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Linda Stark's Covert Emotion

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There's something that happens when I look at Linda Stark's paintings that I can't quite explain. A feeling in the throat, the chest—like a long-suppressed sob fighting to push up towards the surface. In other words, they make me feel things. I don't know quite how to write or think about the paintings, and as a critic, that inspires a fair amount of vulnerability. Yet, as Jennifer Doyle argues in her wonderful book *Hold it Against Me* (2013), which fights for a space for emotion in contemporary art, an art critic can choose *not* to be cynical and instead wade into uncharted territories, discussing the hidden world of emotion.

Doyle remarks that "there is a false assumption in much art writing that we can be smart about emotions only if we are being cynical about them. (Jaded is the default attitude one strikes in the social space of the art gallery about nearly everything.)"¹ Yet, nothing in me wishes to be jaded about the tender emotionality palpable in Linda Stark's new show, *Hearts*, at David Kordansky Gallery. In it, hearts abound in both predictable and curious ways: purple hearts, bleeding hearts, candy box hearts, sacred hearts. The paintings are deployed with the calculated precision that you might associate with the opposite of feeling or sentimentality—such as Peter Halley's paintings, which prize harsh accuracy over embodied feeling. Stark's paintings accomplish an orchestra of feeling with minimal moves, clean graphics, and overly-calculated brushstrokes. Her flawless paint application is bounce-a-coin-off-a-bed tight—a single work sometimes takes the artist years to execute. In making

them, she slowly adds layer upon layer, building up low-relief, sculptural surfaces that create lifelike skin textures and glowing halos with perfect, emoji-like symmetry. Moody Rothkos these are not—quite the contrary.

As Doyle solemnly observes, sentimentality is not only unexpected from critics but "generally unwelcome in institutional spaces associated with contemporary art." The messiness of emotion belongs to soap operas, page-turning beach reads, motivational quotes strung over entryways—the *popular* world. But we generally deny it within the hallowed halls of the art museum, gallery, or other academicized art spaces. "The sentimental," Doyle writes, "stands in opposition to the codes of conduct that regulate the social spaces of art consumption."² Stark seems to flip the switch. Welcoming feeling in by way of the *popular*, en route to the sentimental.

I'm not the first critic to wrestle with Stark's tug of war between politic, emotion, and the world of symbols. Many cleanly duck out when emotion stirs—some have dipped a toe into writing about how the work emotes while simultaneously edging out of the pool, maintaining the feigned critical remove expected of the (male) academic. In a 2017 *LA Times* review, David Pagel writes that the paintings' "elusiveness intensifies their emotional resonance,"³ as if unsure what transformative effect the small paintings have had on him and unwilling to muse further. Artist Vincent Fecteau described Stark's work in *ArtForum* as "suffused with intense emotion" that somehow "[lodges] in the folds of [his] unconscious usually reserved for the weirdest of dreams."⁴ Here, the world of dreams represents a convenient, surreal space where mixed emotions can be random, and it's not necessary to fully unpack their resonance. Frustrated by the overall sincerity of the 2018 *Made in L.A.* exhibition—in which Stark's stigmata hand emblazoned with the word "feminist" was a crowd favorite—Travis Diehl pondered whether the exhibition as a whole was too earnest, writing that "nothing stifles

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1. Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 107.

2. *Ibid.*, 77.

3. David Pagel, "What Do You See? The Curious Allure of Linda Stark's Imagery," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 23, 2017.



Linda Stark, *Perylene Heart Weave* (2020).
Oil on panel, 13 x 12.5 x 2.25 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and
David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.
Photo: Lee Thompson.



Linda Stark, *Cyclops Fountain* (detail) (2020).
Oil on linen over panel, 20.75 x 20.75 x 2.5 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky
Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Lee Thompson.

criticism like righteous appeals to present problems."⁵ *Where has all that good old jaded cynicism gone?* he seemed to plea.

Across Stark's oeuvre, flowers, cats, nipples, and tarot cards appear as repeated motifs. Such icons have been subsumed into a mainstream visual language, deployed by 20-something painters with ironic detachment—as in the Nike swooshes or tennis balls that seem to appear for no apparent reason in otherwise abstract paintings. (Lucy Lippard's refrain to young artists echoes in the back of my head: "why [do artists] fear that it is uncool to show feelings on the surface?"⁶) Though, while another artist might deploy the overt kitschiness of Stark's hearts with a distanced remove (the cutesy reference an ironic end goal), her legible symbology rewards the viewer willing to plumb the depths of her icons to venture into something more unknowable. In the small drawing, *I Heart NY* (2012), the heart in the iconic emblem is replaced by tarot's three of swords card, an allusion to heartbreak, grief, and sorrow. Here, a kitschy icon is replaced with another familiar symbol, though one with a deeper tonal vibration. What exactly is the emotional resonance? Where does it land?

In *Hearts*, a cartoon Minion-esque eye (*Cyclops Fountain*, 2020) is topped with a single, flawlessly-plucked eyebrow and floats atop a yellow ground. Its teal eyelids are rendered with layers of slowly applied paint that culminate in a bulbous oculus that juts out from the canvas. A small white heart sits near the pupil—the twinkle in the eye. Not shy of a dramatic flair, Stark has applied ribbons of silvery-blue tears that pour down the composition in neat rows, pooling as they float off the canvas' edge. And here, somewhere between the sheen of blue-painted tears and the folds of her meticulously-painted eyelid, is Stark's covert emotion. The paintings evolve "like a fool's journey that becomes a source of revelation,"⁷ the artist told *Hyperallergic* earlier this year. Stark summons an army of everyday objects to do her emotive bidding,

transfusing her cutesy forms through some sort of alchemy and allowing her tender personhood to radiate through the layers of rippling paint.

Only once I've moved past that first checkpoint of recognizable symbols do Stark's paintings begin to work on me, even as they confound. My ongoing inability to square her Pop symbology with the moodier and almost transcendent undercurrent in her work compelled me to reach out to Stark herself. This is another vulnerable and slightly unconventional position for a critic to take: relinquishing a cynical, self-protective distance from her subject. Stark helped me both more and less than I'd hoped, offering responses with an air of wise simplicity—like Buddhist mantras that are at once banal and enlightening—but that didn't quite line up with each other. Still, consistent throughout her commentary was her interest in cerebral ruptures—spaces where meaning-making becomes harder to place.

"If I can take an idea and dive down to the bottom of the well with it, then come back up for air," Stark mused, "that is the goal." This well metaphor resonated with my own confusion, as I splashed around the dark depths with no clear pathway forward, still unsure of how to achieve the coming up for air part. Rather than guiding me up, Stark offered more loose ends. "For me, art is a space where the abject and sublime can co-exist," she told me. I imagined myself rising like a phoenix from the depths of the murky waters, shuttling forth towards the sublime. She explained that she "aim[s] to express an idea in the form of an essentialized image," and that in its depiction, emotionality is driven in via her precise and delicate picture-making. "Hopefully," the paintings "contain a presence which can be transformative," she said.

The slipperiness of Stark's imagery might be the thing facilitating this tension between the abject and the sublime, the popular and the emotional. "Presenting symbols in an unfamiliar way may promote a new emotional response, which can be transformational," Stark wrote me, again with a Yoda-esque air.

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-linda-stark-review-20170120-htmlstory.html>.

4. "The Artist's Artists: The Best of 2014," *ArtForum*. <https://www.artforum.com/print/201410/the-best-exhibitions-of-2014-49122>.

5. Travis Diehl, "Made in L.A. 2018: Widely Inclusive and Brimming with Community Spirit, But Is It Too Earnest?", *Frieze*. June 27, 2018. <https://www.frieze.com/article/made-la-2018-widely-inclusive-and-brimming-community-spirit-it-too-earnest>.



Linda Stark, *Bleeding Hearts* (2020).
Oil on canvas over panel, 12.25 x 12 x 2 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky
Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Lee Thompson.

Take *Bleeding Hearts* (2020), a small work that Stark confessed to me was her favorite in the show. The work depicts two cartoon hearts, each topped by mascaraed eyelashes. The symmetry of the eyelash-ed hearts, placed on the upper half of the canvas above a bronze, concealer-toned background, lend a strange personification—something animal, deer-like. The hearts each spill a thin ribbon of red blood (much like *Cyclops*' tears) that unexpectedly splay at the bottom of the canvas to form a pair of duck feet. Stark explained that she found her way while creating the painting, listening attentively to its needs: "[It] surprised me and defied logic... The painting resolved itself without clueing me in, and its significance remains a mystery to me." She described the duck feet as "an enigma," puzzled by them even as she brought them into being. And, through her own embrace of disillusionment, Stark slowly began to ease my own.

In her 2004 book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed traces the resonance that objects have on the body and how they engage the unknowable world of emotion. She describes a process of relating self to object and ascribing to it an emotive label (i.e., "good" or "bad").⁶ Within this logic, what kind of orientation occurs when (as in *Bleeding Hearts*) the object itself escapes namability? In so much of Stark's work, her symbols rest on the edge of familiarity and dreamy confusion, hybrid amalgams of recognizable forms unnamable in their collective gestalt. Through the additive puzzle that their symbolism somehow unlocks, the work triggers memories and deeply-buried feelings. In this way, Stark engages a collective registry of cultural codes and tugs at our personal associations with them. We often think of emotion as a private or even shameful activity; we save our tears for private release in the confines of our cars or bedrooms. Yet, emotion is ultimately a process of relating: to objects, to ourselves, and to each other.

In our communication, Stark relayed a story about an email she

received in response to her painting *Purple Heart* (2018). The painting is a faithful representation of a Purple Heart medal, save the tenderly-painted flowers applied around George Washington's textured profile. The medal floats against a black background. In the email, a former Marine explained that he happened across an image of Stark's painting in *The Wall Street Journal*. He had received a Purple Heart in the '60s after his service in Vietnam, and he rarely looks at it because of the extreme emotional charge that the object embodies for him. (Emotion that was culturally transferred and modulated into the relic of the medal.) After seeing Stark's painting, the man said he felt differently about his medal, and he took it out and held it. Its leering effect on him had somehow changed, and he instead felt a sense of peace around the object. Stark's transmutation allows us to approach long-held belief systems in new and surprising ways, even as we are unable to explain exactly why.

Perhaps it is precisely through Stark's unique methodology that her symbols can modify cultural codes, upturn previously held emotional responses. In approaching her symbolology tenderly—slowly cultivating connective points that might encourage a collective understanding (even as the work evades one)—her sincerity is what lassoes the viewer into joining her in this quest. As Stark opens herself up to unknown meanings and transfigurations, she lovingly takes us with her, leaving space for relational communion. She positions even the critic as a vulnerable participant, rather than an arbiter of meaning. Stark sets the table for her own communion with the work, and through her relatable (but ultimately unknowable) iconography, she invites us to hold her hand as we jump into the well, so that we might collectively come up for air together.

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6. Lucy Lippard, "From the Archives: Out of the Safety Zone," *Art in America*. December 1, 1990. <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/archives-safety-zone-63535/>.

7. Elisa Wouk Almino, "Meet LA's Art Community: Linda Stark Likes the 'Challenge of Resurrecting

a Bankrupt Image," *Hyperallergic*. February 25, 2020. <https://hyperallergic.com/544616/meet-las-art-community-linda-stark/>.

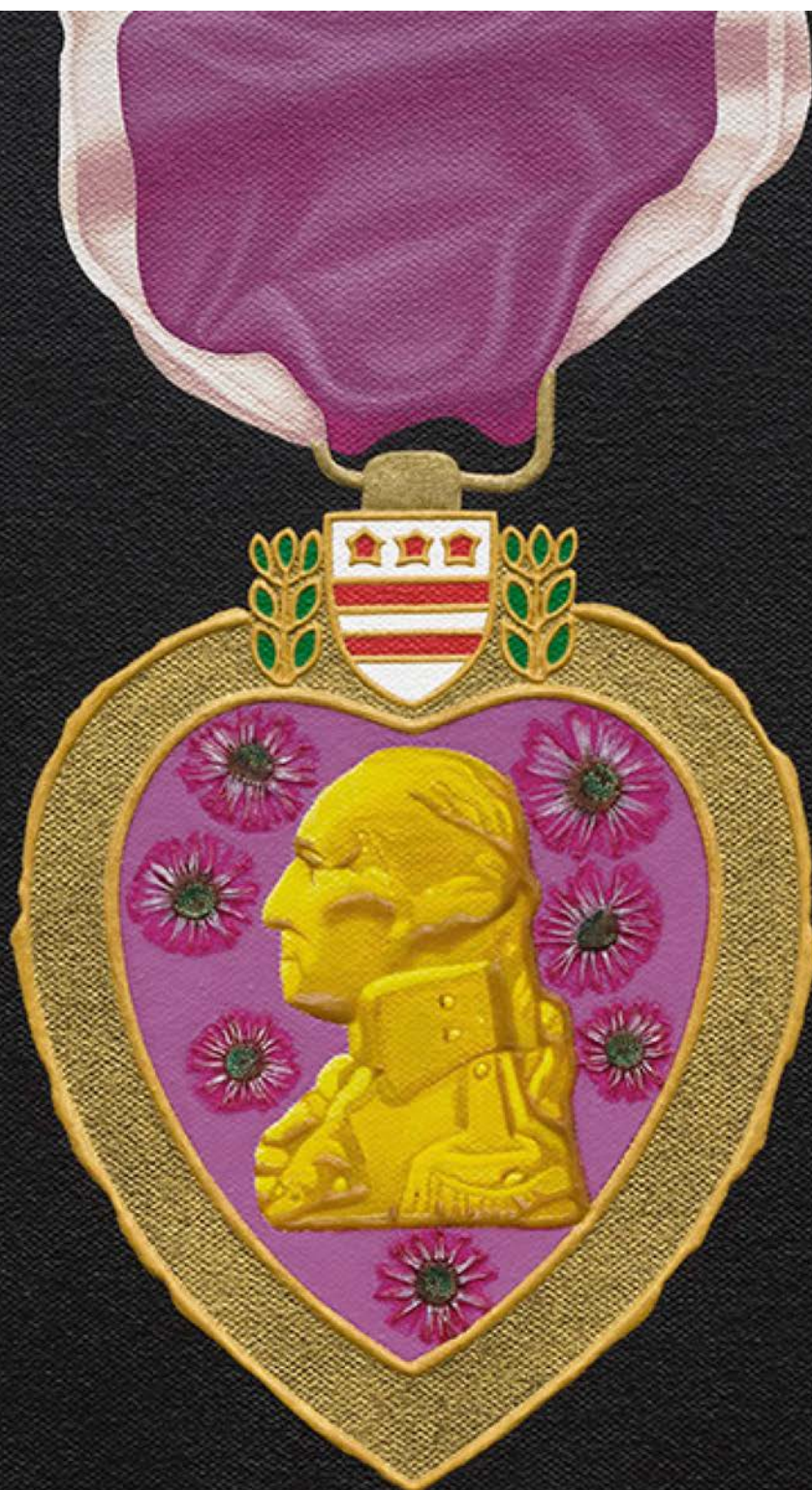
8. Sara Ahmed, *The Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, London, 2004.



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Linda Stark, *Hearts* (installation view) (2020).
Image courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky
Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Elon Schoenholz.



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Linda Stark, *Purple Heart* (detail) (2018).
Oil and flowers on canvas over panel,
12 x 12 x 2 inches. Image courtesy
of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane.