

Katy Crowe: *Lunae Orbitae*

Katy Crowe's Los Angeles studio is in her home, although the reverse is equally true--her home is in her studio. Entering, as so many times before, I note the familiar trace of an alchemical scent, her unique elixir of oil, beeswax, and turpentine. In Crowe's paintings, the sensuality of traditional oil-on-linen nods to the pleasures and history specific to this medium. It also exemplifies her commitment to painting as a material driven endeavor. Having studied with the renowned teacher James Jarvaise, while a student in Santa Barbara, and mentored as a young artist by Joan Mitchell both in France and in LA, Crowe settled into a serious practice early on. Now, with skills nearing five decades of development, Crowe has honed a rigorous abstraction, coding the essential shapes of geometry--primarily circles and rectangles--into her own semiotic language. She favors reductive form, flat space, and complex color juxtapositions, positioning them into rhythmic compositions suggestive of fluctuation. She also manages to be marvelously idiosyncratic. Part of the noted charm of Crowe's work is its playful wit, allowing her life, imagination, and travels to invigorate and test the limits of what might be described as formalism.

In the essay, *The Haptic and the Third Eye* (lecture 6 in "On Painting"), Giles Deleuze makes reference to a text from poet Paul Claudel: "what is a composition? He [Claudel] explains it all in one beautiful sentence, composition is organization in the process of becoming undone...taken at the point of imbalance." In Crowe's recent paintings, moons, eyes, orbs or circles move buoyantly around shallow planes of space. They appear to be wobbling, in formation, or perhaps in orbit. Untethered, and with the

sensation of floating, the orbs move in and out of spatial frames, through portals, and against edges. The shapes sometimes drift beyond the compositional frame, accentuating the tension between absorption and theatricality. Crowe's utilization of planes at times suggests a paradoxical depth—she edges towards a visual pun on the classic quattrocento notion that the canvas denotes a window, or that geometry could, or should, be precise. Instead, for Crowe, there's a release of tension, an evocative invitation to wander, a letting go.

Within a composition, a single form is never repeated. Each form is delineated with a particular color, density, and purpose. These individuating qualities are enhanced by Crowe's emphasis upon surfaces, with the sole intent seemingly to emanate pleasure, they are a place to linger. She attends to softly blurred edges between forms, keeping the surface both sumptuous and active. The brushstrokes are **often** vertical, **always** direct, and rhythmic. Where the surface is less opaque, Crowe enlists the weave of the linen to serve as a recessive grid or provisional crosshatching.

Crowe's palette is notably complex, both tertiary and twilight in hue. She describes her color sense as intuitive, although it may refer to specific sources, for example, the light remembered from Cairo, Tuscany or Mexico City. As Merleau Ponty quotes Cezanne in *Eye and Mind*, "Color is the "place where our brain and the universe meet." Crowe sometimes layers complimentary colors which glow with the aura of subtle afterimages. The luminosity can conjure airy translucency, scrimms of color holding back light like shades on a window. They may also be fully saturated orbs laden with heavy pigments. Crowe equates color with form, in relationships that confound clear differentiation,

utilizing slippages especially between figure and ground. They become dyads between the material and dematerialization of matter. The poetics of duality are her metier—of light and shadow, near and far, inside and out, whole and hole. Two show titles underscore the spatial metaphors embedded in Crowe’s symbolism. The 2022 show, *A Wrinkle in the Macula* and, from 2024, *Lunar Shift*, together suggest great distances optically traversed. From inside the interior of the eye itself, to the 238,900 miles to the moon, Crowe’s pursuit of abstraction embodies the contemplation of perception, of the idea that light is only seen as form through its interaction with matter, and time may only be made visible through its evidence in process. Crowe, like Merleau-Ponty says in *“Eye and Mind”* is “the painter to whom the things of the world give birth by a sort of concentration or coming-to-itself of the visible.” In Crowe’s studio, things are being fixed, formulas are being tested, and paintings are in progress.

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