

Tracey Emin Saw Her Paintings on Social Media. It Changed Laura Footes's Career Forever

The British artist draws on her experiences with chronic illness in her transcendent paintings.



Laura Footes, 2025. Courtesy and copyright of Carl Freedman.

Emily Steer (<https://news.artnet.com/about/emily-steer-28029>) January 6, 2026

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Laura Footes's paintings are at once trippy, sublime, and suffocating. They feature a series of translucent, ethereal bodies, simultaneously suggestive of escape and entrapment. Some figures float, bedbound, above city spaces. Others merge into vast mountainous forms. Interior and exterior space are blurred to hallucinogenic effect. Fluid, pulsating marks are applied using an electric-colored palette. Some paintings stretch across one or two meters, drawing the viewer into beautiful yet haunting visions.

"Living with chronic illness since I was a child, I don't take the body for granted," said Footes when we spoke soon after the opening of her solo exhibition "[Anamnesis \(https://www.shrine.nyc/laura-footes-anamnesis\)](https://www.shrine.nyc/laura-footes-anamnesis)" at Shrine NYC in early December. The British artist has spent long stretches in the hospital, getting treatment, surgery, and aftercare for Crohn's disease.

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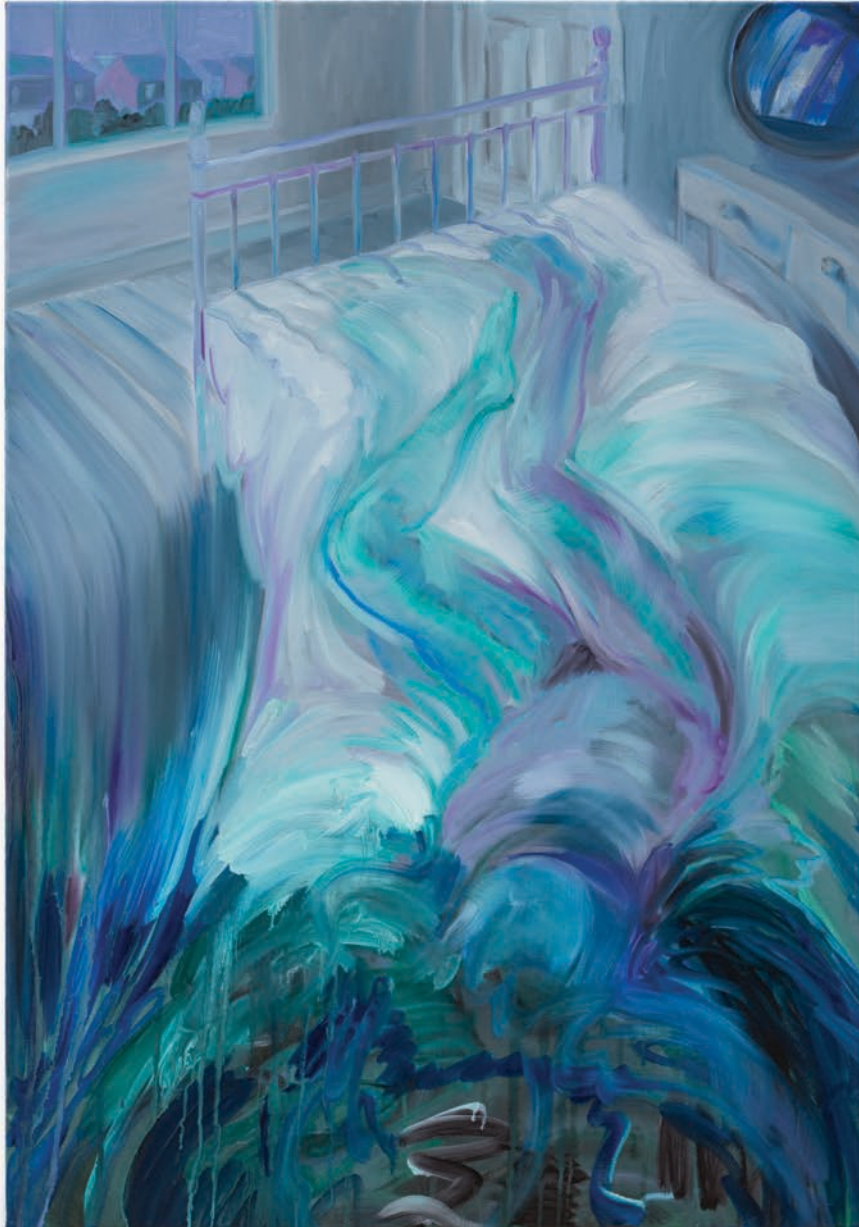
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Laura Footes, *Mountain* (2025), oil on canvas. Photo: courtesy of the artist and SHRINE.

"The body is porous; it's temporal. I learned that our time is finite earlier than most young people," she said. "I don't know how else I could communicate my experience of the body other than it being so ungraspable." She described her paintings as both "corporeal and psychological," conjuring the feeling of a "wounded sheep" who is separated from the flock. She hopes her paintings convey a sense of alienation that is recognizable to anyone who is isolated due to illness and disability.

Footes grew up in a working-class family in Birmingham and didn't go to a lot of galleries when she was a child. She originally studied modern languages, first traveling and exploring other cultures around Europe on her Erasmus year, a program that funds work experience for post-secondary school students. She started drawing and painting after graduation, and supported herself by working in care homes. She describes two moments as formative: studying at the Royal Drawing School in 2013, where she was introduced to art-historical heavyweights, such as Giotto and Piero della Francesca; and being discovered by Tracey Emin (<https://www.artnet.com/artists/tracey-emin/>) in 2022.



Laura Footes, *Descent* (2025), oil on canvas. Photo: courtesy of the artist and SHRINE.

Emin reached out to Footes after seeing her work on social media. Footes had long admired Emin—her renowned 1998 sculpture *My Bed* had impacted Footes as a teenager. "It all starts with Tracey," she told me. "I understand what that work means more as I've had my own traumas." Beds are an almost constant icon in Footes's paintings. They are variously a place of comfort, frustration, entrapment, pain, rest, and insomnia. Footes described her painted beds having a "potent duality" as she "processes how out of control, trapped, and submerged I felt—and many people feel—during moments of ill health, both mental and physical." Her use of space is also inspired by cinematic devices, informed by her time watching movies during extended spells in bed.



Laura Footes, *Memory in Green* (2025), oil on canvas. Photo: courtesy of the artist and SHRINE.

When Footes took up a residency at Emin's [TKE Studios](https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-led-spaces-are-proliferating-around-the-world-filling-a-gap-caused-by-dwindling-public-funding-and-market-pressures-2232925) (https://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-led-spaces-are-proliferating-around-the-world-filling-a-gap-caused-by-dwindling-public-funding-and-market-pressures-2232925) in Margate, the young artist began to delve further into art history and learned practical skills such as canvas stretching. "It was both a technical and philosophical mentorship from Tracey," she said. "It totally revolutionized how I see things. Tracey helped me to think about what it means to make an image. What do I want to communicate, and is it true to me? I'm still expanding from it. It's almost like she opened Pandora's box and I'm still percolating."

Emin encouraged her mentees to move away from purely decorative art, looking for the truth of their psyches within the work and challenging them to find visual potency. In late 2024, Emin curated "A Healing Dream," a solo show of Footes's work at Carl Freedman Gallery in Margate. The exhibition highlighted the common threads in their practices, exploring the purgatorial experience of being at home during recovery and convalescence. Footes has since shown with Freedman at Frieze London and Untitled Miami. Footes will also be included in "Crossing into Darkness" (January 18–April 12, 2026), an exhibition curated by Emin at Carl Freedman, which will also feature works by Lindsey Mendick, Louise Bourgeois, Anselm Kiefer, Edvard Munch, Emin, and others.

Footes's show at Shrine NYC features many of her recurring motifs, such as the new painting *Sertraline Dream*, which is based on the memory of a previous trip to New York, when Footes was essentially confined at home for fear of a medical emergency after her health coverage was unexpectedly canceled. "I felt so sad, abandoned, frustrated, and isolated," she remembered. "That feeling leaks into a lot of my experience of the city. Being in it and so surrounded by activity, but not being able to penetrate it."



Laura Footes, *Sertraline Dream* (2025), oil on canvas. Photo: courtesy of the artist and SHRINE.

Some works are also driven by medication-fueled dreams and the artist's ongoing daydreaming, which she chalks up to regular bouts of insomnia. Her paintings also call to mind the visual memories that dominate PTSD and near-death experiences. It is common for survivors to retain a bird's-eye view of traumatic memories, looking down at themselves from the ceiling rather than through their own eyes. Footes works with a similarly aerial view, which she attributes to memories from medicated dreams, when "I feel so separate that I'm watching."

But the bed is also a place to dream and fall out of time. Footes regularly writes down her dreams upon waking, using them to shape her compositions. She also uses her bed as a creative space, sometimes drawing while lying in it, or "taking time out of life, cocooning, and getting the resources to go back out into the world," she said.



Laura Footes, *Dream on Mars* (2025), oil on canvas. Photo: courtesy of the artist and SHRINE.

And there is a sense of connection to be found in sleeping as well, which Footes said is “the most equalized we will ever be in the sense of everyone knowing what it’s like to live with chronic illness. You’re not awake and participating. You’re in this halfway house. A lot of my work is owed to the no man’s land between living and being dead.” She also recalled working on an Alzheimer’s ward and witnessing the slow dissolving of the minds of patients there. “Watching people lose shades of themselves every day made me realise that even though Crohn’s disease has plagued my body, the most important and cherished thing I have is my mind and memory.”

This helped inform her current show’s title, “Anamnesis,” a word that refers to the retelling of a patient’s medical trauma to a doctor, as well as the memory of a previous existence. “Through these signs, symbols, and painted rooms, I am offering a space that might catalyze a memory for someone else,” Footes said. “I hope viewers of this show will go through their own process of anamnesis with the works.”



Laura Footes, *Planets* (2025), oil on canvas. Photo: courtesy of the artist and SHRINE.

Despite the pain that is evident in Footes's paintings, there is a sense of transcendence to them as well. She connects this with her Irish Catholic upbringing, when she was surrounded by religious imagery that promised elevation. Her paintings likewise extend beyond the tangible world. "They are definitely about escape," she said. "That is the beauty and power of art, being able to take all that trauma and negativity and reconfigure it into your own new reality. I don't want to make people feel depressed with my paintings. There is a beauty to the challenges and difficulties of a life that doesn't fit into a capitalist, high-functioning, able-bodied system."



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