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## **Lucas Reiner's Los Angeles Trees**

Edge of frame—  
—no horizon line.  
Tree wants to take root  
In the world—in the mind  
Of the viewer.

—Lucas Reiner, September 2002

How can one best describe these paintings? How best interpret them? Allow them to “take root in the mind of the viewer”! Imagine a room in which these wonderful paintings in oil and wax line the walls like trees on a boulevard. We stroll past and linger, looking at and experiencing their presence. How sensitively and sensually they are painted. In terms of their subject, brushwork, color, and light, they are reminiscent of Old Masters and yet are anything but traditional landscape painting. Tree for tree, individually, like portraits, removed from their surroundings: without soil and without horizon. They grow out of the lower edge of the painting and fill nearly the entire canvas. They spread their branches into a plane of many grays that also include other colors: blue, violet, pink, modeled matte and velvety. In the repetition of the composition an all but inexhaustible variety of colors and forms unfolds. Slowness and care, thought and emotion are inscribed in these paintings. The pathos of the history of painting and something very contemporary merge. Their beauty, grace and melancholy are seductive. “The brushwork, lines and contours are careful and delicate, drawing on the sheer love for painterly tradition and accomplishment as if the brazen iconographic humor of Guston were somehow transmuted back through the strategies of Italian Renaissance,” wrote Fred Dewey in 2004. Let’s accept their invitation to observe them and contemplate them attentively.

Lucas Reiner’s paintings communicate immediately through the aesthetic pleasure of painting and through their subject: the tree. We recognize it as an object in the real world and, observing and comprehending, we add what is absent: the city. Anyone who knows Los

Angeles will have filled in, in his or her imagination, the “voids” of the painting. The trees are crooked, mistreated, strangely trimmed, pruned into shape by the traffic, grazed by trucks, cut back to clear the view of the billboards, alienated by signs, Christmas decorations or graffiti. Fragile yet tenacious, vying for space: sideways against the wall of the building, upward against the power lines. That is the story this cycle seems to tell - -- of the relationship of people to creation, of the domestication of nature by civilization, of survival in an urban context.

Trees are often natural manifestations of our everyday world. In an unpublished lecture, Lucas Reiner wrote how, for years, he passed by countless trees and never saw them. Then he described how, in 2001, his eyes were opened on a trip through Michigan, where “amazing trees in the woods . . . captured my attention. I felt for the first time the power of nature without man. An unmanicured landscape.” Back in Los Angeles he saw what he had never perceived before. The city of images passes by him in his car like a film; when he sees a tree he likes, he stops and makes small drawings in his sketchbook and took photographs.

In a sudden obsession, he began to “adopt” trees, to “visit” them, and to take an interest in their history. Most of them, incidentally, are not native to California. They have been imported to Los Angeles from around the entire world. Reiner sees them as “people”. “I started to see the trees all over the city as portraits. Their shapes were the result of their interaction with the needs of civilization, of the environment. And I thought, that’s similar to how we are. We are marked by civilization. So I’ll paint them as portraits.” Each of them has its own face and its own character: introverted, sensitive, depressive, airily cheerful, proud, deformed, eccentric, defiant.

As individual and unique as each painting may be, it also joins with the others to form a conceptually rigorous series. This complex of works seems like a collection of variations using a standard format and procedure. Initially all the paintings had the same format: fourteen by twelve inches. The “figure” extends from the lower edge of the painting nearly to the upper one, thus filling the entire canvas, which always has a background in shades of gray.

The German photographer Karl Blossfeldt (1865-1932) may come to mind, and it would be fascinating to see Lucas Reiner’s *Trees* next to Blossfeldt’s pictures of plants, taken over more than three decades with the same camera and in the same style. His *Urformen der Kunst*

(Archetypes of Art) was a serial work whose publication in 1928 caused a sensation. "Whereas Blossfeldt magnified the plant to fill the frame and placed it in front of a neutral sheet of cardboard," comments Lucas Reiner, "I have reduced the tree, leaving space around it and placed it within a grayish background reminiscent of the polluted Los Angeles sky. "

Lucas Reiner is a painter. Observing, drawing, photographing, filming—all these things are sources and materials that inspire him. However, the topic is painting. What can it achieve? And what can the artist add to what already exists? For the tree in itself is not an unusual theme in the history of art. It is less about the phenomenology of the tree than about the possibilities of painting.

After his minimalist paintings of the 1990s—in which only occasional letters point to the "cultural landscape" —reduction being a reaction against the daily flood of images -Reiner is now bringing the object back into his painting. His "trees" are rooted in reality, and yet at the same time they are remote, even though the titles of the works locate them precisely and indicate their provenance: *On Ocean Park Boulevard*, *On Packard Street*, *Western Avenue*, *On Canyon Drive* ... They are also not copies from photographs like those of Gerhard Richter, whose photographs collected in his *Atlas* represent the store of images for his paintings. Reiner insists on the integrity of his photographs and on the "liberation" of his painting from its source. More and more he breaks away from the "actual" conditions. He postulates: "I can take liberties." One tree is joined by a second; an ensemble of four results; the formats grow. In the process, the "object" that is spread over the canvas remains almost the same size within the space that is expanding around it. Later it abandons its position on the lower edge of the painting and begins to float, as in *On Alameda Ave. #1*)- a "tree that in exile." The colors of the background become more powerful, luminous, even radiant orange and bright red. "I would like the painting to allow space not only for what has been eliminated, but also for what is yet to come, and, of course, for the viewers themselves."

In the Project Room at Roberts & Tilton Gallery in Los Angeles in 2002 painting after painting in the same format were lined the walls. At Claudia Gian Ferrari Arte Contemporanea in Milan two years later, the dimensions of the works varied, and the gaze out the window enticingly drew nature into the exhibition. At Pocket Utopia in Brooklyn in 2007, the artist supplemented the paintings for the first time with drawings, photographs,

and film to create an installation. The use of various media in close proximity is similarly planned for the exhibition at the Galerie Biedermann in Munich. When seen together with other media, the special light and uniqueness of the painting become apparent. "The painting is not the end, it points to something else, it broadens out," Lucas Reiner says. Each painting is like balsam for the soul – a "refuge and shelter."

Perhaps the paintings touch us inwardly because their subject opens up a wealth of associations that feed on diverse symbolic references of countless cultures and religions. The tree is a universal symbol of the sacred; the Tree of Life planted in paradise, the vertical, symbol of growth, of constant renewal, of victory over death; the tree that stands tall in freedom, that grows up to the heavens yet is rooted in the earth, the "world tree" as an image of the cosmos. The Christian cross, the wood of death, which becomes the symbol of resurrection, the sign of salvation. The appearance of this archetype in our dreams interprets the dream symbolism as a sign of the soul's maturing process, and the faith in a relationship between human beings and trees is deeply rooted.

Western painting is full of trees, and with an eye made keener by the *Los Angeles Trees*, we can visualize them immediately: growing out of the painting, in flower or in fruit, or as stumps from which new shoots grow – the Tree of Knowledge, the Fall, the wooden cross, the apocalyptic Tree of Life; the apple tree with ripe fruit as symbol of Christ or a reminder of the *Song of Songs*: "As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons." The tree is inscribed in our collective memory, and even today its power to fascinate remains unbroken in recent painting and in contemporary photography: we need only think of Lee Friedlander, Jitka Hanzlová's *Forest*, Michael Kenna's *Hokkaido* series, and many others. Lucas Reiner's paintings offer "narrative" and "symbol" and are at the same time non-representational. Just as the figurative paintings of Giorgio Morandi, whom he admires, are not about merely depicting vessels, so Sean Scully's definitive abstract works have narrative structures when they evoke associations with figures and landscapes, windows and mirrors, or religious forms and themes such as altars or the Resurrection. Is de Kooning's *Tree in Naples* of 1960, that we stumble across in the MoMA in New York, purely abstract or a figurative work? "Abstract—figurative: it is not a battle anymore. It is about life, it is about humanity!" Reiner maintains.

Reiner's oeuvre combines the European tradition of painting—the pathos of history, the desire for an emotional aura and poetry—and American art movements such as Minimalism. Likewise, the artist's origins reflect the merging of these two continents: His paternal grandfather, a watchmaker, who once produced a precious timepiece for Emperor Franz Joseph, came from present-day Chernivtsi, formerly in Romania, now part of the Ukraine. Together with his wife he emigrated to New York after the turn of the twentieth century, where Lucas Reiner's father, Carl, the actor, author and director, was born. His mother, Estelle, a painter and a singer, is also from New York. Lucas was born in Los Angeles and grew up in the world of film and the arts—his brother, Rob, is a director, too, and his sister Annie, a psychoanalyst and poet. Lucas studied in both continents: first in New York and then in Paris- and studied in New York and Paris.

Although Reiner has more recently produced a new group of works, the *Firework Paintings*, the tree could stay rooted in his oeuvre for some time to come. He is now exploring using the tree in a cycle of paintings called *Stations of the Cross* for St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Washington D.C. Surely several other works with trees may well emerge following his study of Renaissance painting on recent trips to Italy. As Reiner himself has confirmed: "Within the limitations of a subject you can find the infinite which enables you to keep going."

And how right the artist Lawrence Carroll was, when he first introduced his friend Lucas with the words: "He is a terrific painter!"

#### **Note**

The Lucas Reiner quotations are taken from his lecture "At Farmlab" (November 2007) and from conversations with the author in Munich (2004/ 2007), New York (October 2007), Venice (February 2008), and Los Angeles (April 2008).