

Talking About Decadence, Disneyland, and Little Bathrooms with Lizbeth Mitty



Leap, 2017, oil on linen, 10 x 8 feet, courtesy of the artist

By **MARY GAGLER**, SEPT. 2017

A solo exhibition at DAVID&SCHWEITZER Contemporary this October features recent large-scale works by New York painter **Lizbeth Mitty**. From urban ruins to chandeliers and carousels, Mitty navigates hope and decadence as she captures emblems of the carefree in their decline. Her Stemming from a childhood reverie out her window in Queens of an apocalyptic Disneyland assembled from elevated subways and distant city lights, her paintings reflect her perceptions of a certain "wow" factor in the visual world. I sat down with Mitty in her Red Hook studio to discuss little bathrooms, the end of the world, and everything in between.

Mary Gagler: Who are some of your early influences?

Lizbeth Mitty: In the 70's, my teacher was Malcolm Morley, an acclaimed photorealist painter and a really interesting and scary character. In fact, literally everybody dropped the class [at SUNY Stony Brook] except me. I had to do a lot of my painting at home and bring it to him, as I could not necessarily paint around him. But I felt challenged, and I went and produced a lot of work. He talked about Cezanne all the time, and that really rang a bell with me. I used to cut high school to hang out [with] the Cezanne paintings in MoMA. The structure in Cezanne's work is deeply ingrained in my whole mindset when I work: the idea that every part of the painting is as important as every other part, and the way you can break down a landscape or any subject into patches of color and tonality.



Image of three chandeliers, L to R: Big Steve, 2017, oil on canvas, 120 x 50 in. Twist, 2017, oil on canvas, 120 x 50 in. Antlers #5, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 50 in., courtesy of the artist

MG: Describe an early scene of art-making to me.

LM: I always did art because my family were pretty much all artists. It was what I did as a kid: hang out in the basement with my father, an inventor, and [with] one of my brothers who painted. But early on I wanted to write. I was an avid reader from the time I was about 14, and that's what I first wanted to do. But the other thing, the painting just took over.

MG: Do you think that you tell stories with your paintings now?

LM: I mean, every painting tells some kind of story. But the language of color and abstraction is pretty real. When you're working on a painting, you really go into another zone. While that's happening, everything that's on your mind or on the edge of your mind feeds in. I always feel like I am surrounded by people that aren't there when I am in the studio: people who've passed away that have been important to me, or [people] who have talked to me about art and the words just keep going through my head. Then it becomes subliminal, and it all kind of melts into the painting.



Seen, 2016, oil on canvas, 20 x 16 in., courtesy of the artist

MG: Is there something you're explicitly thinking while you're painting?

LM: When I paint, I think: "Oh, that's pretty! That's really pretty!" Of course it's not completely pretty; it's bleak. It's a beautiful sadness, a beautiful apocalypse. The apocalyptic thing has always been there, but it's not because I am saying I want to paint the apocalypse. It's probably just because I grew up in Queens, and I had the kind of childhood where you are surrounded by industrial things and subways and things that are not very natural. Mine was a city kind of upbringing but not a posh upper-class one.

MG: Later in your career, chandeliers come in as sort of a "posh upper-class" reference. Can you describe where that comes from?

LM: What happened with the chandeliers was [that] I took a trip to Barcelona two years ago in the summer, and of course I was blown away by the cathedrals and the Gaudi. When I am someplace that blows me away, I take a lot of pictures and make little sketches. Then I come home and I don't know if it's going to go into the painting or not. In this case, what seemed to come out was the chandeliers, which I wasn't focusing on while I was there. The Barcelona *Cathedral* painting happened, and that is why I keep it out in my studio. When I painted it, I enjoyed making that chandelier most of all; I squeezed it out of three tubes of different blacks and indigos (I never use a real black, so it's more of an indigo), [and] black roman earth (which is a dark dark brown).

After that painting, the chandeliers started appearing on unexpected backgrounds. At the time, I was working in a process of layering images on a single canvas. With this one, the image on the bottom layer is the office of a junkyard with a chandelier superimposed over it to give it the feeling of an antique shop. It's something I had seen on the Bowery, so it's combining the two kinds of imagery interesting me at the time: the previous junkyard stuff and then the newer interiors and chandeliers knotted together in the same painting.



Cathedral, 2015, oil on canvas, 68 x 60 in., photograph by the author

MG: What other kinds of subjects have gotten your attention?

LM: Earlier in my career I did a lot of interiors. There was one point when I was doing little bathrooms and I would go to the St. Mark's Bar, stand there for an hour, and then run home and paint it. I never referenced photographs or sketches really until around 1990, because at that time I was looking at nature and I couldn't get the variety I needed. I referenced photos during a very short period of time in the beginning of the process mostly for the purposes of composition. Well, you do make spaces in your head. But when you get them out, it

becomes something entirely different. Things achieve prominence that wouldn't have if you were actually looking at the subject, which is why the photograph is a dangerous thing to reference. You have to reference it very lightly. With the chandelier paintings, I had to get in there and make the painting in a couple of hours and maybe pick away at it a little bit the next day, but they are a one-off. You have to be really fast and really inside of it, like working in ink on paper.



Tumble, 2017, oil on linen, 12 x 12 feet., courtesy of the artist

MG: Is something finite about an object or an interior that reflects in your process?

LM: I think it's just that [with] the kinds of interiors or objects that I'm interested in, there is a formal element to [them] and also a spirit of that object or that place that hooks me in. I notice something splendid and then I'm hooked; or [I'm in] an overwhelming place, be it an industrial landscape or a little bathroom that has crazy tiles and writing on it. It's just that I see something that makes me say "wow," and then I have to translate it into paint. Within that "wow" [factor] there is decadence, ruin, beauty... it's all there.

I don't think it's a coincidence that I was making these in conjunction with the whole Trump thing. There's a painting called *Royal* that I was making just before he was elected, and it represents decadence, [even though] it started out as a 9/11 painting. I painted a burned Detroit house structure on top of of it, and then a sense of castles and palaces forming out of the ruin came out on top of that. [There's a painting I made] called *Hoping to Hope* with a black background that I did on the day of the women's march, and I think it was because I was thinking of torches and symbols of freedom. But that [work] is as overtly political as I get. I never set out to do a political painting. If it happens, it's just part of everything else.



Hoping to Hope, 2017, oil and metal on board, 60 x 30 in., courtesy of the artist

MG: One thing that struck me in looking at your earlier works about Detroit structures and urban ruins was that there is a sense of stillness and then your objects have a lot of movement to them. I was wondering about the journey from barren urban landscape to ornate rollicking object, and what that journey felt like for you.

LM: I think it's just a manifestation of the fact that I am working in more of a linear way. And that's very different for me on canvas. It's a first for me to do the whole painting that way, because I am a colorist and I've always expressed that through blocks and chunks of color as building blocks. It is very liberating to cut loose and just use line. It was starting to happen here as part of everything (in *Cathedral*). I mean, it has always been a part of my paintings, but it really jumped out after that.

MG: Somewhere you mentioned a sense of hope in these paintings. How do those jive together? Hope and decadence?

LM: I just know that a good painting says a lot of things, it doesn't just say one thing.



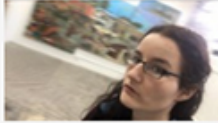
Sagrada Green, 2016, oil on canvas, 30 x 30 in., courtesy of the artist

MG: In closing, is there anything else you would like to share with me?

LM: I was just thinking about when I was a kid. I used to look out the window at our house in Queens, and far in the distance there were lights and a very distant bridge, and buildings, and there was a subway train, and from far away the trains honking sounded just like a foghorn. I used to look out there and look at those lights, and somehow I would turn that view into a Disneyland kind of place in my mind. I would just stare at that [view] and make that happen for hours, and maybe that pertains to a lot of my work in a transient way. It's just all there.

Decadence can be beauty, and it can be ugliness: all these things work hand in hand in a very thick mesh of what it's like to be alive right now. I think a painter just sifts that through themselves, and it comes out in ways that they can't even predict. **WM**

Glistens Down Me runs October 6 - 29, 2017 at DAVID&SCHWEITZER Contemporary, with a reception on October 6 from 6-9PM.



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