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EARTH AND WORLD IN JAMES LAHEY'S INDEX ABSTRACTIONS

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World and earth are always intrinsically and essentially in conflict, belligerent by nature. Only as such do they enter into the conflict of clearing and concealing. Earth juts through the world and world grounds itself on the earth only so far as truth happens as the primal conflict between clearing and concealing.

—Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*

Not every work of art resonates with earth-world strife the way Heidegger suggests it ought to do, but the work of James Lahey presents vivid examples of how this “belligerence” might lie at the heart of artistic truth. Traditional in method, orthodox in technique, and yet powerfully unstable in meaning, Lahey’s paintings, especially as they have progressed from figurative to abstract, offer a series of insights on representation, image, proportion, colour, and ultimately paint itself. Like the work of Gerhard Richter, to which it bears some kinship, Lahey’s painting interrogates the very idea of art by probing the medium of which it is ostensibly composed. ‘Ostensibly’ because the medium is never simply the work, and the struggle between the medium as an earthly fact — that is, pigment drawn from the soil’s own chemicals — and the world opened up by the deployment of that medium, is what makes the work *true* in Heidegger’s sense. True not as a proposition whose truth-value could be determined by comparison to an alleged pre-existing external reality; but as a simultaneous clearing and concealing — as a revelation that hides as much as it exposes.

This process begins in the taken-for-granted structures of the artwork: the four-square, two-dimensional surface on which is projected a scene or object; and the medium of paint which, applied there, resists and constrains the act of creation. Indeed, canvas and paint together constitute the medium, the site of struggle, where intention is not so much exercised as revealed, the way I come to see what I mean not by pre-forming a sentence in ‘mentalese’ then translated into, say, English; but rather by finding out what I meant to say when the intricacies of vocabulary, semantics and syntax *push back* on me even as I push forward on them. This, surely, is part — if only part — of what Heidegger means when he says, elsewhere, that “language speaks us.” But a more accurate (if that is word) assessment of the struggle comes in the thought of Austin and Derrida, where language is always escaping intention, recalling lost voices, acting like an unruly stranger. *Je veux dire*, Derrida likes to say — “I want to say” — a discursive tic shared, albeit mostly unconsciously, by Wittgenstein. (A second-language user of English, the latter did not form an attachment to the more common but less poignant “I mean to say.”) I want to say: the habitual burr of language is revealed now as a plangent voicing of desire, a sense of thwarted urgency. We say many things, none of them precisely what we want because ‘precisely’ is precisely what we cannot realize!



How is this tragi-comic dynamic enacted in painting? Significantly, Lahey's favourite motifs within painterly representation are the landscape and the still-life. Significant because both forms offer what appear to be straightforward views of the external world, in one case by framing, according to traditional golden mean proportions, a chunk of viewed nature, the other by isolating and intensifying the presence of a single object: an orchid branch, say. (The celebrated cloud paintings, Lahey's signature works to this point, might be viewed as a compromise, or compression, of these two linked techniques: still-life skyscape.) These works are meticulous and luminous, an inner glow achieved via painstaking layering of pigment in tiny brush-strokes or via application of paint over a photographic pentimento. As with other masters of realist representation, Lahey's figurative works begin, when viewed consistently, to exceed their edges, flooding the eye and the frame. The images become almost too vivid, throbbing with an unearthly lustre and aura.

As if aware of this, Lahey then begins to deconstruct the painting from beneath and below. The flower image is allowed to distort and waver, sometimes apparently scraped or defaced or showing parts of the photographic pentimento (the *Eric's Garden* series from 2001, the floating glowing orchids and peonies from 2004). Or the blurring of the camera lens is itself precisely rendered in paint (see, e.g., *Tulip, May 20 16:30 53.1* and similar works). Or the paint drips and disintegrates towards the bottom of the large square frame of mixed-media works such as the 2004 work *Atlantic Ocean, Vero Beach, FL (Dec 3 AM)* and its kin, and 2003's *Atlantic Ocean, Watch Hill, Rhode Island (2001 Aug 26 6:44.12.2)*. Indeed, like the *Vero Beach* works, the whole series of canvases from *Watch Hill*, dating from as early as 2000, both vertically and horizontally oriented, work this same magic; as do the brilliant *La Jolla* and *Brasilito* works from 2001 and the *Pacific Ocean* series of 1999. Even some of Lahey's most traditional landscapes, the long series of *Field from Highway 115* works, occasionally show the same bottom-of-frame blurring.

This willed decomposition, the falling apart of representational illusion at the base of the composition itself, is arguably the point towards which all of Lahey's remarkable technique has over the years been pointing. We are reminded of the basic insight that, as Gadamer puts it, it is not the frame that holds the picture, rather the picture that secures the frame. But now the traditional illusion of representation is both maintained and broken, revealed and concealed, and the elegant dimensions of the frame are queried or perhaps mocked by a self-referential confidence that would, with a different artist, risk arrogance. The sometimes absurdly precise documentations of the image reflect their origins in Lahey's vast photographic practice, but also suggest a kind of satire: the crashing waves of the ocean scene are caught in a time-split moment of image making, then carefully and lovingly rendered in paint — only to have the project undermined by its own decomposition as paint moves from stunning realism to deliberately sloppy runs and drips, a suggestion of decay or even refuse.

There is retained nevertheless a sense of charm, one might say wonder, that at once revels in and ironizes the superb technical skill otherwise made invisible. These paintings manage to establish what we might think of as a visual analogue of Wittgenstein's remark that, while philosophy is thinking devoted to clarity, astonishment too is a form of thinking — a form admittedly as yet unlinked to precision or

propositions (still less precise proposition), but thinking nevertheless, and not merely the 'broken knowledge' that Francis Bacon considered wonder to be. Like the playful trompe l'oeil works of the bravura Early Dutch Masters, De Gheyn and Van Hoogstratten, who tried to follow the way of the 'empty eye' and merely realize sight as such — a doomed enterprise, of course, because all looking is some kind of seeing, however partial, and so never empty — these works revel in their presumptive ability to render three dimensions into two. Also like those earlier works, they likewise take obvious pleasure in performing and disclaiming the trick at the same moment, with the same image.

The paintings open up a world of meaning in the depicted natural scene or reverently observed object, the crashing waves or too-bright tulip; but that world — achieved by close application of pigment — is immediately dismantled by exposing the struggle implicit in all works, between the materials of their existence and the meanings they are able to embody. The thingly nature of the work, as Heidegger reminds us, is not explained by the traditional philosophical accounts. It is not a bearer of traits or properties, as in Descartes; nor a unified manifold of sensations, as in Locke; nor even an amalgamation of matter and form, as in Aristotle. Its thingliness is more mysterious, and more deeply embedded in a larger world of things, than these abstracted accounts would suggest. The larger world includes the equipment which the work of art resolutely refuses to be, but to which it cannot help but relate — either directly, as in Heidegger's celebrated example of Van Gogh's *Peasant Shoes*, an earthly capture of a whole world of labour; or indirectly, as when the work of art is a labour without use-value.

From here it is a short step to the square canvases and bright abstractions of Lahey's other recent work, once again large (some 30" x 30" but most 60" x 60") canvases mostly in vibrant red, orange, yellow and blue. Viewing these works in context suggests they are natural extensions of the more abstract examples of the ongoing cloud series, since some of the latter — three 2003 18" x 18" tokens, for example — are already almost abstracted studies of blue swirled with wisps of white. In the abstracts proper, once more deep effects are achieved by careful application of colour in repeated layers, the revelation now coming not from superb details but in the form of scraped surfaces that reveal cognate relations and internal disharmonies of hue, small patches or streaks of underpaint showing through the 'master' colour on the surface. Deep orange reveals an undercurrent of indigo, teal is haunted by dark olive, blue turns black at the edges of the square. Some of the earlier examples, such as *Abstraction No. 5* and *Abstraction No. 4*, from 2001, and some examples from the years before — see *Abstraction No. 3* from 1999, say — show an even greater range of colour, but the later works suggests a preference for a single dominant note rendered more powerful by what lies beneath. These works are brilliant and striking, but despite the vivid colours, they lack a sense of the struggle that brought them into being. They might be considered intermediate works, indicators of something else still to come — as long, that is, as we are allowed to see and approve the further development to which they might be seen to point. The *Buried Ocean* works, for example, diptychs that link abstraction with representation, are too didactic to engage the dialectical energy implied by Lahey's practice.



Which brings us, finally, to the *Index* or *Salvage* abstractions. (One is inclined to speak of a temporal progression here, but in fact the works discussed all come from the same intensely productive period beginning in 2000 and running to the present.) The first of these new-style abstractions were small works, 18" x 18", drawn from a series of rather sombre traditional figurative paintings of the Great Lakes, mostly with stormy skies and troubled waters. Three of them are dated 2003 and show Lahey already beginning to experiment with the possibilities of rescued paint. The tones are mainly grey, white and blue, indicating their origin in the *Great Lakes* works, and already we see what will become a key feature of the later, larger works, the working of texture into surprising focal points, thick encrustations that make the eye play between edge and centre. One slightly larger (30" x 30") work from this year, now labelled *Abstraction (Index Series)*, shows the future direction — indeed, various larger works had already been attempted. This example is a kind of unnerving thesis in the language of suggestive formlessness, constantly setting up expectations of figurative success — a hint of a skyscape, a gesture towards representation — that are then immediately dashed. The paint swirls in the square frame, but so does the eye, seeking and not finding the sort of resolution somehow hinted at, or presupposed, by the fact of a painting. Three more small *Index* or *Salvage* works are listed in 2004, one from the *Great Lakes* painting, another from flowers (and hence a somewhat bloody combination of dark red and green), and a third called *February Landscape*. These are gritty and thick, less nuanced and more insistent, bolder, than the earlier ones. The idea is gathering strength.

In the past two years, Lahey's *Index* paintings have become bolder, larger and more vibrant. Now square canvases typically of the 60" x 60" dimensions he favours in the slicker 'intended' abstracts, the latest *Index* works are big swaths of colour, with bright chemical greens joining violet, crimson, lush blues that all echo, and reference, the oceans, skies and open fields of the source works. But in addition to colour, the basic earth/world truth of these works is enabled by texture, especially big clumps of exuberant impasto. The paint clots and gathers in thick tactile nodes, or is cut into runnels and patterns of risen spots or blotches. Light and dark play across the square surfaces, creating lines of flight for the eye, the same suggestive possible resolutions — really, non-resolutions — opened up in the earlier, smaller examples. The result is a series of works that are chthonic and tough in feeling even as they are etiolated, almost ethereal, in colour tone. The combination is intoxicating; but the larger argument — about the place of pigment in a painter's practice, the struggle of earth to jut through the very world that is grounded in it, the earth — is all the more so.

Indeed, these works are, like the Greek temple described by Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, a conjunction of transcendence and groundedness. "The Greeks early called this emergence and rising in itself and all things *phusis*," Heidegger notes, giving the Greek word that we now limit and constrains as physics or the physical. His suggestion is that *phusis* had, originally, a deeper meaning. *Phusis*, says Heidegger, "clears and illuminates, also, that on which and in which man bases his dwelling. We call this ground earth. What this word says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere, or with the merely astro-

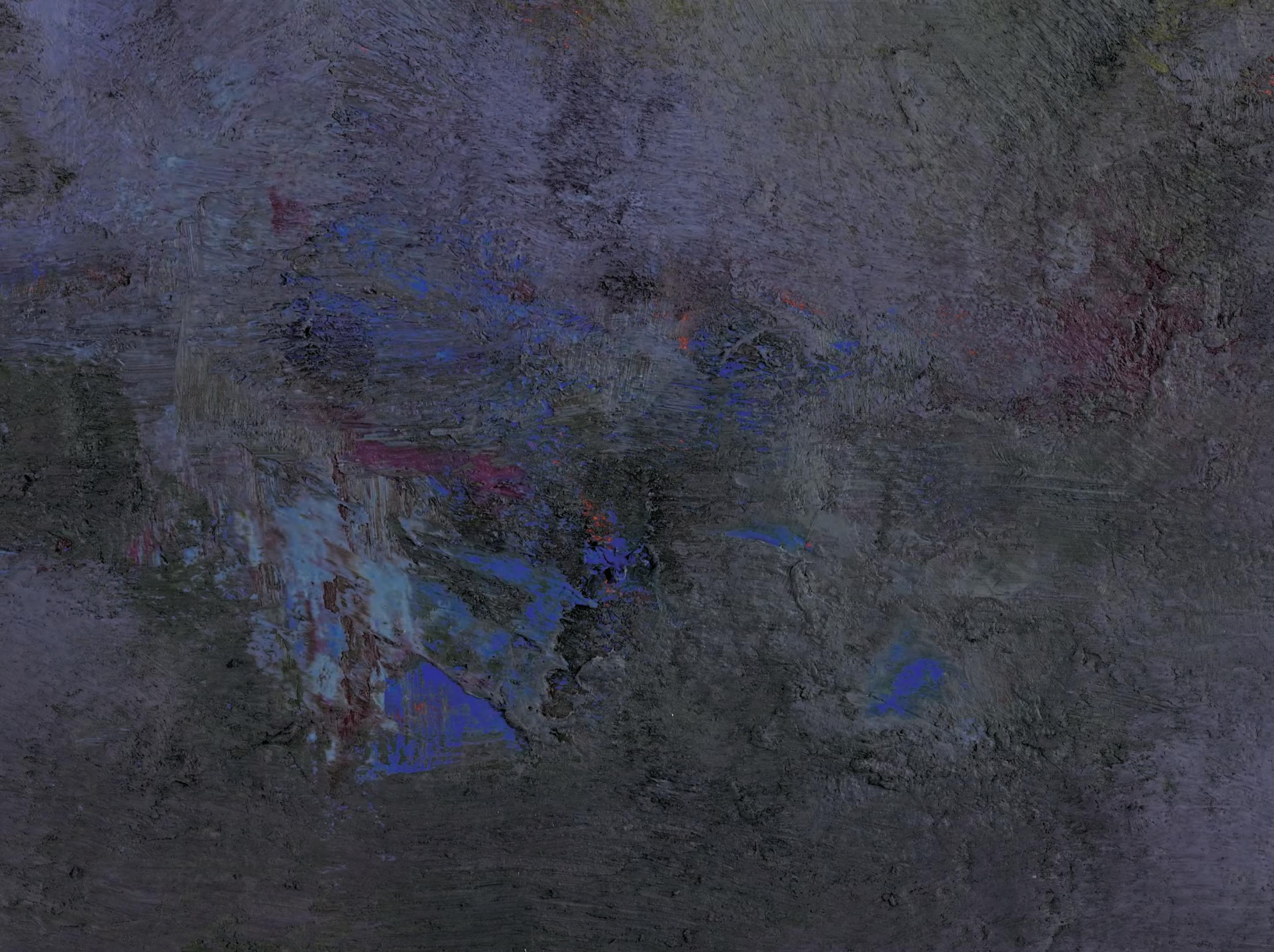
nomical idea of a planet. Earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation. In the things that arise, earth is present as the sheltering agent. The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground."

The temple is an aspiration and a foundation; it is able to soar precisely because it sits, because its feet remain on the ground and gather a world of meaning to a singular site. (Heidegger makes the same point, perhaps even more vividly, about the bridge at Heidelberg: a bridge creates a world by joining two separated earths, sitting firm on each bank.) And then, because of being both soaring and site, the temple also shelters the meanings mortal desire for the sky, the divine. It is a happy apposite irony that Lahey's earth/world struggles are drawn, in some cases, from paintings precisely of sky — one corner of Heidegger's fourfold, the earth/sky, mortals/gods structure of all worlds. Without traditional intention, instead via the poignant process of discard and rescue, scraping and working, these works gather up all the careful depictions of Lahey's practice, all the paint and technique, into surprising, moving and, finally, unsettling meetings of material forces and spiritual ones.

At the same time, these are Lahey's most challenging works, not least because they are not beautiful — from a painter whose reputation and success hitherto have been largely a matter of beauty. The risks for the painter are obvious, and in themselves a good illustration of the intimate strife that runs beneath the surface of all true art work. Critics who disdained the supposedly too-easy haptic qualities of earlier works are now replaced by critics who cannot see past the disturbing ugliness, the thick materiality, of the *Index* works. They are formed by paint that has been scraped and palette-knifed off other canvases, then worked and layered as new conjunctions of earth and world. They refer back to the origins in pigment, the characteristic colours of other series showing up in blue-grey ranges, red-yellow ranges, and so on. And yet, they also, when they succeed (for not all of them do; one or two are incomplete or off-kilter, failing to achieve the special alchemy of the best) open up new worlds of their own, a kind of meta-commentary on the act of painting that is also a revelatory work in its own right.

The installation conceived for this exhibition combines nine 60" x 60" *Index* pieces with a single large cloud painting — an eye-filling 60" x 120" — and thereby creates, in effect, a single work (Plates 1–10). The conjunction with the cloud realizes the painterly origin but also opens up the moving dualities of the series: *prima materia* and heavenly sky, profane and sacred, earthly and transcendent. Source and result are both necessary to complete the implied argument, the revealing urgency of dazzling representation surrounded by bright, tough, almost loamy surfaces. The studio, the site of work and play and rescue, is captured and displayed in a nine-plus-one metawork, a narrative of truth into which the viewer can both enter and gaze.

The *Index Abstractions* are a distillate of aesthetic practice, literally and metaphorically. They are the compressed and sometimes intoxicating remainders of other works, other visions, other worlds, worked from paint scraped and gathered together almost as refuse, as the sloughed-off. Unlike the self-conscious gorgeousness of his representational works, especially the prized orchid and peony still-lives, where the



paint-extended natural detail glows so bright it becomes quivering and almost surreal, the *Index* canvases are earthy, muted, even ugly. They seem determined to refuse the beauty so characteristic of Lahey's earlier signature works (the flowers, the clouds) and opt instead for a challenging counter-position, a necessary resistance.

Their swirling abstraction, meanwhile, achieved with paint scraped from other pieces, massaged and reworked, offers a complex statement on creative energy. An indexical, in philosophy of language, is a pointer word (or, sometimes, gesture): 'this', 'that', or the stylized finger that may, in public signage, point to an exit or seating area. But an indexical sign is also, as in Peirce's semiotic analysis, a sign that points to the conditions of its own origin: a weathervane is an indexical sign, pointing to the source of wind by pointing away from it, where the wind blows; but so is a fingerprint, which 'points' to its owner and the fact, so crucial in murder mysteries and criminal investigations of the old sort, that that owner was somewhere in particular, namely here, where the print is found. The *Index Abstractions* capture these layered meanings of index. The individual works point back, as indexical signs, to the conditions of their own possibility, namely the rescued earthly pigment and the ur-paintings from which it has been gathered. But because of this relationship to other works, other occasions, the works are indexical in another sense too. The series as a whole serves to order Lahey's entire artistic output, to index it, by gathering the world of the studio into imposing yet intimate blocks, squares of tactile colour that, however teasing and suggestive, finally refuse to resolve or focus. You get lost in these works precisely because they are, in the best sense, found.

Philosopher and critic MARK KINGWELL is the author of seven books of political and cultural theory, including the national bestsellers Better Living and The World We Want; also, most recently, Nothing for Granted: Tales of War, Philosophy, and Why the Right Was Mostly Wrong. His writing on art and architecture has appeared in many publications, including the Harvard Design Magazine, Harper's Magazine, Canadian Art, Azure, Queen's Quarterly, Perspectives, Bite, Span, Toronto Life and the National Post. Currently Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, specializing in political theory and aesthetics, Kingwell has held visiting posts at Cambridge University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the City University of New York, where he was Weissman Distinguished Visiting Professor of Humanities for 2002. He is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine and a frequent contributor to Queen's Quarterly, Toro, and The Globe and Mail, among others. He has won many awards for his writing, including the 1996 Spitz Prize for political theory, the 1998 Drummer General's Award for non-fiction, and National Magazine Awards for both essays (2002) and columns (2004). In 2000, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts by the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design for contributions to theory and criticism. He is currently at work on a book about the Empire State Building and a study of how cities shape consciousness.

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INDEX ABSTRACTION NO. 1
2002
oil, alkyd and wax on canvas
60 x 60 inches / 150 x 150 cm



INDEX ABSTRACTION NO. 2
2002-03
oil, alkyd and wax on canvas
60 x 60 inches / 150 x 150 cm

