

CALIDA RAWLES

*A Certain Oblivion*

November 9 – December 16, 2023

New York



Calida Rawles, *And So It Be*, 2023 (detail)

Lehmann Maupin presents *A Certain Oblivion*, an exhibition of new paintings by Los Angeles-based artist Calida Rawles. This is her first major solo exhibition in New York following an In Focus exhibition with the gallery in 2021. Featuring Rawles' most monumentally scaled works to date, *A Certain Oblivion* celebrates hope as an expression of our shared humanity in the face of dark times. The power of Rawles' proposition is embodied in her subjects: young women and girls who float and tread-alone and in community-in uncertain waters. They are the next generation, women whose graceful determination to transcend the riptides of contemporary American life belies the effort required to keep their heads above water. Rawles' newest body of work reminds us that their triumph is our salvation.

Water is an element of paradox: placid and turbulent, navigable and unwieldy, transparent and unknowable, clarifying and obscuring. Throughout Rawles' practice, water's permeability offers a structure for contending with the past while looking toward the future. She has drawn inspiration from water memory theory, the idea that water absorbs physical and spiritual traces of that which passes through it. In her work, water retains its varied and charged associations across time and place. These are signaled in a variety of subtle shapes in the ripples and reflections that dapple each painting's surface. Almost imperceptible, these forms allude to recent events in our nation's assault on the rights of women. Troubling the exquisite beauty of crystalline swells, Rawles' textured references remind us of the undertow that threatens to drag us down if we do not push back. Rising above it all, Rawles' tenderly painted figures become everywomen—daughters of an upward movement powered by hope and enacted with grace.

In visually arresting scenes of meditative transcendence, Rawles skillfully reclaims water as a reparative space, creating paintings that simultaneously offer representation and refuge. The exhibition moves from high-toned pictures of piercing clarity to canvasses of sensuous darkness. Where at first the human figure presses close to the surface of the water in scenes of fully

articulated movement, Rawles' subjects eventually embrace the cover of darkness. In *Like Other Gods with Ancient Rage* (2023), the theme culminates in a swirl of bodies luxuriating in twilit foam. Blues turn black and darkness becomes a refuge. Even as water bears traces of the seemingly imperceptible obstacles that so often shape female experience, it is nevertheless transformed into a space for recuperation in Rawles' work. Embodying lessons of the past, Rawles' women save their future from those who desire to control it by finding solace in the shadows.

*A Certain Oblivion* mines the productive tension between visibility and obscurity. Often declining to immediately reveal her subjects to the viewer, Rawles' paintings offer recuperative alternatives to the regimes of hypervisibility and surveillance to which women's bodies have so often been subjected. Instead, ripples, waves, and reflected light abstract and multiply the human form, attesting to the fact that water both reveals and distorts. Nighttime scenes such as *And So It Be* (2023) presents a woman shrouded in darkness. Here, only the figure's outstretched palms and a hint of her shoulder blade catch the light, while the rest of her body is suggested only by ripples. Figures such as these resist immediate legibility, dissolving into splashes of color and whorls of shadow that delight but confound the eye.

In Rawles' most recent work, obscurity presents both an ethical position and a technical challenge. When painting her darkest canvases, elements of the composition remained partially obscured even to the artist due to the variable nature of acrylic paint, which dries darker than it appears when wet. Achieving the subtle gradations of greens and blacks meant effectively painting blind. *A Certain Oblivion* suggests that, much like the experience of floating in water, painting itself occasionally necessitates giving up control. As she contends with the task of representation, Rawles takes her cues from water, embracing its unknowable depths, its slippery evasiveness, its powerful fluidity—and ultimately, its irrepressible vitality.

The paintings of Calida Rawles (b. 1976, Wilmington, DE; lives and works in Los Angeles, CA) merge hyper-realism with poetic abstraction. Situating her subjects in dynamic spaces, her recent work employs water as a vital, organic, multifaceted material, and historically charged space. Ranging from buoyant and ebullient to submerged and mysterious, Black bodies float in exquisitely rendered submarine landscapes of bubbles, ripples, refracted light and expanses of blue. For Rawles, water signifies both physical and spiritual healing as well as historical trauma and racial exclusion. She uses this complicated duality as a means to envision a new space for Black healing, and to reimagine her subjects beyond racialized tropes. Enhancing the seductive nature of water, the work tempers heavier subjects with aquatic serenity and geographic and temporal ambiguities, inviting multiple readings. Embedded in her titles and topographical notations in the compositions, Rawles' canvases represent an expansive vision of strength and tranquility during today's turbulent times, while insisting on the triumph of humanity.

Rawles' most recent body of work reimagines the ancient story of Lilith, Adam's first wife, who was demonized for refusing to submit to him. Rawles expands the Lilith legacy and repositions her from a malevolent spirit at the antithesis of womanhood to a sovereign being who drifts to the surface of uncertain waters, becoming a source of inspired rebellion. Influenced by contemporary Black female writers and their approaches to intersectionality, Rawles depicts Black women and girls cloaked in white gowns floating in a realm of calmness and spiritual relief from their identity politics and its undercurrent of microaggressions, colorism, and generational trauma. With closed eyes and poise, her subjects radiate in the refracted lights of the iridescent blues waters. Harboring moments of leisure and delight, Rawles honors the allegorical potential and otherworldliness of water to pursue a place of kinship, belonging, and sisterhood.

Rawles received a B.A. from Spelman College, Atlanta, GA (1998) and an M.A. from New York University, New York, NY (2000). Solo exhibitions of her work have been organized at Lehmann Maupin, New York, NY (2021); Various Small Fires, Los Angeles, CA (2020); and Standard Vision, Los Angeles, CA (2020). Her work has been featured in numerous group exhibitions including *Generation\**. Jugend trotz(t) Krise, Kunsthalle Bremen, Bremen, Germany (2023); *Rose in the Concrete*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA (2023); *12th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art*, Berlin, Germany (2022); *Black American Portraits*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los

Angeles, CA (2021), Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, GA (2023); *A Shared Body*, FSU Museum of Fine Arts, Tallahassee, FL (2021); *View From Here*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA (2020); *Art Finds a Way*, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL (2020); *Visions in Light*, Windows on the Wallis, Beverly Hills, CA (2020); *Presence*, Fullerton College Art Gallery, Fullerton, CA (2019); *With Liberty and Justice for Some*, Walter Maciel Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (2017); *Sanctuary City: With Liberty and Justice for Some*, San Francisco Arts Commission, San Francisco, CA (2017); LACMA Inglewood + Film Lab, Inglewood, CA (2014); and *Living off Experience*, Rush Arts Gallery, New York, NY (2002). Rawles created the cover art for Ta-Nehisi Coates's debut novel, "The Water Dancer," and her work is in numerous public and private collections, including Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles, CA; Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL; Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, GA; and Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY.



Portrait by Marten Elder.

**LEHMANN MAUPIN**

Rachel Lehmann and David Maupin co-founded Lehmann Maupin in 1996 in New York. Since Inception, Lehmann Maupin has served as a leading contemporary art gallery with locations in the U.S., Europe, and Asia. For over 25 years, Lehmann Maupin has been instrumental in introducing international artists in new geographies and building long-lasting curatorial relationships. Known for championing diverse voices, the gallery's program proudly features artists whose work challenges notions of identity, and shapes international culture. Today, the gallery has locations in New York, Hong Kong, Seoul and London, as well as a team in mainland China. In the past year with growing opportunities in new markets, the gallery has opened seasonal spaces in Aspen, Palm Beach, Taipei, and Beijing.

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