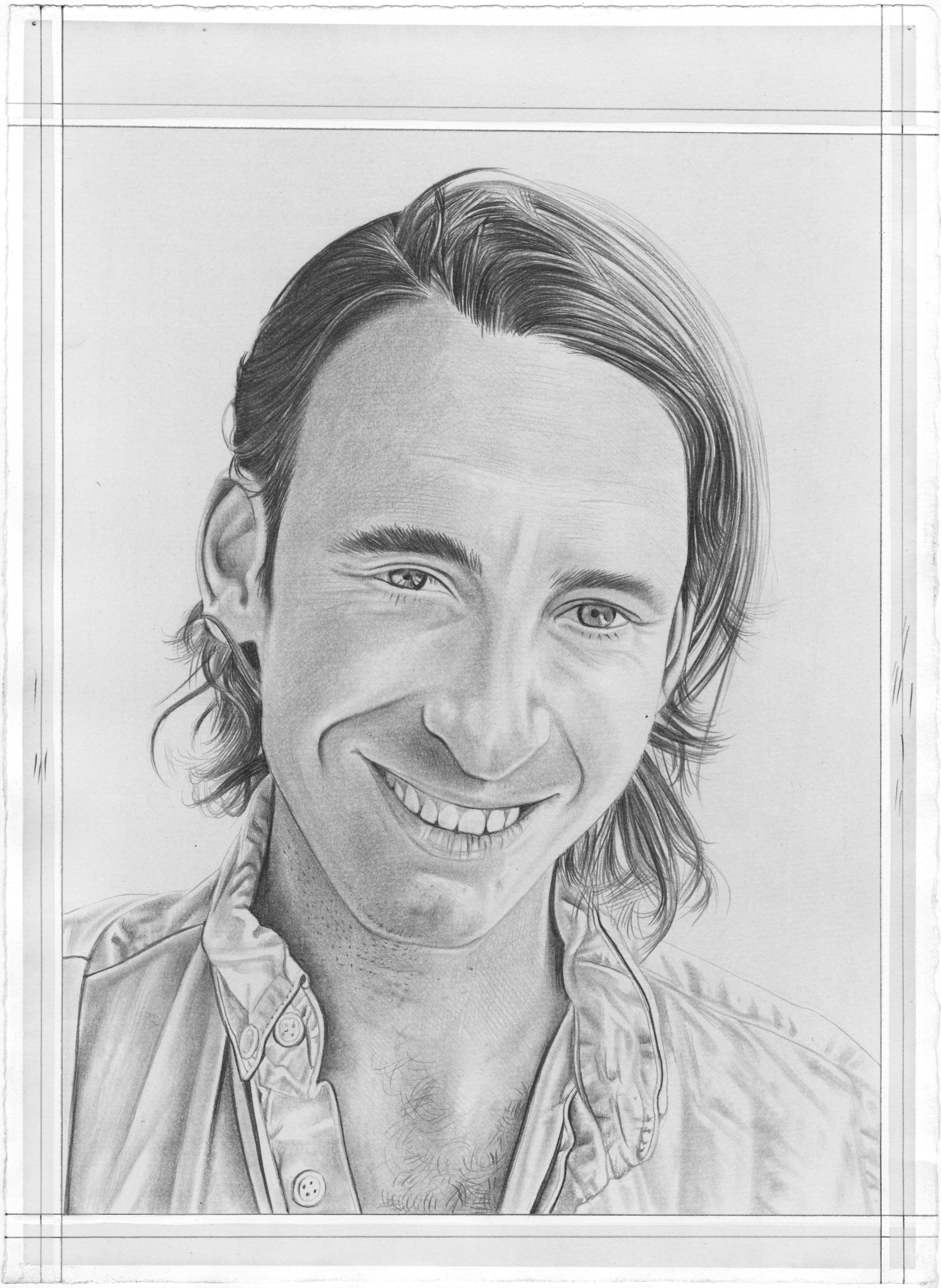


Portrait of Erik Lindman, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

ERIK LINDMAN with Louis Block

In Erik Lindman's new paintings, fugitive patches of color seem to filter through a scaffolding of pasted fabric and metal elements. Up close, there is evidence of further working beneath the thick paint: previous layers, built up, scraped away, and built up again. Lindman (b. 1985, New York) employs a number of modernist moves in making his pictures, chief among which is the chance operation of incorporating found materials into his compositions, but the resulting work is not guided by strict adherence to any system or prescribed form. His most recent paintings move toward a lyricism that was not readily apparent in former work. On the occasion of his current show, *Fal/Parsi*, at Peter Blum Gallery, I spoke with Lindman about this shift toward the expressive quality of the medium.

Fal/Parsi
Peter Blum
September 12–October 31, 2020

LOUIS BLOCK (RAIL): **The title of your current show, as well as your most recent show in London, plays with the word "Parsifal," referring to the Celtic legend of a foolish boy that sets out to become a knight of Arthur. There are many variations of the story, but they all contain certain linked images, notably the discovery of the Grail. If you read the same scene in successive retellings of the story, the description evolves with each version. In the Welsh *Peredur Son of Efrawg* (12th–13th century) the grail scene contains only "a large platter with a man's head covered with blood on it." Then, in Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval* (ca. 1180–90), we have: "this grail, it glowed/With so great a light that the candles/Suddenly seemed to grow dim,/Like the moon and stars when the sun/Appears in the sky." And finally from Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1200–10), which inspired Wagner's opera, we have "the consummation of heart's desire, its root and its blossoming—a thing called 'The Gral,' paradisal, transcending all earthly perfection!" We move from a simple physical description to a metaphysical description of the object. I think there's a parallel to the way, in painting, that images or motifs get digested and reused by artists, both in successive generations and in a single practice. So perhaps a connection between the way painting and storytelling both work. Could you say a bit about what drew you to the story of Perceval?**

ERIK LINDMAN: This image of the holy fool, or this neophyte, going into the dark forest and not knowing what's there, not being aware of the danger that he's about to face—something about that image has stuck with me since maybe 2008–2009. At the time I was working on a project photographing undercover police officers by my old studio, which was on 126th Street and Morningside Avenue, right near the police precinct on Old Broadway. I was noticing all these men wearing Hawaiian shirts, standing next to yellow cabs with signage that was a bit off. Everything about them was like, conspicuously inconspicuous. I was talking about this project with someone and they told me I was like Parsifal, going around with a camera, taking pictures of things that look a little odd in a very naïve way while there's a whole mechanism of this dark surveillance state, hiding right behind it. [*Laughter*] Clearly, I wasn't going to overturn or have any sort of real effect on unseating this horror that's going on in society. And this image has stayed with me because it more accurately articulated the position I feel you have to be in as a painter. There's such a loaded history of painting, and thinking about approaching something in such a large totality felt kind of impossible, but yet through these small little fissures, or—I wouldn't even say a willful ignorance—but a sort of a naïveté, an openness, allowed for a productive engagement with painting.

RAIL: **Artists are taught to unlearn the naming of things while drawing, in order to place more trust in their eyes. Maybe you do have to move through the world somewhat naïvely in order to see things differently.**

LINDMAN: And I'm not necessarily trying to conjure up some idea of the artist as a naïve figure, but there is something about the way that this body of work has unfolded. I stumbled into a lot of imagery inside the Parsifal myth that started to become present in motifs in the paintings. In a lot of the recent paintings, there just happened to be a lot of avian imagery, which I think about in terms of the swan in Wagner's opera, and there are also natural forms of the forest or the landscape. And the isolated form of the head on the platter from the Welsh myth you read, you see a lot of that isolation of forms in space in these paintings, too.

RAIL: **There is a spear that appears each time alongside the grail, and I see that in your vertical forms as well.**

LINDMAN: That was very unintentional as well. The bands or the webbing in the paintings and their verticality—those were originally ways to solve a compositional painting problem, rather than anything that's iconographic. But I think that there is something that happens in art that allows for that resonance. In a way that almost circles back to the idea of the holy fool. It's all a very open-ended process even within the naming and the structure.

RAIL: **Can we say that there's a shift going on from your last work where there was a focus on creating a positive/negative space tension? Whereas now—not to say that the picture space is more complex—but there are more formal relationships and subtler shifts. How are you changing your strategy?**

LINDMAN: Though I see a line drawn from earlier work with the found surfaces through to this work, this almost feels like another phase. I think that the shift occurred through making sculptures the last two years. When I started to make work in three dimensions, something about the objecthood of the sculptures allowed for something more linear and painterly to happen in the paintings themselves. The connection between painting and sculpture has been drawing, a practice which I really invested in developing over the past three years, and opened new possibilities. I think that's what you're picking up on in terms of the varied space in these paintings—they feel so much more open. A lot of the material decisions in these new paintings have contributed to that feeling.

RAIL: **It's almost as if the collage elements are functioning differently, like you say, a "webbing" that the image takes shape upon as opposed to constituting the image itself.**

LINDMAN: The found surfaces have never really had much of an object nature in my paintings, they're very flat. I started using them because I wanted to paint but I didn't know how to make paintings that felt grounded in the world. I once had a studio visit with Richard Aldrich and was sharing this feeling that I was using a certain material procedure as a crutch. And he said, "Why don't you actually put a crutch on the painting and paint it?" I would never have done something so literal as that, but I realized I could just be direct and use these

found surfaces and represent them as paintings. For the past 10 years or so, there's been a slow process in terms of the actual found surfaces informing my eye. The lack of color in my earlier paintings probably had to do with not feeling that I had the facility to use color, a lack of trust in myself masked by a gesture towards "radicality." I couldn't find a successful way, or a reason to use color as you see it here. I feel that it's actually just taken this long for me to feel confident in my facility toward making these really declarative painterly gestures.

RAIL: Speaking of gesture, let's talk about the first painting that you encounter when you enter the show, which references the Norwegian painter Peder Balke, who had an unorthodox use of painting tools, dragging and scraping his canvases for expressive landscape effects. Turner might also be a helpful comparison in terms of paint handling. And these are landscape references. Do you ever think of your paintings as landscapes?

LINDMAN: I love Balke's honesty in using all these dirty tricks to create visual space inside the paintings, using what's at hand in order to describe something. In terms of the tone of the imagery in a lot of these works, there is a sense of landscape. What I like about Turner's watercolors, more than his oils, is a certain sense, very abstract actually, of open space. I was taught to try to resist the associative language of landscape in abstract painting, but I have allowed it to filter into my paintings right now. There are certain spaces that can be read as a distillation of a memory of a landscape, and I think that's coming from drawing. I'm making a lot of drawings sitting by the river, drawing shapes I see between clouds, leaves, or branches—the original found images. Often it's sort of an automatic kind of downloading of information. Are these referencing an urban landscape? I'm really not sure what that would mean for me anymore. I've spent my entire life in New York and so I don't think in terms of narratives of the thrills of city life—it doesn't have any novelty to me like the Futurists' obsession with technology or the chaos of an urban environment, and I'm also not interested in garbage or detritus as something that is redemptive in and of itself. That's often been a misunderstanding about the found surfaces I've used. They've never been junk sculptures or bricolage, they're just things that I've found that seem like a means to an end.

RAIL: I was looking at *Treille* (2020), which does evoke the sense of traveling over a bridge, and its green could either be natural or the color of industrial paint or copper.

LINDMAN: Yes, or the top of the George Washington Bridge, but you could also see the tufts of a horned owl, or the trellis for some pea shoots to grow.

RAIL: Up close, there are all these multidirectional drips in the bottom left quadrant. It seems to indicate that you're working in all sorts of orientations, moving the canvas around as you paint.

LINDMAN: It's new for me to leave visible drips in the paintings, even though they're actually still kind of mannered or checked in a way, and partly obfuscated with a thin layer of white. I used to work primarily on saw horses, because I didn't want to have any incidental marks. Drips seemed to be signaling a certain language of painting in a very intentional, performative way. I was working on many paintings at a time and was more interested in a kind of uniformity and a lack of visible gesture. In these paintings, a lot of these marks are really the result of technology in a way. Most of the paintings are acrylic, which I think about really as a kind of glue more than a paint. When I was working on rigid panels with found surfaces and oil, I had to make decisions early on that would inform the whole rest of the process. You can't glue something back on top of an oil painting. Once you've made that choice, it's a limit. And those limits stopped being interesting to me. Acrylics opened up possibilities that I used to think wouldn't be productive. Now I can glue these fabric webbings in between paint films as I'm working. To get back to the drips: when acrylic paint is drying, it cures from the outside in, as opposed to inside out, and I spray my paintings with water so that some of the excess binder and pigment drips off into the more porous areas between the webbing to create almost an index of a drip, which is what you're seeing here in *Treille*. It almost looks like a printed image of drying paint, because the inside of the drip has been wiped away. That printed element is coming up a lot, like in the herringbone pattern of the webbing, which also looks like a frottage in a way. Acrylic allows for those plays between a shallow visual reality and a real haptic materiality at the same time.

RAIL: You were talking about drawing the shapes between leaves or clouds, which is another kind of "stealing" from nature, or another way to isolate a found shape.

LINDMAN: What you're talking about is the acceptance of the found negative space between something natural as a generative gesture.

RAIL: Like Ellsworth Kelly's *Curve I* (1973), which is drawn directly from the shape of a crushed paper cup.

LINDMAN: But with the example of Kelly, I think what I'm more excited about is maybe the material and singularity of the actual cup itself rather than Kelly's reuse and reproduction of these forms in a variety of precious materials and bright colors.

RAIL: When they get pasted onto the canvas, do you think of your collage elements as part of the substrate of the painting? Or do you think of them as marks that you're making?

LINDMAN: I think of them as marks more than I ever did before. The negative space around the central form is incredibly important in terms of experiencing the painting. I don't think I could isolate the central forms as cutouts and have them function in the same way. I don't know if I see the white and black space as ground. They're often painted on top of and around the form, like a visual plane that's held in the painting. I see the totality as something not quite like a tomb, but a slab. I think you see a confluence in both the material and the visual form. These paintings, they're all arrived at, they're not enlargements of drawings, they're not made from plans. Every time I'm using a found surface, it's because I want to finish the painting. I want to get there, and it just seems like the quickest way to do it. Perhaps I'm using these found surfaces and collage elements as a gesture, but there's an incorporation of all the time spent looking at that painting and arriving up to that decision.

RAIL: Looking at the paintings in reproduction, they don't seem like the type of paintings that allow you to fall into them when you're up close, but in person they're very immersive. Maybe those painted margins are what allow for that experience.

LINDMAN: What I've discovered in these works is that in order for the color to work in a very succinct way, it has to be compressed into a very small window of form. When the color is compressed and condensed by this white space, it becomes much more meaningful to me.

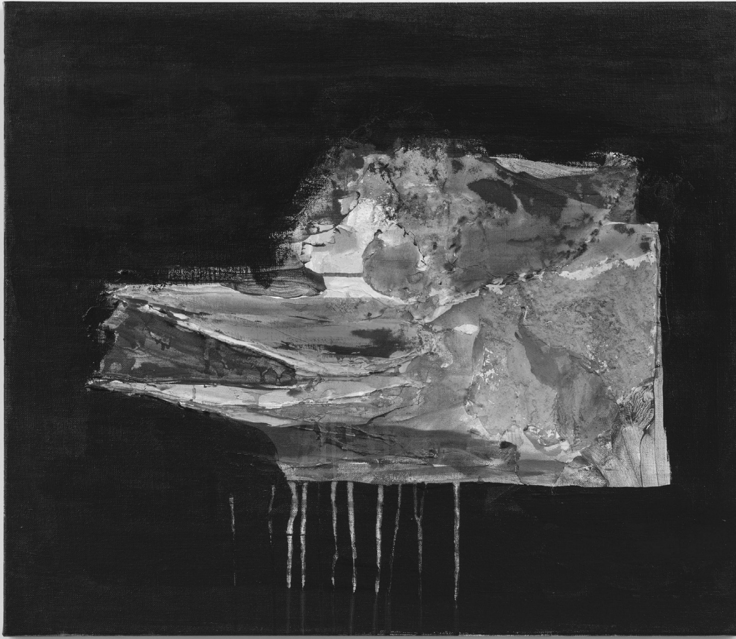
RAIL: Similar to how Monet's water lilies would not function without the vast expanse of water around them.

LINDMAN: Absolutely, but getting back to the landscapes I was thinking of before, there are two small burgundy rooms in the back left corner of the European painting galleries at the Met. There actually is a Peder Balke [*The North Cape by Moonlight*, 1848] and two Turners [*Whalers*, ca. 1845 and *Venice, from the Porch of Madonna della Salute*, ca. 1835] right before you enter into these rooms that have mostly oil on paper landscapes made by Corot or Robert-Léopold Leprince, and a lot of Danish and Norwegian painters like Johan Christian Dahl who had gone to the north of Italy. Part of what I think is wonderful about these paintings is their openness because of the lack of figure in their painted organic forms. Yet you can clearly feel the artist there on the other side of the picture, due to the intimate scale. Also, because of the abstraction of these forms and the materiality of the paper and oil, there's a beautiful light in a lot of these works. This may be a bit historicizing, but it's like you're seeing nature on the cusp, about to be fully destroyed, in a sense. Which brings me back to the importance of this feeling in my paintings of eking out a bit of space inside of the claustrophobic world or something like that. I can't put my finger on it exactly, but I think it relates to the landscape.

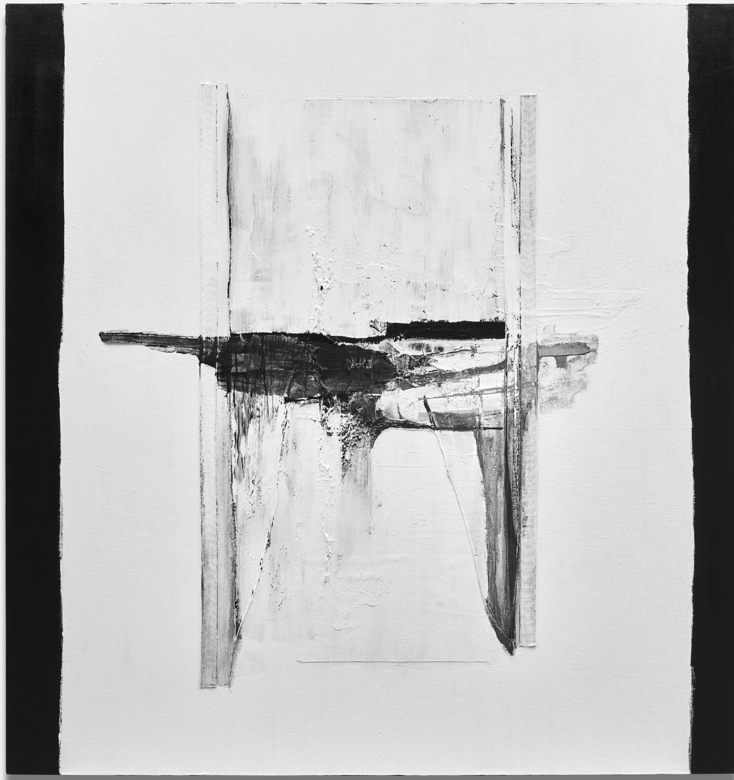
RAIL: Another figure to bring up—different from you in many ways, but relevant to this conversation about space—would be Caspar David Friedrich. I'm thinking specifically of *The Monk by the Sea* (1808–10), *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818), or *The Sea of Ice* (1823–24) in the space that isolates the central form, which vacillates between heavy and light.

LINDMAN: A lot of these recent paintings create the possibility of a certain melodrama, which Friedrich goes all the way into. I try to almost get up to that point and then stop short, and do something like add webbing in order to counteract this by using something very banal. Still in any painting I'm interested in, there is something that feels existential in a sense, for lack of a better word. So even if I'm not directly thinking about the sublime at all, if I'm spending my whole life doing this, the painting has to carry meaning and depth and weight.

RAIL: There is a certain heaviness in the material nature of your new paintings, despite what may seem like a spatial lightness.



Erik Lindman, *Balke 2*, 2019. Acrylic on linen, 24 × 28 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.



Erik Lindman, *Pisces*, 2018. Acrylic, collaged canvas, canvas webbing, sisal rope and luan on linen, 90 × 86 inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Matt Kroenig.

LINDMAN: But there does have to be an opening in order to create meaning. The holy fool does not set out to make a sublime work of art, but they can find their way into it. These paintings are finished to me when they have a certain feeling of emptiness, but are also full. Maybe it is a cliché to use paradox to describe painting.

RAIL: But maybe the cliché is relevant. After all, the holy grail is a sort of paradox: a vessel that is never empty, always replenishing itself with the holder's desires.

LINDMAN: At the end, all we are left with are these motifs to recycle, regenerate, refine, breathe new life into in order to continue on. The tools don't create meaning in and of themselves, it's how the tools are used and articulated by the artists. Many artists now could use the same tools as Peder Balke, but the result could be completely different, even if they're both trying to make a sublime work of art by dragging or scraping their paintings.

RAIL: Except now those tools can be bought at the art store, molded in silicone and available in a variety of shapes and textures.

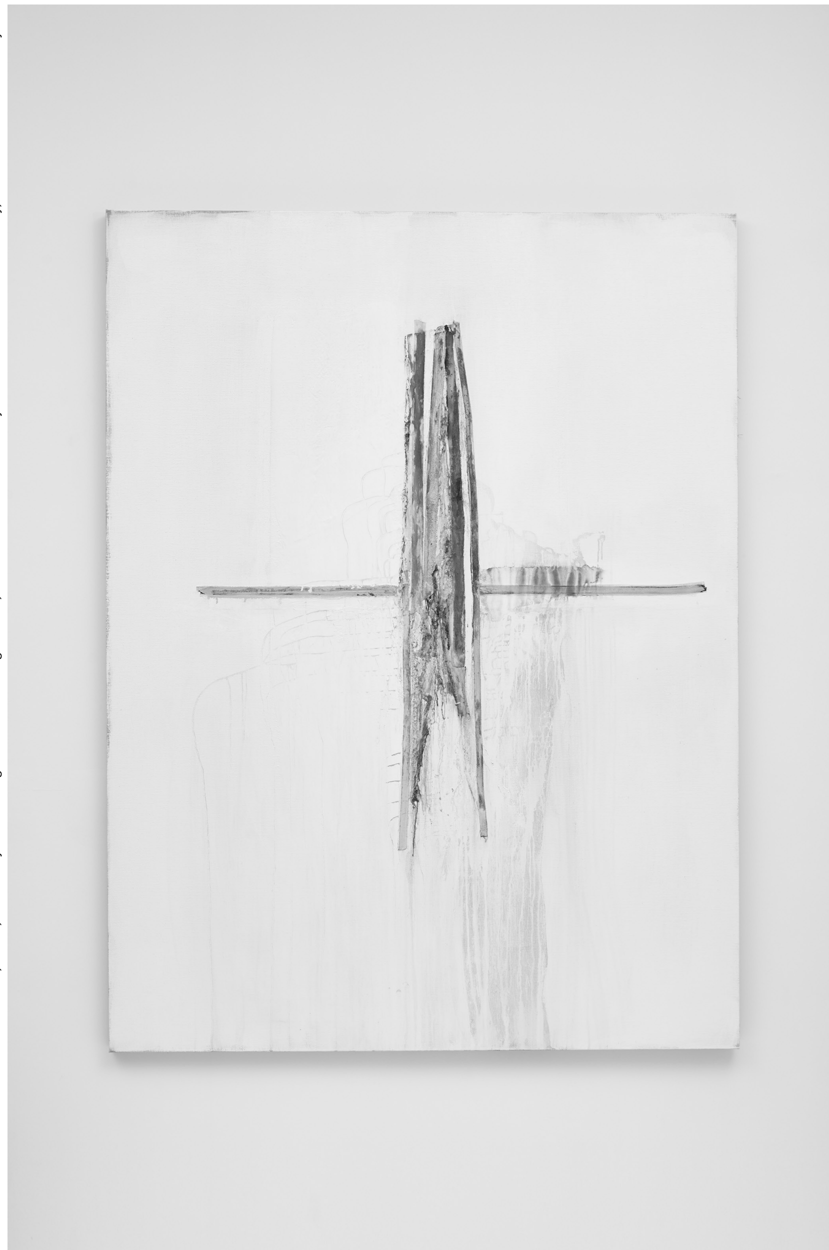
LINDMAN: Exactly. And all of those color changing gels or pumice gels and texture pastes are not that interesting in and of themselves, but why should they be off limits? They're just means to an end as well.

RAIL: To switch directions a bit, I wanted to speak more about specific imagery and iconography. There is a recurring scene in the Perceval myths where Perceval sees the imprint of a fallen bird in the snow, and a few drops of its blood mix into the snow. This imprint reminds him of a woman that he loves but that he's left behind on his journey. In a way Perceval's desire is revealed through this one image in that it's merely the color of blood mixed with snow that brings forth this image that he's primed to see. I'm reminded of this when I look at a painting of yours such as *Pisces* (2018), which does not really resemble a fish. But with your title in mind I can start to connect the effect of the golden pigment with the effect of light against fish scales underwater. Are you interested in directing the viewer's experience with your titles, or calling forth some type of imagery, even if it's not representational?

LINDMAN: The image that you mention from Perceval is so similar to the way I've been discovering and using these found surfaces. And you're right, the titling has become very important to me now—

RAIL: The paintings were untitled for a long time—

LINDMAN: All untitled, and it just became unmanageable. The titles come after the work is finished. Giving them titles seems to signify a sense of intentionality. They all point toward something without showing or describing exactly what it is—I'm not trying to impose obvious meaning on the work but am open to a point of access. At the time I was making *Pisces*, I had just finished reading *Aion* (1951), in which Jung explores the symbolic pairing of Christ and the fish and what he calls the "Phenomenology of the Self." And as you say, this painting obviously doesn't depict a fish, but does have a large central



Erik Lindman, *Treille*, 2020. Acrylic and collaged canvas webbing on linen, 78 ¾ x 59 ⅛ inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.

image that for me resonated with my interpretation of Jung's image of the "giant fish" lying in the ocean's depths as some sort of shadow or anchor for the world. The bands of webbing—aside from echoing a spear, like you noticed—also perhaps reference the shepherd's staff in the Christ-as-lamb image that Jung also explores. I don't think that these images are trying to explore a certain archetypal quality in a Jungian way, but the titles need to point toward something. A more directed title is *Asplund's Lockset* (2014–20), which just has a really beautiful syntax when it comes out of the mouth. But in that painting there is a skull-like shape in the black metal forms, which very much recalled this memory I had of a specific lock on a door in the cemetery at the Skogskyrkogården in Stockholm, designed by Erik Gunnar Asplund. That's not an iconography that's readily apparent to someone walking down Grand Street in 2020, but it helps the orientation of the forms seem less arbitrary. *Treille* doesn't mean anything in and of itself in English, but it's a derivation of trellis. The painting *Galehaut* (2020) is a more specific literary reference, from the story of Lancelot. But I don't expect viewers to change their reading of the work based on their knowledge of these references.

RAIL: You've also used the Latin names for plants as titles in the past.

LINDMAN: Yes. A lot of people thought I made up those words, but they're such specific names. They are on the verge of having meaning in English, and they also lead back to the visual language that registers in my mind upon making the work.

RAIL: I do love the idea of choosing a title just for the mellifluous quality that it has as it comes out of your mouth. Sometimes there are words that you find yourself saying over and over until they lose meaning. And it's that muscle memory in the tongue or the mouth that draws you back to them.

LINDMAN: Sometimes the paintings then become my main reference for that word. Like when I hear "Jupiter," I think of this painting [*Jupiter* (2017–18)], rather than the planet.

RAIL: You told me that you're in the process of moving studios.

LINDMAN: Yes, I'm kind of half in, half out.

RAIL: Given that you encounter the objects that become part of the paintings on the street, can you tell us about some of the neighborhoods you've had studios in, in the city? Do you see your studio as a space that the neighborhood's environment permeates and informs, or is it an anonymous space for creation?

LINDMAN: The biggest thing I've learned from this recent choice to move my studio this summer is that I am not my studio—it is just somewhere I work until the day I don't anymore, and then I go somewhere else. The openness of these paintings and the moving away from found surfaces as a very specific procedure of the paintings have reaffirmed this new sense of self as independent from exterior circumstances. That being said, a lot of the paintings that used found pieces of metal were made when I had a studio in Sunset Park above a scrap metal redemption center. But I don't know how far to extrapolate this idea of place. I talked to an architect at one of my openings in London, and he said, "Oh, you must live somewhere that's rapidly gentrifying, because there's so much garbage," referring to the Lauan and Plexiglas and metal getting thrown out, that must be the result of destroyed buildings. I don't see that foregrounded as part of the content of my work, though I do think all painting has a certain sense of loss in it. I'm not nostalgic for some lost space of New York, but the city is constantly disappearing and reappearing in a way right now, that certainly finds its way into the work.

RAIL: I think when people describe work as urban or related to the city, there's this idea that maybe that means it's dead in a way because it's about façades and not life. There's a ton of life in the painting. Especially with *Peregrine* (2018–19), again, a title that's sort of just gesturing to the elusive avian form but not really describing it visually. I could try to trace the bird that I see among the buildings, but I'm sure it's not the same bird that you see. But the verticality, the flash of color, it conjures a type of movement that's very much alive.

LINDMAN: That allusion just feels very personal to me, in the way that I've actually witnessed the falcon come back from near extinction as a kid to now seeing them everywhere. Just yesterday in Central Park I watched as one stalked a squirrel and then took off right in front of me. It still feels unreal to see this in the city but it happens all the time.

RAIL: As someone that didn't grow up here, the more time I spend, the more I notice that beneath the façades and roads there is this immense space, filled not only with pipes and beams and subways, but also life. A painting is also involved in a

Erik Lindman, *Blackwater*, 2019–20. Acrylic, collaged canvas and canvas webbing on linen, 70 ⅞ × 43 ¼ inches. Courtesy the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.

regenerative cycle, taking raw material away from the landscape to build another reality.

LINDMAN: That's right. At the same time, I still feel a real sense of home and comfort in New York. I feel very grounded here—I think I feel more untethered in a more open quiet pastoral space, just because of what I'm used to. I grew up above the FDR Drive, and there was one day a year where they would have the five-borough bicycle tour, and the FDR would be closed. You would wake up and it sounded so loud, because there was nothing going on, and it was disturbing how quiet it was without that slow hum of the cars going by.

RAIL: We've been talking a lot about things that are cyclical or unfinished, like a city or like a repeating narrative. But these are paintings that are finished and on the gallery wall. Can you talk about making the decision that something is finished?

LINDMAN: The process of finishing the work is probably the most important decision that I'm making as an artist. It happens when that work has arrived at a certain tone and feeling of something that is immediate, yet still unfettered in a sense. What's interesting about the work in this show is that there are some paintings, especially the larger works, that took years to arrive at that feeling. The force and physicality of shifting and changing the images takes time. And then there are paintings here that I arrived at more quickly than I normally do. Part of that may come from working at home during quarantine, being very unsatisfied with what was going on with my work, and having, essentially, this isolation kind of ruining my solitude. When I got to the studio again, four or five paintings just came out over a period of a month and a half. You can see that speed in some of the finished works, and I think people can feel that and understand that shift experiencing the paintings in person.

RAIL: The small paintings in the back room are also very compelling. They're more colorful and don't contain the same collage elements in them. Can you talk about the differences in working at such different scales?

LINDMAN: I think you can see a certain sense of drawing across the work at all different scales, but the small paintings have their own logic to them. The larger paintings are not enlargements of the small work.

RAIL: The small paintings have a certain solidity in the faceting of forms.

LINDMAN: Those paintings are all oil on panel with no collage elements at all, and there's something very visible and mineral about the oil paint. Because of the smaller scale, they don't need as much visual space around the forms to create a sense of depth.

RAIL: They are also reminiscent of avian forms and colors, maybe even more so than *Peregrine*.

LINDMAN: I think in a lot of the colors, you do want to seize on the image of a bird or something like that. Part of what makes the color striking is that there's a brightness that comes through the contrast with neutrality. It's not like experiencing a full on assault of fluorescence radiating out at you. There's a muted green-red in the background that pulls out the cobalt green in the form and then that sort of cadmium yellowish-green at the bottom of the form like that you can't really put a finger on. In the North Woods in Central Park, there are a ton of birds. It's one of the best birdwatching sites in the world. That's part of my experience of New York—there's actually this wonderful, natural, manmade, bizarre place in the middle of the city. In the park I've often watched the female cardinal and it's way more beautiful and enchanting than the more well known bright red male—it has this muted burnt sienna inflected gray color, and then this really bright orange undertone, which is very similar to the way I've used color in these small oils.

RAIL: And there's color everywhere, not just the birds we typically think of as colorful. When a pigeon takes flight, there are all sorts of iridescent greens and purples underneath.

LINDMAN: For sure. I think it's important to talk about these paintings, too, because ultimately all the images that I arrive at are not limited by a specific set of material procedures through which they are created.

RAIL: I also wanted to ask about *Blackwater* (2019–20), which is notably the only large horizontal landscape format canvas in the show. Did it start in that orientation?

LINDMAN: I think it originally started as a vertical then quickly after starting I rotated it horizontally. I've started making more horizontal paintings, which I never did before. I think that might have had to do with resisting landscape. Again, it isn't depictive, but the thing that I think could seem to me more spatial is the color tone that was arrived at in the central form. It feels very liminal in a way, like between times, early morning or evening, indeterminant.

RAIL: And it's a loaded title.

LINDMAN: It's interesting, because the name *Blackwater* in and of itself is so anodyne, but what it alludes to is just so horrible. There's something in a lot of these words here that feels kind of empty and terrifying. But maybe there's a subtle shift away from what seems most obvious, and then they're not entirely defeated words, and they're not paintings of despair. They're not platitudes of hopefulness either. There are glimpses of something that feels redemptive inside of all the forms. I don't think I was alone this year in seriously questioning what I was doing as a painter with everything going on in the world—but in the end there are a ton of significant and meaningful ways to engage as a human being and none of these need to exclude making art. This painting is not going to have any direct effect on dismantling the surveillance state, but it's not supposed to—it's an issue of scale. I just kept thinking of Boriska's bell and Rublev's return to painting [in Andrei Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* (1966)].

RAIL: I like the word *redemptive* as a possible goal of painting, and perhaps it relates back to Perceval. There's something very true about being lost when making a painting, and then finding that feeling that seems so impossible at the beginning. But you arrive there at the end.

LOUIS BLOCK is a painter based in Brooklyn.