

Laura Findlay:  
NIGHT VISION





# Bats, Brambles, and Butterflies: On Laura Findlay's Nocturnal Ponds and Gardens

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD

"There was a full moonlight, and I could see that the noise was made by a great bat," Dr. Seward records in his diary in Bram Stoker's gothic opus *Dracula*, "which wheeled around, doubtless attracted by the light, although so dim, and every now and again struck the window with its wings."<sup>1</sup>

I remember summer evenings spent on the dock at my aunt's old cottage near Bancroft in the Haliburton Highlands, casting my lure into copper-toned water so calm it looked iced over. As a kid, I knew the day was done when bats took over the night. Looking up at the twilight sky, suddenly a black flash here, then a black flicker there, until the air was thick with outstretched wings.

The bats gorged on bugs with impunity, every now and then softly prodding the inlets of my fishing rod or line to see if that could be eaten too. Close enough, you could hear them, chattering away to each other in a cacophony of tiny squeaks and chirps, as they filled their bellies with mosquitoes that had recently robbed me of my blood. Spooked yet enthralled, I would lie down with my back against the dock and watch the spectacle unfold above me.

I tell this story to articulate my childhood discomfort when sharing the night with them. Dr. Seward experienced a similar scare as he watched over Lucy during her mysterious illness in *Dracula*. Bats, as we have come to know them, embody a certain trepidation of the night.

Laura Findlay's exhibition reinforces this disarming sense of unease by permeating it with scores of paintings of great bats. These are hung unconventionally high and low on the wall, so that audiences look up and down to see them dart and dip and dance in the gallery. They are pictured suspended in flight, moored in moments of rest, and attacking their next prey. Usually, their paper-thin wings extend to the very edges of the panel, as if suggesting that they could barely be contained. Across a large triptych, they gulp water from a pond strewn with lily pads.

Often, the bats' mouths gape open, revealing little tongues protruding or needle-like teeth at the ready. They are at once menacing and sinister, yet adorable, and dare I say... cute. One appears close-up, almost smiling, in a three-quarter profile, as if posing for a traditional portrait, an absurdly funny art historical reference. Ultimately, though, they are a paradox that festers into an unresolved tension. This is why, "In Findlay's paintings, things seem both fine and completely wrong."<sup>2</sup>

We, as human beings, let bats do their thing for good reason, as they carry fatal zoonotic diseases. I'm convinced that Findlay's bat paintings scratch something deep in our reptilian brains that warns us against them, against getting too close. Perhaps this is what coaxes me into Findlay's work, but it is the technical level of execution that keeps me there.

Her paintings look different because they are different. For one thing, an important thing, she knows the properties of light far better than most artists, being both a painter and a professional photographer. Each work appears to be abruptly illuminated by the camera's blinding white flash, which not only blankets the composition in a snowy afterglow but also records a nightlife hitherto unseen to our daylight eyes. This kind of gonzo-style garden photography is the source material that creeps into her paintings.

Moreover, while most painters add pigment and glaze to the surface, she tears it away, often using cloth or fingertips to deny the pigment's lasting impression. Doing so leaves a soft stain underneath, occasionally so thin the gessoed surface of the panel can be seen underneath.<sup>3</sup> This subtractive process is Draculian in nature, and is precisely why her work looks transparent, which lends itself well to rendering the wings of bats. But the transparency also permits an underlying phantasmal quality.

Dracula, too, had this quality. He took human form, yes, but he also shapeshifted into a bat, and even into a strange mist—all phenomena that you do not want to bump into in the night. He ravaged Europe, from Transylvania to London, feasting on victims' blood and inciting terror. Let us forget the book for a moment: there are over 500 films featuring the character of Dracula, making him the most portrayed literary character in movie history.<sup>4</sup> No wonder our collective perception of bats spills from pop cultural expressions like these. Hell, mine does as well. What *Jaws* did for sharks, *Dracula* did for bats.



*Drinker*, oil on panel, 2026.



*Bramble*, oil on panel, 2022.

As paintings of nocturnal ponds and gardenscapes, her work features worms, butterflies, slugs, robins, wasps' nests, and more, navigating the liminal space between human-made environments and Mother Nature's own. In Findlay's lucid focus on the nature of things, there is deep concern for the ways that nature pushes back against human presence and the built environment. Here, nature moves with agency, as an unrelenting force that affirms its continued existence.

A rush of morning glories breaches through a fence that is scarcely visible in the background. Elsewhere, exuberant bramble bushes flood the picture plane in sharp contrasts of darkness and light, red and green, all while a white picket fence shadows the background. It would seem that despite our best backyard interventions, nature has a way of resisting the bounds of our containment, almost as if there is an underlying order to it all that we fail to respect or understand

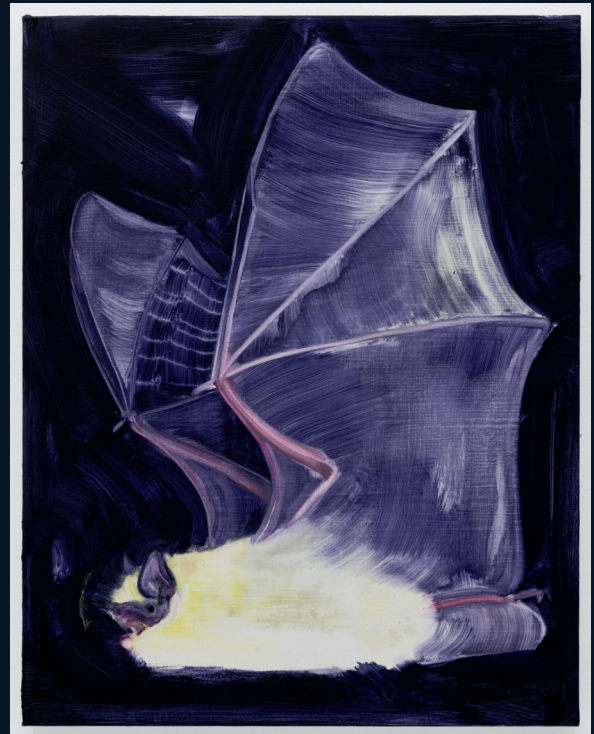
Findlay's ponds and gardens teem with life as they do with death. Again, a paradox. My grandmother Helena grew a beautiful garden in her backyard every spring, and we would devour its offerings: carrots, peppers, onions, beets, cucumbers, radishes, tomatoes, and more. That smell of wet dirt as the rototiller churned up the earth. Thick slices of plump beefsteak tomatoes with salt and pepper.

The garden would begin to decay by late summer and die by autumn, only to be reborn after the brutality of winter. Those patterns of the garden are the systems of being itself. Today, the garden is gone and replaced by grass; the house my grandfather built was torn down and a new home built in its place; and my grandparents have all passed on to exist in

these memories I share. So it goes.

I find Findlay's dense, thriving gardens to be opportunities to turn inward, to ponder the inevitability of our own life cycles. In their lush abundance, they remind us of renewal, recovery, and restoration. On the other hand, the bats that police the night sky represent a veritable *memento mori*,<sup>5</sup> a reminder of death and the fragility of existence—things that Stoker made sure that *Dracula* personified. These paintings feel unsettled, something does not sit right, and that is part of their allure.

The pond, the garden, and its creatures. Alive but soon to be dead. Beautiful, yes, but every bit as haunting.



*Howl*, oil on panel, 2026.

## Notes

1. Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, chap. 12 (1897 edition), <https://bramstoker.org/pdf/novels/05dracula.pdf>.
  2. Melanie Zurba, "Worried Earth Eco-Anxiety and Entangled Grief," *Worried Earth* (2024), <https://www.worried-earth.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/worried-earth-brochure-web-1.pdf>.
  3. Nicole Dufoe, "The Statement," *Norberg Hall* (2025), <https://norberghall.com/laura-findlay-the-darkest-hour/>.
  4. Guinness Book of World Records, "Most portrayed literary character in film," (no date), <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/69887-most-portrayed-character-in-horror-films>.
  5. Bryne McLaughlin, "Laura Findlay: The Necromancer's Garden," *Laura Findlay* (2022), <http://laurafindlay.com/garden.htm>.
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## About the Artist

Born in Montreal and raised on Vancouver Island, Laura Findlay received a BFA from Concordia University in 2011 and an MFA from the University of Guelph in 2014. She currently lives in Toronto, Ontario. Working primarily in gestural representational painting, Findlay is interested in the tension that emerges from encounters between the natural and built environments. Her work has been exhibited in Canada and internationally, including at Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago; Art Gallery of Grande Prairie, AB; and Arsenal Contemporary, Toronto. She has been an artist-in-residence at the Annandale Artist Residency, the Banff Centre, and the Vermont Studio Center. Findlay is represented by Norberg Hall in Calgary, Alberta.



## Acknowledgements

Glenhyrst Art Gallery acknowledges that we are on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnaabe, and Haudenosaunee Peoples. This land is part of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe peoples and symbolises the agreement to share, protect our resources, and not to engage in conflict. The City of Brantford is situated on the Haldimand Tract, land promised to Six Nations, which includes six miles on each side of the Grand River.

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Images courtesy of the artist.

Front cover: *Skim*, oil on panel, 2025.

Inside cover: *Morning Glories*, oil on panel, 2024.

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