

# CARVALHO PARK

*A conversation with between Terra Firma's featured artist, Lawrence Calver, and artist and arts writer, Allan Gardner, at Calver's studio in London, on October 17, 2023:*

**AG: When did you start working with textiles?**

LC: I started painting to begin with, but I didn't really like the freedom of my hand. I introduced the sewing machine around that time. I was painting panels of fabric and using the machine to bring them back together, and during this process, I realized I could remove the paint and maintain this process of textile collage.

With this approach, I still treat them as paintings, but at that moment, I realized paint was not the catalyst that made them work.

**AG: They remain well within the formal language of abstraction.**

LC: I don't think I've ever produced a piece which is free from a stretcher – that has a very specific connotation regarding how the work is viewed.

**AG: It's an active insistence on them as paintings, isn't it?**

LC: Exactly.

**AG: Looking at the new work for *Terra Firma*, I'm conscious of your use of pigment. I saw that as a formal choice, to create new colors and textures. Why have you started to re-embrace paint?**

LC: Each outcome is very different. Each work has a beginning point, a potential in the material, which I carry in that direction. Occasionally I arrive at points, after stitching, where dyeing, bleaching, etc., become more of an option. As you follow this process, you start to restrict what the options are, and eventually the options dictate the application of pigment.

For many artists, adding paint is the beginning, but for me, it becomes the final action of an exhaustive process.

**AG: You've talked about taking the material to what you see as a logical conclusion, working with options, etc., but how do you define where a piece ends? What makes a certain route through the material more successful than another?**

LC: In the most successful works, it tends to be one of two things: The first being a material, which is very exciting to begin with - maybe the process of reconfiguration doesn't need to be particularly extensive, it doesn't require a huge amount of alteration to make something interesting. For example, in very old materials there are pre-existing gestures of age and distress, which are very beautiful, and in that situation, I'm able to focus on presenting these particularly interesting aspects of the material in the most clean, coherent way possible, emphasizing the qualities which were so appealing when finding the material in the first place.

**AG: The word *find* is very present in your practice. There's a difference between being an educated seeker of specific qualities versus someone who happens to stumble across something -- nothing about your work seems coincidental. I presume you have places that you regularly go to find source material?**

LC: As my work develops, it does so alongside the contacts I've made over the years. There are suppliers and merchants whom I've been dealing with for around half a decade, and some that I encounter through various travels and residencies who become regular suppliers.

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Travelling, going to places and meeting people that I might not otherwise, with the specific intention of finding something, has become part of my artistic process. I was recently in Vietnam. The materials I brought back are very different, and will produce very different works, compared to what I may find in a French flea market.

Most of the works in *Terra Firma* were produced on a residency in Cape Town, with a lot of the fabric coming from a nautical context – boat sales, flags, etc. It might not be visible due to the process of recomposition, but regardless, that was their previous life – one that has a significant role in defining how the artwork will be resolved.

**AG: Is that previous life of the fabric something you're very conscious of? Obviously, through the process of recomposing, dying, etc., the viewer is unlikely to know exactly where a piece came from, but does that retain importance for you? How quickly is that history shed in favor of formal decisions?**

LC: I like to retain an awareness of it – sometimes a viewer sees a piece and will immediately be reminded of exactly what it used to be, there's something nice in that but sometimes it just isn't enough – there has to be something more. That's the point at which dye, paint, bleach start to become more present in the work and the history perhaps becomes obscure.

**AG: *Enough* is an interesting word to use. It's the language often applied to painting, one of undefinable parameters. Your work and practice very much fits into painterly conversation, as well as the contemporary history of painting.**

LC: In *Terra Firma*, the application of pigment definitely has a strong relationship to the history of Minimalism. The pigment often plays the same role that color or texture might have regarding the original fabric. For example, with *Blue Sky*, the piece started with very colorful fabric that led itself into a very complicated collage. The longer that the piece was worked on, the more complicated it became and the more problems it presented, so the heavy application of pigment was a way to almost reset it and to begin dealing with one thing rather than many things. The application of pigment can take a work that had a lot going on, maybe too much, and remove most of those points of consideration, reducing the discussion around a work to something simple, like surface.

**AG: How did you begin to define what would or wouldn't be a good textile to begin a piece with initially? Has that changed as your work has developed?**

LC: Initially there wasn't much color. I was working with very raw, natural materials - jute, burlap, things like that, but at a certain point, I became attracted to dealing with materials that were unattractive or unfamiliar and using them to make works that emphasized their potential for beauty, regardless of how significantly they're obscured. It can be very exciting to start with something that you don't like and to try to make a great work out of it.

For example, in *Terra Firma*, there are works that began with parachute material – a sort of plastic that can be difficult to work with, quite nasty and unattractive, and throughout that process, I became more and more comfortable with that as part of the process.

**AG: That's an interesting divergence from the conversation around painting. It's very rare that painters would use a pigment, thinner, etc. that were of a fundamentally bad quality. Even if the materials are cheap, industrial, etc. the painter would normally find some kind of beauty or quality in that material they'd want to emphasize – one would rarely say "*I'm using this because it's ugly and of poor quality*" in more traditional painting. Is that challenge something you're attracted to?**

LC: In part at least, yes. I would normally see a glimmer of the feeling that I hope to arrive at within the source material, and throughout the process of producing the work, would drive towards that. Even a sort of poly-plastic could have subtle beauty hidden within it, a softness that I can bring out and emphasize. Even with things that are very garish, which one might struggle to imagine a way in which they could be repatriated, there is the potential to soften the edges. Ultimately, it can be entirely possible, and absolutely rewarding, to use those kinds of materials to reach a sense of comfort and harmony.