



## JAANIKA PEERNA

### *Light Matter*

"It is by lending his body to the world that the artist transforms the world into paintings." The utterance belongs to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenologist, who, like so many others whose native home is in language, harbored a lifelong fascination with the silent power of visual art. Although Merleau-Ponty's passion was for painting, his words might apply even more forcibly to certain kinds of drawing (and indeed to the other gender his pronoun ignores). For with some drawing, the primacy of corporeal experience so central to phenomenology is not only its generative impulse but indeed its very subject. Such is the case with the work of Jaanika Peerna, the Estonian-born, New York-based artist whose protean drawing practice encompasses a broad range of media. Whether in her large-scale gesture drawings on Mylar that become expansive installations, her smaller sculptural pieces that become receptacles for delicate inscriptions of light or

her videos and performances, at the core of Peerna's work is a concern for the embodied, sensorially engaged subject in dynamic relation to the spatial and material world. By drawing attention to the evanescent, experiential qualities of light, shadow and movement, Peerna's work operates with the subtle force of a slowly rising tide—first by awakening the senses, and then, gradually, by delivering insights only a mind deeply in touch with its body is prepared to receive.

We are, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us, first and foremost *mobile* beings. (Even the seemingly passive sense of vision is wholly dependent on the eye's motility.) In Peerna's work, corporeal movement is not just evoked by her sweeping linear forms but is in fact integral to the work's formative process. For this artist, the body is her primary instrument, its kinesthetic capacities and limitations setting the conditions for all the work.

For this exhibition, in which dense clusters of vertical lines predominate, a singular performative act, itself a wonder to behold,

precedes each piece. This whole-body gesture, which is enacted repeatedly for each work, begins with a clearing: First the artist must undergo a kind of self-emptying, lest the discursive noise of the mind interfere. Above all, openness to the vicissitudes of the present is crucial. Thus prepared, Peerna gathers a fistful of pencils in both hands and stands before a large sheet of Mylar temporarily affixed to a hard surface. Then, extending her arms to their terminal length and pushing her pencil tips against the Mylar, she snaps her body down to the floor in one swift stroke. Essentially an act of freefall leavened by friction, the movement produces a bold graphic streak that cannot be attributed to the artist's agency alone. Rather, it is the artist in intimate contact with both her materials and the force of gravity that is its source.

For the larger works, such as the formidable *Brooklyn Falls*, which is the centerpiece of *Light Matter*, Peerna begins the act again where each previous sweep ended, gently lifting the lowermost edge of the scroll-like sheets to the top of her support board and repeating the downward thrust. The subtle overlap that

results creates discernible horizontal bands that pulsate across the expansive fields of vertical lines, both rhythmic directions being further dramatized in the installation by a light source behind the piece. Suggestive of a massive waterfall suspended in time, *Brooklyn Falls* nevertheless exudes a warmth and humanness belied by its scale. All bodies, both sentient and otherwise, are subject to the same forces; sensing these carnal echoes, we are reminded that nature is not something *other* against which we are at odds, but indeed something in which we are intimately—and irrevocably—embedded.

Just as Peerna is both an active and passive agent in the creation of her work, so too is her signature material. Mylar's chief characteristic is its translucency, but Peerna's Mylar, being slightly frosted, is semi-opaque. Its sheets resemble diaphanous rectangles of cloudy ice, velvety white yet still penetrable by light. At once strong and flexible, capable of flight yet ever subject to the downward pull of gravity and above all exquisitely responsive to ambient conditions, artist and material alike are both vehicle and vessel.



Allusions to water in all its forms—liquid, solid and vapor—pervade *Light Matter*. From the enormous falls invoked by the show's centerpiece to the gently rolling waves that cascade down both *Graphite Falls* to the ubiquitous evocations of fluid flow throughout, the presence of this notoriously dense substance is rich with significance. Growing up in Soviet-era Estonia, Peerna lived on the edge of a continent marked by repression and isolation and a sea just across which lay freedom and the plentitude of the larger world. One can imagine the artist as a child gazing out over the crashing waves and feeling not fear of nature but the solace of a kind of aquatic contact with a much longed-for world.

But it is toward a larger sense of connectedness that Peerna's work ultimately points—one that extends beyond the personal and historical to reach us all. This is none other than the primordial interweaving of self and world that is at once our most intimate relation as embodied beings and the one of which we are least aware,

so thoroughly have the various dualisms endemic to our culture fractured our lived experience. We are related to the world of space and matter not just because we act in it; we *are* that world, being made of the same porous, ever-mutating substance. Especially in an era in which we are becoming increasingly dissociated from our bodies and the actual in favor of the disembodied experience of the virtual, visual art that returns us to our basic ontology could hardly be more timely. With its insistence on the here-and-now—on active corporeal engagement with the flesh of the world—Peerna's work offers a powerful and necessary corrective. By lending her body to the world, Peerna hands ours back to us, a gift we refuse only at our own peril.

— Taney Roniger is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn, NY and the Catskills