

MOTION PICTURES

Marie Heilich

Multiple orbiting centers sit amidst illuminated horizons, spinning ripples of luscious growth. A riot of ridged spines might snake, fuse, or flair into wild blooms that pollinate with a floating mist. Animated stirrings—waves crashing, cyclones spinning, liquids melting, flames dancing—begin to cascade slowly before quickening in a surge of shape-shifting entropy. These rhythmic impressions, propelled and whirling with candescent color, illustrate a momentum without resolve; an undefined force which rolls across a variegated surface.

Lucy Bull's paintings expand the act of looking to engage an array of perceptual possibilities. The compositions bait, lure, and hook the eye, body, and psyche in a rapture of attention. What begins as a compelling invitation to meander until lost leads to the endless weaving of fissions that crescendo in optical overload, as if multiple paintings were layered into one. As time passes, carefully calibrated symphonies of movement open up to unveil abysses of staggering depth.

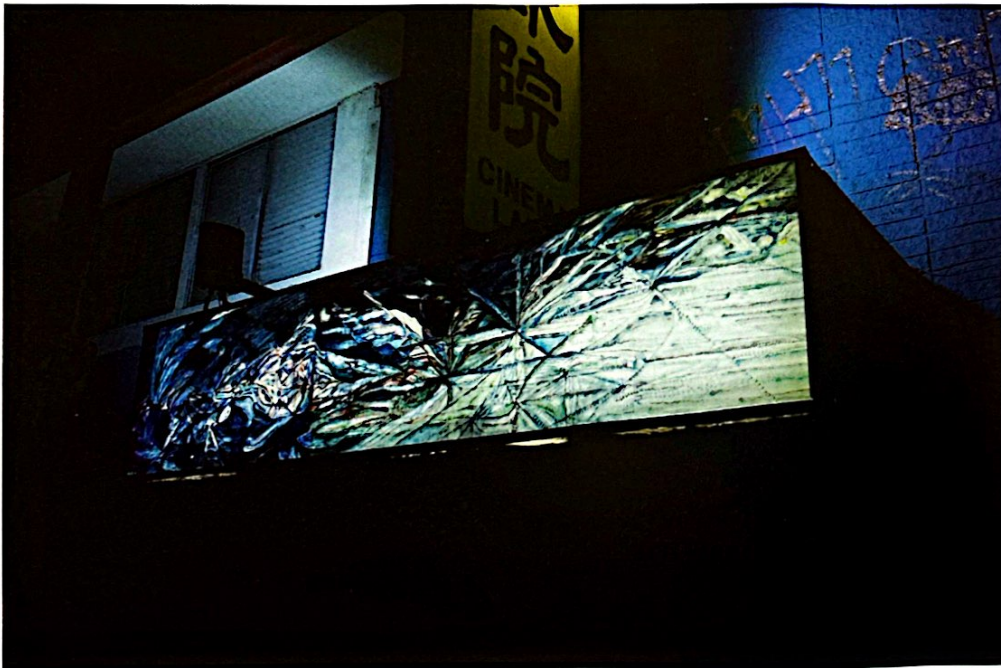
There is a dismantling of the interwoven congestion of marks when viewed up close; the sweeping etch-lines excavate deeper layers of gyrating bristle marks, grounding, searching in the physicality of the hand. These hairline threads, both wiry and smooth, form patterns evocative of ribbed fumes, connective muscle tissue, and the barbs of a feather; contorting dimensional space out of the dense accumulation of their striations. Within the porous puckers of texture, the incompatibility between natural and synthetic hues charges hyper-pigmented vapors with a supernatural illusion of vibration. Courting the risk of "too much," Bull's depths of color cast a visceral vertigo. As pressure builds and releases in steamy puffs, colors morph based on their proximity and relation; a crimson red bleeds differently against a cerulean sky than it does beneath a jade-green fog. Dancing between terrestrial, oceanic, and cosmic palettes, fragrant cocktails of color quiver and hum in spirited ecstasy.

For all their otherworldliness, Bull's paintings reveal themselves to be the result of confrontation with material boundaries, which the artist addresses with open curiosity. Color is just one of the realms in which such encounters take place. But worked and pulled to generate more than the sum of their parts, even the colors in these paintings break down as stable objects of contemplation. As anthropologist Michael Taussig notes on color, "Nothing could be further from the notion that first there are forms and then we have color lying on top as a cover or a jacket. If anything, it is the other way around." Treated as momentary, fugitive happenings, Bull's colors surpass a state of superficial wrapping and instead determine form.

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Hinting at the relationship between duration and change, and evoking moments of birth, time stamps serve as titles for some of Bull's paintings. These notations of time are free of context; they delimit an abstract field with multiple entry and exit points. Others are oriented according to an emotional compass, with a romantic emphasis on irrational hooks of desire, as exemplified in titles like *Pussy Willow*, *Skigame*, *Evening Switch*, and *Most Attractive*. After spending enough time with a piece, a secret wish for a reciprocated relationship might form—a longing to inhabit the images, to cede to their sweeping sensibility, to be engulfed in their roving mutations, to enter and be entered by them. Bull seems to acknowledge the presence of such desire, in some works incorporating compositional elements, such as eye-like globes, which emerge from the haze. These serve as reminders that intuitive obsessions, even one-sided bouts of limerence, can culminate in self-discovery or pleasurable self-abandon.

For *The Damage* (2019), a site-specific installation, Bull painted the illuminated marquee above the Los Angeles nonprofit space Human Resources, where she curated a program of thirteen films screened back-to-back over twenty-four hours. “The films were not chosen with a particular theme in mind,” the program notes read, “instead, it’s a mix of films that inspire and haunt.” The selection’s non-narrative, strictly affective criteria demonstrated a methodology churning within Bull’s work as an invitation to forego narrative arcs and analysis for more experiential and associative ways of viewing—a sensory approach that encouraged viewers to be consumed by the emotionally provocative stimulants of the cinematic experience.



The Damage was an ideal announcement for the marathon screening. Lit nightly, it quietly expanded what might define a “motion picture.” Kaleidoscopic tendrils merged into an organic form within a shadowy-blue atmosphere. Originating from bursts, spawning veins radiated quivering reverberations that floated across the marquee into an open field of light, putting Bull’s range of brushwork on full display. It was as if multiple film frames were fixed into an abstracted, composite image: a turbulent percolation that appeared momentarily frozen in time.

fig 1
The Damage, 2019
 oil on plexiglass onto illuminated marquee,
 36 x 148 inches (91.4 x 375.9 cm).
 Human Resources, Los Angeles, installation view.

Bull's paintings tempt interpretation, projection, and identification, as if they are oracles capable of generating or diffusing our most deeply harbored fantasies. Like tea leaves or coffee grounds at the bottom of a saucer, they tease a Rorschach-like legibility, ready to reveal something, but something already represented within. Their content is like the content of dreams; what appears can only be accessed by each viewer's unique visual catalog. Creatures, landscapes, and symbols are readily discovered, yet lost as swiftly and unexpectedly as they arrive. The work is celebratory and sensuous; it extends calls to forfeit rational thought and enter into euphoric abandon.

Paintings like *17:50* (2022, see page 8) compulsively “begin with a trickle and end with blaze of petrol,” to use Jacques Lacan’s words. They evoke the boundless state of *jouissance*, which presents itself through repetition to a point of exhaustion. “What I call *jouissance*,” Lacan noted, “in the sense in which the body experiences itself—is always in the nature of tension in the nature of a forcing, of a spending, even of an exploit.” Indeed, in Bull’s paintings pictorial space spits, pours, heaves, and warps. The paintings are filled with passages in which alluring chromatic shifts provide optical equivalents to somatic release; moments, for instance, like those in *17:50* in which the warm tones that dominate the upper half of the composition give way to the aquatic blues and greens that anchor its lower edge. Rather than balance out the painting’s overall visual effect, this movement introduces another element that destabilizes it further, making more out of more. Striving toward resolution, there is something left over, a “too much.” This quality also appears in Bull’s mark-making, which is characterized by the presence of repeated gestures that introduce textures and carry a variety of speeds and energetic intensities. While repetition channels impressions of life’s pulsating excess, its aim is always fixed on a horizon line that reaches for full, self-annihilating satisfaction. The image threatens to vacuum itself up, collapse inside out, or slip into a navel of origin.

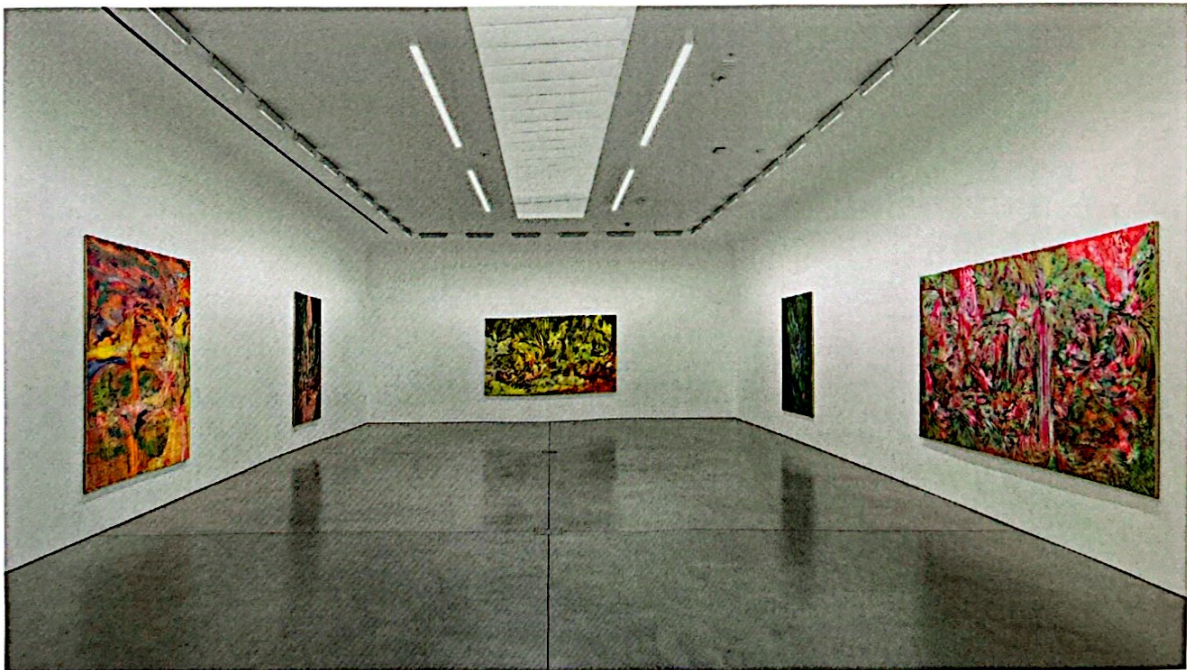


fig 2
 Skunk Grove, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles,
 March 20-May 1, 2021,
 installation view.

While the term *psychedelic* is often used to describe strains of the Western counterculture that first coalesced in the 1960s, the term's complexity expands when it rightfully re-contextualized by curator and art historian Lars Bang Larsen. Taking into account psychedelia's Greek etymology, which translates as "mind-revealing," Larsen suggests making a shift from using it as "a journalistic and colloquial term" to employing it in reference to an aesthetic devoid of origin or history—the primordial soup bubbling beneath the surface of everything. "It is a scandal of ephemeral form, hermetic imagery, and strange temporalities," in Larsen's description. "The melancholy and joy of this unholy mess stem from a fragile refusal to mend the world's incoherence." Perhaps the currents that swim throughout Bull's canvases are just that: accumulations of many small refusals to resolve life's inconsistencies and absurdities. Consider *2:35* (2021, see page 60). Trembling storms of fiery orange and lime green, with ribbons of red throughout, splinter into endlessly dividing fractals. Magnetized waves of pockmarks and crevices enact a tidal back and forth; they connote not only the cyclical motion of life energies, but the eternal exchange of sense and senselessness.

If psychedelia's point of origin, like that of the thrust of Bull's work, is an embodied form of archaic memory, Theodore Adorno's concept of *the shudder* provides a clarifying interpretive lens. A prelinguistic phenomenon, the shudder is initiated by perceived movement. In a passage that could have been written in direct response to one of Bull's paintings, Adorno observed that "under patient contemplation artworks begin to move":

[T]o this extent they are truly afterimages of the primordial shudder in the age of reification. [...] For if at one time human beings in their powerlessness against nature feared the shudder as something real, the fear is no less intense, no less justified, that the shudder will dissipate.



fig 3
Sisper, High Art, Arles, France,
December 19, 2020-February 20, 2021,
installation view.

This notion of the shudder assumes that all subjects hold memories of an undifferentiated state which has been ruptured by an evolutionary separation between subject and object. If brought to the surface, this shared suppressed memory would expose the failure of reason to make sense of the material world, eliciting an encounter with an overwhelming boundlessness that would then send the perceiving subject into existential terror. *Hell ears* (2021, see page 40) enacts this guttural plunge into a splayed, spine-like center that holds together a trembling, carnal red interior. In a “balance between the vanishing and the preserved,” the amorphous shudder reverberates as a vestige of the past and echoes into all possible futures. As Adorno pointed out, and as the attraction of Bull’s work makes clear, loss of cohesion is not merely a force with a negative valence. If we’re afraid of the shudder, we also don’t want it to go away; experiences of it are necessary if we want to remember what we really are. Reflective or discursive thought can be employed to tame the wildness associated with shudder, and it is natural to want to inscribe these paintings with associative meaning. But again and again, experience exposes us to a state in which relinquishing control is the only option.

Bull’s paintings flaunt mass, depth, power, and persuasion. At a time when condensed reproductions are influential, they reinforce the importance of in-person viewing, opening mysterious gaps between materials and representation when they are seen in the flesh. Figure and ground never completely stabilize. Buoyant with the theatricality of an active organic phenomenon, they are compositionally evasive, fragmentary, and fleeting. Their layers of fountains and gossamer speak the language of painting within a zeitgeist of new sincerity. As such, the pleasure associated with looking takes on new meaning, as they allow viewers to navigate phenomenological extremes and sublimate personal affect into the universal and back again. Elemental yet bewitched, the works cascade, drip, sink, fizz, breach, froth, seethe, fume, and flame—matching our emotional and spiritual turbulence with the rapture of the natural world.

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