

Lewis Hammond

Bludgeoned Sky

February 24–March 25, 2023

47 Canal presents “Bludgeoned Sky”, Lewis Hammond’s first solo presentation in New York, comprising a new series of paintings that probe the experience of physical, political, and emotional dislocation.

Following Freud’s distinction between healthy mourning and pathological melancholia, Paul Gilroy, theorist of race, culture, and nationalism, has described Britain as mired in “postcolonial melancholia”— a persistent state that prevents the country from accepting the loss of Empire. Unable to relinquish the trappings of imperial dominance and exceptionalism, and unwilling to reconstitute itself as a nation among other nations, Britain longs for a falsely imagined racial and cultural homogeneity of times past, as Brexit, thirteen years of austerity policies, and the serpentine queues to view the late Queen Elizabeth II lying in state indicate.

Hammond, who grew up in Wolverhampton, England, and now lives between Berlin and London, is trying to understand the psychic life of the United Kingdom, the psychology of a people who repeatedly choose nostalgia over change, and of those who must live alongside them in an island nation that, after much human, environmental, political and economic catastrophe, seems to be “slipping slowly into the sea.”

Hammond’s catastrophe is less an event than an encompassing unease. Across the paintings in “Bludgeoned Sky”, Hammond confronts the viewer with closeups of objects and body parts devoid of explanatory context, rendering a world in which these figures are on rapidly disappearing ground.

Falling Sky (all works 2023) presents a giant of justice, vengeance, and destruction. The form of a black figure lurches through a city wreaking destruction, her gaze direct and focused. She is a spectre returning, an embodiment of the existential threats that we face as a species: climate, war, pandemic, white supremacy, and misogyny, all of our own making.

In *fidelity* (*process of shattering*), a woman stands in the mirror with her arms folded and face turned away from her reflection. Her reflection might have a life of its own: are the reflected figure’s legs slightly more apart than the ‘real’ figure, her lean slightly more exaggerated? Or are these distortions? The sense of ambiguity begins to undermine the assumed ease of the domestic scene, setting the viewer in a position of voyeuristic remove which permeates the exhibition.

The figures in “Bludgeoned Sky” are painted with eyes closed, or staring into an objectless middle distance, as though the glaze of disassociation is their only psychic protection from the void. The repeated foreclosure and refraction of the gaze suggests that these figures might also be holding fast to an interior world that is, by necessity, all their own. In *early attrition*, the figure’s eyes stare into a middle-distance that adds space between the figure and the viewer, increasing their sense of remoteness and

underscoring their solitude. That this figure is both familiar and unknown to the viewer and in some senses the artists heightens the tense of this detachment.

Hope comes quietly from amongst these lonely scenes. *Spite* features two leafy stems crossed to form an 'x' and pinned to a wall within a tight, oval canvas. Hammond drains the leaves of verdancy, pliancy and suppleness, the red flowers appear brittle and spiky.

The artist subtends this quiet horror using earthy umber and ochres that have become associated with classical European ideals of beauty and harmony, are transfigured and much harder to digest. In *untitled (figure)*, a cornered figure with eyes closed holds a long leafy stem, caught between waking and sleep, his purple t-shirt markedly more vibrant than its slightly pallid wearer.

What unites the works is a quality of what Hammond calls "bludgeoned light" that the artist links to his hometown Wolverhampton, a "post-industrial, mid-sized town, a millennium city that isn't truly a city," and the color blue, which recurs across these paintings: In *no telling*, a mother and son are couched in blue; in *early attrition*, blue waters and sky fix a dazed figure and the overlarge setting sun in place. Blue light locks them into this undefined, fragmented time, so that while "Bludgeoned Sky" resists narration, these figures and scenes share a state of mind.

Lewis Hammond (b. 1987, Wolverhampton, UK) lives and works between London and Berlin. Recent solo and duo exhibitions include: Arcadia Missa, London (2022), Kai Art Center, Tallinn, Estonia (2022); HFKD, Holstebro, Denmark (2021); Brücke Museum, Berlin (2021); La Maison de Rendez-Vous, Brussels, Belgium (2021); Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno, Italy (2021); Lulu, Mexico City (2020); Arcadia Missa, London (2019). Recent group exhibitions include: 47 Canal, New York (2022); X Museum, Beijing (2021); Andrew Kreps, New York (2021); MOCO, Montpellier (2020); Kunsthalle Fribourg, Fribourg (2019); Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin (2019); and Antenna Space, Shanghai (2019). Lewis Hammond's public collections include the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami and Tate, London (UK)