

# THE BEAUTIFUL PECULIARITY OF LEIDY CHURCHMAN'S PAINTINGS

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Writing on the birthing process of a lone argonaut in the poem “The Paper Nautilus” (1941), Marianne Moore calls its wispy, secreted eggcase a “perishable souvenir of hope . . . glossy as the sea.” Life here is just beginning and the moment is wondrous, apprehensive, and mundane all at once. These conflicting feelings somehow hold together and result in empathy. Perhaps that’s why Moore kept returning to animals as metaphors in her poetry, for their ability to express and process the emotions we can’t, or we don’t want to admit to.

I thought about this walking through *Crocodile*, Leidy Churchman’s first US survey, at the Hessel Museum of Art. Curated by Lauren Cornell and including over 60 paintings of everything from the blue Maine coast to thickly laid abstractions to appropriations of other people’s art, *Crocodile* brims with a genuine curiosity and care. Churchman seems to be painting as a way to better comprehend his subjects; the canvases feel like dedications, striving to embody someone or something’s true nature. Many of the paintings feature animals, their expressions so coolly composed you can’t help but admire how well they seem to understand themselves.

In “Giraffe Birth” (2017), spittle drips from a newborn’s snout, barely poking through a red, glistening amniotic sac. Legs buckled out in front of its face, the newborn is wide-eyed and looks ready to run. By contrast, the mother giraffe stands unfazed amid the dry savanna. Her shadow is painted as a limp reflection smeared in the dirt, an odd detail characteristic of Churchman’s occasionally loose style — used to great effect when rendering light in water, streaky clouds, or even the wear on a photocopied sign.

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This technique is prominent in the *Hardbacks*, a 2010 series of oil-on-wood book covers, the selection of which can be read as a bibliography of sorts. “Donald Judd” has “JUDD” in such big, macho block letters it’s almost comical; “Fuck You” even mimics the globs of caught ink in the scrawled handwriting on the magazine’s cover. Churchman’s *Hardbacks* show where he began to stop looking and start riffing.

He continues working with maps, posters, and the like in “Billions of Never Ending Universes” (2015). A map of the world is composed of names of nations on a bright, patchy goldenrod ground between two blue horizontal borders that represent the night sky, flecked with stars. “Billions” has the charm of an old homework assignment; its uneven paint application and hand-lettering project a sense of ingenuousness while the subject matter evokes the childhood realization of how endless and diverse the universe is.

At the center of *Crocodile* is a gallery containing over 20 variously sized paintings, all created between 2014 and 2018 and hung cheek by jowl in a line around the room. The subjects rarely correspond to one another, emphasizing Churchman’s style of painting as a way to take in his surroundings. His technique ranges from unrefined but sincere, as in the lopsided gold amoeba surrounded by cracked red paint in “Golden Vagina Mouth of Time” (2016), to decidedly meticulous, as in the darting boats and bridge piers in “Japanese Airport” (2015). Walking among these works is like trying to follow all the turns in a Marianne Moore poem. Just as Churchman’s “Basically Good” (2013) pictures a field rat staring at its reflection in a puddle, Moore’s “An Octopus” (1935) begins with a description of the “deceptively reserved” animal. Both re-imagine animals in nature as unexpectedly relatable without anthropomorphizing them.

The key to Churchman’s visual and symbolic world might lie in “Mother” (2018), a jigsaw puzzle of influences that crowd the canvas like a foreboding dream. A backlit weed grows in the corner, and the words “Taxi,” “Egypt,” “Jazz,” and “Mother” — the last ominously rendered in dotted letters as if they were poked out — appear like stressful thoughts streaming into the brain. A black zigzag vertically bisects the canvas at the center, its edges trimmed with white, making it appear 3D as the void of the zigzag is pushed further into our space. “Mother” looks like one of Stuart Davis’s Jazz Age parties gone darkly haywire.

Often in *Crocodile* it’s the weirdest paintings that are the most poignant. “Untitled (Billboard of an Empty Bed)” (2018) refers to Félix González-Torres’s 1991 work of the same name. However, the lightly impressed, still-warm pillows in Churchman’s painting are above a whirlpool threatening to drown some crocodiles at an Egyptian temple, rather than an unoccupied bed. The water is a lambent azure, pulsing and receding in passes — up close the content is almost obscured by the paint’s oily glare. Nearly washed

out at the bottom is a stone carving of a siege of mice, crawling over a fortress wall. “Untitled” heightens the intimate absence in González-Torres’s bed by pairing it with a civilization on the brink of becoming just a myth; Churchman renders the flash of vulnerability that accompanies trying to be brave in the face of an overwhelming problem.

“Transcave” (2018) illustrates a similar drama, though on a much more quotidian level — it’s a bird’s-eye view of a geometric seagull and crab trying to stop the rushing spill of a shamrock-green glass bottle. The linen is still visible through the thin white paint of the gull’s wings, and the shucked-off cap is painted so flatly it looks like the moon. Faint gray dots on the crab’s vermilion shell make it seem like a mask uncannily scuttling by. The animals’ frantic, caring collaboration under stress makes “Transcave” an unexpectedly heartfelt painting.

Churchman’s paintings are captivating for how they make the absolutely mundane seem awesome, and this informs his immense floor painting, “Don’t Try To Be the Fastest (Runaway Bardo)” (2019), commissioned by the Hessel and made with the help of Siobhan Liddell. The painting is composed like a long carpet, scattered with sketches and images sourced from a *Vogue* cover, E.T. biking across the moon, Chinese painting, the animal kingdom, Churchman’s own previous paintings, and bolts of billowing, patterned fabric. It also includes Tibetan Buddhist Lojong cards that read “In postmeditation, be a child of illusion” and “Sending and taking should be practiced alternately. These two should ride the breath.” These sentiments seem to sum up Churchman’s open, sincere practice of reflecting the world.

Spending time with *Crocodile* is like scrolling through memories via your phone’s camera roll. Not everything makes sense — in this case, two early videos Churchman made that show instruments like sticks pushing around paint, or the abstract, somewhat pretentiously titled monochrome, “Knowledge Must Be Burned, Hammered and Beaten Like Pure Gold. Then One Can Wear it as an Ornament. So When You Receive Spiritual Instruction You Do Not Take it Uncritically. But You Burn it, Hammer it, You Beat it Until the Bright Dignified Color of Gold” (2018) — but it’s all part of his process. Churchman’s paintings are replete with the beautiful peculiarities in the world around us. They recall, for me, something Manuel Álvarez Bravo said in a 1990 interview about “discovering” photographs, not looking for them: “You bring your accumulated life to the moment that something sparks you to make an image. Everything influences you. And it’s all good.”

<https://hyperallergic.com/520137/leidy-churchman-crocodile/>