

GAGOSIAN

HYPERALLERGIC

Melancholy in Black and Neon

Mary Weatherford's new paintings confront us with a sense of place, a remembered moment, a hidden story.

Mika Ross-Southall



Installation view, Mary Weatherford: Train Yards at Gagosian, London (© Mary Weatherford. Photo: Lucy Dawkins. Courtesy Gagosian)

In his memoir *Speak, Memory* (1951) Vladimir Nabokov writes about why trains are compelling and mournful. Their long-drawn sigh when pulling into the station; the shadows and chinks of light that dance across carriages; the unsettling excitement of journeying into the unknown. The Californian artist Mary Weatherford tries to capture these qualities in her new series of 10 huge abstract paintings, *Train Yards*, on view at the Gagosian Gallery in London through February 27.

“There’s always something lonely and comforting about the sound of a train whistle,” she tells us in a 15-minute film on the gallery’s website that accompanies the exhibition. “Because you know somebody’s going somewhere. Somebody has a plan and somebody’s left someone and somebody’s going to meet someone. There’s a beginning and there’s going to be an ending and then there’s going to be another beginning.”

Created over the past four years, the paintings are based on the sounds and movements of trains and railway yards in the United States at night. Each contains a haunting, velvety morass of black emulsion brush-strokes — dynamic zig-zags, splatters, smudges, all pummeling the stretched linen, mimicking the rhythm of a train going over tracks. Most have one thin white neon strip-light drilled into their surface and connected by wires dropping to the floor like a luminous, three-dimensional line drawing atop the painted black background.



Mary Weatherford, "Orion's Belt" (2016), flashe and neon on linen, 112 x 107 1/2 inches (© Mary Weatherford. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio. Courtesy Gagosian)

These works are powerful and riveting, partly thanks to their imposing scale. It's about "trying to paint an experience," Weatherford explains in the film, "and about being able to perceive colors at night They're nocturnes. There are varying colors of darkness, and the [fluorescent] lights have the effect of moving towards you, going away from you. One might even be reminded of ... bells and whistles and clanging."

"Bellows" (2016), in the first room, bursts with clouds of dark purple- and gray-tinged black paint framed by a stark white border. A short, vertical neon rod, its wire cords gently arching away from the painting, suggests the glow of a train in the distance. On the opposite wall, the swooshing black marks in "Nickel Plate Road" (2017-18) contain hints of purple and navy blue. A thicker patch of paint, which travels diagonally from the lower left corner to the center of the canvas, forms a path into a far-off horizon that disappears into pitch black; translucent vertical and horizontal lines above create a blur of buildings and trees passing by. Along the full length of the painting's right edge is the cold, harsh white of a neon light — man-made rays from a train or station beaming across the landscape, perhaps.



Installation view, Mary Weatherford: Train Yards at Gagosian, London (© Mary Weatherford. Photo: Lucy Dawkins. Courtesy Gagosian)

American folk and blues music influenced the series, too; a lot of the painting's titles come from song lyrics. "Country blues has so much about trains and traveling," Weatherford says in the video, which includes a wistful blues soundtrack by Thurston Moore from Sonic Youth. Moore also performs a melancholic cover of "This Train Is Bound for Glory" (first recorded in 1922 and adapted by Woody Guthrie in 1958) in front of Weatherford's work in the gallery, as well as a new acoustic composition inspired by one of her paintings — a beautifully hopeful melody that drifts over an unrelenting, rhythmic bass.

"There are times [in country blues] when people ride on top of trains to get to places ... and the heavens are going by," Weatherford adds. "There's a combination of movement: of the train moving through space and the earth spinning, which makes it look like the stars are going across the sky." In the second room we are met with six more works. Not all feature the neon lights. Instead, "Cosmos" (2020), for instance, radiates with bright flecks and swirls of white paint launching like rockets and stars from the hazy, ash background. Almost the entire canvas is covered in black in "Mars Light" (2019), but the paint glows with a clay-red pigment. "Orion's Belt" (2016) does include neon, here as an unyielding horizontal line that stretches across two bulbous black shapes and straps the canvas to the gallery's wall.



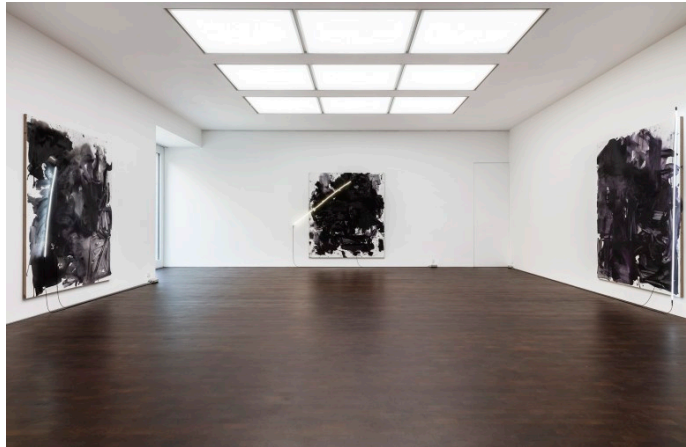
Mary Weatherford, "Cosmos" (2020), flashe on linen, 112 x 99 inches (© Mary Weatherford. Photo: Fredrik Nilsen Studio. Courtesy Gagolian)

It was 2012 when Weatherford first started using neon. A visiting artist at California State University in Bakersfield, she became entranced by the fluorescent signs — some half-illuminated or burnt out — of restaurants, shops, and old factories around the mid-sized city east of Los Angeles. The result was *The Bakersfield Project*, a series of seven large canvases swathed in muted colors and inscribed with a neon strip-light of sickly pink, green, blue, or red. She followed these with more paintings based on other cities, including Manhattan and LA. In "Coney Island II" (2012) four colorful neon rods (two white, one orange, one yellow) are set at jagged angles evoking the up-down-up-down motion of a rollercoaster.

Although these neon paintings seem like a departure for Weatherford from her earlier abstract paintings, some of her work from the 1990s and 2000s incorporates natural found objects, such as starfish, sponges, and seashells, on plains of color that saturate the entire canvas.

What makes *Train Yards* stand out is the way it intensely and convincingly confronts us with a sense of place, a remembered moment, a hidden story that we've all experienced. "I've always

wanted to make paintings about people's lives," Weatherford says in the film, and "the arc of history." With this new show, those lives and histories are felt.



Installation view, Mary Weatherford: Train Yards at Gagosian, London (© Mary Weatherford. Photo: Lucy Dawkins. Courtesy Gagosian)