



Linda Lighton's Luminous

A Review by Tanya Hartman

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. – Virginia Woolf



Installation View of Luminous.

HYBRID FLORAL FORMS, EVOCATIVE WITH SEXUAL insinuation and vibrating with visceral colour have defined the work of Linda Lighton in recent years. These works were subtly figurative and saucy, partially exposed and demanding to be both looked at and reckoned with. Her newest work, on display at the Center for Arts and Letters at Greenlease Gallery on the campus of Rockhurst University in Kansas City, is different. Formally, it is economical of structure and absent of colour. Psychologically, it is ethereal and shy, demanding not so much to be looked at and coveted individually but instead to be experienced as healing collective. In short, Lighton has moved her work from the corporeality of the driven object to the spirituality of installed sanctuary.

The word luminous connotes intelligence, enlightenment and transcendence. Lighton titled her show with this word specifically because she has recently experienced a significant insight. While watching her friends fight illness, grapple with loss, come to terms with partial fulfilment and political disillusion she perceived that each person had an inner strength and capacity to rebuild themselves morally and spiritually. The adversity that she saw around her seemed to illuminate some common core of decency and courage that was universal and non-character specific. Though every person had individual life circumstances and histories, each seemed to draw upon the same core of inner light for strength. Thus, though the flesh and narratives were unique, the quintessential essence was the same. From this realization came the impetus to create *Luminous*.

Victor Hugo writes, "Strange to say, the luminous world is the invisible world; the luminous world is that which we do not see. Our eyes of flesh see only night." Thus, as we walk into the gallery it is indeed

night we see. The hall is dark and the entryway unadorned. The artist even painted two of the gallery walls a deep navy, both to accentuate the shadow and to evoke deep space and dark sky. But entering the actual enclosure, the viewer confronts a grouping of 70 delicate white chrysalis-like forms hanging in space, each glowing like a firefly within the soft darkness. Communally, the light that they emit seems mineral and otherworldly. Gentle music composed by Paul Rudy, a professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music, wafts through and currents of air make the ceramic forms sway as subtly as they would in nature.

In aggregate, these sculptures have an organic presence, similar to a colony or a hive. Lighton hand-built each form, creating porcelain walls as thin as membranes so that the special LED lights contained within would shine through the clay in a mottled, organic manner much like a peach's skin slowly ripening. Depending upon the density of the clay, the light can appear warm or cool, allowing these white forms to read as milky opals of subtly changing character and hue. At moments, there is rose, then a cool and bruised blue. The effect of the shifting light is to evoke a body, with its various densities and enclosures. The luminosity and subtlety of form have the effect of drawing the viewer towards the installation for closer scrutiny. One stands under these airborne entities, looking upwards. Hence, the viewer becomes the flesh, while the sculptures become something nuanced and mysterious, hovering somewhere between incarnation and disembodiment, floor and ceiling, soil and sky. And yet, each is formally specific and unique. These sculptures seem like abstracted pods and petals and there is great variety in the way that they are modelled. Some are partially open, caught mid-bloom and transported,



Above and below: *Luminous (Details).*



it seems, to another realm. Others are tightly closed, sealed and immature, while still others are fully open, revealing natural compartments and possibly cellular walls. It is hard not to ascribe a narrative to these 'figures' suspended at a midpoint in transition, some young and some old, some open and some shut, some so small they seem barely significant and others almost too large and vaguely dominant. They seem like souls in ascension, partially free from the confines of character and circumstance and yet still specific and it is this very liminal presence that makes the installation so poignant. Linda Lighton has created a small chapel, a place of calm and reflection in which, by looking upwards, we are confronted with our earthly nature but also with our capacity to emit light and to transcend specific circumstance to become a part of greater humanity.

Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas, US. She has received numerous awards including two Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden. Other honours include a grant from the Puffin Foundation and various teaching awards at Yale University and at the University of Kansas including the TIAA-Cref Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at the graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas.