

ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

Los Angeles

Thomas Lawson

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY
3143 South La Cienega Boulevard, Unit A
September 8–October 20

It has been three decades since Thomas Lawson first stated his strangely qualified case for figurative painting as a political Trojan horse. Still, his latest works are more than painted corpses. Lawson's current exhibition contains only seven paintings—big, good-looking ones at that—but in fact they are inwardly catastrophic, scattered with witty casualties. Lithe and pressurized, the show could not withstand the amputation of even one element of one work. The impasto wildness of the werewolf head in *Voluptuous Panic* (all works 2012) is mitigated by the (apparent) restraint of the rest. But even the more outwardly placid canvases contain a weirdly savaged classicism. Crimson splatter outlines handprints on ghostly philosophers' robes in *Subject to Debate*. Faces are pained; oversize hands or feet float in space; necks terminate in rough brushstrokes. Brightly colored remnants of lost wholes, these works are reminiscent of the way myths have survived: in fragments. The cowering man in *The Bell* screams in silent agony; he has had enough. Yet Lawson keeps on. Through its self-consciously "painterly" perversions—unexpected transparency, jarring coloration, and strange formal correspondences—this exhibition crossbreeds and sutures huge chunks of culture. Think what you will; these monsters are thrilled they exist. Their "figurative" ilk hatch, like sensational headlines, at an alarming rate. In *Theoretical Picture*, a horse run through the eye with a lance becomes a unicorn. A jackal's patterned coat slithers onto a periwinkle-faced man's suit (or vice versa) in *Into the Night*, and the two figures share the same underpainted red form: a two-headed hybrid, joined in paint.



Thomas Lawson, *Theoretical Picture*, 2012, oil on canvas, 72 x 60".

— Travis Diehl