

Maggi Hambling: *Real time* reviewed in *The New York Times*

Max Lakin

Online April 14, 2022

The British artist Maggi Hambling has painted churning seas, violent sprays and other roiling bodies of water for the last two decades, but the suite of pictures she made last year, emphatically rendered snow-capped peaks dissolving into glacial melt, on view in her current show, *Real time*, are sparer and sadder. Their calligraphic marks and impressionistic application recall Chinese literati and Japanese nanga painting, but with reverence for the natural world displaced by rage.

Hambling's stuttering strokes seem to cascade like condensation, whorls of indigo and optic white weeping into marine and slicks of silver. In places the paint is caked onto the canvas in icing-thick impasto, elsewhere it's ghostly thin, so delicate as to seem to seep through from the back of the canvas — an elegy for the rapidly vanishing. The cool palette can feel soothing, until you remember you're looking at a cataclysm.

These are joined by another series of human crimes against nature: animals in captivity. Like Hambling's liquefying landscapes, these rattle between abstraction and figure, so that the defeated heap of a lion jolts into view as quickly as it fades away again, and the silhouette of a polar bear flickers as it's overwhelmed by a fluid blue-gray field. These are not happy paintings. Hambling depicts her creatures inching toward death or having already arrived there. They're also proxies for the rest of us, and the prisons of our own design. A dancing circus bear, its torqued face shifting between euphoria and agony, suggests there's more than one way to dissolve.

Edge XIII, 2021, oil on canvas, diptych, each panel: 84 x 36 in. / 213.4 x 91.4 cm

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