

The Black Paintings - James Lomax

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Fourteen images, cast in concrete and devoid of colour, resemble windows overlooking a street. In each, an aperture is obscured by different means: a newspaper laid on with thick paste, crumpled bin-bags pinned from edge to edge or slatted blinds hung from top to bottom. In each of these windows, a sliver of clear glass remains unobscured, revealing a fragment of the view beyond. These concrete visions are at once beautiful and unsettling, provoking apprehension and disquiet. Whether read as views into private interiors or unseen exteriors, each of the fourteen works frustrates our expectations of what a window is *for* – a means through which to view the world – and instead compels us to search their mottled surfaces for a clear image.

These images unsettle our perception of space. Tint, shadow and negative space carry the eye between the foreground and the suggested zone beyond it. Like spectral flashes, they appear as visions of mysterious subjects, each obscured by dense grey fog or floating in a diffused light in which foreground and background converge and the figurative dissolves into the abstract. They resist being read as purely pessimistic images, and in their muted surfaces and the faint glimpses of worlds beyond, they suggest the possibility of an alternative reality: a fragile glimmer of hope, promise, or revelation.

Such descriptions offer a sense of Lomax's new body of work. But they could just as readily describe another cycle of fourteen paintings, produced some two centuries earlier by Francisco Goya. With their muted palette and political subtext, Goya's paintings laid the groundwork for Lomax's series, and shaped its conceptual foundations.

During the 1790s, spurred by the violence and corruption that was then consuming Spain, Goya began to make overtly political works criticising his country's monarchy, church and aristocracy, decisions that would alienate him from his patrons and cost Goya both his fortune and his social standing. Cut adrift and plagued by poor health, he left Madrid, the city where he'd spent his entire working life, in 1819, at the age of 73, and moved to a farmhouse on the city's outskirts. There, in near-isolation, he had ample time to lament the state of the world and to chart a new artistic path. From this anguish, he produced a cycle of fourteen nightmarish paintings depicting dark rituals and grotesque acts of violence that would later be known as the *Black Paintings*. Remarkably, Goya painted these works directly onto the walls of his villa with no evident intention that they be seen by others. With these sinister visions, he forged an intensely personal visual language of anger, despair, and paranoia, but also, in imagining art without the need for an audience, questioned the very purpose of image-making itself.

For Lomax, the question of why Goya created these images solely for himself has proved compelling. Having first seen the paintings up close at the Museo del Prado while he was a student, Lomax has long been intrigued by Goya's experimentations with colour and his willingness to depart with painterly conventions to open up a different emotional register.

Although principally a conceptual artist, Lomax's practice has always been informed by the traditions of both painting and sculpture, and his work consistently occupies a space between the two. This new cycle of fourteen works is particularly enigmatic, each produced through the reworking of construction materials using sculptural processes. The works retain the presence of a painting: each is cast to the approximate thickness of a standard canvas and reads, from a distance, like a carefully painted surface. Like Goya, Lomax is concerned with the limits of his chosen medium, producing experimental pieces that function as acts of personal exploration as much as artworks intended for public consumption. In this sense, both Goya and Lomax's paintings operate as forms of introspection: their brooding, anxious character charting an internal psychodrama in which mark-making becomes a kind of release.

Read in this way, the blocked entry points and makeshift coverings that obstruct our view into and through each of Lomax's fourteen images – a blind, a bag, a newspaper – suggest a kind of claustrophobia or entrapment, offering no clear way in or out. But even if these works, like Goya's, operate partly as introspective meditations or private experiments in form, they are also emphatically extrospective, outward-looking commentaries on the state of the world and the possibility of meaningful change. Whereas Goya articulated this in his allegorical visions of grotesque demons and voracious gods, Lomax takes a different approach, working instead with a device that is absent from Goya's paintings though ubiquitous across Western art: the window.

For an artist drawn to hard, unbroken surfaces, windows have come to occupy a surprisingly central place in Lomax's practice. While present in various forms in his earlier work, their significance became more apparent during a recent residency at the therapeutic men's prison HMP Grendon and through Lomax's growing engagement with art-making in prisons across Europe. In such closed environments, the window acquires an intense importance, at once the primary point of access to a world beyond and a constant reminder of confinement. In this setting, the window – whether large or small, open or shut – becomes both a marker of hope and an unbreachable boundary.

It is in this dual register that Lomax deploys the window motif in his *Black Paintings*, with each of the fourteen windows opening onto a different field of possibility. Intuitively, we understand that each window looks either into or onto a place other than our own, a scene we might, in theory, inhabit and a reality that is perhaps more desirable than our own. Yet these are never straightforward views. Where Goya's paintings confronted the violences of autocracy and

institutional corruption, Lomax's concrete images can be read as responses to a present marked by stagnation, social division, insularity and intolerance.

Even so, Lomax's decision to preserve a small but deliberate portion of unblocked glass in each of his windows implies that, beyond newspaper coverings and drawn blinds, another view still exists, and with it perhaps another way of seeing.