

Introductory Essay by Tatum Dooley

Tonight I've watched

*The moon and then
the Pleiades
go down*

*The night is now
half-gone; youth
goes; I am*

in bed alone

The midnight poem, often attributed to Sappho and preserved only in fragments, feels especially pertinent right now. My sense of time is confused. I check the clock only to find it later than I assumed, the night half-gone. Time feels fast and full of nothing, the repetition of each day washing away. I turned twenty-seven on April 11th, in bed alone (my youth goes). The moon was almost full—I know this because Keiran Brennan Hinton painted the sky that night.

During self-isolation in Toronto, away from his studio in New York, Brennan Hinton cycled between painting a panorama of the night sky and interiors of his mother's apartment. Like a stop-motion camera that takes a photo twice a day, with an exposure of a few hours, Brennan Hinton captured the slippery time of quarantine. A stovetop espresso and cocktail bookend the day, both brushed up against the moon. The lunar phase feels like the most accurate way to track time lately, its consistency annoyingly precise. I look up at the moon some nights and am surprised by its shape.

Hours and days bleed together in quarantine, the monotony makes it difficult to make memories, let alone remember them. Typically with events of global significance, people grasp onto the memory of where they were when "the world had changed." This phenomenon, called flashbulb memory, isn't possible in a pandemic. Instead of one distinct memory of the pandemic, there's a gradual buildup of realizations and constant shifts—not unlike a painting. At the end of April, Brennan Hinton wrote to me (unlike KBH, I only have the time-stamps of my email to ground my memory): "I've been thinking about how we will remember right now, the past few months and the months to come. For me, making paintings from life is a way to hold onto my memory of this moment; physical and visual testaments to being in a specific place on a specific day, to feel what is within arms reach." The paintings are a personal archive, connected to a collective experience.

The compositions of the paintings in “A Broken Clock is Right Twice a Day,” at Michael Gibson Gallery are cropped tight, almost claustrophobic. On May 5th, a nocturne of a single window painted in autumn-hues: the viewer could be looking into a room or at a forrest of trees. What is surrounding the canvas? My mind moves outwards, to all that is unknowable. The same quality is what draws me to the fragments of Sappho’s poetry. It feels truthful that so little of her poetry remains: nothing in life is perfectly preserved, not memory, time, or objects. Even the way we see is fragmented, our eyesight lacks in comparison to what there is to see. The moon proves this, our eyes unable to discern if a crescent moon contains the trace of its full counterpart—or if our eye fills in the circle. Likewise, I’d argue that the moon is present in Brennan Hinton’s paintings, even when we don’t see it. The moon, a star, a swipe of weather—evidence of the surrounding world, and of Brennan Hinton himself—are embedded in the canvas. The paintings feel like a series of fragments, small slips of life that are part of an overall poem.

The poet Mary Ruefle writes, “The moon has no light of its own; our apprehension of it is but a reflection of the sun.” Reflections recur throughout Brennan Hinton’s paintings. Light from the street and neighbouring apartments are translated into strokes of paint—economic marks on a dark canvas form a familiar scene. The daytime paintings, too, are curiously low on shadows—surfaces reflect light from the colours around it. The leaves from a basil plant reflected in reds, oranges, and pinks. The effect has a Peter Pan quality: the paintings hover, detached from the world below and at a slight remove. Not unlike the general feeling that has permeated the pandemic.

I’m happy these particular verses of Sappho remain, that I can tether myself to her memory: watching the sky as it articulates time. “The moon sets, the night passes, life flies, and the individual is the obvious repository of all this motion, insofar as she is aware of it, is conscious at all, and yet, lying alone in her bed she brings it at once to a stand-still,” writes Ruefle about the midnight poem. “The nauseous motion of the whole system is pinned and preserved like a butterfly upon a board, so that time hardly seems to be passing at all, though that is exactly what the poem is about,” she continues. I feel the same jolt of recognition in Brennan Hinton’s paintings, the frozen quality of something that is meant to be in motion.

The moon is often used as a metaphor—for fertility, death, desire—though Brennan Hinton’s paintings are distinct in their lack of metaphor. Right now, all we have is the moon, and a painting of it.

Tatum Dooley, May 2020