

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

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## LAURA LANCASTER *A Stranger's Dream*

by Molly Elizalde

SARGENT'S DAUGHTERS | MARCH 20 – APRIL 19, 2015

British painter Laura Lancaster is known for making works from photos found in flea markets. She began the series while she was making paintings from old family photos. Lancaster found she could not distinguish herself from her twin sister and felt disconnected from the moment of the photo and her own identity in the image.

Her new works in *A Stranger's Dream*, on view last month at Sargent's Daughters—a show that marked the artist's New York debut—are made from the moving image: paintings rendered from stills of found home movie reels and Super 8 films. Lancaster paints the film stills as if she is looking through the viewfinder, navigating the scene. She scrutinizes the lack of significance in the lost moments and scavenges for meaning in her alienated, unknown subjects. There is a delicate and caring quality in Lancaster's work, like she is seeking to commemorate lost beings, or the memories shaping each individual that have become meaningless with time.

The most successful works in the show are the two largest paintings, each made of two canvases displayed one on top of the other and side-by-side, respectively. Each depicting two film stills in a singular work, these untitled paintings are mysteriously cinematic. The work with the side-by-side, horizontal display seems to be two stills from a panning shot across a room. On one panel is half the face of a smiling woman; on the other are a man and a woman waving at the camera—three white circles or holes obscure their faces and the background. Even though dark borders distinguish the separate canvases as different stills, they remain connected moments.



Laura Lancaster, "Untitled" (2015). Oil on canvas, 102 × 90". Courtesy of Sargent's Daughters.

The figuration is slightly blurred and the background is rendered through wide, abstract strokes. Lancaster's style hovers between abstraction and clear representation, demonstrating the faded meaning of the original document from which she took the images. The holes in the second panel—perhaps a direct reference to damaged film stock—are a reminder that these commemorative films are fragile; they will not last forever, even through Lancaster's hauntingly enigmatic paintings.

The other double panel work in the show has similar abstract qualities with a single blurred figure represented in two separate stills from a film. The smooth, wide strokes here speak to the physicality of Lancaster's style—they give an expressionistic feeling. Lancaster illustrates the hazy sentiments evoked by the films, as if she is the prophet of their meaning in the present. Still, splatters and dripping paint, along with the holes as in the other paneled work, give that damaged quality, like a speckled film or a spotty memory.

These same formal qualities appear in another of her larger works, also untitled; this painting depicts the face of a woman across the entire work made on board rather than canvas. The many bright colors bleed into one another, making the figure at once distinct from the background, while also blending with her surroundings. The undefined border, with skin-colored streaks dripping into black, communicates the uncertainty of the moment in its present context. This gives the work a dreamy quality that emanates from both the subject's expression and Lancaster's painting style. By blurring colors and shapes, she blends the hazy identities of her subjects into phantasmal paintings.

The five smaller paintings in the show are almost wholly abstract, characterized by wide brush strokes, but with thick paint streaks. Lancaster uses mostly the same color scheme in each of these works, making the semi-distinguishable figures fade into the background, obscuring the human forms that the viewer assumes to be there. In one of these smaller untitled works, she smears white, purple, and pink paint across the board; the only distinguishable feature is a face swept into the streaks and perhaps two other bodies in motion. These smaller works have a much quieter presence. Lancaster's role as a medium for the lost moments of the original films doesn't quite fulfill its potential here; these works lack the details that make her other works evocative of human moments in time. Perhaps indicating our fading memories and the anonymous lives of those who have passed away, the indistinguishable figures hold little significance to the viewer.



Laura Lancaster, "Untitled" (2015). Oil on canvas, 51 × 205 ". Courtesy of Sargent's Daughters.

Lancaster's paintings depict our strange reality. They hold onto the collective moments that oscillate from meaningful for one person, to vacant for another. They are delicate without being sentimental and truthful without being harrowing. Hers is the kind of contemporary work—amongst much mixed media condemning politics or our social and natural environment—that you can imagine in your everyday life.

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**CONTRIBUTOR**

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