

Press Release

August 30
October 11, 2025Opening
Saturday, August 30
from 11am to 8pm

The Nature Poem

Laurent Proux

Many have their eyes closed or their face in a dark shadow, or they completely turn their back to us, exposing without any reserve the rest of their body to our gaze. In the triptych entitled *The Nature Poem* (2025), all the figures ignore us, showing instead the top of their head, the underside of their chin, the sole of their feet, the back of their shoulders, the geometry of overlapping limbs at rest. As if freed from the concern of being seen, their head is elsewhere. Further on, in other paintings, they are even separated from the rest of the body. The opportunities to *face*, in the literal sense of the term, Laurent Proux's figures are rare. Within a group architected by three monumental bodies (*Duel*, 2025), with riffs on the theme of the ages of life, one standing and one on the ground, one character leans with the palm of their hand on the eyes of the one on the ground. This does not look like a brutal gesture; the blinded figure's arms are free from their ordinary limits, they lengthen, soften and turn into a reptilian organ or one affected by some strange deformity. Nothing threatening here, it seems. Often, with Laurent Proux's painted bodies, we are not quite sure who owns which limb; there is an overall delightful confusion or a sort of organic pooling. The bodies made available come together and hybridise. Plugging in on each other, connecting their emotions via a caress or an embrace, they escape conventional desire-induced projections. Something from the Mannerist legacy runs through these pictures, namely in these particularly extravagant melees of bodies reminiscent, for example, of Bronzino's in *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid* (c. 1545, National Gallery, London).

The heads come together less as melees than as couples. There is no point in attempting to individualise them. They are one, thrown there under our gaze, but not in a violent way like the decapitated heads painted by Géricault. Rather than with the tragic, are we not dealing with a sensuality of a different kind, here? They interpenetrate, fuse together, and arms, hands and fingers sometimes take part in this union. Feeling a little awkward in the face of this enigmatic effusion, we first hesitate to look at them up close. Our viewer's voyeuristic head seems to be too much. The effort of a close-up limits the field of vision on these bases of focused thinking, with no or hardly any chance of escaping towards the sky in the background. It seems necessary to step back to see them, as if this was a landscape made up of organic fragments. The painting *Summer Afternoon* (2025), which frames the two heads of an embracing couple lying on their stomach, captures them as they look up towards the sun, which, as we know, cannot be looked upon directly. But one of the characters has put their hand up, fingers spread apart, as a pointless shield. The painter's hand, perhaps? We cannot see his vision, only his shadow, like the one cast over the face of the woman (or man, it is hard to decide) who looks up at what blinds her (or him).

"I believe that man dreams only so as not to stop seeing", wrote Goethe in *Elective Affinities* (1809). We wish we could have access to Laurent Proux's painted figures' dreams to see through their eyes. How do we know they are dreaming? They are absent from the *natural* world around them. If we pay attention, what surrounds them could not be identified as what we usually call, in the West, nature, which would be in opposition to the culture represented by these creatures adopting such non-ergonomic postures. Amid large lancet-like leaves reminiscent of those that make up the background in Le Douanier Rousseau's *The Snake Charmer* (1907, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), a squatting figure, their head on their knees looks down at their hand that runs languorously

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over their lying partner's thigh (*Red Moon*, 2025). Both bodies are striped by the shadows of the large leaves that surround and protect them. Paying thorough attention to the German Romantics' thought, the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy described dreams, in the collection *The Fall of Sleep* (2007), as the culmination of the individual's absorption in something other than him-/herself: the body, finally free, lets itself go, and rather than oppose the world, it becomes the world. Perhaps it is this becoming that we are witnessing, as we are hypnotised in front of these Laurent Proux canvases where figures do not appear amidst grasses or at the foot of a tree: they combine, belong to each other, redouble their artifice by contagion, they express themselves, as it were, into each other.

The very large canvas entitled *The Nature Poem* (2025) opens up a new path, deepening the feeling of being buried and suffocating that could already be sensed in some recent paintings. The landscape was recomposed by the painter after noticing some undergrowth in the Jura, now haunted by Gustave Courbet's work. What caused the character with soft, rag-like limbs on the left-hand side to fall? This is a reversed sister of the pig-skin figure in *Étant donnés 1° La chute d'eau 2° Le gaz d'éclairage* (1946-66, Philadelphia Museum of Art) by Marcel Duchamp. Between her and the group absorbed by the lush vegetation and devouring love embrace, a crack splits the large canvas that is crossed by appealing lateral light: this blind spot is neither necessarily attractive, nor is it deeply disturbing. It is a painted question. It holds its place, at the centre, and perhaps it is about to get hidden if the surrounding roots and foliage that shimmer under the effect of the setting sun were to proliferate. For now, the crack is there, delineating what may be a third body between the living humans, i.e. the stratified mass of the powerful rock carved by trickling water and partly covered with green grapes like heavy necklaces. What scene is this? These characters are dreaming up a world that is far less innocent than the nudes in full light by the bent tree, or those that we saw in the retrospective *L'Arbre et la Machine* at the Musée de l'Abbaye in Saint-Claude (8 February – 28 September 2025). We can no longer believe in their complete casualness. Time no longer stands still. The geometry has become complex, orchestrating a great battle à la Uccello where everywhere undergrowth branches clash and crack. As for the bodies, they use up the as yet empty space. Something has just happened: something is slipping, the intertwined group. Imminence is becoming paint. And Laurent Proux puts us, the viewers, in front of this undecidable world fragment, fascinating in its details of multiple crevices, creating for us, near the lovers, a lit-up path. It is up to us to see the escape.

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