

BLOCK XXXIII

TO LOOK OUT, TO LOOK IN
some reflections on practice, in community

In her manifesto against the historical conventions of the pastoral, poet, novelist, and arts writer Lisa Robertson describes the form's problems and obsolescent conceits. "Ontology is the luxury of the landed," she writes, locating the pastoral within the generational wealth of a land-owning settler class. To know one's being, then, is to be imbricated in the *possession* of a place. But among the pastoral poem's attributes, Robertson notes that this "establishment of a sense of place" becomes the "ground for philosophical being and discourse." Building-creating one's understanding of where and when we are living, then, is a foundational exercise in the life of the mind and its interlocutors, worth being disentangled from its histories of extraction and exclusion. What happens in this building, in this museum, in this city, in this year as much defines this place as it mirrors it: here, you see the work of artists who are creating what Houston might look like, from a practice of close looking and listening.

In this survey of recent work by eleven participants in the Glassell School's Block Program, I have framed the idea of looking out or *lookouts* as an organizing principle for a wildly disparate collective exhibition. To *look out* can mean many things: to engage visually with what is ahead, to watch over and protect. To look out might be to survey one's place, in its wild potentialities and intersections of care and complexity. To *look out for* is to be working toward community, building trust. "Having a soul, I thought, is about looking out," writes Robertson in her recent novel, *The Baudelaire Fractal*. There is a kind of mythology of what the artist's life is supposed to look like: indeed, as a culture, we fetishize the idea of the isolated and tortured genius, living apart from the world he inhabits. To look out, though, indicates a relationship with something beyond the self; to look out is a soulful attempt at connection and understanding.

The artists here have spent a year together in close reflection and constant dialogue. In weekly studio critiques by visiting artists, writers, curators, and gallerists, they have built a practice that is necessarily discursive, that is meant to look out as much as to look deeply inward. Through the development of a cohort, these artists experiment alongside one another, a profound

exercise in trust and sincerity of practice. A lookout is someone “engaged in keeping watch,” or, a “structure affording a wide view for observation.” A lookout indicates care in viewing, patience, and a generosity of listening and interpretation. To look closely can be a radical act of expansion, of understanding something heretofore mysterious or taken for granted, something misunderstood becoming finally more clear.

There is nothing simple about creating a community: indeed, the fractious falling-apart of community relationships is perhaps as underacknowledged a tenet of community as the cheery rainbows and unicorns vision of everyone holding hands together is overdetermined. Further, a classroom experience can only make certain broad gestures toward community: perhaps it is worthwhile to suggest that this is only the beginning of something, a shared vocabulary, a very preliminary kind of trust, a space of vulnerability that may flourish or may fracture. It is a bet, that in one or two years of close looking, something new might spring forth from this particular place, from these shared conversations and reading lists. It is, deeply, something imaginary but, as Robertson writes, “Consider that the imaginary generates landscapes for political futures.”

Curation is also, of course, a close looking. Over the past four years of teaching the Block seminar, I have had the luxury of seeing these artists’ practices grow in ambition, skill, and scale. I have watched intuition find its language. But to make an exhibition also requires seeing the visual rhythms and frictions between objects, understanding how they need space and light, and finding spatial frames that are barely capable of hinting at the breadth of the practices represented in the space. As you walk through this exhibition, you might find a line of relationships to the natural world: studies of wind, of carnivorous plants, of wildlife and natural materials, of water and its complex metaphors and properties, of geographies and travel, of immigration. You might also find reflections on grief and loss: memories of the past, of loved ones, of what might have been. There is brightness here: bold colors and wild movement, fantastical terrain and dense patterns. There are shadows, both literal and suggestive. There are overlapping lines of thought, questions that bounce against one another, and answers that remain unresolved.

To the artists in the room: you have my profound admiration and deep affection, and I wish you the futures you hope for and deserve. You have taught me so much.

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