

LISA BRADLEY

LISA BRADLEY

February 3 - February 27 1993

Text by April Kingsley

E. M. DONAHUE GALLERY
560 BROADWAY NEW YORK, NY 10012 TEL (212) 226 1111

All the paintings are blue — or blue-gray, or blue-violet. All are verticals, sort of squarish verticals. All have passages of black and white which shape and articulate the blueness. All the imagery is centered in the blue and completely abstract. If you think you recognize something in Lisa Bradley's billows of blue, just remember how you always found faces and animals in the clouds when you lay on your back in the warm summer grass as a child. It's a mirage. Their abstractness is central to their abiding spirituality. Were they not abstract they would be "about" something, something in particular. But they are not about specifics. They are about light as it manifests the spiritual in the most generic and general senses. Edward Hopper dedicated his life to capturing sunlight on the side of a barn; Bradley is after an inner light that can shine for all of us.

Lisa Bradley is a young painter less than two decades into her career, a career that has decidedly not followed the pattern of her peers. Unlike the now-fading "stars" of the eighties who seemed to have spent most of their time on power plays and smart career moves to the detriment of their art, Bradley has been painting. For over fifteen years she has been painting mainly bluish abstractions. To be sure they have undergone many changes, but what they have in common so far outweighs their differences as to make those differences seem negligible to the indiscriminating eye. Bradley has never wavered in her commitment to abstraction and to the seriousness, indeed the spirituality, of her endeavor. In an age of cute art, art appropriated from other artists, and art that is politically correct but esthetically crippled (or rather, disadvantaged), she makes art that is simply and unashamedly art with a capital "A". Bradley is not making art merely for art's sake, however. She aims higher. P.D. Ouspensky spoke to Bradley's purpose when he said, "Art in its highest manifestations is a path to cosmic consciousness."¹

Lisa Bradley's consciousness has been developing over the years in league with her art and her recent paintings show them joining forces. In the seventies the surfaces of Bradley's paintings seemed to heave and sigh. Niches appeared to open into them and promontories to push forward from them because shadows darkened and whites highlighted the pigmented material that covered the canvas. It was a vast, unchartable, non-crystalline netherworld of blue she created. That world sealed over in the eighties and we were only given rare glimpses into the space behind the crevassed, crinkled glacial surfaces. It was as though we viewed the Antarctic moraine from a spaceship with a few snow-crested mountain ridgetops piercing the icy wastes. Between the mid-seventies and mid-eighties she also shifted our viewpoint so that instead of confronting a vertical surface which our erect posture paralleled, we seemed to hover above a vast horizontal extension on which we looked down. This was followed at the end of the eighties by a shift in focus so that the surface seemed to smooth out and flatten, becoming one with the imagery. The visual sensation was somewhat like that of a plastic laminate where the image seems to float within a hazy transparent plane, not in front of it, yet not far behind the surface. The light seemed to be located somewhere inside the translucent plane or

behind it and yet it sometimes shone forth, sparking in spurts like a Roman candle in a fog-filled nighttime sky. As one might expect given the short passage of time, the changes since 1989 have not been blatant, but then subtlety is one of the qualities that distinguishes Lisa Bradley's art as a whole.

One of these subtleties has been a centering of the imagery in the new work. Whereas in 1989 painted matter seemed to flow or surge upward and to the right, now the imagery is centered and the flow is equilaterally upward. A swirling vortex of colored light fills the central and lower portions of the canvas and seems to radiate sparks or streams of light into the upper regions. This happens most demonstrably in *Moment*, *Luminous Shadow*, *Whisper*, *Winged*, and *Reflection*, and more discreetly in *Clarity* and *Tummo*. The one painting to depart dramatically from this tendency toward ascension is *Jubilee*, in which an ecstatic figure eight whirls through the picture space like a skirted dervish in a fevered state. Jubilant and dynamic, the forms in this painting reach out to grab the surrounding space; in the other paintings the dynamism of the central forms has a strange quietude that seems implosive rather than explosive. Like the frantic patterns of leaf shadows even the gentlest of breezes can create on a sunlit wall — or a tempest in a lily pond — the erratic, splintery, sometimes even violent-seeming movements in Bradley's new paintings simultaneously convey a contradictory sense of being stilled or contained, a sense of peace.

The quality of time in Bradley's new paintings is likewise internally contrary. Forces rush through the space, trajectories and jets of matter fly, knifesharp rents are torn, whites flame and blacks burst, all implying the swift passage of time, and yet there is a curious motionlessness or, better, an odd sense of time *not* passing in the work. Space, too, doesn't seem to operate in the classic push-pull, positive-negative, yin-yang manner of post Abstract Expressionist abstraction. Space is active — the whole of each painting is full of energies in action — but it is not predictable in the way we have come to expect it to be since Abstract Expressionism. The best way to describe it may be to use the words of a spiritual illuminant whose sensations upon experiencing a revelatory vision uncannily echo one's own in front of Lisa Bradley's new paintings:

There was a very decided and peculiar feeling across the brow above the eyes, as of tension gone, a feeling of *more room*. That is the physical sensation. The mental is a sense of *majesty*, of serenity... Another very decided and peculiar effect followed — that of being *centred*, or of being *a centre*. It was as if surrounding me and touching me on all sides were the softest, downiest pillows. Lean in whatever direction I might there they were. A pillow or pillows which fitted *every tired spot*, so that though I was distinctly conscious of that lightest touch there was not the least resistance or obstruction to movement, and yet the support was as permanent and solid as the universe. It was "the everlasting arms."²

The space in Lisa Bradley's paintings is too amorphous to conform in a precise way to that of Abstract Expressionism, but her way of painting does. Working completely without preconceptions in a de-controlled state of mental regulation, she makes her marks on the canvas and reacts to them intuitively, trusting her ability to be in harmony with her self. At times of perfect balance she feels she can't go wrong. She is in a mystical state of simply knowing that everything she's doing is as it should be, that it is, as she puts it, "a complete reflection of one's soul." Being in this state, which is known in the sports world as "being in the zone," reflects back to Jackson Pollock's statement about not being aware of what he

was doing when he was “in” his painting, but that there was an “easy give and take,” except when he lost contact with the painting.

As with Lisa Bradley’s body of work as a whole, which appears to be an unchanging continuity but is actually in constant flux, each separate painting proffers a new resolution to the paradox of life itself, in which time’s swift passage is but a still multi-milli-second in the history of the universe. This paradox might be metaphorically pictured as the eye of a storm. In a fascinating way a recent description of that meteorological phenomenon also describes the sensation of projecting oneself mentally inside one of Bradley’s new paintings:

The storm was right on the ground, and had more *black energy* than any he had ever seen. The gust front rolled over them. Under the base, he could see a huge lowering with a curtain cloud going into it. It boiled like a lava lamp, great gobs of cloud going up and down.

A bolt of lightning hit the next ridge. He heard what sounded like a rattle of sash weights, an enormous window being thrown up. Blue balls rolled across the ground. They were under the base [in a storm cellar without a door]. The air was black, the ground covered with [huge] glowing hailstones. The wind was really blowing now. On the next ridge, he saw vortices, little spindles of dust leap up, appearing and disappearing. The funnel built down. The wind was blowing ...

Then all was silence, except for a thudding sound, the beating of his heart. He opened his eyes. Blue light fell on everything. He looked through the door and saw something outside that hadn’t been there before. A brown curtain just above the cedars, rippling smoothly up and down. With a shock he realized it was the rim of the funnel, shooting past at incredible speed, and they were inside of it.

He looked up. He looked up and up, into something huge and complicated and blue. Some kind of blue machinery in motion... At the very top there was a pointed cloud of blue light, like the pale blue flame at the heart of a gas flame. Lightning was playing up and down the walls, copper blue and green. The cloud jumped up and down with each flash. With the brightest one it jumped down and touched him. He saw the flash behind his eyes, felt electricity on his tongue. It [the cloud] was beautifully smooth and coherent. This ripple moved down the funnel until it reached the bottom-most funnel, the one surrounding him. Then it moved over... For a moment there was darkness, then daylight burst in blinding him.³

© April Kingsley

¹ P.D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought. A Key to the Enigmas of the World*, trans. from the 2nd edition (1916) by Claude Bragdon and Nicholas Bessaraboff, 2nd American edition, revised (New York: Random House, Inc., 1970), p. 301.

² Richard Maurice Bucke, M.D., “The case of C.M.C. in Her Own Words,” *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study of the Evolution of the Human Mind* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, Inc., 1961), p. 272.

³ William Hauptman, *The Storm Season* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 297-98.