Interestingly, in the *Stations* project I was kind of hiding the self, because I was hiding all the brush marks with the gradients—they're made with repeated merging of paint. I was like, "Oh, I'm going to take a Frank Stella, step one, step two, and turn it into a gradient." But basically, I was canceling out the brush marks. And then a critic at the time said it was "self-rejection," or "self-effacement," or something like "canceling out the self."

RAIL There's another related famous quote—John Cage said to Philip Guston, "When you start working, everybody is in your studio.... But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you're lucky, even you leave." So, there is this kind of technical necessity to remove yourself in order to let the painting speak for itself.

M.D.L. For sure, but I think that's the core of the spiritual. It's like Agnes Martin talked about, how you don't really have any decision making in the painting, you're just channeling something. That's why consistency and continuity, all those things, are so important, because when you have too much going on in your head, or you're worried about this, it's harder to get to that connection.

RAIL So let's speak about your show. Some of the paintings included have nickel and copper elements or fittings.

M.D.L. Well, actually they come from the Greenberg frame. The gold Greenberg frame, you know, Thomas Downing—all the empty canvas, and then you see the gold frame. And drawing from that idea of turning modernism on its head, I thought, "How do I make a Greenberg frame actually become decorative and illusionistic?" So it's like the glint of sunlight in a painting—I thought of them almost like fashion accessories, but part of the structure, part of the illusion, and also part of the historical reference to Greenberg. They're also theatrical. [*Laughs*] In one there's black nickel, which to me is like moonlight, so it'll be in a dark painting. The black metal will feel like a glint of moonlight.

RAIL You call them elements. So for me, they're like this little condensation of what you're expressing visually in a painting. They're elemental condensations of natural phenomena. They also remind me of how Robert Ryman focuses on his painting's fixtures. This goes back to the idea of the objecthood of the painting, right?

M.D.L. Exactly.

RAIL I think that cleaves so well with our earlier discussion about the outer-directed influences of pop culture and movies, and the natural phenomena of the skies in LA. There's a relationship between the machined piece being, you know, the human thing. And then in the paintings, it's an expression of an element, right? Like a dispersion of that—I mean, you could think about some of the heavy metals in pollution, for instance, like copper and nickel and lead, right?

M.D.L. Well, if I look out my window at the sunset here, there's this reflection of—the sunset is over there, and it glints. There's that metal glint building. That is exactly my point—or, one of my points, with the metal pieces. You get the man-made and the textural, the urban, whatever—the metal building and the glint of sunlight.

RAIL There's this critical core of a pictorial investigation, both historically and graphically, but then also the way the paint evokes phenomena. Like the romantic sunset, or just the moon. It could be considered a simulated romantic, but it can also be considered just a focus on the sensory: the body, and touch, and smell.

M.D.L. Yeah, I think that's kind of the Light and Space, the Irwin—there's a lot in there for sure. There's the critical core, then there's the romantic image, and there's the interest in the materiality of the canvas, and the metal plays into that in a few ways. Then there's the manipulation of the canvas, the cutouts. I'm interested in the canvas manipulation as that rupturing of the fourth wall—like behind the scrim, or whatever. Like in *La Jolla Shores* you have this atmospheric illusion of the sky the way it is near the beach. *La Jolla Shores* references this beautiful coastline, and then over here you kind of run off the edge of the canvas. Any kind of manipulation is meant to be almost a stand-in—so it's canvas and paint, but it's also a picture of the sky scrolling back. I was strongly impressed by Joe Goode's "Torn Sky" series.

RAIL Was he in LA at the time, when you were there?

M.D.L. Yeah, I've met him several times. He did those "Torn Sky" paintings in the seventies. He would paint these beautifully illusionistic, oil painted skies, influenced quite a lot by Japanese movements and philosophy. I got to know him because I became friends with a writer, Kristine McKenna, who knew Irwin closely and Joe Goode, and wrote *The Ferus Gallery*, and produced the film on that seminal gallery. Joe talked to me a lot about this Japanese philosophy, the Gutai movement, that was about destruction and process.

RAIL Just going back to the show: they're all paintings that were done in LA. Is there an overriding concept for the show? What's the title?

M.D.L. The title of the show is *Western Gate*. So again, kind of reaching somewhere in my subconscious, with the reading that I was doing the last couple of years on this utopian vision of the West, the California dream, and sun worship and all these things. I got that term from one of the books I've mentioned, unfortunately I don't remember which one. It could have been *Grassland,* by the environmental activist Richard Manning. He wrote it in the nineties, but somehow I found it at the right time. I was teaching at UC Irvine,

and Joan Didion's book, *Where I Was From*, goes into the landscape of Irvine, and how part of the ranch was sold off to create UC Irvine. And you just live in the landscape in this way—the way that it's been kind of violated in California—it's really extreme, the desert. You're going through the desert, and then there's a green golf course with sprinklers. [*Laughter*] It's just insane. California is the weirdest place ever. In my painting *Sun Gaze* (2024) the yellow is actually really important, and there are two different techniques. One is the pour here, and one is a kind of systematic merging of paint. So one is on primed canvas, and the other is on unprimed. So it's a bringing together of two of these ideas about process.

RAIL It kind of sets up a paradox, too. It sets up a structural irony between the two—wouldn't you say?

M.D.L. Like the immediacy of one, and the labor-intensive of the other. That's exactly what I was kind of thinking about. Two ways to make a painting, put them together, and that's interesting to me, somehow. Also, the surface is different to start out with. On one side, the light comes from the white of the canvas. On the other side, it's painted light—it's a gradient.

RAIL So it's not just a literal, spatial interval, but it's also a conceptual interval.

M.D.L. Well, you know, the funny thing is, this painting took so many variations. It took a long time. This painting took like six months.

RAIL Really? Wow.

M.D.L. Yeah. And if you look at the side of the canvas when it gets shown, you'll see all the different colors of yellow, and they're very thin. I thinned down the paint quite a lot.

RAIL And you use acrylic, right?

M.D.L. These are acrylics. My oil paintings are all pretty traditional, easel on a traditional gesso emulsion, to really suck the pigments.

RAIL Well, let's just pause there for a second. The idea of duration is interesting to me, too. You work on a painting, and then it keeps on bringing you back. You know, a layperson would think, "Oh, they worked on that for six months?" But you don't actually work on it literally for six months, right? It's in the studio, and you have to keep on responding to it. You wait, and then something happens. I think Greenberg used to say to artists, "Let it cook for a while." Don't try to sum it up all at once, but let it steep, you know.

M.D.L. Oh, for sure. Like, this one, I'm not even—I thought it was done. But anyhow, with these pour works, usually they're in an orientation that refers more directly to landscape or to skyscape—

RAIL And you paint them on the floor too, right?

M.D.L. Yeah, the pours. And then I usually overlay with some sort of collage element or cut, but this painting—going back to that idea of "you have no power in your own painting"—it just did not want to be. It just wanted to be that. And I was kind of surprised by it, and then it just needed to have exactly the same yellow on that side, somehow. It just took a while to get it right. So it was kind of one of those risky paintings.

RAIL I identify with that as a painter, but it's interesting as a viewer—the duration and the struggle. This looks to me like a very calm painting. It doesn't look like a lot of struggle. So what's depicted isn't necessarily what your experience is.

M.D.L. Oh no, not at all.

RAIL I'm curious how time factors into that painterly call and response thing. With this diptych situation, is the time kind of built in, and is it resonant with the viewer? I think it might be. I wonder about that. Like I wonder if that time actually resonates, you know. Upon visiting Native American burial mounds in Akron, Ohio, Barnett Newman remarked that they weren't so much about space as they were about time.

M.D.L. Vija Celmins actually talked about that—the time that you put into the painting, it brings something unknown, something magical. Do you believe that?

RAIL Yes, sitting with it. It's more like a meditation.

M.D.L. A lot of painters talk about that, like Agnes Martin, and Susan Rothenberg. In her Art21 video, she says, "If you're not in your studio, physically, most every day, you've denied the possibility of anything happening. So even if you're reading a detective novel, you should be there." Let it sit with you and tell you what it needs. Try something, throw something away.

RAIL It's different. Not all painters do that. For instance, Alex Katz makes monumental paintings in a couple of hours. He makes these amazing, giant gestures, and he prefers to finish in one sitting. I mean, he's not an abstract painter, but that's also an aspect of one's sensibility, I think—to let it sit. I just wonder if non-imagistic or abstract painting engenders that kind of meditation?

M.D.L. Well, this one also took, like, a year.

RAIL And what's that one called?

M.D.L. This one's called *Cut Western Clouds* (2024).

RAIL There are other painters that have that kind of relationship to landscape or the sunset and—I don't know if you know the work of Ronnie Landfield? He's a New York painter. But he starts to do this thing—his work is very Color Field, and a lot of them sometimes look like sunsets. But then he started to do this thing where he did an intervention where there was a threshold, or some other geometric element that he just kind of stuck in there. And I thought that the frisson of that was so much more interesting than just the Color Field. Like the fact that it had both. It had this—I wouldn't call it skepticism—but it presented a remove.

M.D.L. Like pointing to itself.

RAIL Yes. A form of the indexical. It's pointing to itself. But it's not off-putting in a clever way. I think that's super important. I mean, I'm glad that you came up with that phrase, "critical core." Because, again, I feel like one can really indulge in the kind of beauty and materiality of the paintings if one also maintains their critical or conceptual core. It's not like Mike Kelley, it's not that kind of ironic. But there is a kind of structural frisson, you know. There's a structural tension.

M.D.L. Well, I mean, tension is really important to have there. Because otherwise what are you making? Fluff?

RAIL And that tension potentially recapitulates the history of painting.

M.D.L. Exactly.

RAIL The continuity is not just your own continuity, but if you're in touch with the continuity in your own practice, you get in touch with the continuity of the history of painting.

M.D.L. That's very well put.

RAIL I think that's something implicit in a lot of criticism, but sometimes it's just marketing. I think artists have a different relationship to that, because their ass is on the line, you know? [*Laughs*] So you go back into the thing that might be exhausted, or you go back into that thing that is your conceptual core. You go back, and you go back. And if you have the faith to sustain that practice, then the rewards are that you have this larger connection to the conceptual continuity of Tiepolo, or Newman.

M.D.L. That's exactly it. Yeah. Actually Greenberg, going back, said something like that. He said, "Pollock lives and dies in the same breath as Matisse," or he said something about the continuity—it's in the film *Painters Painting*: "Pollock lives and dies by the same standards as Manet, Matisse and Cézanne." And he talks about the continuity, the quality. The standards are the same. He's funny. And the other thing he said was, like, "Pollock knocks you flat with his arbitrariness." [*Laughter*] Which I love, because I think that kind of gave me courage with the two sides. Like, why not be completely arbitrary, right? Why not do this?

RAIL It's freedom in the studio. No one else is watching.

M.D.L. Exactly, yeah. So, thank you, Greenberg. People love to hate him, especially at CalArts.

RAIL He was an incredibly perceptive writer. I read something of his recently about Milton Avery. He nailed the fact that Milton Avery was much better at landscapes than he was at figures. You usually think of him in the context of Pollock and post-painterly painting, but, you know, if you read him on Milton Avery, it's dead on.

M.D.L. Yeah, that's funny. Post-painterly painting. I haven't actually thought about that word in a long time, but that's so interesting. [*Laughs*] It's so true, and it's like de Kooning said in that same film, "What does painterly mean? It means you can see it was done with a brush." [*Laughter*] So that always keeps circling, right? Like, do you show the brush? Do you not show the brush? All those ideas.

RAIL Right. And I meant to ask, before we finish, has your work changed since you relocated to the New York City area?

M.D.L. Well, the works that I made on the East Coast, the year I was resident here at Monira, were all about the winter light, because I hadn't had winter in twenty years, even though my parents live on the East Coast. But I somehow didn't experience winter. So they were all a palette that was very stark and—

RAIL Like that of the Northern Romantic?

M.D.L. Yeah, like a kind of white light, and I felt like I took some risks then that are kind of showing up now. But it was all about the palette. So now I think I'm trying to soak in, and then I'll figure it out.

Tom McGlynn is an artist, writer, and independent curator based in the NYC area. His work is represented in the permanent collections of the Whitney Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum of the Smithsonian. He is the director of Beautiful Fields, an organization dedicated to socially-engaged curatorial projects, and is also currently a visiting lecturer at Parsons/the New School.