

Snail Mail Shells

A text by Ava Alvarez

Best known for creating artworks that fossilise found objects and for creating exhibitions that unveil a preoccupation with space, in James Lomax's current exhibition *A Tale of Two Cities* at Sid Motion Gallery he has added in the ingredient of light. Specifically, he has installed low sodium vapour lamps which will be activated in the gallery as the sun begins to go down each day. Before being phased out in the early 2000s during a sustainability and efficiency push in the UK, these lamps were often used to illuminate the urban nighttime. In this presentation, the lights start out emitting a pink light then develop into a potent yellow amber glow that transforms the gallery space into a site of duality.

Vision is the perception and prediction of light. We create images when light enters our eyes and hits the back of our retina where photoreceptors of rods and cones make sense of depth and colour. Light then has a chemical reaction and converts into an electric signal that travels along the optic nerve and leaves the optic chiasm. Messages of encoded light then move onto higher cortical structures where past memories meet current predictions until, finally, our brain holds a stable idea of the image to report back to our accessible consciousness. Ergo, even if the subject matter remains constant, a change of light conditions can create different rendering of the same object.

The intense yellow glow of low sodium vapour lamps desaturates light so that colour rendering is lost. Filmmakers have leveraged the otherworldly quality initiated by the lamps to create gritty cities, amplify unease, and to portray surreal moods. In general, according to neuroaesthetics, when people are immersed in cooler light tones they feel more expansive in space whereas in warmer tones, like an amber glow, people feel the spatial depth is more compact. Through inducing a ganzfeld-esque light immersion, Lomax psychologically brings people in closer. In addition, the use of the lights brings people closer through a shared aesthetic experience.

An awareness of the ultimate curatorial interaction is at the core of Lomax's practice. He consistently presents his work so that the viewer is guided back to an awareness of placehood. He asks what the lexicon of a city like London is, a city that is simultaneously innovative and dilapidated. At Sid Motion Gallery, Lomax maps out dual exhibitions that work in synchronicity to explain that we walk along streets where a copy of a Charles Dickens novel is cheaper than a meal deal. In Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, words are compiled to detail urban squalor. In Lomax's *A Tale of Two Cities*, letters are compiled to detail urban closures.

The work is political by nature of the subject but is dealt with like syllables exist in a word, the undertones are a part of the composition but are not the statement itself. The photographs he presents of abandoned storefronts are echoed in the organically coloured casts – which Lomax sometimes refers to as 'paintings'.

While reading these paintings, one is cognizant that they are looking at arrangements of envelopes. Specifically, unopened letters, which stamp on an inferential psychological weight of avoidance and communication gaps. Lomax became interested in the litter of letters on walks around town and when exploring shut down businesses.

The layered letter compositions in *Letters (Hand Delivered)* and *Letters (The Respondent)* are reminiscent of old country houses left to ruin or seaside villages whose facades have become cracked up by the sun. Although the sombre context is clear, the contemplative essence and serene quality of the artworks speak in a modernist vein like Donald Judd, Agnes Martin, Maria Taniguchi, and other artists who are preoccupied with perception, materiality, and geometric simplicity – however Lomax's materials present a weathered veneer. In the process of producing concrete casts the base layer picks up texture and relays it as tonal shifts. The imprint of the natural imperfections of the industrial materials cast are evident. This adds to the overall soothing aura of the concrete paintings.

In addition to starting to work with more colour and constructed compositions, in this new body of work we see a stylistic departure from Lomax's typical found fabricated objects – a biotic being finds itself in a pink casting. A disposed rose, referenced in the photographic piece *Closed*, adds to the pastoral condition of the other concrete paintings. Reminiscent of the enchanted rose in the Beauty in the Beast, the flower hangs centred on the canvas, in a hazy place like a keeper of time.

The photographs are all undated and 1:1 life size, allowing people to step into the scene. Lomax is careful to compose scenes that are devoid of romance, yet still maintain an eerie artifactual beauty. Tying together the photographs fitted behind plexiglass and the paintings framed in aluminium, the gallery spaces are intersected with a hanging window display from a shop that went into liquidation. While all the works are cross referential and flow together in unison, the rendering of the abstractions and descriptions of city living conditions is contingent on the timing of when the visitor enters the gallery. Just as a city is experienced in multiplicity depending on the viewer and the moment of encounter, this exhibition is one of shifting perceptions.