

Flute Notes: Peter Barrickman's Recent Paintings

In Sylvia Plath's 1959 poem *Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond*, seasonal change is less a passage from one space to another than a transformation in the condition of things. Cold descends "layer after layer" and summer recedes. Life withdraws into cases and husks. Color and movement sink beneath surfaces. Yet this apparent retreat is not an ending. "This is not death, it is something safer," Plath writes. The pond has entered a state of latency, holding forms and rhythms that will emerge in future cycles. Plath's changing landscape is visible and psychological, a place where observation gives over to the energies of rearrangement. Even the poem's title converts life cycles into metrical sound as reeds become flute notes and the natural world becomes a strata of notations.

Now coldness comes sifting down, layer after layer,
To our bower at the lily root.
Overhead the old umbrellas of summer
Wither like pithless hands. There is little shelter.

Hourly the eye of the sky enlarges its blank
Dominion. The stars are no nearer.
Already frog-mouth and fish-mouth drink
The liquor of indolence, and all thing sink

Into a soft caul of forgetfulness.
The fugitive colors die.
Caddis worms drowse in their silk cases,
The lamp-headed nymphs are nodding to sleep like
statues.

Puppets, loosed from the strings of the puppet-
master,
Wear masks of horn to bed.
This is not death, it is something safer.
The wingy myths won't tug at us anymore:

The molts are tongueless that sang from above the
water
Of golgotha at the tip of a reed,
And how a god flimsy as a baby's finger
Shall unhusk himself and steer into the air.

Something similar is happening in Peter Barrickman's recent paintings. They begin with recognizable forms culled from our world. But also from found print media and his imagination. Water flows, plants branch, leaves accumulate, light appears through windows, boats are tossed at sea, and paper folds. But Barrickman's observation never settles into the resolve of description. His representations and their shapes and colors occupy states of transition. The paintings move between liquid, vegetal, architectural, and crystalline conditions without fully belonging to any of them. The paintings disclose transformation on both a material and philosophical level. The

work's physical forms register the processes of making with acts of layering, alteration, accretion, and revision. At the same time, these processes of becoming gives form to a broader philosophical conception of change as a condition of existence. Never entirely fixed, the paintings and their image-vocabularies continually emerge, dissolve, and reorganize. Transformation is not simply what the paintings depict, it is the principle through which they operate.

Barrickman's paintings like Plath's poem are similarly notational: repeated shapes, intervals, clusters, and interruptions create rhythms across the surface and hover about in compositional arrangements and constraints. They are comprised of a lexicon of notations that never coalesce into stable condition. A line can suggest a branch or a ribbon before becoming a current or a map. A leaf becomes a brushstroke. Rectangles and dots become windows and thresh-holds. A hedge becomes an cartographic survey. Recognition arrives and then recedes. Like Plath's pond, the painting holds things temporarily, allowing one recognizable thing to remain latent inside and aside of another.

Barrickman's *Testaccio Video* (2026), a nocturnal and architectural composition is an intriguing contrast to an early Laura Owens painting, *Untitled* (1995). Depicting an improbable interior in which smaller paintings inhabit the larger painting, Owens distorted perspective destabilizes the viewer's position, while its pictures-within-the-picture theme makes painting, its history and its styles part of the subject. Representation, decoration, abstraction, and architectural space coexist in Owen's composition. Barrickman's painting on the other hand, with its many windows and small rectangular pictures that drift over an illuminated apartment façade belongs to another pictorial condition. Here his free floating paintings hover or slip into architectural recesses. The distinction between depicted space and the painting's surface becomes uncertain. While Owens's embedded pictures are cataloged, Barrickman's smaller images feel less inventoried than remembered. They resemble marks and fragments that have migrated from elsewhere in his work. *Testaccio Video*'s picture-within-a-picture experiment is as much temporal as it is spatial, countering Owens's picture-within-a-picture motif with its severe perspectival organization and its indexed legibility of accumulated painting styles.

Josephine Halvorson's paintings also offers a relevant comparison. In her 2023 series *On the Ground*, Halvorson describes her marks as notational records of direct experience. Working on site, she attends so closely to a particular subject field that ordinary scale becomes unstable. For example, depictions of gravel becomes galactic and litter becomes geological. The

stranger the image becomes, the more insistently it remains attached to a particular encounter, place, and duration. Barrickman shares Halvorson's sensitivity to the transformation produced by looking, but abandons her commitment to verification. If Halvorson's notation functions as transcription, Barrickman's notations functions as metamorphosis. The world provides him with a vocabulary rather than a destination. Things do not cease to resemble what has been seen, but neither are they required to remain faithful to it.

This is where Plath returns. Her pond is populated by forms whose apparent disappearance conceals another condition of life. Barrickman's paintings similarly allow images to withdraw, reappear, and change state. Halvorson anchors painting to the experience of having been somewhere; Owens makes painting conscious of its existence among other images; Barrickman allows observation itself to circulate. Looking becomes memory, memory becomes invention, and invention returns unexpectedly to the world.

Barrickman's place within contemporary painting alongside his contemporaries such as Owens and Halvorson ultimately lies in the distinct way he understands painting as an activity of perception. If Halvorson anchors the image to the specificity of encounter, and Owens turns painting toward its own histories, conventions, and proliferating languages, Barrickman allows observation to remain fundamentally unsettled. His paintings neither verify the world nor retreat into the self-consciousness of the image; they hold representation in a state of becoming. Forms migrate between nature and abstraction, perception and memory, carrying traces of what they have been into what they might become. Like Plath's poem, Barrickman's paintings are rife with sinking, layering, nodding, molting, and unhusking. These are all mutations. In his paintings forms emerge, recede, and return altered, making painting not simply a record of seeing, but seeing itself a place where painting can continually begin.

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