



LILY LUDLOW

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Lily Ludlow's paintings sing stories about the elation and peace of being alone, and the corporeal sexy joys of human interaction. A Lily Ludlow painting tells us what it is like to be in love with your best friend, and how to die with everything right. Made by layering and erasure, her paintings are reverse frescos. Her figures emerge from clouds of smoke, they are as much a result of excavation as they are of painting. They are holy apparitions made physical.



We should just start by you telling us where you were born.

In Los Angeles, California.

And you have a sister, and I know that your mother was an aeronautical engineer and worked at Boeing, but I've never been totally clear on what your dad was, because he's no longer around, right, your dad passed away?

Yes. He was a musician.

What kind of music did he play?

He played jazz in a band.

A clarinet player?

Clarinet and saxophone. He played with Tommy Dorsey, Vegas lounge acts, stuff like that. But my dad was done playing music by the time I was born.

And the family left Los Angeles and moved to Seattle?

Yes. My parents got divorced. I was sent to live with my aunt and uncle in Virginia. I went to school there but I didn't really fit in because I was used to a whole different structure. There were 3,000 kids versus 800 kids at my old school. I didn't really talk to anybody and I got placed in the wrong grade, because the school didn't have my records. And when they found out that I didn't have enough credits to be in the 8th grade I stopped going and would go to the Smithsonian in Washington DC during the day. And then I got caught, because I had checked out of school for two months.

Right.

And my mom flew in, it was a big ordeal.

She must have been upset. Did she take you back to Seattle?

Yes. When we got back she said, "That's it with school, you have to get a job." She would take me around to fill out applications and one day we were driving by a big "We're Hiring" banner next to a Burger King sign we were passing, and there was a little trailer because the location wasn't open yet. It was brand new and I got a job. I worked the day shift and my mom worked at one of the extension offices of Boeing nearby and I had to treat the Burger King like school. If I missed a day I couldn't live at home. Well, I didn't live at home, not permanently.

How do you mean?

My stepfather and I couldn't get a long. I lived at a motel.

How old were you then?

Maybe 15, 16. My mom paid the motel, I wasn't old enough to rent the room.

And your sister, did she go to school?

Yes. I think my sister just wanted to get it done.

So you were working. And that went on for a quite a while?

That went on for a year. During the day there weren't any kids my age. I was working with all these people who should have been retired, you know, but they're back working because they couldn't pay the fucking bills.

Right.

And after working there for about a year, they were like, "What are you doing, what's next? Go back to school." And they had just opened an alternative school, where they condensed the program and it was one hour and forty-five minutes long, and was mostly for girls who had kids. So I went back to school and I made up all of my credits in a year.

Is that when you kind of fell in with this bookstore in Seattle?

This was later, I met Josh through friends. One night we were out drinking with his dad, Richard, who runs Beauty and the Books, which is a bookstore in Seattle. Richard would always have large sums of cash on him and he gave Josh some money to hold on to. The next day Josh said he wasn't going to give the money back to his dad and asked me if I wanted to go to Paris, and that he was going to buy a plane ticket. So we went to Paris from Seattle as couriers, taking some books over from Beauty and the Books to Shakespeare and Company, where we stayed for a while and I became friends with George.

Who was the owner of Shakespeare and Company?

George Whitman, yes.

And what did you do there?

I worked in the store and helped organize poetry readings.

How old was George when you met him?

I was about 21 and I think he was in his 80s, he used to lie about his age, so I don't know. There are a lot of stories about George.

Were there any other kids living and working at the store as well?

Yes, George had this whole thing going on. He believed that you have got to let someone stay there because it could be an angel in disguise. When the store would close at night, people would take these heavy blankets out and they'd sleep. George, depending on what he felt like, would just sort of have fun with the people staying there and create his own little games and stuff like that. He'd come in at 2 a.m. with a baseball cap with a flashlight and make people hunt for bedbugs, and then have them line up the bedbug corpses. If you didn't have enough he'd say you were just feeding the bugs, and then you had to leave.

How many people were there?

There were maybe about seven sleeping around the bookstore.

And what kind of people were they?

All sorts of people. I remember once Sawyer-Lauçanno, who wrote the biography of Paul Bowles, came into the store. He was a little bit full of himself and George was fond of feeding people dog food when they would come up to have dinner with him.

Secretly?

He would make something he would call taco salad. The taco meat was out of a dog food can. And usually, if you were sitting in the right seat, you could see the kitchen, and see an open can of dog food on the counter, but you wouldn't normally think that that's what was being served. You might think that the can was left from feeding the dog earlier, although there was no dog to be seen. So this guy shows up and I had been there for a while at the time, and I told him, "You might want to bring a little bag with you to dinner this evening, because your going to get some dog food." And he just acted like I don't know who he was and, you know, I was just a kid, and when I went up to dinner that night George had made a taco salad.

Would George eat it, too?

George probably ate it. I don't think he really had a problem with that. He made us punch as well. He would collect cigarette butts outside the store and soak them in alcohol and then make this cigarette butt infused punch—he was convinced that it would make people quit smoking.

How long did you stay as his employee?

I think for almost two years. It was pretty fun. After a while he gave me my own room to stay in, a quiet room, and he had kicked out almost everyone in the store at the time, so it was just me and this old guy Morgan, who looked like a monk dressed for a safari. He would drink red wine out of a coffee cup all day until he got drunk, and then he would fall asleep. I had my own station on the antiquarian side of the store. It didn't have bedbugs and there were these incredible books that I'm sure I'll never see again in my life, and I'd go through them. They were crazy, magical books. One day, I opened some deep secretary drawer, and if I had to guess, I'd say there were stacks of money about 12 inches high. Hundreds of bills, francs that weren't even in print anymore. And I said to myself, that if the money is still there on the following Thursday I'll take some. So then on that Thursday I went back and I opened the door and the money was still there. Another time George would say, "Go hem my trousers," and when I'd hem the trousers there would be four thousand francs on the floor. Cleaning behind the refrigerator, there would be another three thousand francs. I would take half, I never took the whole thing. I would put it in a sock, and then I had it in my boots. And it was getting all wet because my boots were shredded. I would go into a store and buy something nice for my sister, but I had too much money, it was disintegrating. In the end I decided to go to Morocco, and took the money to go there.

George encouraged you to go to Morocco?

Well, right before Allen Ginsberg died, he came to the store. I only ended up speaking to him because George would steal people's credit cards to open his European type doors, and he had taken Allen Ginsberg's American Express card. So when Allen Ginsberg wanted to leave, he asked if I could get him his card back. I had avoided speaking to him, or even trying to go near him, because there were lots of people crowding around him, and I was sort of freaked out when he came up to me. But I knew exactly where the cards were, George literally had a drawer full of people's credit cards. When I came back to Ginsberg with his card, George was talking to him, and that's when George decided I should go see, and stay with, Paul Bowles, in Tangier.

Because they were friends?

They were friends.

You read the books and read *The Sheltering Sky*.

I like his writing.

So you're this kid from Burger King in Seattle and now you've suddenly transplanted yourself into a pretty high literary corner in Paris and you start to read books and being interested in poetry, or how does it all happen?

I have always read books. And George would give me some books and say, "Tell me something about it later." He would direct me to read some things that I might not find on my own.

And he secretly was paying you to live life fully. The money just kind of kept coming around.

Yes, I think he knew and he didn't mind. He gave me adventures. I'm sure that there are people today that go to that bookstore and pull books off the shelves to look for money. It used to be like that. George would take fifty thousand francs and put it in a book.

And these were books that were available?

Yes. He was completely eccentric. I'm sure his daughter changed that, because he obviously wasn't paying his bills properly. But he didn't really care about that. He did show me great literature.

And sent you off to Tangier to find Paul Bowles, and how did that work out?

I got there and I thought that I would just go and quickly check out Fes, so I would have something to say instead of just being there staring at him, and I knew he didn't really care for all these people coming and paying homage to him. I ended up being on this little journey for four months. I shaved my head and went out into the desert with these Bedouins I met for about a month and a half. As far as you can go into the Sahara. And I would stay with them and I would hang out there until their truck came back and I just jumped on the truck and left.

Did you ever find Paul and visit him?

I did, I'd met a friend in Casablanca and went from there back to Tangier. He didn't seem very interested, there were other people there that were trying to—

Bother him?

Yeah, and it seemed almost like a violation. I didn't stay very long, and by then I had been much longer than it was intended for me to be away, so when I got back to Paris, George was like, "Where have you been?"

Because time had just elapsed, and you got lost in Morocco—

It wasn't as easy to get out of places as I thought. I'd go and literally be strapped in this place, they wanted me to stay there.

The Berbers?

Yeah. And I'd meet this guy in Casablanca and we got robbed, so I just ended up staying a lot longer than I thought.

Tell me about how you found yourself back in New York, or at least in Westchester.

When I came back from Paris to America, we had stopped here with a friend who had lived in New Rochelle. And there was this dance club, The Beat, in Port Chester. He thought it was a cool place to go dancing. So we met some people there and one of the bartenders was sick, and he asked me if I wanted to work for him. So I said, "OK, I'll work for you." Because of its proximity to Connecticut, where the bars close early, I made like six hundred dollars in tips.

Awesome.

Then I just started working there. It was a good job and my boyfriend Michael would have his poetry readings there, and it was really good. My friends would come from the city—it was a reverse commute. They would take the train to go to The Beat, we'd lock the doors and have these wild dance parties.

And it went on for a couple of years?

It went on until—well, the owner was a crack addict and I had to put in my own money with the beer distributors and just to keep the place alive, you know. And when the power was out, we got some of those prayer candles, and we did not realize that these candles put off an insane amount of smoke. So we're all in there and the next thing you know, the fire truck pulls up and shines one of those huge spot lights in and all you can see is—

Smoke.

Half a foot above everybody's head it's just dense smoke and they called in on the megaphone, "We strongly suggest you guys shut down." That was pretty much the end of it.

And did you ever visit George again?

Yes, I went back to Paris years later with a friend and I went to visit him. I was sad when I left Paris the first time, and I had written in my journal about how much I loved George, because he was an amazing person. So when I got to Shakespeare and Company, I walked in and I see George sitting behind the desk, and he's just, "Hello dear, would you watch the counter while I go upstairs?"

And he just picked up exactly where you left off.

I didn't have much time, because we were supposed to catch the Eurostar that day. I could have gone earlier but I didn't really know what to say, because I left

kind of abruptly the first time around. I said, "George I got to—" and he just took off, and there was a line of people, so I just sat down behind the counter. When George finally came back down, I am realizing that's when we were supposed to get on the train, so I left again.

Did you ever get the chance to really say hello and goodbye to George again?

No, never. But I think it was the way it should be. You can't really have an end to a story with someone like that.

There are no appropriate words.

Yeah, it's better that way, left on it's own.

Right. I want to talk about your paintings. How is Port Chester as a place for making your work?

It's pretty good.

Were you painting pictures and doing drawings all along?

No. I did make some when I was a little kid. My mom and I went into a painting store and it was a store where people sit in a semicircle painting a picture of a busted boat in a field with a purple landscape behind it. Sun setting. How did that boat get there, you know? I wanted to paint, and I was kind of throwing a tantrum. My mom was getting ready to drag me out, and this lady was like, "Let's just sit her down and she'll be bored." So basically to shut me up, and so she could continue her thing, they gave me some paper and at the end of it, she said, "OK, I'll give her free lessons." So my mom would drop me off at this lady and we would paint these Bob Ross paintings.

The TBS Bob?

Yes.

That's amazing. How old were you?

I was 6. And I'd go in and she would take the palette knife, and divide the thing in half. "That's where the sky is, that's where the grass is, and here are your colors," which she would squirt out onto the palette. And I would use the knife to make the grass and the sky and then she would come back and be like, "OK, now here, if you want to make your boat, you cut in with the back edge of the brush and scratch in the boat." I'd have a giant signature on it, "Lillian," and my mom would come pick me up once she got off second shift. And then we moved and that was that.

Let's talk about the paintings you are making now. The erasure, the way you work the surface, that's what I find really different about them. The way the surface is sanded down and then rebuilt, and then sort of obliterated and rebuilt again, it's almost like they become animations of feelings, like they're film.

Sanding them down started when I switched to acrylics from oil bars, because I didn't like the way the acrylics looked. If I sanded it down, you could see the layers coming through. But then the sanding also seemed to me to make them more alive.

What I really love about your paintings is that they seem to come from a very sweet spot. And I think it has to do with this other trajectory, you know, when you decided to go to the Smithsonian, not to do algebra, schooling yourself. And I know that you see a lot of art, and you're friends with a lot of artists, and part of a larger community, so you are aware of what is going on, but I just feel that the paintings come from a different place, a very honest place.

I think that the more I look at art I realize don't know very much at all.

I don't think that matters.

I feel lucky to have the ability to have a life as an artist. I like painting, I like doing it. Sometimes I question it. Why I'm doing it now? I guess, like my sister said, "Too late."

Too late for what?

Too late to turn back now.

After all the stuff that you've been through it is sort of strange to think you wouldn't be writing poetry or books. Does it ever feel like you're in the wrong place, or a place you didn't expect to be?

This is what I like to do, I like to paint. It's what I would do.

So do you think that now, after all you've been through, you feel yourself settling down?

I don't know. I've been in Port Chester for such a long time. I've been there longer than anywhere.

And you never saw that coming.

No. When I stayed there first, the bartender that I met was living with two other people. It was weird that when I went upstairs that night we had been out drinking, and I was sitting with my boots in the windowsill, I had a strange feeling that it would be my home.

Wow.

It was weird. I've never had that feeling before, and, you know, it all sort of fell into place.

I can't imagine Port Chester without you at this point.

Well, I hope that Port Chester is without me at some point. I don't think it would be very interesting to live there my whole life. But it's good for now.