

## The Translucent Edge as Transcendence: The Works of Michael Lownie

Consciousness can only make sense of the world by parsing it via specificity and definition. To the intellect, each word and each object is unique and bounded and distinct from one another. Just as elements of matter cannot occupy the same space in the material world, neither can words or objects intersect. In a sense, language serially digitizes the world so that consciousness can process information at the interface with its surroundings. The disadvantage of this construct is that each defining line of segregation is also a barrier to a direct unbounded communion with reality – that communion being defined as transcendence. To completely reject these defining boundaries, however, would dissolve specificity and distinctness, and thus would only restore the amorphous feeling of a pre-conscious neonate. Rather, true transcendence – an alert hyper-consciousness – requires the simultaneous acceptance and coexistence of all distinct words and objects (including their boundaries). That is, rather than occurring in a digital world, transcendence occurs in an analog world. Rather than a serial world, a parallel world. Acceptance, rather than rejection. Intersection, rather than material exclusion. And thus, visually translucent, rather than opaque. Michael Lownie portrays the edges and boundaries of the world. When those edges and boundaries are translucent, he presents transcendence.

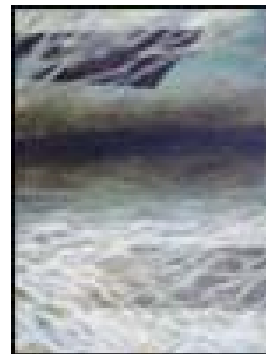
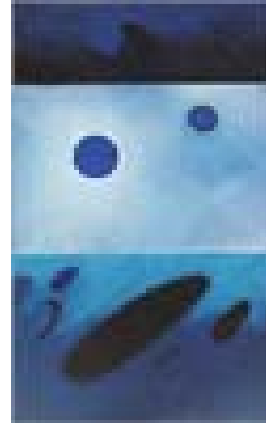
Michael Lownie lives and works in San Francisco – a city at the sharp confluence of earth, sea, and sky. And the theme of so much of his work is the nature of boundary. The painting's titles describe boundaries in space (*Epicenter*, *Crevasse*, *Fissure*, and *Horizon*); boundaries in time (*Dusk West*, *Crack of Dawn*, *Silver Solstice*, *Afterglow*, *Dawn*, and *'Round Midnight*); the fulcrum moments of historic events (*Tsunami*, *Hurricane Watch*, and *Hanging Chad*); and ultimate boundaries of reality (*Speed of Light*, *Disappearing Act*, and *Creation*). More importantly, behind the titles, boundary is the intrinsic theme of the works themselves (as described below).

### Early period

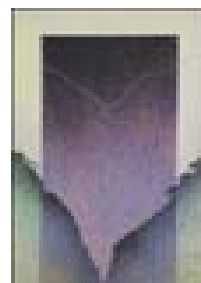
To date, Lownie's works can be divided into two periods. The earlier period is composed mostly of canvasses that glimpse outward at, or through, the world's edges and boundaries. Horizons - where states of matter distinctly meet - are featured especially. For example, *Stratus Blue* shows an intermediate layer between sky and ocean. Depending on the composition of that middle layer, the suspended spheres in it can be either bubbles (air-in-water) or planets (solids-in-air). So, that intermediate layer is a state of matter that oscillates across the boundary that separates gas from liquid. And the interspersed spheres within the layer help to facilitate that oscillation.

Similarly, in *View from Below*, further facilitation is seen, but modulated by finer elements. In the painting, fine misty clouds (water-in-air) are separated by a blurred boundary of horizon from fine sea-foam (air-in-water). Although, in these works, the artist has not allowed the intersection of matter's boundaries, he is approaching a dissolution of the boundary between distinct states of matter by modulating that difference with smaller intermediary elements.

Beyond matter, there is the approach to dissolve the boundary between light and dark. *Beacon*, is a shaft of light in the dark; and its inverse, *Dawn*, is a shaft of dark in the light. Unlike the unbounded continuum of real macroscopic light, here the edges between dark and light are clearly defined, yet translucent at their intersection. By accepting all boundaries, Lownie has shown a world where light and dark can coexist, thus transcendent.



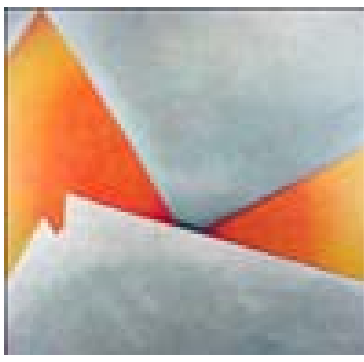
*Modulated states of matter: Stratus Blue (upper) and View from Below (lower).*



*Light and dark coexist in Beacon (left) and Dawn (above).*

Opaque foregrounds and horizons are featured in *Round Midnight*, *Signs of Life*, *Dune*, and *Stratus Blue*. Conversely, translucent foregrounds accept background features (such as horizons) in *Beckoning Horizon*, *Veils 1*, *Destiny*, and *Spirit's Landing*. Lownie's edges have slid through Mark Rothko's meditative expressionist horizons via the artist's abstract transcendentalism.

For some canvasses (e.g., *Spirit's Landing*), a rectangular surface functions as the subject, casting its shadow onto a landscape. Here then is an object of intermediate dimension, i.e., between a two- and three-dimensional object. But, by 2005, that thematic surface is fully transcended. For example, in *Veils 2* and *Speed of Light 2*, it's dimension takes on a more visual perspective of its own (although it is still only a surface) shedding the need for supporting surroundings. In the contemporaneous *Fissure*, an upper surface's hidden edge is echoed by a nick on its inverted lower surface. So, preservation of *Fissure's* opaque edge is the theme of the painting. In retrospect, both *Veil 2's* and *Speed of Light 2's* emphasis on the surface without its surroundings, and *Fissure's* thematic focus on the opaque boundary alone, can both be seen as seminal to Lownie's latter period paintings.



The surface transcended from its surroundings in *Veils 2* (upper), and the thematic opaque edge of *Fissure* (lower): both seminal to the later period.



*Dune's* opaque horizon (left). *Spirit's Landing's* foreground surface accepts the horizon; and casts a shadow (right).

### Later period

The later period is dominated by a mixed media of metal leaf and acrylic. The works' thematic edges exhibit a crystalline topography under high tension. Rather than allowing forms to intersect consonantly (as in the earlier period), here the boundaries are clearly emphasized, because the forms emphatically do not intersect. Rather, they mate, and do so jaggedly. Dissonance is clear. Except for the contemplative titles of *Afterglow* and *Silver Solstice*, the opaque metal incisors of these works show the impenetrable front of crises: the gnashing bite of tidal waves, lightning, crevasses, and earthquakes. Rather than the earlier period's hushed shimmer of zephyric strings (musically, say, as in Webern's *Symphony, op.21*), the cold crash of cymbal and metallophone are heard (as in, say, Mayuzumi's *Vajra-Dhatu Mandala*).

By its nature, metal leaf is not translucent. It doesn't passively absorb: it defiantly reflects. Rather than glimpses to the outer world, the canvases of this latter period appear to be glimpses inward to a deeper two-dimensional cross-sectioned microscopic world. Perhaps because of this, there appears to be an attempt to retain the higher dimensionality of the earlier period: The *Silver Solstice* is outstretched in flight, the *Earthly Gasp* disintegrates along a visual perspective, and both *Epicenters* and *Tsunami* flame their metallic edges into a sky-like background (in a modulation similar to *Stratus Blue*).



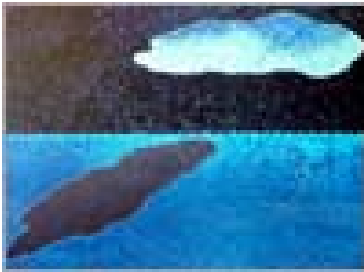
Dissonant mating is clear in *Epicenter 1* (upper) and *Tsunami* (lower). The edges modulate into sky-like backgrounds



Attempts at retaining dimensionality in *Silver Solstice* (upper) and *Earthly Gasp* (lower)

**Attractive and Intriguing**

Particularly, I am attracted to the beautiful *'Round Midnight* and *Stratus Blue*. I am partial to the ocean, and to a clear moonlight, that is evident in the former work. When the paintings are viewed together, one can see the *'Round Midnight* cloud's shadow sunk to the bottom of *Stratus Blue* as a kelp-like form.



*Round Midnight's shadow (upper) is Stratus Blue's kelp (lower)*

*Adrift* is appropriately blurry, and *Hurricane Watch's* shutters seem to be flapping to the coming storm. Both are realistically recognizable, fully-colored, and thoroughly-composed.

*Earthy Gasp* is an inspiring luminescent vision of a golden flight into a golden field.

*Hanging Chad* and *Urban Sky* are attractive for the minimized realizations of their themes.

*Veils 2* is composed of a two-dimensional surface in three-dimensional visual perspective, above a one-dimensional bar. Both are suspended in a fuzzy multi-dimensional field. The field is both foreground and background, with all gradations in between. That field is a world where dimensions are indistinct and one.

The most intriguing work is *Crevasse Rouge*. Here the painter has presented a pure image having no template in reality. It defies description with words because it references neither an object, nor a letter, nor a symbol. Thus, analogous to *Veils 2*, it perhaps shows object, letter, and symbol as indistinct and one. A conceptual world where boundaries among the three are indistinct transcends the limiting constructs of the intellect.



*Adrift (upper) and Hurricane Watch (lower) are thoroughly composed.*



*The thematic minimization of Hanging Chad (upper) and Urban Sky (lower)*



*Veils 2's multi-dimensionality (far left); and Crevasse Rouge's pure image (left)*

## A Method toward Transcendence

In summary, Michael Lowrie is seeking the underlying ultimate edge between materiality and the transcendent. This type of quest, which is often attended by a cold impersonal silence, resonates with the non-sequitor paintings of Magritte (e.g., in [Threatening Weather](#) and [La Voix des Airs](#)), the expansive color fields of [Rothko](#), the static ambient music of Erik Satie ([Gymnopédies](#)), the [temps mort](#) silence in the films of [Antonioni](#), and the metaphysical poetry of Wallace Stevens ([The Snow Man](#) and [Of Mere Being](#)).

Perhaps an alert disorientation of the viewer's equilibrium is a method toward transcendence, as in the blurring of the viewer's equilibrium in *Adrift*, *Nozone*, and the vertigous *Urban Sky*. I had experienced what I imagined to be a transcendent moment as a result of a disorientation. In a strange town, I had been surprised by the sight of a wide expanse of seaside devoid of people and objects; and under a birdless, cloudless sky. So, all that was in my field of vision was only three horizontal bands of color. That encounter is described in a set of poems called *Infinitions from the Beach*:

*from offwards, to the whorl of an ear,  
only the muffled ee, and cleansing waft, of a  
salt-tinged air,  
compels me there, to turn to see,  
suddenly, the shock of a planar verizon rising!  
slicing the world with a tri-color of infinity:*

*the wide azure sky above  
a fluid cerulean sea  
and solid sand below.*

*Here, on the edge of the earth,  
Its reality disintegrates all I have learned, and  
ego is.*

*If this is a curtain to the next world  
Then this town is its proscenium.*

Boundaries parse the world. If those boundaries are incorporated in multi-dimensional forms, perspectives, or contexts, or they approach dissolution, or they are in translucent consonance, as they are in Michael Lowrie's paintings, then the boundary themes of Lowrie's works are focal points to "the next world", and his collected works are "its proscenium".

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