

LYSE LEMIEUX
SO DAWN GOES DOWN TODAY

EVERGREEN ART GALLERY
September 17 to November 13, 2022



Dorsale. La Couleur de mes mots (detail), 2022
acrylic and Flashe on canvas Photo: Rachel Topham Photography

Colour has always been present: in the folds of the fabrics and the contours of the figures, forming the profile of a face or the patterns in a tunic. Black wasn't about the absence of colour but the lack of need for colour. Black emphasized the line, for which the artist is well known. Now colour comes to the fore in the paintings of Vancouver-based artist Lyse Lemieux. Her interdisciplinary practice, which encompasses drawing, painting, sculpture and installation, explores how the human figure takes shape within the space between the abstract and the representational image – now in vibrant colour. The need for colour – intuitively guiding Lemieux's newest works – was galvanized by the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, although the proliferation of these hues predates this global event, already evident in the 2018–19 series Painted Drawings. The artist's signature black maintains its presence, but now black is in dialogue with an intense chromatic array: rich swaths of yellows, reds, oranges, blues, greens. Speaking of colour, some readers may instantly recognize the exhibition's title, *So dawn goes down to day*, as a line from Robert Frost's "Nothing Gold Can Stay" (1923). This short, celebrated poem speaks of the fleeting nature of beauty (however one defines such an impossible term) and the impermanence of life. What resonates with Lemieux's art is the push and pull between the melodramatic weight of the poem and the levity hidden within. As poet Kay Ryan boldly asserts in her essay "A Consideration of Poetry," the best poetry is funny, and she uses Frost's "Nothing Gold" as exhibit A in her argument:

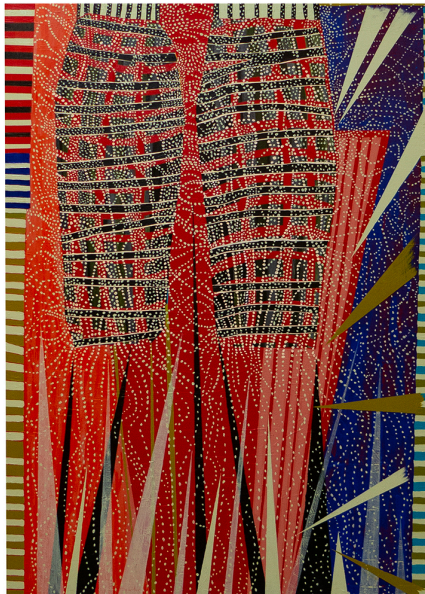
Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.¹



Untitled. Pie Crust Forest, 2019
ink, acrylic, gesso, wool felt on Yupo 40"x 26" Photo: Michael Love

A humble humour and tension run through the line "So dawn goes down to day," where the golden dawn is unexpectedly lost to its companion, the rising sun. This internal battle, where dawn fights the day, resonates with the way Lemieux's paintings are at odds with themselves, to delightful results. At once joyful and exuberant – as seen in her expressive

gestures, expansive shapes and saturated colours – her paintings are likewise rife with anxiety: vibrating with dense details, tiny dots and layer upon layer of paint built up over time. Both emotional states are suspended within the work, “shivering,” like Frost’s gold, “between being and being palmed.”² Ryan contends that Frost’s poem “is all trick,” and that “it’s the strangest thing; the poem is a trap – that is a release. It’s a small door to a room full of gold that we can have any time we go through the door, but that we can’t take away.”³ And Lemieux is just as tricky as Frost. We have before us a room full of colour, painted with a wry sense of humour, but our time together is fleeting. The painting is a trap – that is a release. This friction plays out within Lemieux’s latest work *Dorsale. La Couleur de mes mots* (2022), which took form over more than a year and many iterations. A blue spine-like shape runs through the canvas. A black web overlays the segments of matte ash blue, which also read as an aerial view of a river. The head-like forms create pathways: rhizomatic connectors that hint at figuration. Look closely to see the skirted figures, covered in tiny dots (overtaken by a disease, perhaps?). These manifold associations float into the mind while standing in front of the human-sized canvas. The first iteration of this painting was free from the weight of the repetitive marks, but the worries of the world have a way of creeping in. Upon the work’s completion, the points had transformed the surface into a dense, multidimensional, living organism. These elements from nature, which the artist infrequently depicts, are less a departure from her focus on the body and more a focusing in. The weblike pattern evokes internal systems, suggesting a look inside through layers of tissue. *Dorsale* accentuates the intimate and inescapable connection between our bodies and the external world.



Une Affaire Entre Moi et moi, 2020
acrylic on canvas, 60"x 40" Photo: Michael Love

Lemieux describes the act of painting these recurring marks as meditative. Process-driven and responsive to her materials, the artist uses painting as a way of thinking and feeling through making. Her paintings – intricately detailed with saturated colour, dense layers of paint and Lemieux’s signature use of black – reveal as much about the inner workings of the artist’s mind as they do about the physical forms they depict. Lemieux’s art holds a constant tension between joyfulness and anxiety: during moments of calm, the artist’s brushstrokes are open and expansive, contrasting with the focused and detailed layers of patterning she creates in times of unease.

These anxious dots appear elsewhere in the exhibition: covering the limbs of the figures in *Une Affaire Entre Moi et moi* (2020). But these are not the only shapes that obscure while also connecting. The grid – an important and evolving visual structure in the history of art that is as impactful as it is simple – also recurs throughout the exhibition. The artist’s use of this structure nods to the importance of the line in drawing. Her early incorporation of the grid is visible in the Painted Drawings series, as in the tightly formed lattice of *Untitled. Pie Crust Forest* (2019) and its materialization among the lines of *Sans titre. Untitled Threads* (2019). This connective structure also dominates in many of the paintings in a later series first exhibited in an exhibition titled *Enceinte* at Wil Aballe Art Projects in 2021. Across Lemieux’s work, the grid frames, contains and reveals in equal measure.



Enceinte En Jaune, 2020, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 40", Photo: Mike Love

Enceinte: a double meaning, evident in so much of Lemieux's work, suggesting both enclosure and pregnancy. A space where meaning takes form but also gets lost in translation. The acrylic-on-canvas painting *Enceinte En Jaune* (2020) eloquently illustrates such layered readings possible within Lemieux's oeuvre. The olive-coloured venetian blinds form a grid that at first glance masks the graphic figure within. The rounded curve of her belly is evident on closer inspection, as the pattern on her dress emerges against the vibrant yellow. Yellow. The colour of tulips and daffodils, of children's toys and colouring crayons. It's the colour of caution, and "the color of caution is the color of concern. It's a maternal sign in a world of commands."⁴ Left with uncertainty, the viewer might wonder: Is this a painting of expectant joy, or a reflection on a state of confinement?

The grid also links to a significant and ongoing infatuation in Lemieux's practice: its interlocking form hints at the weft and warp of woven fabric. The only sculptural work included in the exhibition, *Collared Column* (2016), similarly points to the significance of textiles, which emerges in recent paintings through intense patterning and colour that mimics fabric. The twelve-foot tower of *Collared Column* grounds the exhibition. This playful and central work acts, in the words of the artist, as "connective tissue" for the disparate but linked paintings. The sculpture reinforces Lemieux's emphasis on the process of making, in this case accomplished by gluing together plackets, collars and cuffs with the same meditative focus that drives the painting of repeating dots and detailed patterning, the textures now formed with brushstrokes instead of fabric.



*Famille: Sans titre; La Mère, 2022
Acrylic, coloured pencil and Flashe on canvas, 60" x 40" Photo: Rachel Topham Photography*

This textile-inspired patterning adorns, for example, the detailed backgrounds of her newest series, *Famille* (2022). Flat blocks of matte colour, geometric forms and the decisive black line – suggestive of fashion and art history in turns – create the backdrop for this peculiar grouping, in which a mother, an angel, a couple and a child create an

unexpected family unit. Created as the global pandemic wears on, the *Famille* series draws attention to the complexity of familial relations further complicated by the isolation and distance enforced by public health measures, which has over the last several years shaped and reshaped the notion of a family “bubble.” The curious cartoon-like figures embody stories hidden from view while inviting the viewer to create their own associations. The horned matriarch of *Famille: Sans titre; La Mère* (2022), with her regal ruff collar and three arms, stands against a vibrant orange backdrop with geometric black forms. Orange. A colour both adjective and noun, speaking of citrus fruit and safety vests. “Orange denotes both sensation and thing,” a colour embodying the duality so important to Lemieux’s work, as the hue “upsets the quintessentially modern distinctions between objectivity and subjectivity, nature and culture, public and private.”⁵



Unfit for Foot racing, 2019
26”x40” Photo: Mike Love

Lemieux paints only a hint of facial features on the otherwise flat planes of the figures. The openness of the characters points to the artist’s desire to understand the ambiguities of the human form and produces bodies that, in her words, “question what they are.” As a result, her figures seem to be in a continual process of becoming and unbecoming. The horned profile of *La Mère*, the bodiless leg in *Celestial Painting 3* (2021) and the exaggerated appendages in *Unfit for Foot Racing* (2019) all recall the medicalized body. Many of the paintings reveal the artist’s provisional fixation on legs, depicted in isolation or as part of a figure. The focus shifts from limb to core with *Dorsale*, part of the artist’s growing awareness of her own body. Art and life take a toll on the physical self, which is, inescapably, always aging. Lemieux’s unquenchable curiosity with the human (and not-so-human) figure carries through her art-making, both in subject matter and in the painting process. In the end, by way of paint or fabric, brushstroke or stitch, line or colour, Lemieux always comes back to the body, and the body is always in relation: to itself, to the mind, to the world around it and to the making of art.

– Katherine Dennis, curator

1 Robert Frost, “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” 1923, Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/148652/nothing-gold-can-stay-5c095cc5ab679>

2 Kay Ryan, “A Consideration of Poetry,” Poetry, May 2006, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/68531/a-consideration-of-poetry>.

3 Ryan, “A Consideration of Poetry.”

4 Nato Thompson, “Colors / Yellow: The Sign of Things to Come,” Cabinet, Spring 2006, <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/21/thompson.php>.

5 Michael Rossi, “Colors / Orange: Why Not YR?,” Cabinet, Spring 2011, <https://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/41/rossi.php>.