

LISSON GALLERY

Press Release

Sarah Cunningham: *Flight Paths*

June 20 – August 24, 2024

1037 N. Sycamore Avenue, Los Angeles

Press preview: Wednesday, June 19, 11am

“I imagine myself in flight when I am painting, scanning over the surface, searching for places to deep dive, touch down or lift off. The paintings are journeys between the space of my body and the space of the outside.”

For her first solo show with Lisson Gallery in Los Angeles, the British artist Sarah Cunningham presents a new body of work entitled *Flight Paths*. Named after a diptych that seemingly defies gravity, the gallery presentation captures this young painter’s soaring, spontaneous gestures in full flow. In the two panels of *Flight Path* (all works 2024) and throughout this exhibition, Cunningham explores aerial and bodily movements, flipping directions and orientations until reaching that moment when verticality and horizontality shift or tilt beyond recognition – when up becomes down, or left suddenly turns right.

The direction of travel in these works fluctuates between sweeping side-to-side brushstrokes, suggesting the lateral arcing of airplane contrails, and top-to-bottom marks that either open up the canvases to the sky, in *Clouds Closed for Target Practice* for example, or delve down into the ocean, in the submarine composition, *Choral Chorus*. The artist’s frenetic and free movement of paint speaks not only to her constant, performative process – employing both time and movement in pursuit of a new formlessness in painting – but also to her material experimentation – removing paint with rags, holding two brushes in each hand at the same time, or even approaching the picture plane from one side when working on the surface. Cunningham is also known to rotate and even reverse her paintings, often making her oversized pictures on the floor.

There are other boundaries and pathways within the exhibition, from the first few paintings representing morning light or the dawn of the day, on to the second half of the show, which moves towards dusk and nighttime. While this could represent the passage of time that many of these works go through – with many of them only slowly progressing from clean canvas to final picture over the course of months or even years – the diurnal passage from day to night is fundamental to Cunningham’s practice. Due to the long, late and strange hours that she tends to work, she shows remarkable sensitivity to the fluctuation of light effects, ranging from the golden tones of paintings such as *Sunrise with Spirits* or *Sunrise with Birdsong*, through to the crepuscular, autumnal hues of *The Deepest Hour*. This latter diptych, in particular, takes the exhibition firmly from day to night and into outer space, the artist tracking shifts in the solar system.

A further perspective on Cunningham’s intense painterly process and preferred method of ‘taking flight’ is through spiritual release, akin to the shamanistic ‘soul flying’ documented in ancient accounts of ascension or religious fervor (often brought on by ritual prayer or hallucinogenic means). In works such as *Ghosts in the Throat*, Cunningham’s own visions – perhaps assisted by her self-imposed sleep deprivation and protracted painting sessions – allow her to transition towards a higher, dreamlike state, which she describes in a passage about painting this work: “As I continue to apply paint, there is an uprising of tiny, spinning ghost-like figures before my eyes. They were floating above the painting they had travelled out of, the thing they had so long and relentlessly hidden within. Deep down, I knew that these ghosts would be unrecognizable to most, they would be impossible to untangle from the paintings’ splatters and earthy, worn-down clusters. Yet I could see them, hanging onto the last ray of light, weaving together, set swaying against a cotton sky.” It is in this feverish moment when she can access both inner and outer worlds, summoning the psyche and the landscape simultaneously, combining aerial views with what is hidden below.

About the artist

Sarah Cunningham seeks out the essential and the alive through her imaginary wildernesses and fluid forestscapes. She constructs kaleidoscopic environments and imagined forest clearings from multiple layers of radiating bursts of light, line and colour. Cunningham builds up complex spatial structures through gestural marks, in a process of continual obliteration and overpainting, until hidden worlds and pastures appear. Part abstract experimentation, part spiritual journey, every painting at some level represents the intuitive and unspoken connection between nature and humankind, with the artist acting as a conduit for our continuing coexistence and paying homage to the ancient practices dedicated to this mutual understanding. The resulting works exist forever in the act of making and becoming, as if in constant flux, with the canopied compositions seemingly being pulled or carved from each canvas in front of the viewer. Cunningham draws from a multitude of literary, art historical and personal references, adopting and dissolving these situations through vivid, expressionistic mark making. An improvisatory approach to materials also influences every expressionistic sweep and crystalline composition she makes, whether using cloth to drag and remove paint or by adding branches and other wooden extensions to brushes as a means to extend or alter her arm's length. Her unusual, nocturnal practice of working through the night further estranges her limbs and thoughts from any systematic, painterly movements, resulting in works that briefly dwell in darkness only to culminate in the arrival of the dawn chorus.

Cunningham was born in Nottingham in 1993 and lives and works in London. She received an MA in Painting from Royal College of Art in 2022. Her work has been included in numerous exhibitions in Aspen, Berlin, Los Angeles, New York and Vancouver at Almine Rech, Max Hetzler and the CICA Vancouver among others. She is the recipient of the Ali H. Alkazzi Scholarship Award (2019) and the Djanogly Art Award (2019).

About Lisson Gallery

Lisson Gallery is one of the most influential and longest-running international contemporary art galleries in the world. Today the gallery supports and promotes the work of more than 70 international artists across spaces in London, New York, Los Angeles, Shanghai and Beijing. Established in 1967 by Nicholas Logsdail, Lisson Gallery pioneered the early careers of important Minimal and Conceptual artists such as Art & Language, Carl Andre, Daniel Buren, Donald Judd, John Latham, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long and Robert Ryman among many others. It still works with many of these artists and others of that generation, from Carmen Herrera and Olga de Amaral to Hélio Oiticica and Lee Ufan. In its second decade the gallery introduced significant British sculptors to the public for the first time, including Tony Cragg, Richard Deacon, Anish Kapoor, Shirazeh Houshiary and Julian Opie. Since 2000, the gallery has gone on to represent many more leading international artists such as Marina Abramović, Ai Weiwei, John Akomfrah, Liu Xiaodong, Otobong Nkanga, Pedro Reyes, Sean Scully, Hiroshi Sugimoto and Wael Shawky. It is also responsible for raising the international profile of a younger generation of artists including Dana Awartani, Cory Arcangel, Garrett Bradley, Ryan Gander, Josh Kline, Hugh Hayden, Haroon Mirza, Laure Prouvost and Cheyney Thompson.

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