

CATHARSIS IN THE FLAME

Lydia Makin

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Finding 'Catharsis in the Flame'

An Essay by Bella Bonner-Evans

The term catharsis was first used by Aristotle to describe the effects of tragedy upon the viewer, "tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of certain magnitude...through pity and fear effecting the proper catharsis of these emotions." As Aristotle never defined the word, its meaning remains a subject of critical debate with scholars advancing three primary definitions: 'purgation', 'purification' and 'clarification'. In a general sense it is used to signify the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions. Lydia Makin's paintings offer a mischievous meditation on the notion of catharsis, considering it both as an idea which may be depicted visually and as a potential effect produced for the viewer.

Each piece features an almost volcanic explosion of luscious colour that seems to burst forth as if from a central tear, mirroring the viewer's experience of deep emotions erupting to the surface on observing these commanding works. Immense in scale and deliciously rendered, the palette of each piece is uniquely and soul-stirringly evocative. They demand a lengthy gaze, creating ample time for an inner journey to take place and transfixing the spectator, as the paint appears to continuously flow over the surface like hot lava. In time, the paintings begin to settle and the initial rush of feeling dissipates. The viewer is granted reprieve and finds a calm clarity as the paintings themselves become still and solid. What remains is a vision of undeniable beauty.

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For Makin, the process of painting is inherently cathartic. Her practice is a demanding one, both emotionally and physically. She keeps the paint wet and flexible, moving her body in dramatic and all encompassing gestures in order to manifest a vision of continuous motion and liveliness upon the canvas. She writes, “I experience painting as the literal physical extension of my body where I undergo continual birth and rebirth of myself into the world”. This method provokes a synergetic connection between herself and her tools. The paintbrush is subsumed into her being, and the canvas upon which she works becomes another form of self. She shares her studio with it, and works on it in a constant dialogue. A negotiation ensues between her innermost thoughts, her desires and the limits of her bodily capabilities. As night draws in, she must leave this other self alone and meditate upon it. On returning the next morning, a sense of cathartic re-birth fills the space as she confronts deeper parts of herself made plain the night before.

In this way, her practice is a spiritual one – it is an introspective journey through the many selves she keeps within. Along the way, she is antagonised by the pain of a continuous and physically demanding task along with the fear of falling short of realising her vision. For Makin, “Painting is about taking risk. To achieve the unexpected, a work must be destroyed in order to attain an element of surprise...there are certain moments where I take total command of the canvas and the image effortlessly comes into fruition. It can feel like a release of some kind. I find these paintings rare, as they arise after a period of struggle and contemplation”. In this way, her process is akin to the journey taken by the protagonist of a Greek tragedy; to create a great work, she must endure an intense psychological and physical voyage along a pathway littered with hardship. The final painting is ultimately forged through destruction, struggle and reincarnation.

The paintings are mysterious and irreducible, each imbued with the sense that something remains hidden, always lurking beneath the surface. Makin has moved away from direct figuration in the years since graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art, yet an ephemeral energy clings on. Her works seem to look back upon the viewer and much waits hidden within them that cannot be easily uncovered – she writes, “There is a sense of something beneath the surface: is it a ghost, a memory, a thought form, all of these or something else entirely?”.

‘Spirit’ calls to mind the surface of a lake with its haze of greens, blues, and yellows rendered with flowing brushstrokes that sweep organically across the canvas. The eye is drawn to a darker space, with washes of browns and hints of black, in the painting’s centre. It may be read as the viewer’s reflection as they look down into the water from the safety of the shore or, perhaps more ominously, something disturbing the surface from beneath.

‘Spellbound’ meanwhile, evokes a feeling of the occult, the rich oranges and frantic mark making creating a much more urgent atmosphere than in the case of ‘Spirit’. With its title in mind, we might come to understand the piece as a manifestation of that which lies beyond nature or scientific reasoning – perhaps the contents of a cauldron or an attempt to capture the casting of a spell? This need not be literal nor demand belief in magic, but may instead be taken as an invitation to consider forces in our universe we may not yet fully comprehend.

In the case of ‘Incantation’, it feels as though the great power encased within Makin’s work is released and swallows the canvas whole, spitting out an unmissable burst of energy. The palette is somewhat reminiscent of medieval tapestries, with deep burgundy set in contrast to regal emerald green. When viewing ‘Incantation’ one may find, as I did, a vision of a dragon speeding past and leaving a trail of flaming destruction in its wake. This piece, in particular, is pressing and loud – summoning the viewer to follow along pathways into forgotten folktales.

There are certain whispers one hears on viewing 'Spirit', 'Spellbound' and 'Incantation' that seem to echo throughout the entire body of work. Namely a dichotomous relationship between the tranquil and the disturbed, an ineffable and undefined spirituality, a sense of heat and the urgency of an unexpected burst of flame, and a timelessness that allows them to inspire all manner of visions. The ultimate magic is the freedom they offer – each viewer may dream up any story and find its characters waiting impatiently to be found in any one of these paintings.

Lydia Makin's solo exhibition 'Catharsis in the Flame' is true to its title. Upon entering, the viewer is met with a rich current of feeling that spreads like wildfire through the gallery. As each piece is experienced in turn, the space becomes filled with a burning emotional intensity and the mysteries that lie deep beneath the painterly surface begin to reveal themselves. Continued contemplation allows the viewer a chance to uncover the paintings' secrets; forgotten figures, hidden stories and concealed truths are pulled to the surface, and with them, come feelings, memories and thoughts that are usually kept locked up tight. After some time, the viewer settles upon a certain work in contemplative sanctity. With this peacefulness comes the expulsive wash of emotional release like the cold splashing of water upon the flame.