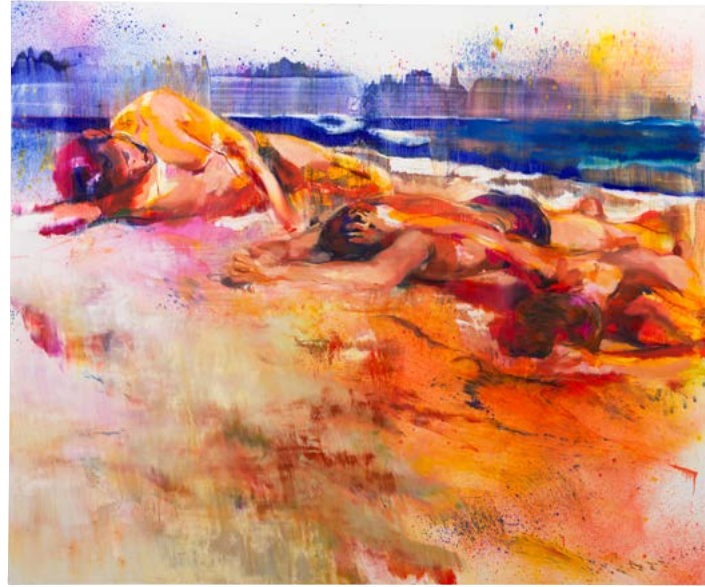


DORON LANGBERG: *NIGHT*

Victoria Miro, London
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hannah baer On Doron Langberg

Philosopher Judith Butler's writing on nonviolence describes how our sense of the world is conjured, not simply by apprehending sense data, but by refracting apprehended sense data through the lens of unconscious phantasy. We internalise early and unspoken ideas about the qualities of human community, and then we see life in that way; we may hold an idea of the world as violent, and then forecast violence; we may be told that people are predominantly straight so we perceive them as straight. Butler invites us to challenge the phantasy (which, when spelled with a 'ph', refers to the unconscious rather than the conscious world). One way to remake the world we perceive is to imagine it differently.

In the queer world of Langberg's paintings, there is something of this pull towards an alternative – and arguably preferable – reality. One has the sense that perhaps the painter who fashioned these worlds (and now the viewer by proxy) may have some other phantasmatic lens through which life is apprehended. Larger-than-your-body tableaux of dancing and reclining figures (some rendered with such detail that you can make out the stitching on a belt loop foregrounding others barely suggested, wisps of subjectivity hanging in the air in sweat and smoke) hang within ethereal interiors or sweeping landscapes; frequently there are lovers, laying and/or wandering. As with anything from the unconscious, it is not so easy to describe plainly how one sees differently when one sees this world. But tracing around the details, there are clues.

There is something about light. There's not a lot of it, and it comes in from different directions. Sometimes light moves through bodies, dancing figures in the distance are overlaid on top of one another, as in *Basement* and *Merge*. The scenes depicted are often quite dark, yet they're full of colour, as in *Dark Room (Underwear Party)*. There are multiple light sources, but the paintings sometimes confuse the eye with lit or unlit space, almost

as though there are sources of obscuration, 'dark sources' if you will, from which darkness or haziness radiates – perhaps literally true in a nightclub with a fog machine, but something more as well.

Sometimes the darkness obscures form, and other times it makes form itself. In *The Walk Back (Underwear Party)*, strokes of darkness define details, licking like flames, swaths of darkness that might mean something about time, or affect, or just a part of the land you can't walk through because the way is blocked, maybe a way you won't go because the pleasures there might be overwhelming. Darkness here is not about fear exactly, it's about permission, it's about possibility, it's about a mutative stance towards the world and embodiment, tangibility without concreteness. A network of unspoken agreements emerge in darkness that through their pulsing, flickering, writhing movements change the shape of what can happen with bodies in a room. This may sound abstract, but with just a glance at the images one can understand at least one obvious valence for this reading of the work, one thing that is permissible – perhaps even undeniable – in darkness: touch.

The energy in these paintings reverberates out from the contact between bodies. In *Morning on the Beach*, the hand of a man lying on the beach falls lazily onto another's body, two figures grip each other in a dancing embrace, maybe they're fucking – probably they are – but you can't quite tell. Other figures are definitely fucking, this certainty sometimes rendered more clearly than the bodies or the figures themselves. There are always multiple stories happening, multiple moments, intersubjective and ambiguous, the people in this world are often touching more than one person; such details are not incidental, they are the data that spell out the not-yet-speakable truth about this other space you get to see and – if you integrate it into how you begin to see, perhaps – begin to experience.

If you think about it a little harder, it might be strange to imagine that a figure could be only partially constituted, more like smoke and sweat than skin and muscle, and yet to still feel so confident that the figure is touching someone else. Touch is what brings these figures into being, whether it's touch between lovers of many years or complete strangers, old friends or eager acquaintances, gripping a lithe waist to thrust into him or gently taking his hand to help guide him on the path over the scrubby woods on the edge of a queer beach enclave. The tenderness in these touches does not make them faint, their vibrational intensity is potent, even when the dark is thick and someone can barely be discerned against the wall of a nightclub or the shrubs of a sand dune, the contact that the bodies make is undeniable.

Here there is a teaching about collectivity. In Western thought, bodies house subjectivities, usually 1:1, and so we might believe in these paintings too, whether the bodies are whole or partial, clear or sketchy, whether they are fucking you or fucking your friend, or fucking a stranger, they are individual. How much more like vapour would a body have to be before we wondered if the subjectivity supposedly pinned to it might be a little different inside? How many people might someone be dancing with or fucking or fading into smoke or sand with before something of the bounded individual subject position became a little looser, dilated a little, maybe even distended or leaked or spurted or blended? The touching here is less the lonely touch of trying to escape individual subjectivity and more the smeared touch of individuality already flickering, the sense that the so-called 'subjects' are sharing something larger and more whole than individual experience.

At the same time, social realities, in basic ways, can also be felt in the work. The way that some of the figures are so clear and close while others are barely-there mirrors a familiar experience of nightlife spaces. Some people at the party are familiar, known, touchable, while others are strange, unknown, outside (not to mention visual reality in a nightclub or cruising on a night beach, where you actually just can't see very far in the dark). There is also something melancholic at times about the shrouded figures in these paintings, a suggestion of loss or absence in the inability to fully render another, which

stays with you after the painting is no longer in view. Langberg is of course playfully and expertly using paint as he conjures what our eyes see in low-lit environments; but something else is also suggested. These darkened hazy figures can feel scratched out, sketchy, at times painted over and at other times barely rendered, under- or over-painted suggesting low light but also leaky subjectivity, touchable bodies that are yet somehow ontologically ambient, fleeting or diminished.

When speaking with those who do not believe in the possibility of a world without violence, Judith Butler will ask interlocutors, would they prefer to live in a world where no one is even making the case for nonviolence. Butler notes that 100% of the people to whom this question is addressed respond no, they would prefer to live in a world where a case for nonviolence is made. At this point, an inquiry or exploration can begin, a dare even, to re-pixelate our unspoken but closely held sense of the way things are. A world without violence is not what we hold unconsciously in our mind, so it requires tremendous vision and imagination to begin to figure it. A world without violence, however, is not a world without pain, confusion, disappointment, or loss. It is not a world where you never lose someone at a party, or never feel a jolt of fear when you see your lover pressed up against someone else, where you never stumble in the dark, whether over a twisted root on a path or a stray leg protruding from a shuddering tangle of bodies in a darkened room.

In the loss that hangs around these barely discernible figures the question arises again of what someone who saw this world could see, what they would know, where the limits are. These are not Pollyanna-ish depictions of a queer utopia, they are not merely sanguine, nor do they represent a single stance on gay life, for example, separatism or assimilationism. These under-rendered figures remind us that even in the Elysian queer blowout of this other world, there is no escape from certain kinds of loss, certain kinds of haunting, the way emptiness can nip at the edges even on the most abundant of nights out, the way the discomfort of feeling full can remind one of the discomfort of fasting. They are apparitions, dreamlike both in that they are surreal, in that they meld together what is melancholic and erotic and hopeful, inexplicably and undeniably, and of course in that they contain clues about some world we have not yet found, some way of being that hasn't been all the way permitted, and perhaps, if it was described too closely, like these sketchy figures, might disappear or evaporate if it was too closely illuminated.

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Opposite: *Morning on the Beach*, 2023 Oil on linen, 243.8 × 203.2cm | 96 × 80 in
Above: *The Walk Back (Underwear Party)*, 2023 Oil on linen, 243.8 × 609.6cm | 96 × 240 in
Overleaf: *Basement*, 2023 Oil on linen, 243.8 × 406.4 cm | 96 × 160 in
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