

RaVae Luckhart: VISCERAL

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.  
--William Butler Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium"

RAVAE LUCKHART is a consummate maker of marks. Line and color dance and surge across canvases full of music and emotion, her sensual Abstract Expression rivaling Elaine de Kooning and other belatedly-feted women of the '50s/'60s New York scene. Luckhart is an old-school painter, and unlike recent generations spewing volumes of art-speak and predetermined interpretations, she offers no explanation. A title may hint, but explicate? No. Here is a painting. It works, or it doesn't. If it works—if it is TRUE—then it may strike a clear bell of emotion, spark harmonics off an aspect of human experience, even of existence—but to speak of it, explain it? That is not done. This is PAINTING, not illustration, not the rendition of an idea, and it is not reducible to words. "It's about the mark," she has said, as said that previous generation.

So, what then are we to make of this newest body of work, VISCERAL? More than marks, these are clear images: unambiguous split, hung, bagged, gutted bodies of deer. Ribs gape; antlers tangle. A chest-high hook pierces flesh. Canvases open to engulf the viewer in shadowy recesses of a chest cavity. Dancing silhouettes of carcasses, heads on, loom like horned gods. Others, heads off, dangle and writhe like figures at a crucifixion. Spine and ribs of elk arch, buck, launching backwards into infinite space: a Viking ship; an alien being. Luckhart speaks of letting the brushstroke lead to images, of following the mark to mysteries unveiled. She references the South Dakota hunting season, her intimate knowledge of slaughtered carcass, of bone and sinew, yet warns, "This work is not about a deer on a hook." And it isn't. This is not simple hunting art, not a simple rendering. But what, then, is it?

Painting meat has a long history in Western art. Most famously, Rembrandt van Rijn painted the Louvre version of his *Slaughtered Ox* in 1655; Chaim Soutine, inspired in the 1920s, worked from a moldering carcass in his Paris studio, vibrant slashing brushstrokes seeming to express an anguish of embodiment. Francis Bacon drew from both for *Figure with Beef*, and, working from photographs, flanked a screaming pope with hanging sides of meat in 1954. In each of these paintings, the treatment of the subject makes it clear that they, too, are about more than meat on a hook. Yet coming to meaning is fraught. Psychoanalytic interpretations have tied Bacon's painting to his sexuality or relationship with his father, yet such narrow biographical readings miss what makes the work universally powerful. Iconographic interpretations of Rembrandt have placed the split body of an ox in the Northern Renaissance tradition of referencing the

fatted calf of the Prodigal Son and ultimately the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, yet in doing so, miss what makes *Slaughtered Ox* different from Pieter Aertsen's 1551 *Meat Stall with Holy Family Giving Alms*, for instance, miss the raw, emotional gutting, the subjective experience of personal crisis expressed in handling of paint and form, in composition, framing, color, and brushstroke. Too narrow or too broad, it's easy for interpretation to miss the mark.

In VISCERAL, Luckhart is in conversation with these earlier painters. Led by the mark first to simple studies of the hunt, her work deepens as the painted bodies become more human. Associations and meanings accrue: the twinned carcasses of *Ghostly November Memory* echo Bacon, the ghost of a flanked scream floating between them like pentimento, a trace whisper left in the mind. *Dark Red Velvet* echoes in triplicate Soutine's 1925 *Carcass of Beef* (Minneapolis), the bodies writhing like skinned women, antlers encircling the dangling head of the middle figure like the halo on a martyred saint. In *White Robes Stained with Scarlet*, the literal hunt recedes as in a rearview mirror; here the paint drips expressionistically, the hanging meat is cartoonish. Bags become blood-stained frocks; white interposed with marbled tan of flesh; the painting brings to mind *The Night*, Max Beckman's painting of 1918: a scene of torture, yet redolent of crucifixion. Crucifixion, too, is evoked in *Gone, October's Breath*: A gorgeous painting, here the hooks multiply, shimmering through layers of gray haze and golden light; bodies gone, leaving only shrouds, the mood is contemplative, disorienting; it's like pre-dawn on Golgotha or the cave on Easter morning. Two shining shrouds. A scrap of blood. A breath held. An empty tomb. (And Rembrandt whispers.)

So much here depends on scale and mark. Mostly vertical and body-sized, these paintings are confronted as we would a mirror. The smallest, *Untitled* (42" x 30"), depicts that single hook. It's almost an excised section from *Gone, October's Breath*, but here the golden light reads as flesh, the layered washes of white as fascia covering muscle. Chest-high, it confronts us, challenges us to feel the hook in our own flesh. Body-sized, each depicting a single carcass, *Place to Store Grief* (42" x 42") and *Atonement...Bearing Witness* (72" x 52") likewise act as mirrors. Chilly echoes of Rembrandt, the cold tonality of these empty chest cavities evokes a sense of dread. Here, deft, sparse strokes delineating the contours of the carcass contrast with sharp, sure swoop of antlers that beckon or menace. The antlers reach out, visually break into the viewer's space, threaten to hook, to swallow, to engulf. This is very, very far from just a deer on a hook.

And then *Descending*. Four-by-four-foot square, this canvas presents the open chest—just that, blood-red and dripping. Ribs tight to the edges of the canvas—painted loosely, but with exactitude in red, black and white, flecks of yellow fat flickering like flame along the edges—the image offers no escape from confrontation with mortality, with the body as meat. It is not incidental that, at 77, Luckhart has endured multiple heart operations, that she lives now with a bionic heart powered by Bluetooth, but, as with Bacon, with Soutine, with Rembrandt, it would be a mistake to limit the experience of this canvas to that bit of biography. This is what it comes to, for all of us: our meat bodies; our embodied souls. It is what makes Soutine's carcasses bleed and Bacon's pope howl; it is our deepest truth and our greatest mystery.

In the final painting in this series, the gargantuan *Untitled*, ten feet high by eight feet wide, the canvas does not mirror; it dwarfs. Stripped of meat, the ribs and spine read like an alien insect. Yellow against an undefined space that shifts from blue to orange, the ribs seem to flail like scrambling legs; electrons skitter through a purple haze, the central glowing orange a road pulling into deep, receding space. It's orgasmic, a jolt of energy: a big bang; resuscitation; resurrection; a new creation hurtling to life. (Breathtaking.)

Luckhart brings an authenticity to her subject, intimate knowledge of the butchering of animals as a farmer's daughter and participant in the hunt. She sees beyond the sterile, plastic-wrapped offerings in the freezer aisle to the raw relationship of life and death. She's intimate with the carnality of the body, its reduction to meat on a surgeon's table as in a hunter's shack, and she knows the inevitable end-game. She knows, as well, I think, the pull of faith in a God who has experienced what it means to be flesh. For in this conversation about meat — with Rembrandt, with Soutine, with Bacon—there is a sacred dimension to the depiction of the mundane, and a universal truth in the expression of the personal. When William Butler Yeats wrote “Sailing to Byzantium” in 1927, he was doing his own reckoning with mortality, but Yeats was bargaining, seeking refuge from embodiment in the arts. Luckhart—like her artistic forefathers—is fiercer than that. She is not gun shy. She faces facts head on and follows the mark. In *VISCERAL*, the mark led, and it led to a profound confrontation with embodiment, incarnation—with meat. And it's hard to overstate just how good, and how powerful, these paintings are.

--Elizabeth Bryant (August 14, 2022)

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