

Billy Parker in Conversation with Lucy Neish

*Better than I expected,
worse than I hoped*

A year or two ago, I arrived at work. A book with no title on the cover had been left on my desk. Inside were a series of incredibly fragile drawings that tested the limits of what paper can cling to: a curtain gently sucked out of a window; an adolescent rabbit nestled in long grass; an arrow pierced through a quivering surface. The drawings were bolstered by fragments of poetic fiction, as delicate as the micro-climates of graphite they were laid beside. For years I've digested endless reams of artwork to a point of over-saturation; it takes a precise visual incantation to lure me into forgetting where I am. As I came back to myself, I realised the book contained drawings by Lucy Neish, with supportive text by Hugo Hagger. I had only encountered her work once prior, when I snuck into the attic she was using as a studio and saw formative experiments without her knowing. I've known Lucy for years, but she's always held her work close to her chest.

Contemporary painting is incredibly boring, littered with over-rendered figuration and trivial abstraction. The only thing that cuts through the noise is a painting that holds the ability to affect the viscosity of air in a room. To achieve this, one must rip the skin from their body and lay themselves bare, slice their heart into pieces and bury it gently under sheets of paint.

I visited Lucy's studio while she was making the works for this exhibition. I was arrested by two giant landscapes which grew to become *Ruskin Pool* and *St Giles*. Differing in style, *Ruskin Pool* leant towards an impressionistic classicism; *St Giles* toward a fragmented abstraction. Both leaked with a toxic yellow that oozed from the cracks in their thick muddy cladding. They battled against each other, creating a physical vibration that triggered the pit of my stomach to draw out buried memories of heartache and longing, like a leech drawing blood from a wound. It poured with rain outside, but inside the quiet focus of the studio, the paintings moved air like the early warning signs of a tornado.

Billy Parker: Your last show didn't have paintings in?

Lucy Neish: There were small ones on those rocky canvases, and some drawings.

BP: They didn't feel like paintings in the traditional sense.

LN: They were an entry point. I could feel something happening. I thought I'd make more, but I wanted to go big.

BP: I loved the baby bunnies, where the canvas was stuffed to feel like a nest.

LN: It was one of those paintings that just happens, and you don't know how you made it, some kind of special alchemy. There's no way I could do that again. Painting things over and over freed me from worrying about the end result. It just adds another layer to this insanely heavy canvas.

BP: Has that ever become an issue? Some of my favourite paintings were twenty paintings on top of each other. Once, I made one I loved but I knew there was one underneath I hated. I couldn't get past that.

LN: It had an evilness to it?

BP: Not evil. Maybe it was my OCD. But I had to get rid of it.

LN: The only issue I've had is with painting blindness: when you've spent too long with something and can't see it anymore. I've painted over things, looked back through my camera roll, and thought...oh god, what have I done? You can't control-alt-delete.

BP: Are there paintings underneath these?

LN: Yes. Under this one [*Ruskin Pool*] was a painting of a tunnel in Tokyo.

BP: Have you titled them?

LN: I think so. They're descriptive. *St. Giles*, *Ruskin Pool*, *Studio Flowers*, and *View from APA*. These funny yellow marks are from the painting underneath, things I wouldn't have been brave enough to paint otherwise. It acts as punctuation. A reminder to not get rid of everything.

BP: You're overlapping place conceptually and physically.



LN: Yes, I want to be careful to not romanticise that. But it's true. They have become the most autobiographical my work has ever been. I've been scared of that, but I think it's allowed.

BP: It's hard to have the courage. I grew up acting, which should be the worst thing ever, surely I can show a single painting.... But that's what destroys me the most. Maybe other people can't see it, but you reveal so much about yourself. I always get depressed for at least a month after showing a painting.

LN: I feel really vulnerable showing these works. The last time you came to my studio, you said "how much vertigo do you want to feel?" It's that feeling, and real... fear.

BP: That means you're doing everything right. Your last body of work didn't feel so autobiographical. It felt observational.

LN: That was me skirting around the outside of this. I took images from Reddit and Facebook Marketplace. I thought that's what the art girls do, they get their images from the internet.

BP: The Issy Wood disease.

LN: There's a self-conscious fear that direct experience isn't interesting enough.

BP: The old work felt like representations or symbols. These new paintings feel like I'm inside your experience. It's intense. I like it.

LN: They've all become landscapes. I thought fuck it, I'm going to lean in. I had this moment of obsession with Monet.

BP: It really happens...

LN: Once you get involved, you realise he was a magician.

BP: I used to roll my eyes at Monet, but when I saw the Water Lilies at the Musée de l'Orangerie, I was absolutely floored. Like, okay... understood...

LN: For me, it's not about liking him, it's about learning from him. I started using more colour. Before, everything was strictly monotone.

BP: They were monochrome. Monotone.

LN: Monotone monochrome.

BP: Was it a conscious decision to go small, or a necessity?

LN: I cut a big painting into fragments and stretched them individually. I've enjoyed the formula of predefined scale and no colour. It's been pure pleasure bringing colour back.

BP: You put yourself in painting chastity and edged these new paintings into existence.

LN: They're a whole different world. I was so worried you wouldn't recognise them as mine. I used to rely on that photographic quality, to get my stripes for painting.

BP: What are the stripes for painting?

LN: I always thought the metric for being good was being able to reproduce something directly. I've found that hard to shed. Picasso's early drawings are exceptional. He's seven, making anatomical drawings. It's ridiculous. Even now, I'm showing drawings alongside the paintings. It's the little child in me saying, don't worry guys, I can still draw.

BP: That was my criticism last time. I saw them functioning only as that declaration. I wanted you to feel confident enough with just the paintings, but I'm glad you're including the bunnies.



LN: I like returning to them. They function as a zoom in, contextualisation for the vast scapes. The images are from Hinge. One guy had an amazing picture of bunnies eating a carrot on his profile and I asked if I could use it. I don't know how to give that away. It's a funny bit for myself, but also the viewer. You get knocked out by the bunnies. Suddenly it's like, wait, where are they from, what are they doing, how did they end up inside these traditional landscape paintings?

BP: I tried to convince you to not show them.

LN: You said "you're a coward if you show those bunny drawings."

BP: I've eaten my words.

LN: That makes me happy.

BP: You've proved they are part of whatever this world is. They work conceptually like the Tokyo tunnel buried under the park.

LN: I've always painted rabbits. I'm happy for it all to tumble in.

BP: What draws you to them?

LN: They're quintessentially cute. I saw an incredible one at the Horniman Museum. White, fluffy, with this little baby. Are you kidding?

BP: I used to live by Pets at Home in Deptford. When I was hungover and sad, I'd go alone, get a coffee from the drive through Costa and look at all of the bunnies.

LN: I used to go for the chinchillas. It's fun to have something cute next to a sincere, dark cityscape.

BP: You're trying to jolt people out of what they think they're seeing.

LN: I often hear "I want the viewer to take what they want from it." I'm interested in being a control freak, saying no, I want to show you what I'm seeing.

BP: To not guide or tempt is a rejection of a big part of painting. I don't believe in people who say, "it's whatever you want it to be". I haven't done all of this work-

LN: -to let you have it.

BP: Painting is painful. It hurts. Not physically-

LN: -sometimes physically.

BP: I'm not going to say, "pretend it's whatever you want".

LN: Are you kidding, these are my children. I'm also nosy. Tell me what's going on!

BP: I used to bury things in paintings. Dodgy things.

LN: Like what?

BP: I'd make a painting about someone, skew it just enough, then I'd show it to them and see if they could recognise themselves. They never could. It's about finding that weird tension. You've found it. There's enough to fall into without knowing exactly what they're about. But I guess I do know...

LN: This might have to be my no comment.

BP: You shouldn't... You've arrived at a point where you've almost revealed your secrets. Almost...

LN: That feels so naughty.

BP: It forces people to spend more time with them. Like you were saying, you want people to be nosy.

LN: I'm handing them over. That feels vulnerable enough. You've had enough.

BP: This toxic yellow makes my belly feel that way. That's a crazy achievement. It's definitely tummy turning, but there's a safety to it.

LN: It's intensely thick pigment.

BP: I've always found yellow weak compared to other colours. What paint is it? Is that a secret?

LN: No, you can know. It's Michael Harding. It's actually got lead in it.

BP: Real lead?

LN: Yes. I didn't use gloves...

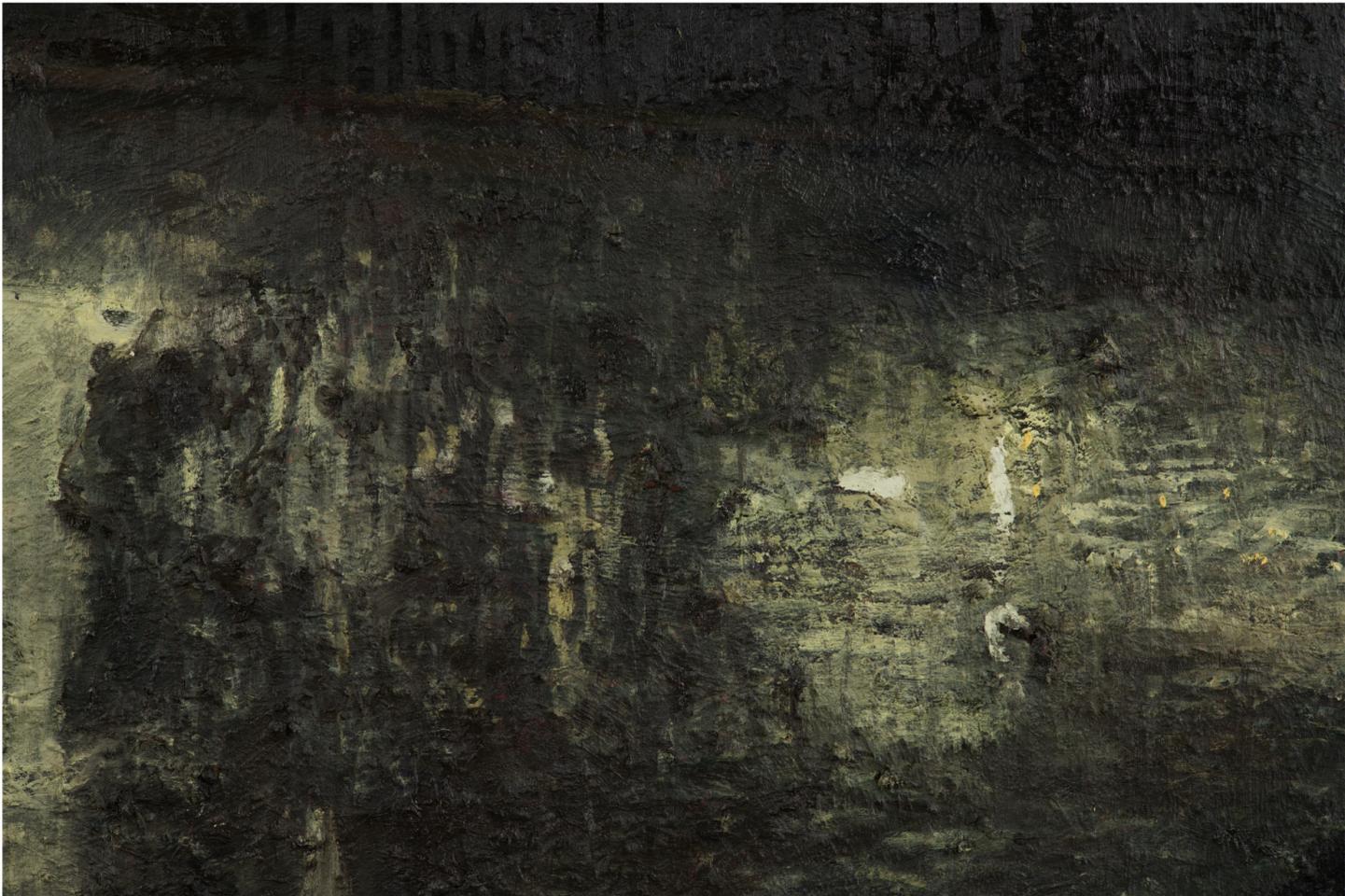
BP: Uh-oh. I like that it's physically toxic.

LN: Uh-oh. If I'm going to cut the top off, I should be careful when that dust gets everywhere.

BP: I'm not sure about the cutting... But I love your conviction with it.

LN: I'm going to do it.

BP: But that means all of my yellow is gone!



LN: I'm not being precious. If it makes the painting feel better for me, then it's worth it.

BP: You have to follow those gut feelings.

LN: It's too tight and controlled. I feel nervous about the cliché of a painted reflection. It feels braver without the top half.

BP: Do you use your fingers a lot?

LN: It's lead paint, Billy... I ruffle a clear Sennelier stick against the surface. It creates this amazing stickiness. Whatever you paint on top becomes incredibly thick, but smooth at the same time. Almost like plastic.

BP: Have you sculpted the surface intentionally?

LN: No. Whenever I scrape my palette clean I keep all the debris. When I'm prepping canvases or painting over something, I drop it in for texture. It's meant to be there, but I got too into it. There were lumps everywhere. I started slicing them off with a palette knife. Now there's a big round scar in the sky. It becomes a new thing to push against, or invite in.

BP: It reminds me of something fucked up... My dog gets weird lumps on his body. He had one on his face that had to be sliced off. He grew them as he aged, as did your paintings. It makes them feel alive and bodily.

LN: There was something sick about removing them. I watch videos of people scraping barnacles off sea creatures. It felt disgusting cutting off the paint scabs.

BP: Ew.

LN: Ew.

BP: It makes sense with the painted imagery. I don't always love impasto. A lot of the time it just feels like pointless thick

paint slapped on a canvas.

LN: This impasto isn't in relation to the image. Normally you think of thick strokes that assist in understanding the image. This is completely separate.

BP: It's disrupting the image. How did you get that lumpy texture on your small paintings?

LN: Some were stuffed to achieve that pillowy texture. Then I started making the surface just from paint. Again, I would scrape my palette and mould the debris together in my hands to make these paint rocks, then paint an image on top of that.

BP: Now you've scaled up, you're building a surface on top of the canvas before you paint. Is the canvas necessary?

LN: It's more for practicality and comfort. I like the spring back. I could lay down some building material.

BP: That feels like cheating.

LN: I should. It would be quicker, and cheaper.

BP: But you would lose the depth. You can tell the difference. Painting deserves, and needs, time.

LN: I was worried this wasn't going to be sustainable. My whole practice relies on painting over paintings, but it becomes a self-fulfilling machine. Making a bad painting is such a bum out, but now at least I get a nice surface to paint on.

BP: It's a graveyard.

LN: It's a joy to bury them in the ground.

BP: We haven't spoken about Studio Flowers.

LN: It feels like an outlier.

BP: Is that simply because it's not a landscape, and uses a different yellow?

LN: It feels scrappier.

BP: Describe scrappy.

LN: It's not so seductive. Less visually balanced.

BP: Do you want them to be seductive?

LN: I'm happy for them to go that way. They're also excessive. You know when people are described as 'a bit much', but in being that, they can be amazing and seductive and charming.

BP: Are we talking in personality?

LN: Yes.

BP: I like ascribing personalities to them.

LN: I like the idea of them being charming.

BP: When I think of charming, I think of...

LN: Slightly fake?

BP: Really nice. There's definitely a sexiness to them. Is charming sexy?

LN: It depends on the context. Oh God, it sounds like Antiques Roadshow. But I mean the way a man or a woman can be charming.

BP: You're trying to flirt.

LN: Yeah, I want to flirt.

BP: Something about this one [Studio Flowers] is making me not want to look at it...

LN: I know what you mean.

BP: It isn't flirting with me hard enough.

LN: I struggled with the huge expanse of space. I kept redoing it. Even now, I don't know how convincing it is of its location.

BP: Negative space is hard to render.

LN: It's so hard. This yellow expanse represents a long white wall with barely any contrast or change in value. I can't bring myself to use all that paint and make it solid. I almost painted the whole thing flat yellow.

BP: Maybe that's what it needs. Maybe it has to become a catalyst for the others. I love the part that looks like it's been burnt and is crisping off.

LN: Those moments bring it back to St. Giles painting. Less rendered. More freaky. I think this scrappy one could be a blessed relief. I'm trying to be a control freak. It's good to have a problem child.

BP: Then maybe it's not naughty enough.

LN: I think I do agree.

BP: It's just missing a tiny... thing.

LN: You're gonna keep. me. up. at. night.

BP: Well I was wrong about the bunnies....

LN: There's a world in which I start cutting them all up.

BP: No! We have to confiscate all your scissors. How do you feel about them now?

LN: It's like learning a language. At first you think about speaking whilst speaking, then suddenly you just speak. My version of that, in painting, is when I can relax and put down paint however my body wants. Hold a brush and slam it on. Someone once said you have to find what feels pleasurable. I think sometimes pleasure is a dirty word. There's an idea that painting is about struggle. It's a great moment when it becomes pleasurable.

BP: You have to be obsessed with the feeling of painting. I love mixing paint, slowly adding turps and linseed oil until it reaches the consistency of soft butter or cream. It suddenly turns and feels alchemical, like mayonnaise when it emulsifies. I mark a painting good if I want to lick it. Like a child not being allowed to eat the glue that tastes like strawberries.

LN: Oh my god yeah.

BP: Turning this very-toxic-don't-eat-don't-put-in-your-mouth paint into something I wanted to eat.

LN: That's it... Mine is more extreme. I get aroused... When you see someone really painting and it's really working. You're like damn... how have they done that? That's hot...

BP: My feeling isn't arousal. It's searing jealousy.

LN: Yes. Eugh. I know someone's good when I get absolute, uncontrollable jealousy.

BP: The first thing I said when I came in last time was "I'm really jealous."

LN: No... you said the drawings made you want to slit your wrists.

BP: Oh my god... That's an awful thing to say. Why did I say that!? I'm a man of tragedy...

BP: God. sorry.

LN: I don't know if you need to unpack that...

BP: Did I mean it in a good way, or a bad way....

LN: You said they're so good that they make you want to slit your wrists.
