

Calida Rawles

This Time Before Tomorrow

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No.9 Cork Street, London



Calida Rawles, *When Time Carries*, 2025

In her first solo exhibition in London, *This Time Before Tomorrow*, internationally recognized painter Calida Rawles presents a new body of work that explores cycles of time and human experience. In her signature, hyperrealist paintings, serenely-composed figures wade and float in water. The liquid element, for Rawles, is a charged substance that reflects and refracts issues of race, power, and access. Often dressed in solid-colored garments that fold and billow in response to water's force and movement, her figures flourish in imperceptible moments of submersion and release. Alternately, the face acts as a window into the subject's soul. In this new suite of six paintings, water is a container for the ebbs and flows that define contemporary global life. The detailed faces typical of Rawles are absent, and the moments of suspension that have become hallmarks of the artist's work take on deeper meaning. *This Time Before Tomorrow* comes on the heels of Rawles' first solo museum exhibition, *Away with the Tides*, which debuted at the Pérez Art Museum Miami in late 2024 before traveling to the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in 2025, as well as her inclusion in the 12th Berlin Biennale in 2022.

In *This Time Before Tomorrow*, there are no identifiable figures and time does not travel in one direction. Broken, disjointed, murky, upside-down bodies represent the feeling of being knocked off one's axis, and hyperrealist representation dissolves into fabulism. The paintings picture the liquid and solid contours of the "in-between," muddying the boundaries between the mundane and the extraordinary by enfolding fantastical, supernatural elements into everyday life. Where and how do we locate ourselves and each other in times of unease and upheaval? What are the consequences of totalizing neglect and frenzy? How much is too much? Rawles answers these questions with play and speculation. Her new works dive more deeply into color theory, asserting her expertise as a colorist; her experiments with both color and chiaroscuro define the buoyancy and stagnation that imbibe the bodies that float, sink, and fold into one another. Strong contrasts of dark and light color, largely within a tertiary palette, create atmospheric volume, depth, and drama. Gestural brushstrokes and depictions of movement mirror states of matter as well as liquid and solid states of being. Blurring the line between hyperrealist figuration and surrealist abstraction, the darkness of the palette personifies the weight of the present while the veil of the water becomes a prism and conduit for other worlds and galaxies.

Reference images of fire, lungs, a Bodhi tree, a living snake plant, and other natural elements inform the artist's conceptual and formal thinking. In *All is One* (2025), twin subjects turn inward to face each other at the center of the canvas. Rather than a mirror image, the two sides fuse into one another. The artist's daughter served as the model for the painting, and resemblance—twin subjects, likeness, similitude, generational transfer, and the past facing the present—forms its core. All

four elements are present—fire, earth, water, air—gesturing toward balance. And yet, this is not a picture of symmetry. The subject on the right is slightly higher than its twin, while two otherworldly bubbles draw the eye into another space and time punctuated by flames, lung tissue, tree branches, and shadows.

Abstraction and figuration blend and blur, just as the flesh of Rawles' subjects diffuse into each other and into aquatic expanses of primordial liquid. Aspects from philosophy texts, speculative fiction novels, ancient and indigenous mythologies, and Black feminist poetry collections and memoirs she read while preparing for the show—including the texts *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, *Survival Is a Promise*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Alchemist*—are also present. What is the artist's role in moments of crisis? In *When Time Carries* (2025), the certainty of time, location, and direction dissolve. Clarity and resolution give way to intermission and surrender as her subject appears to submit to water's ability to hold, carry, and resist. Is the body floating or drowning? Ripples and bubbles obscure the figure's face, camouflaging and hiding its identity and actions as it interacts with and is changed by its environment.

Bubbles, shadows, and stars recur in *This Time Before Tomorrow* as symbols of energy's transformative potential. Both bubbles and stars are composed of gas. The result of nuclear fusion, air bubbles in this new suite of paintings double as stars and planets on the brink of transformation—an alternate state of matter and being. Once fully formed, a star releases excess fuel to create new stars. Here, stored energy and exhaustion become life forces that catalyze new entities constituted by movement, energy renewal, and subject-object relations that meet disequilibrium and disorientation with lightness and effervescence. Asymmetrical bodies of flesh, water, and gas become ciphers for power, weariness, and hope, while natural elements and processes accumulate energy waiting to be released and recycled.

Beyond water's function as a vital force and historically charged site of memory, Rawles' choices in color and pose, as well as how she renders space and the environment, are connected to broader questions of race, representation, and ethics within art history and everyday life. Each artwork is based on a photograph or series of photographs that the artist takes herself, and the tertiary colors of her palate signify the liminal space of transformation and existential angst that her figures tread. This alchemical focus on change, disillusionment, and the potential for renewal in *This Time Before Tomorrow* is a blueprint for the future. Reflection thus emerges not only as a surface element but also as a character in its own right and a method of making. At a time when chaos of all types—political, economic, environmental—proliferates, Rawles' new paintings prompt viewers to embrace the threshold between past and present as well as the feeling of being in transition. What results is a vibrant wellspring for inner and outer worldmaking.

Calida Rawles (b. 1976, Wilmington, DE; lives and works in Los Angeles, CA) is known for her paintings that merge hyperrealism with poetic abstraction. Situating her subjects in dynamic spaces, her work employs water as a vital, organic, multifaceted material and as a historically charged space. At times buoyant and ebullient or submerged and mysterious, Black bodies float in exquisitely rendered submarine landscapes of bubbles, ripples, refracted light, and expanses of blue. For Rawles, water signifies 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, reimagining her subjects beyond racialized tropes and insisting on the strength of humanity.

In her 2019–20 breakthrough body of work, Rawles 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. In late 2024, Rawles' first solo museum exhibition *Away with the Tides* debuted at the Pérez Art Museum Miami. The show traveled to the Memphis Brooks Art Museum in 2025; from there, it will travel to Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens in Jacksonville, FL and Spelman College in Atlanta, GA. To create this body of work, Rawles partnered with residents of the Overtown neighborhood in Miami—a historically Black community that has experienced widespread gentrification and displacement. In a series of large-scale portraits, which feature Overtown's residents immersed in water to varied degrees, Rawles seeks to depict the history of Miami from her subjects' perspective. Ranging from a 10-month-old baby to senior citizens, these portraits provide representation for those who call Overtown home. At the same time, the works capture a significant generational shift, giving shape to an American experience that is often overlooked.

Rawles' most recent (2025) paintings explore the human experience, cycles of time, and the transformative nature of identity. As she continues to push the boundaries between hyperrealist figuration and surrealist abstraction, she dives more deeply into color theory, asserting her expertise as a colorist. While watery environments remain constant, detailed faces are absent, moments of suspension take on deeper meaning, and experiments with both color and chiaroscuro

define the buoyancy and stagnation that imbibe the bodies that float, sink, and fold into one another. True to form, these choices in color, subjectivity, and rendering of space are connected to broader questions of race, representation, and ethics within both art history and everyday life. Each artwork is based on a photograph or series of photographs that the artist takes herself, and the tertiary colors of her palate signify the liminal space of transformation and existential angst that her figures tread. This alchemical focus on change, disillusionment, and the potential for renewal becomes a blueprint for the future, and reflection thus emerges as a method of both art making and of understanding the sociopolitical conditions that color contemporary life.



Photo by Bethany Mollenkof

**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 permanent locations in New York, Seoul, and London, as well as team members throughout Asia and Europe.

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