



View of “John Heward and Jean-François Lauda,” 2018. All works Jean-François Lauda, *Untitled*, 2018. Photo: Maxime Boisvert.

## John Heward and Jean-François Lauda

### THE DARLING FOUNDRY

The only mark I can vividly recall from Jean-François Lauda’s exhibition of nine identically sized paintings is a glare of canary-yellow paint scraped over a moody pink-hued stain. Like a mechanical wing, it artificially lifts the elegiac tone of the room, interrupting the intensity of Lauda’s more understated works. Though the work containing this mark is not the strongest painting in this series of untitled works, it is the loudest. Its afterimage overwhelms the elusive beauty of the other eight, whose quiet reckoning with the void stirred me in ways that most face-to-face encounters with contemporary abstraction do not.

Lauda’s intelligence is liquid, material, sensual, and metaphysical, all at once. Indeed, it is the fugitive quality of his marks that allows for the ineffable experience of abstraction at its best. Although his work dialogues with a variety of mid-century and postwar idioms, including Color Field painting and Minimalism, it has a distinctly contemporary mien. Ranging from almost total occlusion to near blankness, Lauda’s canvases invoke the spectral presence of his artistic forebears—Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin, Gerhard Richter—without ever capitulating to adulation. Scraped, streaked, powdered, squeegeed, and

poured, pigment is applied to the surface in ways that reference, perhaps unwittingly, the failures of both mechanical and digital reproduction: Like copies smeared with ink, or prints from half-spent cartridges, Lauda's compositions juxtapose deeply saturated expanses of dark pigment with areas of minimally stamped or dotted raw canvas. Lauda makes use of hard edges, often in the form of vertical or slightly diagonal lines, to divide and delineate his geometry of broken forms, clouded by a palimpsest of veils. These plumb lines add both gravity and gravitas to the work, framing layers of muted color that might otherwise tempt us toward an uncritical celebration of the sublime. If there is any flaw in Lauda's exquisite paintings, it is that even the tiniest smudges seem too perfectly calculated to convey the ebullient sense of freedom evoked by Morris Louis's voluptuous pours or Willem de Kooning's bold brushstrokes. Of course, behind the myth of total liberation, those, too, are meticulous in their own way.

Yet even though such myths have expired, the spiritual need for abstraction remains. In this high-res world of nonstop bad news, abstract painting provides a space for the contemplation of indeterminacy, those experiences of consciousness and confrontations with our own finitude that cannot be intuited by any form of artificial intelligence. Lauda's vertical contours find material and existential complement in three roughly torn swaths of twisted, painted canvas by veteran Montreal artist John Heward that hang vertiginously in an adjacent chamber of this monumental former foundry. If contemplating a bare canvas can feel to the painter like standing on the edge of a precipice, then Heward's sculptural approach abandons the cliff of medium-specificity altogether, free-falling into an abyss of expanded possibility. Punctuated by black strokes, calligraphic marks, and dashes of color, this improvised cluster of forms reminds the viewer not only of the overlooked physics of painting, but also of the inherent musicality of visual composition. Knotted like prisoners' sheets, the works propose an escape from the limitations of two-dimensionality and from limitation itself. As Lauda clings to the undistracted focus that Agnes Martin described as the "silver cord" (the term that served as the show's title), Heward loosens his grip after a lifetime of chasing its mysteries. No wonder these abstractions resonate as if life itself hung in the balance.

— Ara Osterweil

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