

By Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe

September 14, 2010

JULIKA LACKNER

Julika Lackner's first paintings, in art school in Berlin and Pasadena, were of everyday scenes in the lives of those very different cities. The U-Bahn in Berlin, bleak in that way that Berliners find glumly comforting and painted in a very economical style that allowed the surface of the canvas to be itself gloomy, and open air restaurants in Los Angeles, bland rather than bleak, sunny rather than gloomy, clothing colourful rather than not. I thought those paintings were interesting for exactly the same reasons that others thought they could not be interesting. I understand that a lot of art is a matter of dramatic changes of direction, innovation, transgression in the form of inversion and negation. But I don't see how that could be the only way to do something exciting. For that to be the case there would have to be a rule about how to break rules. So I am just as interested, in principle, in art that doesn't seem to be doing anything new until you look pretty closely, or which might even be doing something new by seeming to refuse to do any such thing.

That is not the case with Julika's work. She isn't preoccupied with doing something new, although she certainly is, and she certainly is not interested in resisting the new. The daily life in Los Angeles paintings turned into city and night paintings, and these led to a development which was quite a step beyond where she had been, in that they led her to try to paint the night sky as it is when one gets past how photography has taught us to see it. Far more complicated from a

colouristic point of view is what it is. Julika would come to my studio at night and we'd look at the sky and figure out what was in it and then go inside and cover a little canvas with that colour and then step outside and see whether, if we held it up against the sky, it disappeared. If it did we had a colour for the sky at that time of night. That information helped her to develop a palette which escapes the simplifications of photography. After the night came fog and then clouds, an investigation which is still being pursued, and which continues to involve the rediscovery of perception in the face of brainwashing by the photographic.

Over the past couple of years this has been complicated by an increasing use of photography. Julika made a couple of series of works which began with photographs from the air, eventually using satellite photographs, the sites photographed then being visited on the ground, so that the resulting painting was the product of information gathered from both far and near, above and below, and through photography (by definition and of necessity) from afar and by the naked eye near at hand. These paintings led to a variety of concerns, or affects, which are unique to painting and which Julika's procedure made one think about anew. For example, the difference between the sea and the land when both are seen from above, which is to say, from the front, and both are being depicted in paint—which is to say, through marks which originate in liquidity and never fail to register as such. The surface of paintings is always a dry crust that was once liquid and when it depicts a field in which half is a crust (the land) and half liquid (the sea) one becomes aware of how both are being subsumed in a medium which was once one and has ended as the other.

I think, without being quite sure how to discuss it at this stage, that this has led Julika to reinvent the study of atmosphere in painting. To almost go back from the photographic to an

understanding of twilight without electricity in order to reanimate a distinction that was quite pressing for nineteenth-century painters for almost the opposite reasons. Atmosphere in Turner is all about fog and rain, wetness as a condition of the visible and blurring as a condition of seeing. Atmosphere in the Impressionists, especially Monet, is I think imaginable as the opposite, not obscurity through fog and rain but blinding clarity through intense sunshine, dryness as a condition of the visible and reflection as a condition of seeing. For Lackner the condition of seeing is a bit more complicated, it's slowness instead of photographic instantaneity, supplemented by the colours and phenomena the camera can't manage, from mist as a deep layer of ephemeral whitenesses that nonetheless have body and depth, to the metallic as a material presence that is not quite the same as a metallic colour. Her most recent paintings take the question more thoroughly into the world of the painting than has been the case before, perhaps. The surface is more exclusively something one may only find in a painting. It is as if she has now found a vocabulary for herself which allows painting to be as specific about itself in its own way as photographs are. It is not that everything in her new paintings—the space, the light, the continuity between what and when a colour represents a thing and when a depth, the place of gesture in manipulating a surface that cannot be seen only as a surface—could only occur that way in a painting. That is indeed true, but it's true like a truism. What's more important is that in de-photographing natural space for us Julika has painted a complexity, because it must be that her works are in some sense pictures of what it is to think a world we are doomed to always be seeing twice, once as phenomena and simultaneously—such is our exposure to the photographic—as phenomena rendered into shorthand by a machine that's generally used to displace the phenomenal into narrative meaning, atmosphere into a story, vague feeling into purposive

interpretation. Actually it's not so important that she's painting how we think this world we can't but always see as two, it's that she's painting how we feel it. In that I think she is pointing towards how we use both photography and painting, and photography as a morass of references to the painted pictorial, and painting as origin of and parasite on the photographic (itself a realization of Renaissance perspective and its valorization of a mobile and individual point of view) in an untidy combination that allows us to have feelings that take into account our separation from nature by all that attaches us to it. Double pathos in one sense, but I don't think that's what it is for Julika Lackner. I don't think pathos has anything to do with it, or at least not very much. Quietness is what is at stake, as a condition for contemplation that takes place in the midst of a din. Not the noise of the city or the clamour of art historians, but the clash of the fast moving photograph hitting the snail-paced medium of painting. It is, I think, a very deep feeling made possible by the implications of that clash that is what one sees in these paintings. It's not pathos because it's not as if there was anything wrong about the clash. It is very deeply engaged though, because the clash is very violent and has done something to what people are, in so far as they are how they see as much as anything. That is I think what runs through these paintings. It is most certainly not clear how one should read them, they can only be interpreted through the two languages which they bring together and make mutually impacted as much as they are mutually explanatory. The contemporary subject can't really separate painting from photography, writing from typing or saying from recording, and Julika's painting is of—both in the sense of it comes from it and it's about it and it's by it—the contemporary subject, which is by the way why it has to be painting rather than photography. All photography can do with other surfaces is make them its own, and as such it cannot achieve any kind of critical relationship with

the world it has made, which consists of photographic surfaces. Painting is the only means by which one might have some critical grasp of seeing in such a world.