

*Light is the  
Thing a Body  
Moves Through*

2021



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Paintings by Madeline Rupard

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# Light is the Thing A Body Moves Through

B.F. Larsen Gallery, Harris Fine Arts Center

I was heartbroken and house sitting in Gowanus, Brooklyn, summer of 2019. My friend lent me a copy of *A Lover's Discourse* by Roland Barthes. His words were a salve; he spoke poetically about uncertainty, absence, and the wounds of love. These words made me pause:

"I am engulfed, I succumb... I am dissolved not dismembered; I fall, I flow, I melt."

Later that week, escaping a heat wave, I entered an air conditioned bookstore in Carroll Gardens and saw a book on display by T. Fleischmann entitled:

*Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*

What struck me was that both authors described the experience of time and space, the colors of the seasons, the movements of muscles and minds—all these as the particular lenses through which anybody experienced grief, love, loss.

I paint pictures. I know the story behind all these pictures; where I took the image, what material I was dealing with, the problems I was facing, the music or audiobook I was getting into, etc. All of these details rush up to meet me when I look at the image. All you get to see is the picture. The subject matter, the composition, the color, the surface quality, the light; light refracted, reflected, shadowed, and brightened. I invite you to bring your own associations to these images, to wander among and between them. Consider them as ways of looking at the world, the American landscape, suburbia, pavement, skies, the gossamer movement of light through water, the quality of water through glass.



These are all paintings of Utah, sourced from neighborhoods, aquariums, suburban streets, BYU's campus. They are painted on wooden panels with acrylic paint, urethane, and resin. When I look at the work I've made during my Visiting Artist & Teaching residency at BYU, I am the subject and perceiver, light is the great unifier. Light is the thing a body moves through.

I grew up moving frequently around different parts of the U.S. and travelling across long distances. One of my first waking memories is through the backseat window of a car: a pink sunset, power lines, and a McDonald's arches sign. This sense of wonder at the modern world and transient, lonely observation is instilled in my work; I am always passing through.

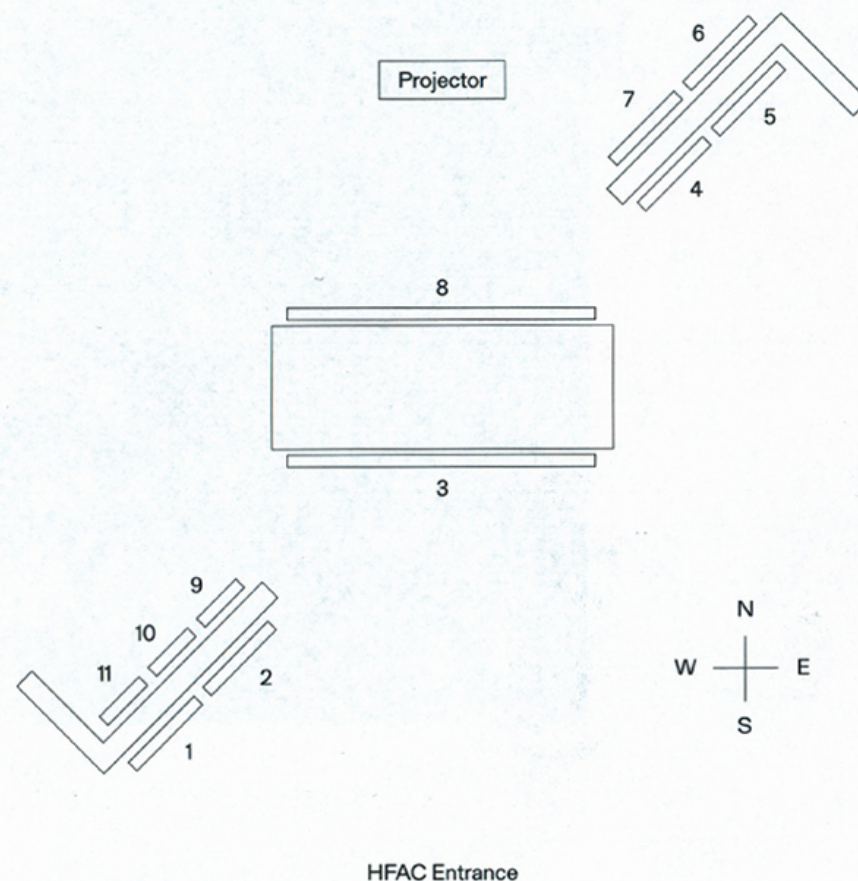
My paintings are observational, my perspective personal. I paint pictures to describe the overwhelming sensory effect of the American landscape; the suburban in conjunction with the sublime, the mysterious quality of the mundane, the ancient and the immediate world running up against each other. I find those contradictions bewildering.

As much as setting and subject, my paintings are also about floors, ceilings, and skies. Using rich opaque colors in contrast with the loose and painterly, I describe surfaces & the air around objects. My most recent material explorations involve translucent resin as a way to mimic atmosphere and the quality of light and water. Still I have yet to find a blue electric enough.

Madeline Rupard  
2021



- 1 Loveland Aquarium  
18" x 24", Acrylic, urethane, and resin on panel
- 2 Scarecrow Walks at Midnight  
18" x 24", Acrylic on panel
- 3 East Lawn Cemetery  
71.5" x 47.5", Acrylic on panel
- 4 Clubhouse at Night  
18" x 24", Acrylic on panel
- 5 Fire on Mt. Timp, Late October  
18" x 24", Acrylic and resin on panel
- 6 Penguin Tank  
18" x 24", Acrylic and resin on panel
- 7 Right Before Therapy  
18" x 24", Acrylic and urethane on panel
- 8 Projection of East Lawn Cemetery  
71.5" x 47.5", Video piece
- 9 Rainforest River Tank  
11" x 14", Acrylic and resin on panel
- 10 Otter Tank  
11" x 14", Acrylic and resin on panel
- 11 Utah River Tank  
11" x 14", Acrylic and resin on panel





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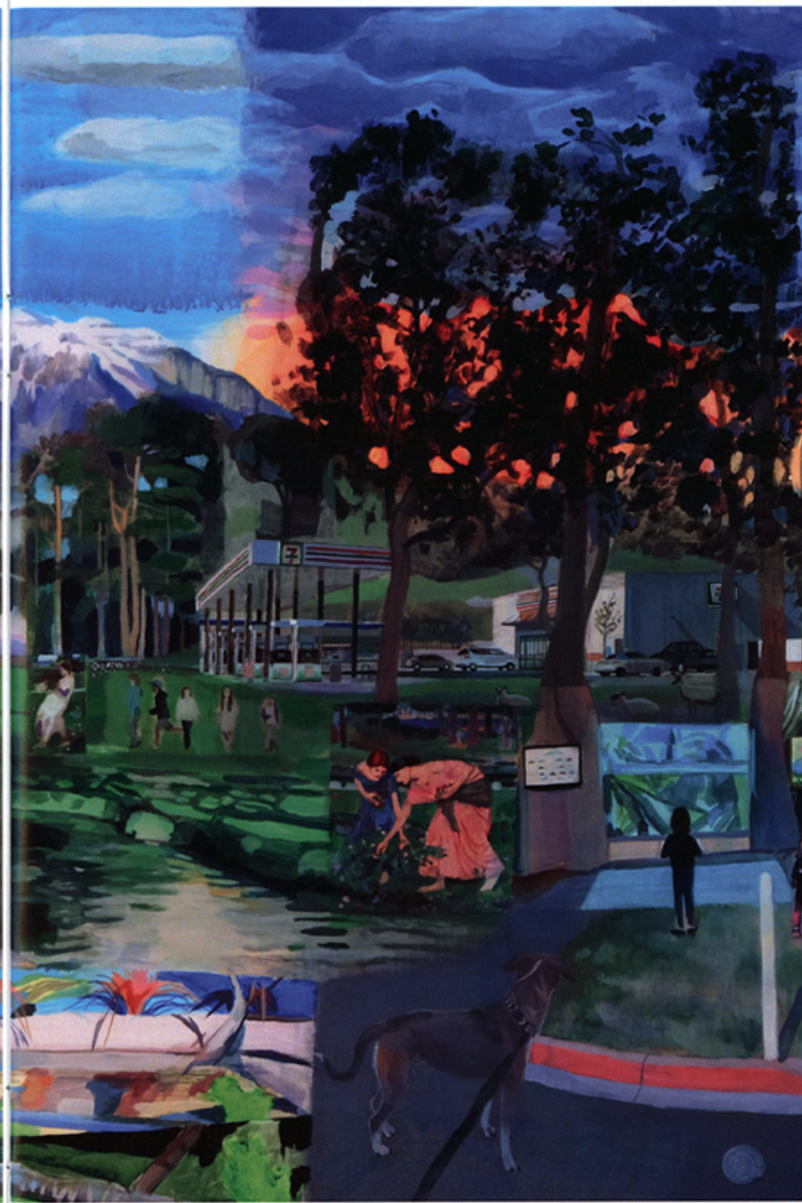


East Lawn Cemetery

18" x 24"

10

Acrylic, Urethane, and Resin  
on Panel



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11





4

Clubhouse at Night

18" x 24"

12

Acrylic on Panel



5

Fire on Mt. Timp, Late October 18" x 24"

13

Acrylic and Resin on panel



6



Penguin Tank

18" x 24"

14

Acrylic and Resin on Panel



Right Before Therapy

18" x 24"

15

Acrylic and Resin on panel



8



Projection of East Lawn Cemetery

18" x 24"

16

Projected Video

9



Rainforest River Tank

18" x 24"

17

Acrylic and Resin on panel





10

Otter Tank

18" x 24"

18

Acrylic on Panel



11

Utah River Tank

18" x 24"

19

Acrylic and Resin on panel



Madeline Rupard in Conversation with Emily Brown

# This Isn't Really About Time

Madeline Rupard is an artist and teacher living in Provo, Utah. She's just finished her yearlong tenure as a Visiting Artist and Teaching Resident at Brigham Young University, which is also where she earned her BFA in Fine Arts. An east-coast native, she lived in New York City for a few years while earning her MFA in painting from Pratt Institute. Her paintings from the past year in Utah reflect the sublime wildness of Utah's ancient landscape juxtaposed with present-day Utah's littering of chain stores, aquariums, and gas stations. Rupard paints these places uncritically and realistically, with a tenderness that makes viewers pause and consider.

Rupard's exhibition of work made during this period is called "Light Is The Thing a Body Moves Through." Her paintings will be on display at Brigham Young University's Harris Fine Arts Center from August 3rd - 12th. Rupard invites viewers "to bring your own associations to these images, to wander among and between them. Consider them as ways of looking at the world, the American landscape, suburbia, pavement, skies, the gossamer movement of light through water, the quality of water through glass."

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Madeline Rupard

In Conversation  
Emily Brown

EB How did you choose your show's title? You mentioned it's a variation on the title of T. Fleischmann's recent book *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*.<sup>1</sup> I'm interested in how you landed on it. In your statement you mentioned some stuff about the particularity of personal perception and art's relationship to memory. I'm interested in your thoughts on light and the body and memory.

MR Seeing that title in the bookstore did something to my brain a little bit— suddenly I thought about life as a tunnel we're going through, and the colors and seasons change as we move. I've heard Nabokov talk about writing in that way, that writing is about the colors and the seasons and the light, and the specificity of things.<sup>2</sup> Apparently, Heidegger was really interested in the idea of the hidden history—people's lives, the way their lives panned out in the particulars.<sup>3</sup> So there were all these different little things that came together when I read that line.

But when I was thinking about this show, I thought, "Well, this isn't really about time." I've been trying to ask myself why I paint the things I paint, and I don't really know. I just know it when I find it and think, I have to paint this. And it's hard to put that into words without sounding trite or simplistic, you know?

Roland Barthes talked about this idea of punctum, in relation to the photos he took of his mom. He had this idea that there's a singular moment in those photos, that he can trace it down to a look in her eye, that pierces him to the heart, and that becomes the thing that justifies all the rest of the photo.<sup>4</sup>

I'm working with paintings— it's different. In this painting, it was something about the spookiness of this, in contrast with this funny hot pink stuff. There's something sinister about all this, even if it's just decoration.

EB I love the gloss on it.

MR And for me this painting wouldn't be interesting without the gloss. There's something about that particular surface. This is where I started doing more than acrylic— this is urethane.

I've been going to the aquarium and looking at strange little cubic volumes of water and the way the light hits them and how some water feels transparent, or sometimes it feels like it's got this glowing blue.

And I've been thinking about life as this environment that's reflective of our experience. I spent all this time with someone I was dating in big open dark spaces— we visited the Dream Mines in Spanish Fork and went to a lot of dimly lit concerts. Everything in that time felt that way— the music we were listening to, and the uncertainty and sorrow of that relationship.

I've always liked the idea that we get to watch our lives as a movie after we die. And I imagine that if you started skipping and scrubbing through it, you'd see how the colors are really different when you're younger, and the spaces you're in are bright and colorful. And then there would be periods of time like that relationship, where everything felt big and dark.

Do you ever feel that way about your life? That somehow the place you're in either mimics or mocks whatever state you're in? When I was 20 and very moody, I was just stuck in St. George and it was so hot all the time. I've just been thinking about the emotional potential of those spaces and that feeling of being immersed in the experience of color and light.

1 Fleischmann, T. *Time Is the Thing a Body Moves Through*. Coffee House Press, 2019.

2 Vladimir Nabokov, *Good Readers, Good Writers*, Essay (1948).

3 Tao Rusapol, *Being in the World*, Film, Mangusta Productions, 2010.

4 See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Paris, 1980).

EB I really like what you're saying about aquariums. I feel like I've seen other pieces of yours that pay attention to these sorts of cross sections that somehow make you want to look inside. It reminds me of how I feel watching trees pass each other when I'm riding in a car. And in reference to the idea of the body moving through light, I feel like there's something contained or framed about it all, as if painting is like building a little aquarium of a moment or something like that. I feel a similar tingleness looking at some Hopper paintings where he's looking into windows.

MR I love him so much. Mark Strand wrote a book about Edward Hopper and wrote about how looking at Hopper paintings always feels like you're passing through quickly, like you're not staying there for long. That really resonated with me.<sup>5</sup>

EB That intense longing you feel when you're driving by something and you see the light in a window or something.

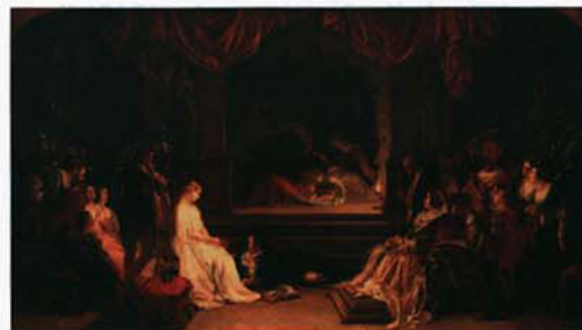
MR One of my first memories ever is being in the back of my parents' car. There was a pink sunset, and there was a McDonald's outside the window. I feel like that's the beginning image of my life. It feels descriptive of the modern world— how funny and strange and lonely it is. I find a lot of the things I want to paint thinking in that way. Like, who paints aquarium tanks? Who paints Halloween suburban decorations? Who paints gas stations? My work, honestly, is kind of a continuation of realism, but I'm not really here to critique America and consumerism. It's more like, why don't we look at what exists and consider it for a second? And wonder, why do things look this way right now?

EB I feel a longing in a lot of these. Maybe it's because you don't really see a lot of people. I feel as if I'm looking in on something.

MR Cause that's the experience of walking through spaces! People aren't looking at you really. It's almost like a play or theater. You're just moving around and my hope is that you get absorbed a little into the piece.

EB Do you know that painting— I don't think it's that famous— but we talked about it a lot in one of my Shakespeare classes, because it's a painting of the play within a play in *Hamlet*, the moment when Hamlet puts on a play in hopes that he can catch his uncle looking guilty.

MR Is it this one— Daniel Maclise?



Daniel Maclise, *The Play Scene in 'Hamlet'* Oil Paint on Canvas (1842)

5 Strand, Mark. *Hopper*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.



EB Yes! I remember hearing that this was particularly revolutionary because it's got these multiple layers of theater—the stage that the characters in *Hamlet* are watching, and then the stage that the characters in *Hamlet* are on, and then you as the viewer complete the scene as the next layer of audience. This was in a time period when they'd transitioned to showing plays on a proscenium-style stage, which is still the most common stage today, where theater is sort of framed-looking and separated from the audience. And this painting illustrates that feeling of looking in on a play and not being able to participate.

MR It's contained. And that's very much the history of painting too. When you look at the parlor paintings in the Louvre, they're always kind of staged and theatrical, until we hit Courbet and then Courbet starts to turn the figure away from us. Do you remember that big Courbet we saw at Musée d'Orsay? It was a huge funeral procession. It's called *Burial At Ornans*.



Gustave Courbet, *Un enterrement à Ornans* or *A Burial at Ornans*, Oil on Canvas (1849)

EB Oh, this feels really theatrical.

MR It is theatrical. Michael Fried, this art critic, talked about how this was actually the schism between modernism and the old ways of painting.<sup>6</sup> Because when you look at this image, the way that it's situated, it's almost like they're not really looking at you. It's kind of off center and there's this strange little hole here. He says he believes that whether or not Courbet knew this explicitly, he was trying to make us feel like we were there, and that he was immersing us into the funeral. In contrast you have painters like Delaroche, who made more theatrical paintings like *Lady Jane Grey*, which is a beautiful painting, but very much feels like you're a spectator watching this opera on a stage.



Paul Delaroche, *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, Oil on Canvas (1833)

EB Oh yeah. That's so different.

MR I think that reading that about that when I was an undergrad had a huge effect on my brain and made me think about poems as having—

EB Paintings or poems?

MR Sorry, paintings. Aren't they the same? (Laughs) Well, and honestly, I can think of a lot of poets and writers that do this too. You feel like they're trying to involve you somehow. Or filmmakers like Terence Malick. I feel like he's always trying to make us feel like we're there, that we're in Austria in the 1940s.

EB And there's tension between those two things, I guess. What we're learning as we're looking at these things, is that we're not actually there and either the painting can suspend that or play with it, or both.

MR That's a good way of talking about that.

EB Which I feel like some of your stuff is doing that to me. I feel like this is probably the view from your studio? And I feel like an observer and yet I also feel present. I feel a lot of longing when I look at these, I don't know what that is exactly.

MR I think deep down I know I'm actually an escapist, but I'm trying to make my escape, or the places I escape to, feel like they correlate with real life in some way. They function with similar laws. It feels like I have more of a suspension of disbelief. You build up a little fake world. And I do think that I divide my work into more documentarian and then more inventive or collaged. In this one, I can tell you where all these images are.

EB This is the only kind of pastiche one.

MR Yeah, this is the way I used to paint.

EB No, but I like it. I like that there are all these more documentary ones, too.

MR This one is more additive. I'm pulling from all over. This is an old medieval painting. These are two people I saw on Google maps. This is from Pennsylvania in the winter. This is at 7-11 in Springville. This is two iterations of Timpanogos. I've had this painting in my head for a very, very long time. And I'm finally making something, but it's funny, the second I start making it I just end up departing and I can't keep it to the same vision. Because otherwise I'll just create a Frankenstein. Paintings develop their own autonomy and free will, separate from ours.

Honestly, I just think the process of translating a painting from a picture you took in one instant is kind of insane. Like saying, Let's actually just do this step-by-step by hand when there's a quicker and easier option.

Also think there's something really—it's almost a hoarding impulse for me. I often think about that meme where Kanye's like, "me taking a picture of a sunset every night, just to never look at it again". I have like 80,000 photos on my phone. I just hoard images, thinking "what am I going to paint next?" But there's something about the process of painting that feels like it's giving these glimpses time and attention. And attention is a limited commodity. Which is why it's sometimes hard when I'm deciding what to paint and I think well, what am I going to spend the next eight hours of my life on?

It's kind of torturous to paint the pastiche, collage paintings. The documentary ones are much more straightforward, but the additive ones can shape shift in ways, you know? I left last night thinking, I kinda hate this painting. And so something has to change. I'm not sure what. The last thing I did was I covered Joey up, cause I just was tired of everything being so crystal clear. I actually think I'm gonna pour resin here.

EB Have you ever read that book by Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*?<sup>7</sup> There's this concept in it that objects and language and images accrue meaning the more you revisit them. I feel like maybe it makes those photos less dispos-



able when you come back and spend more time with them, look at them more closely and witness them more carefully.

**MR** For me, even just going on a trip to Albuquerque to see Laura or driving to Flaming Gorge—you get to these places where there's no one. And you'll look at these strange sand castle formations carved through ancient waterways. And yes, this exists when I'm not here. I know it does. But it just seems like such a waste to not acknowledge it in some way. And I would like to make paintings of those strange spaces.

Then again, there's always a part of me that thinks, is it always right to want to make things, and make meaning out of things?

**EB** I totally relate to that question. But also, I've been reading *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron and in it she talks about how the way that we honor our Creator is to create.<sup>8</sup> It's really opened my eyes to just seeing how the nature of everything in the world is to proliferate. I think it's natural and beautiful to create and to represent oneself in the world. Also I've been doing a lot of meditation lately and thinking about how it's all connected, we're all part of each other anyway.

**MR** Have you heard of Adam Miller? Maxwell Institute's been doing theological introductions and he wrote the introduction to the Book of Mormon.<sup>9</sup> I can tell he read a lot of Jonathan Edwards. That same guy I was talking about, Michael Fried, starts his essay *Art and Objecthood* by quoting Jonathan Edwards.<sup>10</sup> The quote is something about how we are continually seeing creation as if we're in Genesis right now, and every moment we're seeing what happened before, created into something new. I think it's honestly kind of an Eastern meditative idea as well.

But in this book, Miller just goes through what he thinks the book of Mormon is really about. He says, it's a guide to the end of the world, but he says the old world must be sacrificed in order to make the new world and that the work of recreating all things is the work of sacrificing all things. And he's talking in a more theological sense, but I wrote in the margin, letting go of nostalgia is the thing we give up to serve the present. He also says his definition of sin is holding on to a world that is going away, and not giving in to the new one. It seriously lit my brain up. I was so excited about it.

I genuinely feel like people still don't know what I mean when I say this—but when I talk about my paintings, I feel like it's that present-ness, that sentience that's driving the way I'm painting.

**EB** To me that makes a lot of sense. You almost feel like there's not an observer there because as a viewer you feel immersed. And at the same time, outside the scene.

This actually reminds me of something my Shakespeare professor used to say. She had this list about how beauty affects us. I think I shared it with you.

**MR** You shared it with me after the Joanna Newsom concert.

**EB** Yeah! I remember her saying that perceiving beauty makes you feel so small and yet also, integrated into the world. And I've learned to pay attention to those feelings, because that's how I perceive God and divinity and stuff like that. These paintings make me feel that way.

One more thing—I think all these paintings are set in Utah and you're living here now. I wonder what you feel about painting Utah?

**MR** I mean, I recently wrote down all the places I've lived and Utah's kind of the thread of familiarity, which is strange to me. Technically without Utah I wouldn't exist; my parents are both from the

east coast, but they met each other at BYU. So I sort of belong here, and yet I don't feel like I grew up here either, you know? And it's kind of visually hard on me sometimes. I'm not trying to be all snotty, but my friend Sophie came to visit and she was like, You know, if I could nail it down to one thing it's just the air quality here that makes it feel like it's hostile towards you.

But then instead of just hating it and leaving, I end up finding a lot of beauty. I genuinely love parts of living here and this sublime landscape that surrounds us. And I find it really funny how it runs up and meets a lot of pavement, a lot of big box stores. This place could be Switzerland if we tried a little bit. If we just operated a little outside of American practicality.

**EB** In your paintings, it feels like the little people are making their little boxes, coming up against the sublime of the mountains and the clouds that are made of ice cream.

**MR** I love that. I love that so much. One last thing I want to say about it is, I feel like after living in New York, where we were constantly surrounded by all these huge boxes and buildings, I came here and I started thinking about the mountains as architecture, as these kinds of strange architectural forms that are almost like walls or like cereal bowls. They contain us.

This is kind of a funny painting for me because it's a painting of a Utah river, and there's a painting of a Utah mountain behind this space at the aquarium. It feels like a metaphor, a little containable world surrounded by the mountains. I also think a lot about this verse in the Doctrine and Covenants that says something about how everything is a kingdom. There's not a spot or a place that's not a kingdom.

**EB** What?!

**MR** Have you heard this verse?

**EB** No!

**MR** It blew my mind when I read it. Like every little, this little room is a kingdom. Your dog's digestive system is a kingdom.<sup>11</sup> You know, this paint palette is a kingdom. They all have their own little rules and law. It's a verse that's stuck with me for a long time.

<sup>8</sup> Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. Profile Books Ltd, 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Adam S. Miller *Mormon: A Brief Theological Introduction*. Neal A. Maxwell Institute, 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. The University of Chicago Press, 2011.

<sup>11</sup> D&C 88:37, Doctrine and Covenants, 2000. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

## Colophon

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