

Dana Lok

Closer to the Metal

Opening Reception 18.05.2023

19.05.2023 - 29.07.2023

How do I work my way from simple building blocks to the complex world I see around me, the world of trees, fingers, fabric, rain, keyboards, wind, facts and flesh? I think I'll go from the bottom up. Atoms arrange into molecules, which in turn make cells, cells cluster into bodies, bodies make people, and people get together to make speech, communities and institutions. Or, take a computer. A multiplicity of switches, on and off, 0's and 1's, act in concert through layers of code to push light through an array of pixels that create the interactive, virtual space of the screen.

I began this body of work driven by an image that flickers in mind when I consider the notion that our world is built from basics, from the ground up. My sense that nature is arranged into levels must trace to the idea that the way big, complex things look depends on the way small, simple things behave. Dependence looks a bit like one thing sitting on top of another.

With that in mind, getting closer to understanding the world might look like zooming in, or tunneling down, until you hit a hard, physical core. "Closer to the metal", the programmers' term for coding languages least abstracted from the computer's hardware, calls to mind a thin lip where symbolic commands nearly touch the bones of the machine. How, exactly, does a word nudge metal? I want to picture the puzzle of how weightless things—opinions, concepts, beliefs, images, speech—occupy matter, push it around, rest on top of it, and are simultaneously composed by it. Every time I see the world as an ordered pyramid, a staircase, an onion, it's always undermined by conflicting horizons, punctured by holes, or made to glitter with dappled light.

I keep my ears tuned for metaphors that use the language of space, volume and weight to describe abstract relationships. I listen for these metaphors because they hold the potential for novel images, and that's what I aim to make. I look closely at the fuzzy structure that floats in mind when I hear things like "physics is the foundation of science" (physics is a floor?), or "my view of things is coherent" (it sticks together, without gaps?), or "being a woman entails being a person" (a woman contains personhood, like a piece of property, folded up in a pocket?). These paintings begin by trying to focus a blurry arrangement of logical forms. The strangeness and novelty of the image inevitably enters when I fail to get clarity. I can't make paintings of these metaphors because once I sharpen the focus they fall apart. The paintings instead picture the meandering search for a clear view of flawed ideas. I embellish and bend the picture with all the texture, light, and gravity I feel in the vertigo of the realization that my most basic beliefs, the scaffolding of my thought, will not piece together.

-Dana Lok