

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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GARAGE



Phone 11, 2019–20, Oil on linen. Photo: Aaron Wax

ART | By [HALEY MELLIN](#) | Apr 5 2020, 2:31am

The Meditative Richness of Leidy Churchman's Earth Bound

The painter talks about their latest show at Matthew Marks, and the way the Internet warps the way we experience art.

I met Leidy Churchman to walk through the artist's new show *Earth Bound* at Matthew Marks in New York, while the galleries were still open in February, prior to the COVID-19 closing. Kind and intuitive, Churchman deftly handles major topics—Buddhism, now-ness, the environment, abstraction, digital life—with gratitude and observational humility. The scale varies in the twenty-one new paintings on view, from a one-foot abstraction to an interior bedroom scene eight feet wide. Likewise, subject

Mellin, Haley. "The Meditative Richness of Leidy Churchman's Earth Bound." *Garage Magazine*, April 5, 2020.



"RECLINING BUDDHA," 2020, OIL ON LINEN IN NICHE DESIGNED BY THE ARTIST. PHOTO: AARON WAX

matter shifts between the personal, the shared and the monumental. One painting depicts a reclining Buddha carved into a granite cliff in Sri Lanka dating from the twelfth century, with modern-day stanchions rendered alongside. Others illustrate the camera lens of the latest iPhone arranged as three eyes, another a moon, while another pictures a cloud-covered Earth from space with a new Earth rising up behind it. We talked about looking at art online, and the current state of the world.

The timeline of this show, spanned pre-epidemic with the gallery open, and now the show is visible digitally. What do you think about looking at painting online?

I think you can learn a lot about art online but seeing work in person is special. Even for video, because an artist installs it stealthily, in their own way. Most everything is transmogrified to be online, from its previous form, and art is too. Should I start making iPad paintings like David Hockney? Maybe we can learn to be more aware of what we are seeing and what we are not. Especially with painting. It is like a picture of a person: you might get an idea of what they look like and be able to recognize them in a crowd, but you won't know who they really are, what they are capable of.

I enjoyed walking through the show with you. It is good to hear your thoughts on each painting. How are you reconciling technology with the mind-space of meditation and Buddhism?

You know the feeling you have in meditation sometimes, or if you're sitting quietly and you have that quiet library feeling in your stomach? To me, it feels like my belly starts to make honey, it's a warm inner-richness

feeling. Everything starts to fill up, it is an essential feeling and very ordinary, too. When we go so far outside our bodies when we are online, and for so much time, we need to have a real practice to cultivate open awareness. Our riches are in our body, which keeps us alive on earth. This makes me think about Martha Graham, Yvonne Rainer and others at the St. Mark's Church scene. They brought the embodiment of the everyday to performance art and dance. What can performance artists do to guide us now? My favorite artist over the past many years is Mariana Valencia. In her domain, everything in the world is hers, intimately. Could it be that we could craft our "online" to reflect every intimate way that the world sparkles for us, secretly?

Can you talk with me about the painting that the show is titled after: Earth Bound (Card 21 of the Secret Dakini Oracle)?

In the book by Penny Slinger and Nik Douglas, the meaning of the Earth Bound card is written: *Realization of the underlying meaning of earthly existence. The completion of a cycle. Responsibility, understood in its broader aspect as humanitarianism. Action as the result of choice and free will. Liberation from the bondage of habit. Change in viewpoint. Single-mindedness, particularly with regard to worldly things.* I wasn't



"EARTH BOUND (CARD 21 OF THE SECRET DAKINI ORACLE)," 2020. OIL ON LINEN. PHOTO: AARON WAX

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"BUDDHADHARMA FEVER," 2019, OIL ON LINEN. PHOTO: AARON WAX

reading these words while making the painting but reading them now is spooky considering this global crisis. Reverend angel Kyodo williams came to walk through the show with me the day before it opened. Her riff on the picture was interesting: She saw the planet Earth floating in space as the way we view ourselves with our ego, the way we imagine and speculate and fret over our entire image as a separate being. The other view of earth in the painting, which is bigger and fluffier is more embodied and interdependent. It is like the view we see of ourselves looking down and seeing our chest and belly and legs. Earth bound, planted, connected.

How do you decide what to paint, since you work with a range of subjects?

At this particular moment it makes me think about how a dog chooses something to chew. Which toy, which stick. It just happens, in a self-secretive way. And then that thing goes into the mouth of a dog. When my dog Sarah chews something, she takes millions of little clicking bites with her front teeth. It happens throughout the day and I like to say she's at the type-writer, or she's texting.

While you paint a number of different subjects, you pretty much stick to painting as a medium. Why paint?

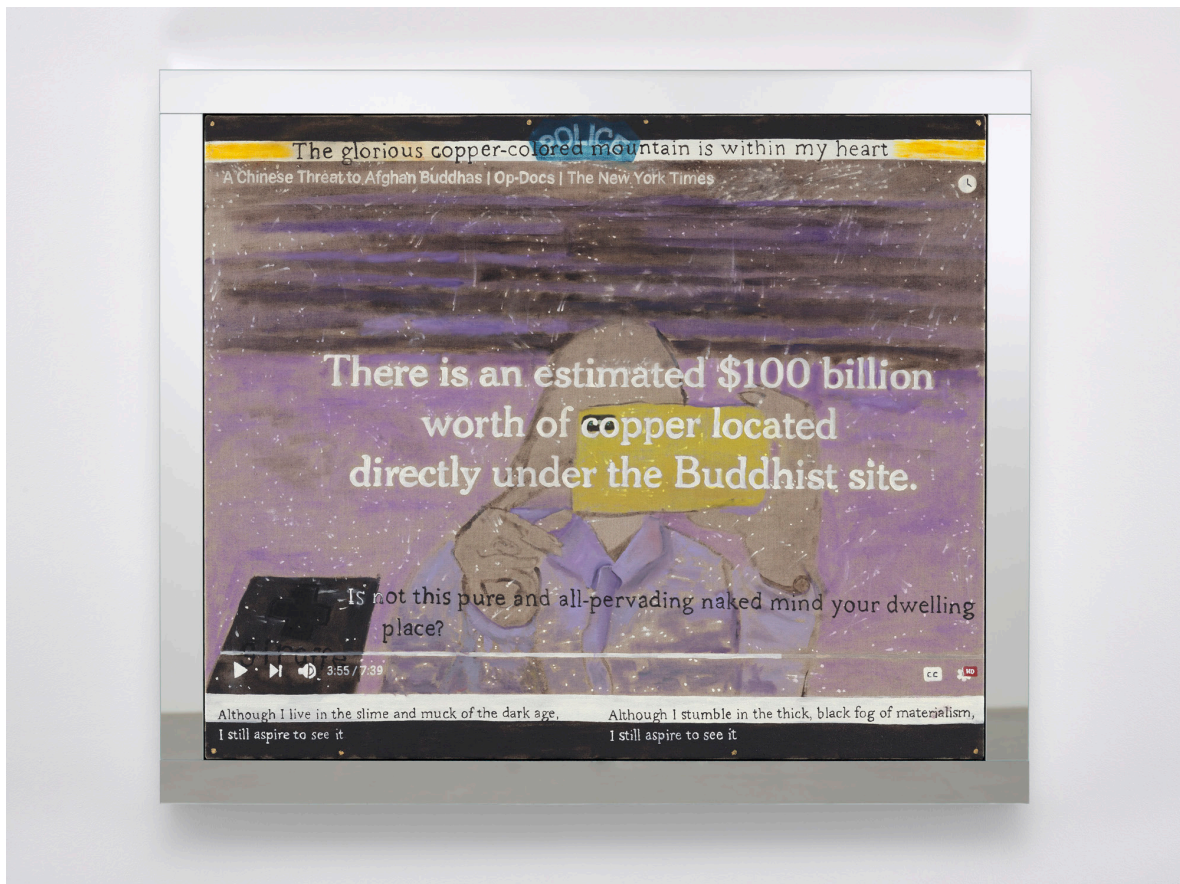
There are so many things to say about that question. My answer would look like an astrology chart. One small part of the chart would be my history of learning. Painting is a self-sufficient action. It is a direct action and

gives all the time in the world. I find so much in painting, for instance, making an answer to a question that reads like a chart.

A few weeks after the gallery walk-through Leidy reflected on the show while the exhibition is temporarily suspended, though viewable online, due to the pandemic.

Thinking about my recent paintings, bound on earth with the COVID-19 virus. This show is called Earth Bound, which turns out is just what a pandemic is. It is not ethereal; the virus clings to bodies and things. Out of the blue, it is trespassing into our most intimate worlds. I read something today by the historian Frank M. Snowden who wrote, "Epidemics are a category of disease that seem to hold up a mirror to human beings as to who we really are." Mirroring is very much what my works aim to embody.

The through-line of this show, for me, is the *Reclining Buddha* painting in the pale blue alcove. It faces the *100 Billion Sadhana of Mahamudra* painting, crossing two of the rooms of the gallery. The Reclining Buddha is a famous image. It was the first way in which the Buddha was depicted after he died, on his death bed, laying down at the end of his life. It is a meditation on his humanness, while at the same time, his enlightenment. I had this painting in the studio for six months, and it had an actual effect on me, which surprised me! I was really shocked by this body. It was so fluid, so peaceful and inviting. Enlightenment is



"100 BILLION SADHANA OF MAHAMUDRA," 2020, OIL ON LINEN, MIRROR. PHOTO: AARON WAX

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a real human quality. That quality is always there in us. We can see it—our basic nature—in flashes. Seeing the Buddha appearing and dying everyday was very nice. I most likely won't find my way to enlightenment in this life, but I aspire to it. I would like to be like the Buddha: fluid, peaceful, and inviting; extending those flashes of realization for the benefit of others.

The *100 Billion Sadhana of Mahamudra* painting, across from *Reclining Buddha*, depicts where we are right now — in Zoom rooms and in online isolation. I was inspired to make this painting in recognition of being online and my position in relationship to the internet—physically as a reflection in my computer screen and mentally filled with dread and fear and a feeling like there was an emergency. The painting holds the experience of sitting in two places at once. Not quite in either location—where are we exactly? The painting is framed by mirrored glass, which turns the whole work into a video or moving image. Words appear on the painting from the Sadhana of Mahamudra, which has an incredible origin story—asking the question, “Is not this pure and all-pervading naked mind your dwelling place?”