

UNION PACIFIC
17 Goulston Street
London E1 7TP (UK)
+44 (0) **207 247 61 61**

KOAK

HOLDING BREATH

03 May – 02 June 2019

Preview: Thursday 02 May, 6-9pm

What is not breath is breathless. Not death, but rather still time. A pause from movement. Or a moment that exceeds time. A moment in which we can fall together with other still lives around us. Is holding a breath then a holding of time? Do we extend being by withholding our breath from leaving our body? And, when we no longer breathe, are we exceeding time forever? Aside from our respiratory system there must be other paths our breath goes by.

A breath is an utterance of life. When it leaves the mouth it becomes a spirit. Exhaled, breath is the afterlife of us from just a moment ago; our spirits, dead and alive, coinciding alongside each other--my breath alongside me. It comes from beyond us, at least air does and maybe it does not become breath until inside of us and only inside of us is it breath before it leaves our body again. Imagine where to our breath travels--the face of a lover in their sleep, onto the street when caught by the wind, on the window of a bus or the mirror of almost any given bathroom, into the mouth of a stranger.

„And a phrase is a spirit

or a breath-shape caught in mid-air“

Holding Breath is the first solo show of Koak at Union Pacific in London and takes its title from the act of holding one's breath. Koak has always held her breath while drawing, specifically when drawing faces or hands. To her it began to feel that "to hold [your breath] long enough, you are able to give it over to the page. Or at least to place yourself in a single moment of time (rather than time in motion) that is akin to the world of the page in front of you. It's a small act of withholding your life to implant it somewhere else, into the work." Like text, two-dimensional art is inherently caught within a moment due to its physically stationary nature. This timelessness has always distinguished art from life, despite art's attempt to equal it. And perhaps it did. Perhaps there is a different way to understand life, where, beyond a common human perception, life can exist forever in a paused breath.

*„And just as I received the breath of life that made me a man, I
breath into you who become a soul.“*

Holding Breath spans both floors of the gallery. The basement floor features works of groups of figures, whereas the works on the ground floor contain individual figures. As though following a circulation of air through lungs, we are led across two floors into a whirl of breaths. Below, so many bodies crowd the surfaces and face us with intense moments of laughter, consolation and childbirth, while upstairs each individual figure remains so isolated in their own piece—whether they enjoy their solitude or long for company is to be debated—and has a calmness to their air. Throughout the exhibition we are held in a variety of breaths, instilled in the works separately, but as a viewer we are captured in a singular moment of holding breath nonetheless until we leave the gallery.

The figures are bent and pulled by the lines that make up their bodies. Placed in challenging, contorted or tightened positions that we are familiar with from Koak's hand, they seem at rest. The dualism of this body of work, placed in two different spaces and separated into representations of groups and individuals, is disrupted by a sense of anxiety and comfort that alternates each other throughout the paralleling narratives of the show. Koak has said previously that “as much as [she is] trying to create moments that feel awkward or uncomfortable in [her] work, it's more often a moment of recognition of just being alive. It's the moments [where] we are fully present in our bodies.” This is where Koak's figures find comfort. Captured in a single moment and held in breath, her figures in may forever be momentarily relieved from life in time. Trying to articulate the reasoning behind holding her breath while drawing, Koak encountered a passage on Gian Lorenzo Bernini's portrait sculpture that explained why he captured his subjects “in a breathless attitude.” He is to have said that “the best time to render the mouth is when [the subject] has just spoken or is just about to begin speaking; that one should catch this moment.” It is in this moment, Koak recounts, that “Bernini felt captured them more truly as themselves, in their truest beauty—rather than a shell of a human they were a human with life.”

Contemplating the holding of breath, the question that leads the exhibition is “which breath do I keep for myself and which breath is for others?” We breathe in silence, we make a sound. We are alone aloud. A breath kept for ourselves or one unable to be shared due to a solitude we cannot break away from. The solo figures in *Holding Breath* are fixed. They were already still and are captured in stillness again. A double pause of time. Some figures appear content with their solitude, or even indulge in the freedom of space they have to breath, think and feel in without interference, such as the figure in *Pacifica* who is nurturing the breath held in her lungs also in her arms against her chest. Or, *The Hermit* who seems to enjoy her own company so much that she will not let you, as a viewer, come close, shielding herself and her thoughts coyishly behind her chair. The figure in *Breathless*, however, looks as though she is kept from letting go of her breath.

Her ribs visible, her body caved in, the bow around her neck is forcibly holding her breath for her. We do not always choose to be alone, but we still need to breathe.

In the group portraits, in the basement of Union Pacific, lines are governed by movement rather than stillness. Although rendered still, their stillness indicates the moment of momentum. The backgrounds in these works have been mostly emptied from a context, but are filled, instead, with the presence of multiple breaths. The essence of a group is different from that of an individual; dynamics come into play. In *When Our Bare Wounds Show* breath was shared until it choked into tears of laughter. Yet, sharing is not always a two-way activity. Sometimes a breath is shared with someone because they need it, because they cannot breathe on their own. We breathe for two for the hope that new life promises to the future or to hold a broken relationships together. Like their breathing, the figures in these group works are tangled. The lines composing their bodies flow into or fight against each other, causing, on the one hand, for beautiful tender moments of balance as so we see in *The Trade*, where the lines of the arms of each figure seem to take over from the other, sharing shape and weight in addition to breath. On the other hand, these tangled lines accumulate overlap and cut each other off, and the affected figures, wanting to stand on their own, seem to ask the question: Why am I still here?

In contrast to the intimacy of the solo works, there is a level of distrust to the group works. The amount of figures and presented together underground allude the feeling of anxiety and even alienation the way how togetherness can sometimes make us feel more in isolation.

„breath: the wind's ally“

They say words carry our spirit. Like a let-go-breath, speech is a phantom of life. If our exhalation is an afterlife, how can we ourselves circulate with our breath? Dead is not dead, for a breath held is alive forever. Do I then become part of my lover's face, the wind in the street, the mirror in your bathroom, and so particle by particle we become part of each other. Every line holds a breath. These works are sustained and will now keep a breath inside them forever. Our bodies will seek to be alone and together, and there will be times when we neither want to be alone nor in company of others. Agony of life. We wish we could leave the earth for a moment. Scream and keep screaming, with no sound at all. In silence. To disconnect from all structures that both hold and restrict us. This remains a fantasy, the dream of a nightmare, that in reality cannot happen, but, here, on the page in front of us, it might. We can only hold our breaths for as long as we are able to, but we will still feel our pulse; our hearts and minds do not stop, bound by the clock of constructed nature. The only breath that might breathe in movement forever and that will hold all breaths at a halt when it holds its own breath forever, is the breath of the earth, the kiss of the wind.

- Lara School

Koak (b. 1981, Lansing, Michigan.) earned her Masters of Fine Arts from California College of the Arts, San Francisco in 2016. Recent solo shows include *Breaking the Prairie* (François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, CA) and her work in painting, drawing, and sculpture has been exhibited at Alter Space, San Francisco; American Medium, New York; Museum of Sex, New York, and has been featured in print in Juxtapoz, Spike Magazine, the New York Observer, Vault Magazine, and Cultured Magazine. *Holding Breath* is her first solo exhibition with Union Pacific and her first in Europe. Koak lives and works in San Francisco.

Exhibition Hours
Wednesday–Saturday
12pm–6pm

Please contact us for
further information.

UNION PACIFIC 17 Goulston Street London E1 7TP +44 (0) 207 247 61 61 mail @ unionpacific.co.uk

