**Marik Lechner: Mild Pain Guaranteed**
**L'Space Gallery, New York**
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**The Mystical, the Monstrous, and the Mundane**
**Text by Jacky Klein**

Marik Lechner (b. 1967, Chernovitz, Ukraine) is known chiefly as a painter of richly colored, expressionist works that mix figuration with abstraction, high with low, beauty with horror, the carnal with the sublime. After emigrating from Chernovitz in Ukraine to northern Israel as a boy, Lechner went on to attend the Hamidrasha School of Arts in Kfar Saba, but has spent the past three decades consistently rejecting the tenets of conceptual art that have prevailed both there and across much of the contemporary art world. In place of intellectual detachment, cool minimalism, and a typically muted palette, his works brim with vibrant color and epic storytelling. His fantastical paintings and textile works have a dense, all-over quality, finding their roots variously in myth, literature, religion, and symbolism, as well as in the natural world, popular culture, his own autobiography, and the materiality of everyday life.

In "Mild Pain Guaranteed", Lechner presents his latest body of works, a series of tapestries and embroideries made since 2015, which signal his unexpected turn from painting towards a new medium of thread and wool, collage, spray paint, and found objects. Initially experimenting with small-scale needleworks because of a lack of money – thread being cheaper than paints – his first works were made on an intimate scale, completed on his lap while at home, in the studio, listening to music, or traveling. Existing within the domestic tradition of illustrated embroideries sewn for pleasure – the maker following the contours of a printed image with easy-to-follow instructions and pre-designated colors – Lechner instead started with the canvas blank and, in his words, "made it freestyle and jazz. I took needlework to another place" – one of violence and danger, slapstick and the uncanny, contemporary politics and existential angst.

Needlework, though, also brought to Lechner's practice a clarity and luminosity that he had long been searching for in his paintings, where a fast technique using thickly layered, heavily impastoed paint inevitably means that his colors mix, becoming, in his words, "ugly, muddy, and missing light". With textile threads, however, colors woven side by side retain their individual hues and vibrancy, not blending as liquid paints do but rather sparking off one another in dynamic combinations of pure, unadulterated color. This enables the works to come closer to achieving Lechner's goal to "manifest light, the light that creates pure color. It should feel when you stand in front of my work that you're looking at light, at energy; like the work comes to life."

This search for clarity, for something fresh – a technique that was literally cleaner, less foul-smelling and dirty than working with paint and turpentine – mirrors a significant transformation in Lechner's personal life in recent years. His dark, often tormented, paintings reflect a life marked by excessive drinking and depression; the woven works have coincided with a period of sobriety, newfound love, and late, unexpected, fatherhood. Their lollipop palettes – created from piles of synthetic and natural wool, bought at discount

stores in large, randomly mixed bags – have brought a new playfulness to his work. He makes use of the accidents and chance effects of the variegated and gradient yarns he finds – those dyed with more than one hue, or whose threads morph from one tone to another – the new materials encouraging him to play with different and often beautiful effects, such as pooling and marbling.

Lechner continues to make small- and medium-scale hand-sewn embroideries. Needleworks are, however, notoriously slow and laborious to produce, and soon after he started, he was already looking for ways to enlarge their scale, and ramp up the speed of making; to give the textile works, in fact, the size and dexterity of his monumental paintings. Three tufting guns acquired on the advice of a friend (machines used in traditional rug-making) lay dormant for a number of years before Lechner fortuitously found a series of online videos that explained how to use them. At around the same time, on a visit to London in the summer of 2019, he managed to acquire the strong polyester backing needed to begin his larger-scale experiments.

As soon as he started, Lechner realised that he had found a new medium of incredible potential. “I built a small wooden frame and threaded some wool onto the gun. The machine was running, and I started. It came so naturally to me: it felt like I had always been doing it. I thought, Okay, that’s amazing! And then I immediately said, Let’s build a frame which is three meters big!” On this, he made his first large tapestry, *Underground* (2019), a wild, Munch-inspired pietà whose patchwork of textures reflects the realities of Lechner’s newfound medium, the tufting gun unintentionally piercing holes in the polyester weave which then had to be filled in order to create a seamless surface. This technique of cutting and pasting, removing and reapplying, using pieces of collage, embroidered off-cuts, and spray paint – developed through necessity and an early lack of technical ability – has since become a conscious way of working for Lechner, who continues to experiment technically in each of the tapestries he makes.

So captivated was he by the possibilities of tapestry that Lechner abandoned painting altogether between 2019 and 2022 to focus exclusively on his new medium. Within his textile works he has, however, explored the same subjects and motifs that have featured in his paintings and drawings for many years. Cats and fish, men and women, monsters and zombies, rivers and seas, trees and flowers, balloons and suns, Nazis and hybrid creatures appear time and again. “I'm haunted by symbolic images,” Lechner explains, “from very simple ones to archetypical and religious ones, Indian, Byzantine, those from ancient civilisations. They're all mixed up in my head. I don’t force them: they just appear.” Body parts – legs, hands, skulls, eyeballs – abound. Screaming or open-mouthed heads and popping eyes evoke raw terror and panic. There are battles, chases, (failed) attempts to hide; there is fecundity and procreation, love and desire, addiction and mortality. The world of cartoons and science fiction collides with gallows humor, the ever-present shadow of the Holocaust, a child-like wonder in nature.

Lechner’s tapestries barely contain their fierce energy. They are at once mystical and mundane, baroque and reduced, sophisticated and utterly wild. Light and dark are ever-present. Man, animals, nature, and the spirit world co-exist, all occupying the same flattened, frieze-like space where depth and perspective have lost their hold. It is a topsy-

turvy Hobbesian realm of war and bestiality, reflecting Lechner's conviction that "we are basically animals. We have one hand in the sublime and one hand in the garbage."

Color communicates powerfully and is derived from the language of nature – the red of desire, the blue of the sky, the green of abundance, or sickness – though at times it also unhinges from reality, becoming unnaturalistic, reminiscent of the violent color ruptures of the early 20th-century Fauves, or 'wild beasts', and of their German Expressionist counterparts whose work Lechner first encountered in his twenties. At the heart of his coded narratives are life's constants, pain and suffering – another spiritual alignment with Kirchner, Beckmann, Dix and the rest. Indeed, for Lechner, "pain is just being alive. It's something to do with passion. When your universe has thrown you into existence, pain is part of it." What he adds, though, to the rawness and unidealized honesty of the German Expressionists is his own streak of dark humor: the absurdity he finds in the idea of picking fruit at night, or in a beautician's neon sign, seen from a passing bus, that proclaims, unreassuringly, "Mild Pain Guaranteed".

Lechner's woven works exist within a contemporary art world that has recently begun to focus more attentively on craft. The explosion of interest in fabric works, ceramics, and handcrafts more generally – historically maligned, placed low down the hierarchy of the fine arts, and often associated with 'women's work' – reflects the art world's long-overdue attention turning at last to issues of gender and empowerment, identity and diversity, social engagement and the environment. Lechner's interests, however, fall outside most of these areas of engagement. His concerns diverge, too, from those artists who experiment with the sculptural potential of thread or fiber. Instead, his tapestries come squarely out of the painting tradition, and his own, ongoing, painterly concerns with color, expressiveness, texture, and the possibilities of three-dimensionality on the two-dimensional surface. His paintings have a physical presence: they are rough and layered, replete with thick swabs of paint, gnarled pieces of cloth, and bulging collage elements. They emerge in their sensuousness from the world of Soutine, van Gogh, Auerbach, and de Kooning, with a similar desire to make paint (or, in this case, wool) flesh, to create not an illusion of an image but something more meatily materialistic: the stuff of life itself.

Embroidery and tapestry have allowed these explorations of the surface to go further. Three-dimensionality is given fuller form through the variable thickness of the yarns Lechner chooses, the use of spooling and unravelling cascades of wool, the projection outwards of found objects such as balls, stockings, nails, toys, and dolls, sourced from the ramshackle floor of his studio, the streets of Tel Aviv, or his infant daughter's playroom. Areas of acrylic paint, glue, or spray paint add further tactility and sensuality, the most recent works edging towards a new kind of painting-sculpture hybrid not dissimilar to the 'Combines' of Robert Rauschenberg, or Jasper Johns' encaustic flag and target paintings of the late 1950s. Indeed, the connection to painting is so central that Lechner's most recent paintings have started to show signs of a kind of reverse cross-fertilization, incorporating materials experimented with first in the tapestries, such as spray paint and collage, as a way of "bringing objects and textures into the painting, making it half a sculpture, constructed with stuff."

If the appeal of textiles to Lechner has emerged from the long history of painting, it has also found its roots in his early childhood and family history. His maternal grandmother,

originally from Bucharest, worked with her twin sister as a dressmaker in Chernovitz, creating wedding outfits, men's suits, and other quality garments. Lechner vividly recalls a childhood home littered with the materials of the seamstress' trade: fabrics, threads, needles, sewing machines. On the walls, conversely, were the heavy tapestries of his paternal grandmother, common in Russia as a means of warming up the home, but retained for sentimental reasons even after the family's move to Israel, a land of desert and harsh sun. "I grew up surrounded by them. The heat was unbearable but the tapestries were colorful: some were vulgar, others were based on famous works of art. From a very young age, art and tapestries were connected in my mind, long before I heard about the tapestry tradition of the great masters."

Drawing, too, has been there from the start, and Lechner continues to make smaller scale works on paper, almost daily. Included in the exhibition are a number of these pencil, pen-and-ink, and watercolor works, notably a series made in response to the mass terrorist attacks by Palestinian militant organisation Hamas on a number of towns and kibbutz communities in Israel's south on 7th–8th October 2023. Created day-by-day as the horrors of the pogrom emerged, they feature Lechner's distinctive figures, howling or terrified, as well as images and symbols directly related to the attacks: sirens, missiles falling from the sky, bullet holes, bodies lying prostrate, wolves' heads, charred houses under siege, gun-wielding terrorists, hiding children, bound hostages. Rorschach-like ink blots seem to reveal ghoulish faces or curled fetuses. Black and blood-red predominate; pale pinks suggest naked flesh, or the sunrise of the surprise early morning attacks. Quickly drawn, instinctive, and powerful, they are unprecedented in Lechner's oeuvre, as a body of work responding to an immediate situation of war in his homeland.

Lechner's art seamlessly combines all these distinct and diverse sources: the biographical, the artistic, the political, the subconscious. He is no artistic 'primitive' or outsider: he went to art school, is a voracious reader and auto-didact, and has an extensive knowledge of art history. Among the many (mostly sublimated) artistic references that percolate through his work, for example, are Catholic altarpieces, medieval tapestries, paintings and prints by Caravaggio, Bruegel, Dürer and Goya, South American Quipu knot writing, Dubuffet and Fautrier's irrational *art informel*, the gestural graffiti of Basquiat, and the work of contemporary painters such as Neo Rauch, Nicole Eisenman, Jonathan Meese, and Dana Schutz, whom Lechner encountered during his years living in Germany.

And yet Lechner comes closer than most to an authentic spirit of wildness. It's there in the expressive gestures, explosive colors, and close-to-unhinged Symbolist sentiment of his tapestries. It's there, too, in his working method, premised heavily on spontaneity, instinct, and chance. Preliminary sketches – if he makes use of them at all – are mapped out speedily, not according to a set of pre-formed ideas but instead out of the depths of his memory or imagination, or from the shadows that happen to be thrown by the morning or evening sun onto the stretched polyester in his studio.

Once he has a starting point, work continues in an entirely unplanned, intuitive manner, each area of the tapestry worked on until the next image or figure emerges organically out of what has already been created. As he says, "Most of the time, the work gives birth to the idea and not the other way round." The process perhaps finds its closest parallel in

Surrealist automatism, where conscious control and rational thought are suppressed in place of free association, the consequences of chance happenings and accidents, and an openness to being guided by the psyche. Among early 20th-century mediums and Spiritualists, automatism even became known as a method for communing with the dead, the spirit apparently taking control of the medium's body to produce a drawing whose meaning could later be deduced from the semi-representational forms hidden within. Lechner's process sounds not a million miles away from this when he recalls making his first artwork as a child at the age of ten, and "the strangeness of it, as if my hands were out of my control, working on their own… to this day I still feel the same strangeness while I work, as if someone else takes the lead." This, after all, is an artist who senses keenly the otherworldly in the everyday; who is fascinated by metaphysics; who believes in kabbalistic reincarnation; who is open to the possibility of alien species living among us.

Lechner's studios similarly point to an artist who exists beyond the fringe. His first work spaces, in Nahariya in the north of Israel, close to his family home, were public bomb shelters – the only places in which he could find privacy and quiet (until, that is, he was habitually thrown out by neighbours fleeing the missiles from the cross-border conflicts with nearby Lebanon). His subsequent studios have included a chicken house, a cowshed, and – during a brief foray in Bombay, India – a room shared with a homeless man and a small herd of goats. Since 2015, he has worked in a series of semi-derelict spaces in the middle of a now-abandoned orchard, down a long dirt track, surrounded by fields of orange and avocado trees. The latest of these, once a fruit-packing warehouse used for storing heavy machinery, had – for many years – no toilet or running water. The studio, for him, has always been a makeshift space, a no-man's land of contingency, danger, impermanence; of exposure to the elements, of a withdrawal from the civilised spaces of society and the city.

The world created by Lechner is in many ways a world apart. Like Chagall or Miro or Paul Klee, he creates a vivid, deeply personal, hermetic universe, with its own visual lexicon of forms, characters, signs, and symbols – but with a chink left open to invite us in. What we discover there is a carnivalesque dreamscape of mystery and beauty, blood and guts, pleasure and pain: a microcosm, in fact, of our own flawed world. Through the maniacal faces, twisted bodies, and luscious undergrowth, he reflects back at us both the horrors and hopes of what it means to be human.

**Artist bio**

Marik Lechner was born in 1967 in Chernovitz, Ukraine and emigrated to Israel with his family in 1973. Lechner graduated from HaMidrasha School of Arts in 2001. He has had solo shows at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Herzilya Museum of Contemporary Art, Givon Art Gallery, Tel Aviv, and Feinkunst Krüger Gallery, Hamburg, Germany, among others and has participated in group exhibitions in Germany, Latvia, and Israel. Lechner has won several awards, among them Israel's National Lottery Prize for Culture and Art, and the Lauren & Mitchell Presser Contemporary Art Grant. He lives and works between Be'er Ya'akov and Tel Aviv, Israel.
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**Author bio**

Jacky Klein is an art historian and writer. She has worked as a curator at the Tate, Hayward,

Courtauld, and Barbican galleries in London, and as commissioning editor for a number of leading arts publishers including Thames & Hudson, Phaidon, and Tate Publishing. She is author or co-author of a number of books, including *Grayson Perry* (Thames & Hudson, 2009/2020), *What is Contemporary Art?* (Museum of Modern Art, NY, 2012), *100 Painters of Tomorrow* (Thames & Hudson, 2014), *Body Art* (Phaidon, 2015), and *Alfred Cohen: An American Artist in Europe* (Ben Uri Gallery, 2020). She lectures and broadcasts regularly, including for the BBC, Channel 5, Bloomberg TV, and Christie's. She lives and works between London and Tel Aviv.
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