

JDJ

Julia Felsenthal - Artist Statement

Low Visibility

January 3 - February 1, 2025

Low Visibility comprises a sequence of twenty-four watercolors loosely based on *The Odyssey*.

I began working on this series about eighteen months ago, shortly after finishing the body of work that would become *Thalassomania*, my first solo show at JDJ. Facing an empty studio, with no road map for what came next, I felt artistically unmoored. How could I build on what I had started without repeating myself? Which impulses were the right impulses? How would I ever know how to know?

Around the same time, my husband and I set out one afternoon in a boat on a bay off the coast of Cape Cod, and proceeded to get mired—and briefly, unnervingly, lost—in a fog so thick and implacable that we could hear but not see other boats as they passed us in the channel, ghost ships slipping by. We inched along as day turned to evening, drenched and discombobulated but dazzled by the eerie glimmers and protean color shifts caused by the sun straining through its dense cloak of atmosphere (a surreal echo of the Canadian wildfire smoke that had blanketed New York City in a thick orange haze just one month earlier). It felt to me like something alien was lurking in the mist, some siren-ish sylph endeavoring to lure us off course.

Days after, I began to make watercolors in my studio based on specific moments from those hours out to sea. Only later did I recognize that I was working from literal disorientation to avoid facing existential disorientation. And of course, also, that in making these paintings I was doing the very work I did not know how to do, carving the path that I feared I would not know how to find.

I've thought a lot lately about what constitutes forward movement. In *The Odyssey*, the central theme of Nostos—the homecoming, the desire to get back to the way things were—troubles any easy dichotomy of progress and regress. For me, making paintings after years of working as a writer has offered my own kind of nostos, a return to an earlier, more elemental version of myself—not unlike what I feel when I enter the ocean, a primordial, cellular homecoming. In the case of this series, I've forged a way forward by gazing backward, making painting after painting of a single day—July 8th, 2023—even as it retreats further and further into the past. What might sound like getting stuck has actually opened a portal of possibility; dig a hole deep enough and you'll burrow to the other side of the world.

I've begun to think of time as occupying different shapes: a circle, a spiral, a pliable container. In *The Odyssey* and in my studio, time functions non-linearly, dilating and

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constricting, sliding forward and back. I can spend a week of twelve hour days laboring over a painting that reinterprets a moment snapped in a millisecond on my phone, and that draws from memories distorted and embroidered by my own act of remembering. My hundreds of photos from the boat slice time in a way that proves as tricky as recollection, revealing phenomena my eyes missed: monstrous shapes below the water's surface, submarine glints that emanate from the depths. The paintings—filtered through literature, memory and my hand—emerge for me as the truest document of the experience.

Many of the titles for these paintings reference characters from Odysseus's trials and Homeric epithets culled from the new Emily Wilson translation of the poem. Others draw from *The Tempest*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which, like my project, grafts the hero's journey onto a single day in the life of a middle-aged person contemplating the problems of modern existence. I've come to see that the decisions an artist makes in her studio can feel as monumental as Odysseus's decade-long, monster-strewn quest to return home to Ithaca, and as solipsistic as Leopold Bloom's mishap-laden peregrinations around Dublin. I'm in their company as I lash myself to my mast and venture out into the fog.

Julia Felsenthal (b. 1983) is a painter and writer working in Brooklyn and Cape Cod. Born and raised in Chicago, she studied English at Yale University and has written extensively about art and culture for various national magazines. A lifelong painter, Felsenthal turned her focus to making art full time while living on Cape Cod during the Covid pandemic. Her series of water paintings emerged from the eeriness and anxiety of that time, and have evolved to reflect the ways that small permutations of the quotidian can become endlessly captivating and sublime. Her work has been exhibited recently at JDJ, Timothy Taylor, Charles Moffett, Hunter Dunbar Projects and Planthouse in New York City, as well as at galleries across the outer Cape, on Block Island, in Woodstock, NY and in Seattle, Washington.