

Rachelle Sawatsky  
Sep 16 — Nov 25, 2023



# Vitals

Western Front is pleased to present a solo exhibition by Rachelle Sawatsky, a multidisciplinary artist based in Vancouver and Los Angeles whose practice spans painting, drawing, ceramics, and writing. This exhibition brings together a new series of brightly coloured abstract paintings and glazed ceramic wall works, which together further the artist's interest in sensory perception, cognition, and signifying systems.

For her series of small format paintings, *Pathers* (2023), Sawatsky has applied a spectrum of fluorescent watercolor, acrylic, oil, and flashe paint to canvas in successive layers through a breadth of techniques, including washing, impasto, stenciling, and expressive mark-making. Through this accumulation of details, Sawatsky creates a unique visual lexicon, which she invites the viewer in to study by the intimacy of each painting's scale. At close proximity, recognizable forms such as stars, love hearts, and dots, appear alongside more ambiguous shapes and fluid elements, with each gesture acting as an annotation - placing emphasis, committing to memory, or distilling importance. Through this, each painting charts the successive events of its making, and an ongoing transit between sensing, perceiving, and interpreting without definitive end.

Punctuating the installation of paintings on canvas, are new additions to Sawatsky's ongoing series of ceramic wall works, *Lexica* (2014—). Placed above eye line, these works point outwards, connecting this presentation to Sawatsky's oeuvre (in which these works appear as a recurring motif), and through the form being reminiscent of an asterisk, the typographical symbol commonly used to signal a footnote, omission, or doubt.

Parallel to the development of *Vitals*, Sawatsky invited the Vancouver-based musician Alexi Baris to create a new octophonic sound composition to underscore vocabularies shared in paint and sound, such as tone and texture. Produced during a six-week residency at Western Front, Baris's work *Firedamp* (2023) furthers his interest in psychoacoustics—how the human auditory system perceives various sounds—by exploring the sonic potentiality generated by a solitary feedback patch on a modular synthesizer. The work will be performed on Sep 22 and 23, 2023.

# Tracking Her Vitals

by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

It's so mental. I am alone, with my back to the world. I am pleasure seeking, picturing intersubjective penetrations and collisions that are both drawn from memory and draw on speculative anticipation. As soon as the scene gets going in my mind's eye, a shudder flutters across what I think is my diaphragm. A deep interior place of gut and muscle in the middle of me. I imagine it, trying to see inside of things. If progress happens at all, it's rapid. A sparkling feeling flashes and is quickly gone. It can appear as a spray, but a spray dispersed within an enclosed body, and thus obscured and muffled to the outside. Maybe I'm depressed. Maybe I'm in need of some of the vitality that that sparkling spray represents. It can feel like I'm chasing something that's barely there to begin with, something imagined that manifests physically as a shock of tingles that dissipates over the skin of the rest of my body from the centre out. That's when a clenched tension releases itself. A smattering of weak pulses finally fades like ripples across syrup. There always is a comedown.

But the end of one thing marks the beginning of another, and a new episode unfolds: a residual part of the whole volatile sensory episode lingers as an afterimage, elusive and paradoxical to describe—a bright darkness, a sunless warmth, a black neon, an uplifting weight. In fact, the responsiveness and syncopated positioning of afterimage and afterglow—an ambiguous visual presence, both distinct and ineffable, reflecting the lasting power of something now absent—figures as a key strategy and life goal here. At this point, I am invariably flat on my back with eyelids heavy over their sunken orbs. Light shines through my lids' overlaying, semi-translucent skin, looking like reddish static. I am neither wakeful nor asleep, but rather slipping into a no-place of meta-perception.

In this closed-eye, receptive state after an endorphin rush, a vague, impossible depth develops gradually as an inchoate image would on an exposed print floating in a chemical bath. Closed-eye vision has a lot in common with cameraless photography, like photograms or cyanotypes, both dealing in inverted shadows of things and indexical impressions. From within that hermetic no-place come waves of internally created visual stimuli, psychically generated imagery without

referent: a pale blue mist, a bloom of purple, a blur of magenta, a splash of acid yellow. It is a nebulous nebula of cloudy colour and shifting light in there. Amidst the burgeoning, murky sense of space (the abysmally deep space of self), singular events leap to the fore as vivid punctuations, bold asterisks—a reminder that this meditative flow state of private, intracorporeal visual observation has untold euphoric potential and proffers many handholds for finding a path through the fog. And when a lavender fog rolls into the frame, it feels like a full body pillow supporting and grounding the otherwise unmoored perceptual experience of such sightless seeing, such closed-eye looking that is not quite vision, but also not not vision and maybe even not not not vision.

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What are those things we see when our eyes are shut? What happens to sight when we turn it inward, back to the world? How do we reckon with and capture the phenomenological experience of watching our own optical apparatus improvise in the dark? There is no one answer, but Rachele's new paintings propose possibilities in their compact surfaces loaded with an unstable accumulation of densities and dimensions. The smallness of each painting does many things—giving the appearance of shrunkenness, compression, concentration, provisionality, intimacy, and a nearness scaled to everyday life. It brings us in and lets us relate.

Using thin washes, stains, rubbings, splotches, smudges, and patches of a variety of homemade pigment recipes that range in effect from smooth acrylic opacity to waxen and watery translucence, she sets the stage for shape and mark to appear suspended and adrift, rather than affixed to anything. There is a tension between the bleached out, muddy fields of colour that make up the paintings' backgrounds and the hot, electric dabs, splats, drips, and smears that constitute the activity contained therein. Fluorescent yellow, hot pink, turquoise, highlighter green, and tangerine: her colour relations throw a fragile illusion of non-representational space into being. The twilight atmosphere is a space in which pulsing lights, retinal floaters, and optical phantoms can dance like fistfuls of confetti or petals on the surface (both reflective and transparent) of a pond. A crucial fluidity runs throughout, in showers and droplets, in the edges of one colour bleeding into another and a pour's entropic drift, in paints' sedimentary settling and the finely veined waterways of an evaporated wash.

The closer I get, the more there is to parse. Engrossing microhabitats, the pictures reveal themselves to be teeming with signs of life. Within the all-over field of polyphonic chatter occurring at varying volumes, each discrete painterly moment gives way to an adjacent anomaly so that a textured thickness accrues. Cryptic signs, undecipherable glyphs, and stenciled images emerge from the disorderly soup, surfacing from the far side of meaning as though having passed through an abyss and sustained some damage. Every mark is a kind of writing that invites reading, part of her lexicon. Every mark provides evidence of the chance-based processes that birthed it. The strangest are the many masked shapes of stickers that Rachelle drew, cut, adhered, painted over, and peeled off to leave the hollow outline of their absence on her pictures. The hole left by each sticker's silhouette is like a missing part of the puzzle. Positive and negative shapes weave in and out of each other. The cut-out shapes are jagged and spiky like barbed wire, or balled up and punchy like fists, stars, and suns. They accumulate in haphazard crowds, semi-obscured beneath multiple layers. The peeled-off

stickers often leave thin drop shadows attached to their edges from paint dragged across their ridges, like embossment or engraving, carrying the suggestion of impressions left and pressure exerted. Things stuck and unstuck leave their mark on a surface which remains receptive to new impressions while still retaining permanent traces of past impressions, recalling Freud's mystic writing pad, his metaphor for the psychological mechanisms of perception and memory. Like Lisa Frank-meets-Dubuffet, the ghost stickers contribute to a performed excess of swarming bits and pieces, crowded textures and fragments that achieves kinship with the non-perspectival arrangements and non-objective scrawlings of a child's early experiments in drawing. Rachelle is exploring chaotic sense experience, unregulated flow, and different ways to contain and guide it. These *Pathers* might be scores or they might be maps, but the small-scale barrage of tangled stimuli that they document testifies to a complex process of ontological uncertainty that strains the range of paint's materiality and affirms a conviction that sight is as vital with eyes closed as with eyes open.

## Biographies

Rachelle Sawatsky is an artist and writer based in Los Angeles, United States and Vancouver, Canada. Her practice encompasses painting, ceramics, drawing, and critical and creative writing. She teaches at Emily Carr University of Art + Design.

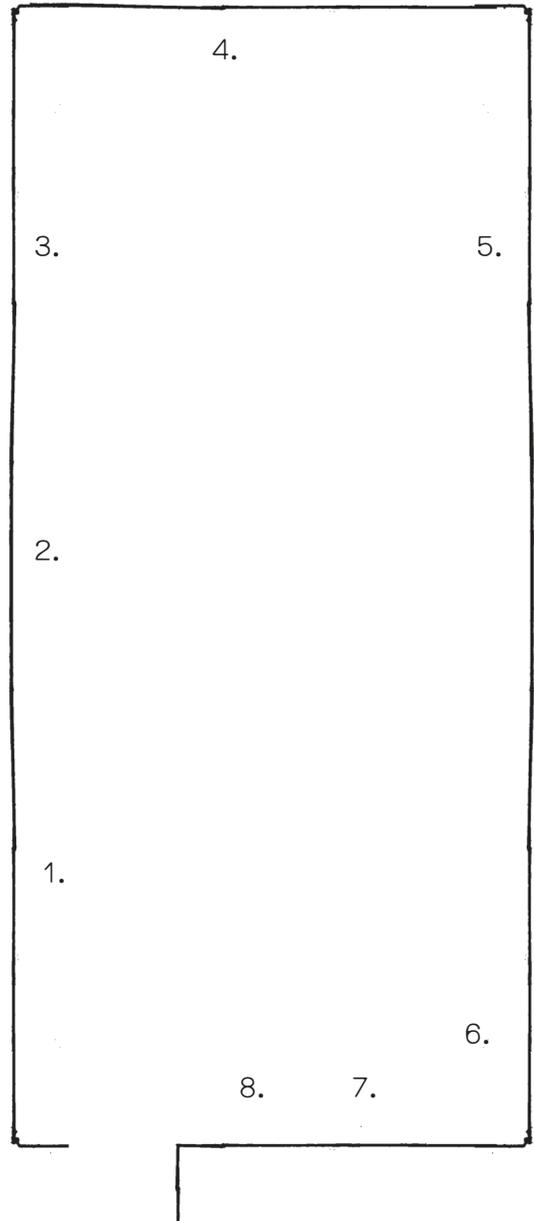
Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer is an art writer, curator, and educator based in Los Angeles, United States. Her writing can be read in Artforum as well as exhibition catalogues on artists including Luchita Hurtado, Carol Rama, Suellen Rocca, Rosemarie Castoro, and Judy Chicago. She runs The Finley Gallery, an alternative art space in Los Feliz, and is the publisher of the small press Pep Talk.

# List of Works

# Floorplan

All works by Rachelle Sawatsky,  
and courtesy of the artist.

1. *Pather 4* (2023)  
acrylic, watercolour, oil, and flashe paint  
on canvas  
41 x 51 cm
2. *Pather 1* (2023)  
acrylic, watercolour, oil, and flashe paint  
on canvas  
41 x 51 cm
3. *Pather 2* (2023)  
acrylic, watercolour, oil, and flashe paint  
on canvas  
41 x 51 cm
4. *Pather 5* (2023)  
acrylic, watercolour, oil, and flashe paint  
on canvas  
41 x 51 cm
5. *Pather 3* (2023)  
acrylic, watercolour, oil, and flashe paint  
on canvas  
46 x 61 cm
6. *Lexica 32* (2023)  
enamel overglaze on ceramic  
40 x 39 x 5 cm
7. *Lexica 33* (2023)  
enamel overglaze on ceramic  
34 x 48 x 5 cm
8. *Lexica 34* (2023)  
enamel overglaze on ceramic  
43 x 43 x 5 cm



# Project Team

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