

Visitor information

Renée Levi – Rhabarber (Rhubarb)

Museum Langmatt,
8th September to
8th December 2019

Throughout its history as a museum, the Langmatt has seen a great deal, but never before has it seen anything like this: huge pictures reaching almost to the ceilings of the historical rooms. They are like freestanding walls, precisely arranged in relation to each other and altering the architectonic proportions of the rooms. Smaller-format artworks interconnect these giants, creating interrelationships and visual points of focus; these are placed loosely on the floor, leaning on the walls. A magical labyrinth, a temporary store of images, a painterly installation? Once again, the aeons meet: the *fin de siècle* and the present day engage in surprising dialogues that disrupt the power of our habits of seeing and our notions of what painting.

Since the late 1990s, Renée Levi has been calmly interrogating the medium of painting, subjecting a discipline often declared to be dead to joyful and critical reappraisals. She uses extensive spatial installations to extend the effects of colour and form, allowing them to transgress boundaries in surprising ways. Subtle dialogues between painting and architecture bring to light hitherto unexploited possibilities of the medium. Renée Levi does this by deploying radical yet precise interventions. In a playfully light manner, colour and form take on formidable dimensions. With all their sensory force, they lose none of their fragility.

Renée Levi (* 1960 in Istanbul, lives in Basel) is among Switzerland's most significant artists working in paintings and installations. Her artwork has been exhibited internationally for more than 20 years, and it appears in major public and private collections at home and abroad. In 2018, the artist received the renowned art prize of the Société des Arts de Genève, together with CHF 50,000 in prize money. Her painterly space interventions are currently featured at the Biennale Lyon. Renée Levi studied architecture at the HTL Muttentz/Basel and the fine arts at the Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst Zürich. Since 2001, she has been professor of painting at the Hochschule für Gestaltung und Kunst in Basel.

For her solo exhibition at the Museum Langmatt – the first significant presentation of Renée Levi's artwork in Switzerland since 2008 – virtually all of the paintings are new. On the canvases, we can see dynamic whirls or large coloured surfaces, applied using a floor mop in swift succession. The painstaking meshing of the canvases with the historical dining room, the library, and the painting gallery allows the visual energy to expand the potential of paintings with a positively symphonic presence. In the park, Renée Levi exposes a large-format picture to wind and weather, transferring authorship to nature by allowing it to continue her work on the picture.

Dining room

Two panels of considerable size cover the room's three windows. They keep the daylight out, darkening the dining room and shrinking it. The historical context – wallpaper, panelling, stucco, parquet, crystal chandeliers, furniture etc. – is confronted with a brilliant painterly gesture of our time. The first time that we look, we see the epochs colliding in a quite unbridled way. A second look, however, shows that there are in fact subtle points of contact that can be discerned between the two. The light pastel colours of the swirls, which form expansive gestures, echo the French Impressionist works in the collection. Pictures by Eugène Boudin and Camille Pissarro in the Venetian Room, with pale-blue colour values, flank the entrance to the dining room. A small-format still life by Pissarro mediates between the porcelain and other objects in the glass cases and the coloured swirls of the large-format artworks.

Library

In the library, a free-standing image rises virtually to the ceiling. Its position is precisely determined in relation to a visual axis in the gallery, where it finds its answer in a further free-standing picture with the same dimensions. A third panel in the park extends the ensemble into the outdoor space. Three small still life images of fruit by Paul Cézanne offer historical points of connection. In the library, the shift in proportions is still more pronounced than it is in the dining room. Whilst the large-format painting at first appears formidable and almost overwhelming, a closer look reveals it to be permeable. The weave of the canvas is remarkably coarse, and in some areas it even looks semi-transparent. This membranous permeability lends the mighty colour surfaces an astonishing fragility, reinforced by the spontaneous application of the paint. The surfaces follow no precise geometrical system. Instead, they

are created at a stroke, based upon an inner impulse. The size of that prosaic article, the floor mop, defines the width of the colour expanses (as if as a matter of course, and not without humour.) Here, one may perceive a striking affinity for imperfection, with a certain measure of pleasure in taking risks. This strange combination contains the incomparable strength of Renée Levi's paintings, particularly in historical surroundings, outside the neutrality of the White Cube.

Gallery

The artworks in the gallery follow a similar image configuration. The permeability of the weave – and thus the fragility of the two largest formats – is observable primarily in the case of the free-standing artwork. In the gallery, this is joined by an “abundance” that is impossible to overlook. The artworks cluster against the wall as if they were in a storehouse or a studio. Standing on the floor or on the consoles, leaning loosely against the walls, they create an impression of being temporary and incomplete, as if we had wandered into an exhibition still in the process of being set up, rather than a “finished” exhibition. This conscious arrangement of the artworks is yet another way of relativising a “self-consciousness” of sheer size. Extremely small picture formats are conventionally hung on the walls as individual artworks – albeit at a considerable height – to figure as important accents. They almost triumph over the larger artworks, which are “only” propped up, plainly ready to vanish again at once. In this moment, it becomes plain that there is a definite sense of value underlying the hanging and leaning of pictures.

As observers, we shrink as we enter the gallery. Turning around, we can barely believe that we came through the low entrance without bumping our heads. If one allows this phenomenon to take effect as one rests in one of the comfortable armchairs from the museum's stock, it becomes more and more apparent that, in this exhibition – no matter how overwhelming it might appear at first sight – Renée Levi has developed a surprisingly sensitive balance between sensory presence and fragile dissolution, between duration and vanishing, between courage and doubt. Even in the gallery, which contains a concentrated energy of colour never before seen in its 100-year history, one sees in the same breath signs of vulnerability and potential impermanence, inscribed into the canvases. Renée Levi's painterly grandeur is oriented on a human scale. The encounter with the historical context leads to a meshing of the Langmatt with our age, and, con-

versely, to a historical contextualising of the contemporary. Both positions are courageous: that of the Impressionists in their era, misunderstood for years and decades, and that of Renée Levi today, unflinchingly questioning conventions and established perceptions.

Park

In the middle of a small birch grove, half concealed behind the leaves, a further freestanding large-format artwork can be seen. At the right times of day, the sun illuminates the coarse canvas from behind, so that the stretcher frame also shows through it in places. In the coming months, nature will alter the picture through wind and weather. The trees and bushes will also contribute to the change in the picture's appearance: the birch leaves will change colour and gradually fall, and the dense, green background will lighten perceptibly as winter approaches.

Publication

A publication relating to the exhibition will be brought out by Hatje Cantz Verlag in late September. It offers an insight into the work of Renée Levi over the past ten years and documents events that include the exhibition at Museum Langmatt. This publication is associated with the art prize of the Société des Arts de Genève, and contains texts by Markus Stegmann, Karine Tissot, and Christina Végh.

Karine Tissot (ed.): *Renée Levi*, Société des Arts de Genève, Geneva, Berlin 2019 (German/English/French, Hardcover, 128 pages, CHF 38.00 / 25.00).

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