

BOMB

Getting Lost in the Brushstrokes: Lucy Bull Interviewed by John Garcia



Lucy Bull, *Pussy Willow*, 2021, oil on linen, 69 × 120 inches. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Lucy Bull has been an ascendent voice in the Los Angeles art community since her arrival in 2014. Her paintings are boldly abstract, making no attempts at representation or didactic explanation. She has shown extensively in LA project spaces, exhibited internationally, and is presently showing her first solo exhibition, *Skunk Grove*, at David Kordansky Gallery. I recently spoke with Lucy as she sat in her car outside her painting studio in Boyle Heights in Los Angeles.

—John Garcia

Lucy Bull

It sounds like a car just exploded. There's weird smoke in the air, like a firework without any light. I have no idea what that was. There's also a car alarm going off. Welcome to Boyle Heights, home of the mysterious noises and smells. There has been a smell that comes out at night. It could be rancid hot sauce or something.

John Garcia

Is the rancid smell where you got the exhibition title *Skunk Grove*?

LB

Ha, probably. Somehow that had not occurred to me. I was looking at a Charles Burchfield book in the studio, and there was a painting of skunk cabbage. I've always loved skunk cabbage—its looks so alien. I started thinking that maybe the skunk was a spirit animal for this show, and then I liked the idea of making the title the name of a place. I had been seeing a lot of skunks around Echo Park.

JG

Throughout the paintings in *Skunk Grove*, circular shapes are often repeated. In *The Bottoms* (2021), a series of twelve circles are painted in a downward arch, evoking a moon cycle chart. Does the passage of time exist within your paintings?

LB

Time is everything. I feel like a lot of the paintings function with a timed release. The layers start to shift and unravel, and the more you look, the more you start to see. In terms of their making, they are actually more process-driven than people realize. In order for the painting



Lucy Bull, *The Bottoms*, 2021, oil on linen, 72 x 98 inches. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

to move forward, I have to let whatever I'm seeing fall back. I want to leave room for different associations. Sometimes the paintings that come together too quickly don't allow enough time for things to open up in a different way.

JG

I would say that is a fundamental difference between how you work versus the vast majority of painters. You're not trying to make the best painting you can as fast as you can. Instead, you focus on a path of discovery of the new, with no regard to the time it takes to find it.

LB

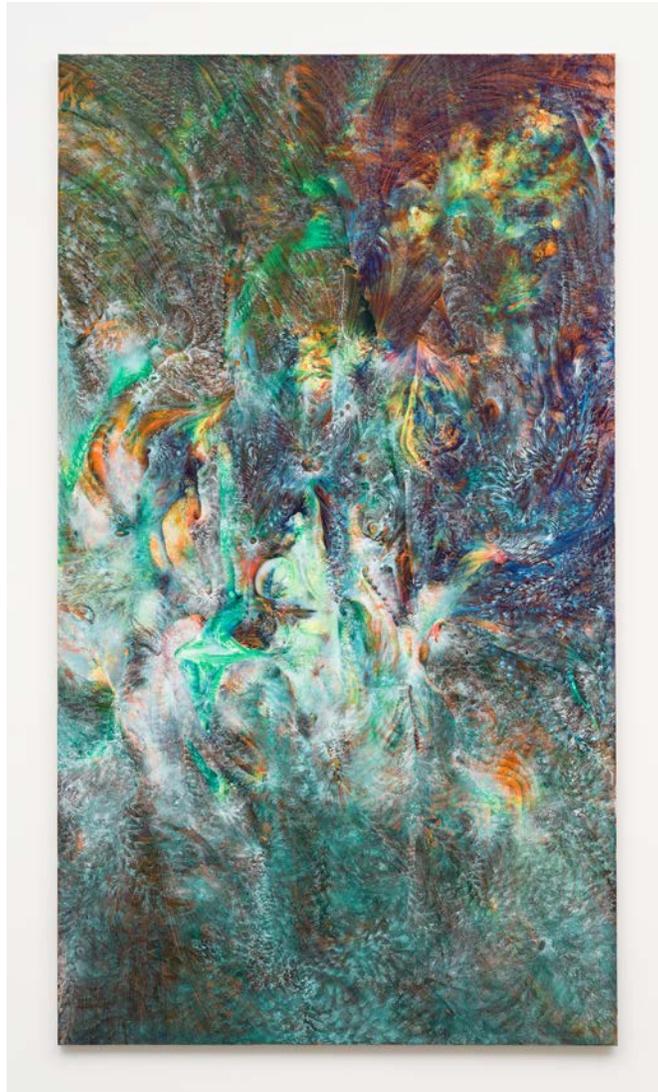
Right. And the question is always how far to take them. I often find myself thinking to myself, "Well, this is good, but it could be *great*." And sometimes that means painting over something that at one point felt finished in hopes of pushing it to another dimension. If I tunnel vision through a single painting for too long, I start to become blind to all that is happening. That's why it's important for me to take breaks between encounters. Sometimes I'll pause on a painting for an entire month. Ultimately what I'm trying to do is get to the point where there is potential for new avenues of discovery. The scratching feels like excavation; older marks in the beginning layers get pulled to the foreground. It's similar to Max Ernst's technique of frottage. I relate to how he talks about being a spectator to the making of his own work. When things finally open up and click, it feels like magic.

JG

Do these moments of discovery catalyze a transformation within the paintings? I noticed the use of the word "transformation" used to describe your paintings in the press release, and it feels important to me.

LB

I have a hard time answering this question because I think the transformation is a subjective experience that someone might have when encountering the work. But it's synonymous with how I relate to the work while making it.



Lucy Bull, *Permission*, 2021, oil on linen, 96 x 54 inches. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

JG

Is tension inherent to transformation? Do your paintings carry within them a scene of tension? Do any of them exist without tension?

LB

I think it would be impossible for them to exist without tension! Certain ones carry a more violent energy, but the tension between clashing colors and forms is what provides the depth. I'm also choosing a lot of complementary colors that create a static buzz on the surface. There's a fair amount of optics at play. I'm trying to draw people in. And of course they are very layered. I think we all have an easier time finding the order in chaos these days. We are constantly overstimulated. I mean, is there anything devoid of tension?

JG

I would say conservatively that tension might be inherent to all things, though I think the amount of tension can be heightened or mitigated through concrete actions. Is color used to arrive at moments of tension and transformation?

LB

I have a very intuitive relationship to color by never planning ahead yet always making notes and responding to colors. The notes section of my phone is predominately random color combinations. In my opinion, the more vivid and acidic, the better. I'm interested in creating a scenario where people can feel their way through a painting. I want the reaction to be more visceral than logical, and color is the best tool for provoking the viscera.

JG

What about scale in your paintings? While there are some very big paintings in *Skunk Grove*, there are also other works that are more modestly sized. Do you approach the paintings differently based on their size?



Installation view of Lucy Bull: *Skunk Grove*, David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo by Jeff McLane. Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

LB

Oh, totally, yes. I try to mix it up for that reason. It's good to not get too comfortable with any sort of scale. That said, I'm very excited about the new mural size—they really envelop you. I think the larger scale has encouraged me to be more brazen and experimental with my mark-making. It's much more of a physical undertaking. That said, I actually sometimes end up spending more time on the smaller ones. It's easier to tweak out on details at the small scale. They end up being more indulgent in a way.

JG

I'm excited that the shift up in scale has added some boldness to your mark-making. There is always a myriad of repeated gestures and marks across the surface of your paintings. In past writing on your paintings, this element has been described as "rhythms and counter rhythms." What importance does rhythm have to you?

LB

In the beginning it's like I'm just doing this dance where I'm getting lost in the different kinds of brushwork and marks that I can make and sort of getting to that point where there's this flow and I'm not thinking of anything and just kind of going with it and trusting that something will come of the layers. The more I go, the more disorienting it starts to get; but that's when things start to happen. I start to have associations and tease certain aspects out. But every impulsive layer of mark-making is countered with a more calculated response. It goes in waves.

JG

I love the word "waves" in relation to your paintings. The feeling of envelopment that you mention trying to evoke in your bigger pieces feels to me like being in the ocean and having a wave break in front of you. It's like seeing still, blue water crash against itself and create a new form while the undertow pulls you closer to this approaching mass of undulation. Where are your paintings trying to take the viewer? Beyond just a name, is *Skunk Grove* a destination within your paintings?

LB

I think the paintings make up *Skunk Grove* collectively. They function like landscapes, but maybe it's more accurate to call them dreamscapes? Or mindscapes? I think that the most interesting paintings are the ones that are disruptive, confusing, and show something of the psyche that you're not aware of. This reminds me of my friend Nancy Lupo's video *Open Mouth Digest* (2020) where she says: "You know you're making art when you're exposing something shameful." That really resonates with me.