

Wes Lang

ENDLESS HORIZONS

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The eight canvases in ENDLESS HORIZONS were all carried out in the late spring and early summer of this year, as the blunt force of the pandemic had begun to wane, leaving us to decide what lessons we will carry with us out of the scorching trauma and into the rest of our lives. “I only had about two meltdowns while painting these,” Wes told me over the phone, laughing. “I was searching for what to talk about and one late night in the studio, I painted over everything for the last time and these things started really clicking.

The succinct, mantra-like phrases in these works imbue the space with an air of optimistic wonder towards the future, and a sense of gratitude for having made it out of fire. *There is Magic . . . Here it is . . . And it is just so . . . Wonderful* reads *No. 2 in E Minor*, which takes its title from a Rachmaninoff symphony. “I feel very hopeful, I feel very excited. No matter how many times I read or write or focus on the ideas in these paintings, it’s easy to forget to feel that way. And it was incredibly easy to forget to feel that way over the last year and a half,” says Wes. “I think we all need a good kick in the ass to remember how fantastic the world can be. And I’m putting myself on the top of the list of people who need a reminder.”

While skulls and other memento mori may not always be associated with hope, the iconography here does in fact serve to fuel this drive towards optimism. (Just ask the people of Bhutan—regularly ranked one of the happiest populations in the world—who live under the philosophy that to be truly happy one must think of death five times a day.) “The acceptance of death has always been a constant theme throughout my work, and these paintings acknowledge that the only way to really live is to have this understanding,” says Wes. “I just want people to remember to make the most out of their life while they have it, that’s really what it’s for.” One of the skulls in the triptych *Results, Results Results...*, rendered cheekily with its tongue sticking out, references one that the artist drew on an elementary school notebook as a child in the ‘70s. In this manner, Lang is not only looking back at the past year, but stretching his purview across the ribbon of time, from his early childhood to the yet-unknown future.

Painters who have served as Lang’s compass throughout his artistic life are also invoked. Ellsworth Kelly and Marc Rothko surface in the color planes and geometry of the compositions, while influences like Cy Twombly, James Ensor, Robert Motherwell, the Danse Macabre genre of the Middle Ages, and others all seep through the thick paint. Talking to Wes, he explains that these influences arise not through intentional emulation, but unconsciously, through countless brushes with the art that moved and became a part of him. That is to say, the work was beyond the control of Lang as an individual, left not up to the artist but to the concatenation of a lifetime’s worth of events that unfold far beyond our power. “The planning is a really great way to let the canvas show you what it really wants; how foolish I was to think I could control this,” he says of the process. If there’s any single takeaway from the past year—a year that these works aim to articulate through Lang’s visual lexicon—it’s just this: that the universe does not care about our plans, and we can either wrestle with reality for control, or we can accept it and be free.

-Wallace Ludel, art critic