

*Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.*

Twice is a modest estimate. Karl Marx's sentiment might better be revised to read: "all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, *ad nauseam* – the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce, *and by each subsequent iteration, sadder and more absurd than the last.*" History reveals our worst compulsions; it is heavy with repetition fatigue, weighed down by our wilful forgetfulness. "What we cannot remember," a certain psychoanalyst once said, "we will repeat." History, then, is less a pat retelling of the past than a cautionary tale of the cruelty we are fated to reprise.

Lorienne Lotz has long made a study of history's rehearsals, her compositions a stage on which a changing cast of corrupt characters return time and again to familiar plot points. The seeming instability of truth is a thematic throughline in her enquiries, as is a sense of being oversaturated and overstimulated by the glut of news media that has come to define the polarised present. Evading the entrenched positions of contemporary politics, Lotz instead pursues a productive uncertainty in her material engagement with her subject. "These works do not seek resolution," the artist writes. "I am interested in what happens when absurdity is no longer hidden beneath the surface but becomes the surface itself."

Refusing to settle into pictorial clarity, Lotz's works remain suspended between figurative description and abstract redaction. Her limber lines – given in oil or occasional acrylic, transcribed in charcoal, or scratched into wet paint – have about them a provisional quality, each being subject to revisions and erasures, to the eclipsing brushstrokes of opaque pigment. Her drips, scrawls, and other, more incidental marks find a counterpoint in the often-vertical divisions that cleave many of her canvases (a compositional equivalent, one imagines, of oppositional politics). The suggestion that nothing is fixed, that these works, having stayed in the artist's studio, might be endlessly reworked, is perhaps revealing of an ethical reluctance to certitude. Rather than reassurances, the artist offers us generative discordancy.

In references, too, Lotz privileges the seemingly incongruous. Art-historical excerpts, news events, biblical motifs, and literary allusions coincide in her compositions and their corresponding titles. However farcical their proximity might first appear, such unlike things afford unexpected resonances. Take, for example, *Falling Man*, which gestures at once to

German expressionist Max Beckmann's 1950 painting of the same title, the indelible Associated Press photograph of a figure falling from the North Tower on 9/11, and the story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Or look to *Ubu in the White House*, which simultaneously speaks to the erosion of American democracy, the titular tyrannical character in French playwright Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896), and the latter's lasting significance in South African cultural production as a metaphor for the country's political failings. In further works, like *Talking through his hat*, *Egg on his face*, and *Gift of the gab?*, the often nonsensical imagery of idiomatic expressions is literally described to darkly comic effect. Others include overtures to justice, redemption, or peace – the scales and gavel in *Verdicts before evidence*, the crown of thorns in *Scapegoat I*, and the white dove in *The fragile now* – yet any optimism is sullied by the stain of oppression spreading as ink across wet paper. "There is no escaping our own shadows," Lotz suggests, "nor the ironies embedded within the stories we tell ourselves."

Allegory, satire, history painting, warning – even in genre, Lotz's studies are slippery. "This body of work emerges from a world that feels increasingly fractured," she writes, "where labels and categories often replace our shared humanity." Resisting any easy definition becomes resistance of another kind, a setting aside of overdetermined difference to arrive at something more nuanced and muddled, the ambivalent shade between black-and-white binaries. If empathy had a hue, it would likely be an ambiguous one, like those that colour Lotz's compositions – taupe, perhaps, or griegie, or one of those ill-named shades: battleship, gunmetal, and cadet grey (even so muted a tone is rendered military, freighted with violent associations).

*History repeats itself*; this much is apparent. Yet the speed at which it reiterates appears only to accelerate. Condensed from centuries into the hour's news cycle, once-legible narratives dissolve into contradictions and confusions. Felicity and fallacy are purposefully conflated; duplicity is strategy, apathy the intended outcome. "Like Alice in Wonderland, I find myself navigating a landscape in which familiar structures no longer hold, where perspective shifts constantly, and any fixed point of reference becomes elusive," Lotz writes. "Unlike Wonderland, however, there is no awakening and no return; there are only lasting consequences of our individual and collective actions."