

Tanya Leighton

FRIEZE

Lunita-July Dorn Channels Music into Paint

At Tanya Leighton, Berlin, the artist's monumental paintings fuse musical notation, self-portraiture and colour-field intensity

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BY LOUISA ELDERTON IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 10 DEC 25



I have often wished I were a painter. Greedily eyeing propositions of colour, line, gesture, shape and space, I try in vain to transpose paint into words – rearranging language as a kind of pigment, hoping one may equal the other in some ill-begotten equation. The painter Lunita-July Dorn seems to feel the same, though her covetous source is music, as intimated in the title of her current exhibition at Tanya Leighton, 'Wenn man Musik malen könnte, wär die Welt ne schönere' ('If One Could Paint Music, the World Would Be a More Beautiful Place').

Think not of Wassily Kandinsky, who believed 'music is the ultimate teacher' and painted synaesthetic abstractions with colours corresponding to notes. Rather, Dorn's large-scale figurative canvases have two main strategies: first, a syntax that recalls musical notation, with little stems dancing across the picture plane as patterns, as well as staves extending horizontally across the lower half of her compositions to evoke sheet music; and second, the more literal citation of her favourite song lyrics nestled within the staff.

Picked out against the monochromatic red field of *The End/The Doors* (all works 2025), two female figures gaze directly at the viewer, one stooping as if to point at the opening verse from the band's titular 1967 record. I am no fan of The Doors, and was barely able to endure my sister blaring them with teenage angst from her bedroom, so here I have to disengage from my cynicism towards coming-of-age clichés. But music taste aside, the painting carries a seductive rhythmic resonance, from the fast-paced brushwork of its ground – watery red acrylic applied with swift circular and linear gestures – to the burgundy flowers growing from the ground or drooping from

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Lunita-July Dorn, *The End/The Doors*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 2.1 x 2.5 m.
Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles;
photograph: Gunter Lepkowski

the figures' hands, to the bold geometric patterns of their tunics. The bucolic landscape in which they stand is delineated with thin outlines of cream paint, the only worked-up elements being their faces and hands, which themselves are formally distilled: a shadow lining the lips; fingers rendered flat in fleshy pink. The result is strange and dreamlike, and brings to mind a contemporary reimaging of Henri Matisse's *The Dessert: Harmony in Red (The Red Room)* (1908).

Symphonic repetitions dance between the eight paintings in the form of angel wings, which adorn some of the figures, as well as tiny, hieroglyphic-like apparitions. A miniature vignette of two angels carrying a fallen friend is particularly imaginative in *Wish You Were Here/Pink Floyd*: divinity potent, even when scaled down.

The faces in the paintings are always Dorn's own: muted self-portraits defined by a simplicity that proposes a symbolic archetype. They are both her and everyone. *Breathe (in the air)/Pink Floyd* sees her with cigarette perched between lips and arms outstretched, ready for flight. The canvas's canary-yellow ground peeks through great expanses of black and chocolate brown, which simultaneously scrub out and define details. There is a unique approach to layering in this work: the yellow ground fills the woman's complexion, her facial contours defined by gentle, soft lines, while the hands are roughly approximated in this same yellow, overpainted atop black.

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Lunita-July Dorn, *Wish You Were Here/Pink Floyd*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 1.85 x 1.95 m. Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles; photograph: Gunter Lepkowski



Lunita-July Dorn, *Breathe (in the air)/Pink Floyd*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 1.85 x 1.95 m. Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles; photograph: Gunter Lepkowski

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The effect is apparition-like, as if she were drifting in and out of focus at the height of some Pink Floyd-esque acid trip.

Dorn's canvases strike at different genres of painting: they are at once monochromes, Christian icons and self-portraits with a universal timbre. This active oscillation between the formal conceits of colour field painting and a more existential search for selfhood overtly holds the viewer's attention. Yet the works possess a melancholy, too, that speaks to the unconscious space where we remain a mystery to ourselves. Whether we are painters, musicians or writers, there is a gap between self and medium that remains language-less, however hard we try to give it form.

*Lunita-July Dorn's Wenn man Musik malen könnte, wär die Welt ne schönere' is on view
at Tanya Leighton, Berlin, until 31 January 2026*

Main image: Lunita-July Dorn, Shine On You Crazy Diamond/Pink Floyd, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 2.1 x 2.3 m. Courtesy: the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin and Los Angeles; photograph: Gunter Lepkowski