

## THE FLATNESS OF PINE FLAT

Mark Godfrey

In 2000, Sharon Lockhart retreated to a cabin in rural California. She had just completed her film *Teatro Amazonas* and the various photographic series related to the project, and had exhibited these works in major solo shows in Europe and the United States. If the primary purpose of her retreat was self-regeneration following a period of extremely hard work, it has since produced a cluster of works *about* regeneration and youth. As interesting as it might be to consider these works through these apparent themes, we might do better to examine the way in which they stage a regeneration of form. Like her earlier works, the projects she has completed since 2000 use the mediums of 16mm film and large-format photography, but it can be argued that these mediums have been regenerated for her through a dialogue with painting.

The first works in this cluster were completed in Japan. Lockhart rented the cabin knowing the trip there was imminent, and she had begun to research ikebana, a traditional art of flower arrangement. She was particularly interested in *No-No Ikebana*, an almost subversive form of the art. *No* means agriculture, and in this ikebana, flowers are replaced by vegetables, fruits, and cereals. Once in Japan, Lockhart photographed various arrangements and also shot a film, titling it *NO* to play on the double suggestions of the word, invoking both agriculture and the ancient drama. As the film commences, we see a ploughed, brown field stretching away from us toward a row of autumnal trees with a greying sky above. Two figures enter the frame from either side. They drop armfuls of straw in piles, gradually forming a grid of these mounds, three across and five deep, starting along what we see as the back, and approaching the front of the field over some time. Then, starting at the front and working away, they rake the piles out. The straw gradually covers the bare earth, so that by the end the field is protected from the coming winter frost. The seeds will be unharmed, ready to sprout the following spring.

But we could redescribe the film, leaving farming practices aside and attending only to form. We could say that over the course of the second half of the film, a monochrome brown surface is slowly turned yellow as one colour is brushed over another. If this field recalls the appearance of mid-20th-century paintings, the raking actions of the two farmers in some ways recall the very *processes* of painting. We could also say that the earlier stages of the process bring to mind an older feature of the history of painting, only to disturb it. Renaissance paintings imaged space receding from the picture plane toward a distant vanishing point. Often, this space was marked out through a grid of pillars or of floor tiles, diminishing in height or breadth as they moved toward the distance, thereby creating the illusion that the widest visible space was at the front of the picture just before the eyes of the beholder, as in Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin* of 1504. The Japanese farmers re-create this spatial marking only to undo it. When the grid of piles is completed, those at the front appear to be as high as those at the back, but we know they are much smaller: those at the front took only one armful of straw to make, while those at the back were built up with five. And when it comes to raking them out, the ones at the front are flattened with one or two sweeps; the ones at the back take far longer to smooth out. Through undoing the illusion of perspective, we are reminded that the space at the back of

Lockhart's image is far broader than at the front, and that the field we see is not a square, as we would assume, but a truncated triangle. In other words, we are reminded that we are *seeing* the field through the viewing frame of the camera, and that though this frame naturalises what lies before it, making everything seem complete, it offers a necessarily limited view. Let us say, then, that by invoking the history of painting, Lockhart manages to scrutinise the operations of the film camera and the contingencies and exclusions of its mode of imaging. If in previous works Lockhart had carried out quasi-anthropological projects only to question the anthropological gaze, here, while representing a traditional agricultural practice in rural Japan, she pursued this kind of self-scrutiny by placing film in dialogue with painting.<sup>1</sup>

1. In passing, I want to note another remarkable feature of the work. The duration of the film was determined by the space it depicted, namely by the size of the field. When you watched the film, even if you did not know how many minutes it was, you knew it would last as long as it took for the two farmers to fill the field. As a result, just as the farmers went about their activity with neither haste nor slowness, the viewer had no anxiety about the film's length.

Intriguingly, this dialogue continued in different circumstances when Lockhart completed a photographic project at the Fogg Art Museum the year after finishing *NO*. She had previously represented the art institution as a place of labour, photographing guards at an On Kawara exhibition in Japan in 1998, a mason worker in an anthropological museum in Mexico City in 1999, and an installation team setting up a Duane Hanson sculpture at a museum in Scotland in 2002. At the Fogg, she was drawn to a conservator who was testing assumptions about how Morris Louis created his famous *Unfurled* paintings of 1960–61. In under a year, Louis had made just over one hundred of these works, manipulating massive expanses of unstretched and unprimed canvas before pouring newly available acrylic paints down their lower corners, working in self-imposed isolation in a small studio in his Washington D.C. house. While *NO* had invoked the deep space of Renaissance painting, this project had as its subject paintings whose representation of space was quite the opposite. Michael Fried, Louis's greatest critic, had written that "One's experience of the unfurleds can be vertiginous", but the void of central blank canvas into which one might imagine falling was never sensed as lying behind the peripheral trails of colour. Instead, it lay on the same plane: Fried imagined falling into a void of *flatness*. Lockhart recorded the conservator's work at five stages of the painting's re-creation. In two of the photographs, the conservator appears at the margin, tugging the canvas to create a fold down which the paint can trickle to form the kind of rivulet we see in the *Unfurleds*. Lockhart's images of the process show that to achieve the radical flatness of his paintings, Louis needed to ruffle and warp his canvas as no other painter had done—to treat it like the sheets of cheesecloth with which Eva Hesse would make *Expanded Expansion* at the end of the 1960s. Just as the conservator had tried to imagine Louis's process, so, in contemplating Lockhart's photographs, we can imagine the hectic work in the conservation laboratory. The conservator must have been guessing at Louis's precise movements, spilling paint, manoeuvring cotton, avoiding fumes. When one thinks of all this activity, the dispassionate quality of the photographs becomes evident. Each photograph shows the painting head on, and the key moment in the re-creation (the pouring of paint) is not depicted. We could even say that to record the complex interplay of folding and flattening in Louis's work, Lockhart deployed the flattest kind of photographic language she could. The dialogue with painting, in other words, had necessitated a particular kind of photography, regenerating a mode of photography that Lockhart had used previously.

*Pine Flat*, Lockhart's latest project, also emerged from the artist's retreat to the Californian countryside, but in a much more obvious way than her Japanese works: spending time away from her home in Los Angeles alerted her to the natural environment in the mountains, to the communities near her retreat, and to the ways the children of these communities lived within this rural environment. It was not long before both the setting and the children would become the subject of a work. Or rather, of a group of works, for *Pine Flat* comprises two series of

photographs and a film. Furthermore, the film is subdivided into two parts each of six ten-minute sections. One part consists of six films of individual children; the other, of six films of groups of children. When shown in the cinema, the two parts are played in succession, broken up by a ten-minute intermission over which one hears a soundtrack played by one of the film's subjects. Alternatively, the film can be shown in a gallery installation, in which case the parts are split up. In one screening room, the first part of the film is shown, one section per day on a continuous loop; in a second screening room, the second part of the film is shown, also one segment per day on a continuous loop.

The larger of the two series of photographs in *Pine Flat* is of large-scale portraits of the children of the community. These portraits were shot in a studio that Lockhart set up in a barn in the centre of town. In each photograph, a child is shown against a black muslin background, though the tone of this background shifts slightly between photographs, as all were shot in natural light. The careful poses give a strong sense that the children took the process of being portrayed very seriously, and looking very closely, one can tell that some found it difficult to stay entirely still during the relatively lengthy exposure time. At the heart of the entire series there seems to be as much an intention to portray the children, as to resurrect photography for them: though most of their parents would have snapshot digital cameras, one can easily tell that they treated the kind of photography Lockhart practiced as a completely different imaging medium. Another feature of the series suggests that Lockhart's aim was not to record the young population of the community as a kind of anthropologist, but to retrieve photographic portraiture: each child, no matter how tall, appears as large as the others. Lockhart enlarged the photographs differently for this effect. From this series alone, it would seem that the dialogue with painting that I have charted is no longer pursued, but the other series of photographs in *Pine Flat* suggests the opposite. These are a series of four closeup shots of the ground in the area, representing different times of the year, showing grass after a light rain, pine needles, and snow. In conversation, Lockhart refers to these images as colour fields.

This designation not only recalls the coloured field of *NO* and the critical vocabulary with which Louis's paintings were once addressed—it also prompts us to consider that the history and modes of address of painting remain of interest to Lockhart in the new project, and indeed that painting might provide a way into an account of the filmic parts of *Pine Flat*. Clearly, Lockhart creates filmic images that we perceive as we perceive paintings because of the way that she films and edits. Each of the twelve sections of the film is shot from a fixed position, and the camera is held totally still, without any panning, zooming, or other kind of movement. Each ten-minute section is shown straight, uninterrupted, and uncut. As a result, the viewer relaxes into each image, having time not only to attend to its subject matter, but also to the complexity of the composition. However, if this manner of filming is a constant through the twelve sections, the way in which the different sections confront and implicate their beholder varies greatly, invoking the different ways in which paintings have traditionally addressed their viewers.

The second section, *The Reader*, for instance, presents a young girl reading on a bank of grass, utterly absorbed in her pursuit. To return to Louis's champion Michael Fried, this image recalls the 18th-century paintings he wrote about in *Absorption and Theatricality* that present characters concentrating on particular activities. Fried described the way such paintings position their spectators entirely outside their narratives, and so too before Lockhart's *Reader* we feel absolutely detached. Through the ten minutes we become as absorbed as the girl, watching her and her surroundings. *The Searcher*, by complete contrast, which opens the first part of the film, positions its viewer within its dramatic narrative. This scene is just as still as *The Reader*: we look from a slope into a pine forest, while snow

falls all around. From beginning to end, we hear the voice of a girl calling out to a friend she cannot find. We become implicated in her activity, scanning the forest for her quarry. We experience the image not as a detached observer but as a participant. The image recalls Caspar David Friedrich's *Fir Trees in the Snow* (1828), but also the art historian Joseph Leo Koerner's reading of this work as a painting that foregrounds the artist's *experience* of place *as such* as the very subject matter of painting, rather than, say, a particular visual theme. The other sections of the first part waver between these two modes, but none more dramatically than the fifth, *The Hunter*. The image here strongly recalls *The Reader*, almost appearing as its opposite. Again, there is a figure sitting on a bank, but the season has changed from summer to winter and the figure is a boy. At first, it seems we are once again detached observers of a character totally immersed in his activity. He sits, gun in lap, waiting for the movement of a deer, listening for the snap of twigs breaking under hooves. Our attention matches his: we watch him watch, but then, picking up his gun, he aims it straight at the camera. Suddenly our cover is blown: no longer a detached observer, we are the hunted. There could be no clearer way of implicating us in the drama of the image. Targeted, we are made utterly self-conscious of the very activity of looking.

I wonder if it would be possible to describe these differences through recourse to the idea of flatness? Those sections that position us as detached viewers could be said to offer a flat image for us to contemplate. And those that involve us spread the world of the image into our own space, offering, in the process, a variegated terrain rather than a flat one. To call the films of 'absorbed' children flat recalls the connection Fried made between the work of 18th-century painters and the flat canvases of the Modernist period, and when we think more about flatness in *Pine Flat*, we begin to notice that many of the images actually *appear* flattened. Take, for instance, the first film in the second part, again shot from a hill with the camera looking out toward a slope in winter. This time, a group of children climbs through the woods. Though we can see after a while that they are ascending, it is at first difficult to judge the topography and the orientation of the land before us. With its tangles of branches against the snowy white ground, the image momentarily resembles a Jackson Pollock drip painting. Other films from the second part share this kind of flatness: the second, for instance, shows two children looking for fish in a shallow creek. The rippled surface of the water catches the light dramatically, but the slight waviness of this plane emphasizes by contrast the flatness of the image as a whole, filled up to its edges by the water. The penultimate section pictures two couples kissing in the golden summer grass. One couple lies at the top left, and the other at the bottom right of the image, and though it is clear that the latter are closer to the camera, the image still seems very flat, because this time the grass extends to fill it.

Like paintings, films use flat supports. We never think of this fact in front of most films, just as before Modernist painting the flatness of the canvas was hardly acknowledged. Though in their appearance Lockhart's films call the physical properties of the screen to mind, her interests are not those of structuralist filmmakers who would have made these properties their explicit subject, nor is her aim simply to refer to painting's flatness for formal reasons alone. A concern with flatness might arise out of a dialogue with painting, but flatness instead is a more expansive notion for her. The flat appearance of the images just discussed results from the absence in them of horizon lines, and it creates a sense that the children are totally surrounded by the landscape, comfortable within it, sated by it. Flatness seems for Lockhart to be a capacious concept that describes this state of absorption and contentment within an environment. So far I have noted two ways in which the film presents this state of flatness: first, by presenting children immersed in activities that the viewer watches from a position of detachment,

and second, by presenting children in apparently flattened images, utterly surrounded by their environment.

The state of flatness is also conjured by the sonic character of the film and by the way in which time is experienced by some of its subjects. Lockhart constructed the sonic environment of the film with Becky Allen, who recorded the sound on the shoots. When groups of children talk to each other, enough sonic detail is audible for the viewer to sense the character of the conversation, but not enough for the viewer to follow the dialogue. In this way, the viewer remains detached from such scenes, treating them as moving pictures to be watched and not as narratives to be followed, and the children remain immersed in their self-contained activities. Let us call this a 'flattened sound environment'. It is matched by the temporal environment that some of the children inhabit. As I have mentioned, each of the films that comprise *Pine Flat* lasts ten minutes, but the children experience this constant duration very differently. Some children let time pass, filling it with nothing but their presence, or with the slightest of actions. There's no urgency, no fidgeting, no compulsion to move on from one pursuit to another. In other words, time is flattened out for these children: watching them, you feel that they could go on and on doing what they are doing, far beyond the time of the film.

Lockhart has called the new project *Pine Flat* to designate the name of the community in which she lived and filmed, but I hope to have established that the second word of this title resonates in many different ways. Flatness in *Pine Flat* names an idyllic, protected, and innocent state of existence, yet it is shown in the film to be a transient one. The bumpy world of adulthood is about to encroach on youth, and we sense this through the different ways in which flatness is threatened.

All of the images in the film, I have said, exclude a horizon, so that the children are surrounded by the landscape. All the action takes place within the frame. However, in the last section of the first part, an action occurs outside this frame. A boy is standing by a road, looking out to the hills before him. At first it seems as if he is just viewing the landscape, but then we hear the rumble of an approaching motor and see in the distance a school bus. The road winds out of the frame of the image, and for many minutes, in its visual absence, we hear the crescendo of the bus's approach. With the interruption of this noise, we can no longer see the scene as flat and self-contained. Finally, the boy is taken away: away from the landscape and to the world of education and adulthood.

In this section, flatness is broken by the approach of the bus, an event with a visual and sonic character. In others, it is more simply sound that intrudes. As a boy plays harmonica in a creek, he is disturbed by a plane overhead; the peace of a sleeping child is interrupted by distant gunshots; the rumble of motorbikes persists behind the kissing couples. If sound elsewhere helps to create the sense that the children are in a bounded and protected space untouched by the world beyond, in these cases, sound restores the horizon, indicating what lies outside the limits of what we can see, and what awaits the children.

Just so, the flatness of time can be disturbed. In the third section of the second part of the film, three children pretend to fight in a rainstorm. Where other groups of younger children concentrate on a single activity for ten minutes, such as searching for fish or swinging under a tree, these older children seem to want to do more and more things within the period. As a result, this section seems a little out of place in the context of the others, but this is significant. Their frenetic behaviour and impatient relationship with time suggest the limits of the state of flatness: teenage time will have its peaks and troughs, its moments of excitement and boredom. If childhood can be touchingly represented by the flattened films that Lockhart comes to through her dialogue with painting, late teenage life seems to require for its representation the narrative and theatrical modes of different media.

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As a way of concluding I want to locate my arguments in a wider context. Many commentators on Lockhart's work have considered the interplay of the mediums of photography and film. Recently, George Baker has termed her photographs "cinematic photographs" because of the "mad multiplication of connotational codes within a single still image" and because of their "embrace of the fragment, of absence, [and] discontinuity". Meanwhile her films are described as "still films": shot from a single viewpoint, and shown uncut, they revisit the terrain of photography. Without wanting to dispute these designations, I hope to have shown that the memories and practices of another older medium, painting, can be generative. But while suggesting this, I want to separate Lockhart's approach to painting from that of an artist such as Jeff Wall, who re-deploys the scale and subject matter of 19th-century history painting, or Andreas Gursky, whose practice of building up a coloured image from hundreds of digital images recalls the part-by-part compositional practices of painting. Lockhart mobilises the memories, forms, and conventions of painting for entirely different ends, and never aims at the grandeur, solidity, and scale that characterise the work of these artists. Though still, her 16mm films are transient: it is only for a limited time that their viewer is able to remain before them. And there is another dimension to this transience: the impending obsolescence of analogue film.

I argued before that because of its ability to create a sense of flatness, her representational means (still-taken, uncut, ten-minute, 16mm films with their particular sonic character) is finely tuned to her subject matter. It is also because of its doubly-valenced transience that Lockhart's medium is a perfect one for her description of youth. But as well as remarking on its appropriateness, I should also acknowledge how surprising her medium is given this subject. We are so accustomed to seeing youth imaged through pop videos, TV, and even digital animation, and, conversely, to 16mm film being deployed because of its approaching obsolescence to represent ageing or out-of-time subjects (think of many of Tacita Dean's films, for instance). So the aptness of Lockhart's medium is astonishing, but most surprising of all, perhaps, is the fact that though she has chosen a transient medium, and though she revisits the conventions of painting, Lockhart has represented childhood without in any way succumbing to the sentimentality and nostalgia that so many adults fall into when recalling their youth.