

# Larry Poons

## Recent Paintings

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### Nowness

Paintings don't move, but somehow that doesn't feel true when you're viewing a work by Larry Poons. Just as Poons has been in continual and restless aesthetic motion throughout his storied career, so do his canvases seem to be on their way somewhere as you look, dancing past your gaze. They also feel to have arrived *from* somewhere, or from two somewheres which Poons alone has synthesised as if realising their destiny: the cosmic expansiveness of all-over modernist abstraction as gestated in midcentury America, and the floral headiness and bursting light of French Impressionism. For all that, though, his engulfing recent paintings locate themselves in an unfolding now. Their morphing pictorial events can't be memorised but only journeyed through: heated colour schemes modulate horizontally, vertically, diagonally, while quicksilver brushstrokes coalesce into cloudlike forms that are substantial but not fixed, imposing yet light. Indeed, these paintings are full of tantalising and precarious not-quites: not quite nonrepresentational, definable neither by summer's-day exuberance nor stormy ferocity. Amid this, Poons reminds us of the counterintuitive places that risk might be found in artmaking: in resistance to the assimilable and mnemonic image, in unabashed beauty, in stylistic suspension, and in reaching into multiple pasts to build a new, if momentary, pictorial present.

Take *Walkin' the Dog* (2018) for example. The first question one might ask is how to read this painting, where to start from. In one sense it invites a left-to-right scan, as the painting feels to transform on a horizontal axis: it begins peachily, flecked with horticultural greens, before progressing into something heavier and bluer and more turbulent, recalling Turner's skies at sea. There's no narrative here but a strong if abstract sense of event, of transformation, unfixity. Perhaps unsurprising given Poons' longstanding interest in music, it might remind you at once of the grandeur of orchestral music and the fleet extemporizations of jazz. All of which feels like a lot to throw at a painting, but we're only just working our way into it. The sideways movement of [illustration one] is only one of its feeling-tones, as the paintstrokes—viewed anywhere in the canvas—have a spiraling quality, aided by the frequent sight of bare canvas, that suggests the whole improvised composition is airborne. It feels like anything you might say about this painting, you can also argue for its inverse.

Other canvases operate differently, though no less multifariously. *Avenue of Spheres*, which leans refulgently into pinks and yellows, (2017) feels like several whirlpools convening: in what direction the composition appears to be spinning changes depends on where your eye has momentarily alighted. Again, there's plenty of visible canvas, attesting to the fact that this was all effected as a one-shot deal, a combination of mastery and the urge to be perpetually self-surprised. As you progress through the canvases, you intuit an artist unwilling to repeat himself. The widescreen *A Host of Stuff* (2023) divides approximately, almost symphonically, into three segments, seeming to tighten into form at its centre, then intensify in tone before dissolving sighingly again. *Well, Well Dress* (2020) is one of several places where Poons flips the axis on the vertical, and, playfully, we almost have a sense of air at top and ground at base; between them, brushstrokes almost interlock, and spatial depth seems to flip back and forth like in an optical illusion, a Necker cube say.

If space can turn itself inside out, maybe time can too; and here's another latent element of risk in Poons's work. On the one hand, a stylistic fusion that speaks to and builds on the innovations of both Monet and Pollock (to pick two names from two larger groups) ought to feel retrograde, the past multiplied by the past. Poons, though, recognizes that the linear flow of art history, what until relatively recently was seen as a steady march of isms up until pluralism, offers an opportunity, something like passing through wormholes or even creating them. Modernity didn't much go in for backwards glances, and postmodernity didn't see jigsawing the past together primarily in terms of visual pleasure, nor did its artists tend to be interested in correlations between distinct if connected aesthetics. Poons isn't being retro here, because what he's accessing never existed; rather he's inventing—to switch spatial metaphors—a road not travelled. One might argue, too, that not only is his art both European and American (and thus freed from the nationalist elements that attended Abstract Expressionism), it's also implicitly Asian—in the sense that its emphasis on the fleeting moment, and harmonization of opposites, speaks strongly to Buddhist thought. In asking where these paintings come from, the best answer starts to be 'everywhere'.

No specific place, then, and no specific time. Except, arguably, the present. The present because these paintings don't so much exist as happen while they're seen, and because—again—what does it mean to paint unabashedly elatedly, in 2023? The world, in so many ways, is not a joyous place; it is terrifying across myriad vectors. And yet contemporary art's typical response to this—its response, arguably, since just after Matisse's day—has not been to create anything like a sanctuary. Instead, and increasingly, art typically reflects the pain of the present right back at us, and often makes visible occluded unhappiness too. There is great validity in that, of course. But that Poons is very much *not* doing so doesn't make his art escapist; rather he's staking out a position that, in the face of great disquiet that shades into hopelessness, art can still be a place to recharge oneself. There's a famous Gandhi quote in which he says he's got such a busy day ahead that he'd have to meditate for two hours rather than one. These paintings, with their superheated opticality, somersaulting spatiality and abundant colour, similarly don't exist as an escape from the world as it is. It's because the world *is* how it is that such paintings need to exist, presenting an art of joy, pleasure and presentness as a radical proposal.

- *Martin Herbert*