

To the Dreamy Otherworld: A Conversation with Lauren Clay



At Picture Theory, New York, Lauren Clay's exhibition titled Love Feast indulges viewers in a dreamland within reach—but somewhat hazy still, with marshmallow-like surfaces and purple-blue pastels. In this conversation, the artist discusses the inspirations behind this unique worldbuilding endeavor that completely transforms the gallery space.



JW: The first thing that drew my attention was the illusion of three-dimensionality in these wallpapers and sculptural pieces—trompe l’oeil from every angle. Can you speak more about how you navigate dimensionality and the ‘trickery of the eye’?

LC: I have both a BFA and MFA in painting, but even early on, I began leaning toward sculpture. I’ve always thought about painting as a physical object that exists in space. I first began marbling paper for a series of sculptures, but soon after that series, I would enlarge and digitally print small sections of the marbled paper and install them as wallpaper. I became interested in the way the enlarged marbling pattern distorted the wall and its surrounding architecture. This process also allowed me to play with some fundamental tools in painting, like perspectival lines, to shift the viewer’s understanding of the space. In a way, my work has always alluded to architecture and incorporated different elements of illusion. In painting, we talk a lot about creating a window for the viewer. It’s something that

happens literally in my work, with all the portals—windows and doorways, which give the viewer an impulse to enter an unseen space.

JW: We say that the painting is a window. But it's often a window onto something else, but your portals don't show what's going on inside.

LC: I like creating a space where the viewer feels like they are standing on a threshold. That liminal space between tangible reality and what lies beyond—or maybe the supernatural. My work has a lot of spiritual themes and references. The sense of being on the edge of something, but unable to see past the threshold is quite common in a lot of spiritual practices. This worldbuilding reverberates the sentiment that the world we are in right now is not the only realm—this tangible reality is fleeting and temporary, but existence continues beyond this world.

JW: What inspired this fascination with the otherworldly?

LC: I'm really interested in dream analysis. I've been studying my dreams and keeping track of them for the past six years. I work with someone at the C. G. Jung Institute, and it's been a fascinating process. A lot of my dreams incorporate architecture in various ways. In an important early dream of Carl Jung, he describes finding himself on the top floor of a house. As he descends the levels of the house, the furnishings get older and older. On the top floor, they were Rococo, then he descends a level and the furnishings were medieval, and then Roman, and then, the very bottom level is a cave. He talks about this house as a symbol of the human psyche. I'm interested in how architecture can be psychological or somehow symbolic of the mind.



JW: How does your work adapt to different gallery spaces (i.e. white cube vs more varied architecture)?

LC: I love white cube galleries, but in a space like Picture Theory, the space is a little quirky with small features I can play off of. Actually, the most challenging part of this Picture Theory installation was that one long wall because you see the entire wall all at once, but I wanted to let the viewers have the experience of making new discoveries as they travel through space.

When planning a show, the first thing I usually do is make a site visit to the space. I take really detailed measurements and then make a scaled model of the gallery space. Then I spend a long time studying the model and thinking about how the viewer travels through the space, and what they see via different vantage points. I'm almost always creating a new,

unique piece for the specific space, making wallpaper that is precisely created for the wall. Someone the other day used the word “bespoke,” which I thought was an interesting way of describing the process.

JW: How did the title of the exhibition, Love Feast, come about?

LC: In Ancient Greece, there are several different words for different types of love. For instance, *érōs* is a romantic kind of love, while *philia* is more like friendship. *Agápē* refers to the love between God and man. It was used by people as early as Homer and was adopted by early Christians. I think it’s really interesting because we talk about love a lot in our culture, but there’s a very specific version of this sentiment with a connotation of the supernatural and the eternal.



JW: Do your works represent specific dreams?

LC: They are more about evoking the feeling of discovering something in a dream. They don't usually reference specific dreams. On that note, there are a lot of famous dreams that reference architecture, the most famous one being Jacob's Ladder, on which a lot of artworks are based. For example, William Blake's 1805 painting of Jacob's Ladder is one of my favorites. Other artists have also used this image of a vertical ladder or stairway... Hilma af Klint spoke about her spiral temple. Martin Puryear made a ladder titled Ladder for Booker T. Washington. And Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang made the Sky Ladder ... The list goes on. It's cool to see these architectural imaginations rendered in art forms.

JW: What inspires you?

LC: I look at a lot of ancient art—carvings, decorative arts, relief sculptures, ancient Egyptian art, classical Greek and Roman sites. Not too long ago, a site called Göbekli Tepe was discovered in Turkey. It's thought to be more than 10,000 years old, which predates many other ancient monolithic sites like Stonehenge. I draw a lot of inspiration from all of them, although I'm not really directly referencing them. I love Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, Franz West, Bernini ... some modernist and post-modernist architects too. It's very broad, and I truly just love art.

The interview was edited and condensed for clarity.

Lauren Clay: Love Feast is on view from May 31 to July 27, 2024, at Picture Theory, 548 W 28th Street, Suite 238, New York.

—XUEZHU JENNY WANG