

HERALD ST

NOT STRAIGHT

I thought for a long time it was about pleasure, or maybe joy: untethered, light and quick as a helium balloon. Now I'm thinking of Matt Connors' paintings like I think of Frank O'Hara's poems, which is to say you can't quite trust the colours, that beneath the excitement, the neon dazzle, there are other regions, other rooms.

Tuesday, drizzle, a cup of tea by my side. I'm crouching on the grey floor in front of Magic Wan, painted in Marfa, lavender or mauve, a shape inside it like a magnet, a magnet cast in concrete by Donald Judd. A surface of disclosure, erasure, disclosure, a territory of second thoughts and interruptions, of things not quite being said. Sous rature, and elsewhere – the black Sharpie-like swipe in Tunnel Weaver, say – zones of absolute redaction. How do we speak? Do we do it frankly or are there hiccups, swerves, retractions, do we swallow back our words? A constellation of tiny drips, white and lilac, a spatter of green and red.

We need to talk about Four Thousand Twenty too, which, jazzy, proclaims itself not square, L7, and not straight either, the solid forms not melting but rising into air. Not straight: what does that even mean? Wonky, also queer, one thing leading not onward or to its opposite but sideways, a landscape of acrobatic inversion. God, these colours – I'm not immune – layers of tomato, violet, forest green, not hesitating, but not not hesitating either, a quick pink pencil line, two bolts of black in Column Cross Section with Two Black Holes, emphatic as two black bulls.

Frank says somewhere all thoughts disappear in a strange quiet excitement, and it's something like that, lines versus explosions, and how comfortable is excitement anyway, or love, the itchiness of feelings, the whizz of yellow, the perilousness of gravity, and are you a bottom or a top, though stumbling's going to happen either way.

So maybe this is freefall and the fear of it, Egypt, Hard G declaring itself and Japan Placket slipping in and out of view. It's so hard to figure out how to present yourself, when to hide and when to stop, and weren't the words beautiful all the same: not as tools for expressing feeling but just the way they fell through air.

And then you answer with a blue stroke, lustrous and dirty, and I would know those rods and circles anywhere, rim of paint can, dot dot dash of a green pencil, assembling along the line your own chance language, made and mended, dripped and stained, an exemplary Morse code.

Olivia Laing