LA WEEKLY

ELEANOR RAY: SUGGESTING PARADISE AT THE HOLLYWOOD ROOSEVELT

PAUL MAZIAR | FEBRUARY 18, 2020

Eleanor Ray, *Blue Sheet*, oil on panel, 6 x 8 inches, 2019 (courtesy of Nicelle Beauchene Gallery).

The art world landed in L.A. this past weekend for Frieze Los Angeles, joined by several other fairs and occasioning numerous openings — way too much to see if you're into the rapturous experience of long-looking. So instead, we opted for a quixotic trip of finding, and looking deeply into, four works from one painter, Eleanor Ray, on view with Nicelle Beauchene's gallery at the Felix Fair in the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel.

After twisting through miles of traffic and waiting in what felt like an hour-long concert line, we finally saw Ray's tiny panel paintings up close. Felix's labyrinthine layout and swarming crowds challenged contemplation, its displays in cramped rooms rather a disservice to what was on view. But Beauchene's chamber was the most exquisitely presented, attractive showing at Felix, and a necessary break from the hubbub.

LA WEEKLY

Eleanor Ray, *Salt Lake Edge*, oil on panel, 6 x 8 inches, 2019 (courtesy of Nicelle Beauchene Gallery).

In that diminutive Hollywood Roosevelt hotel room, painter Eleanor Ray's visionary landscapes brought a total calm. Her pale or cobalt blues and tawnier hues invoke the occult, in the sense of unseen spaces of sky and the tranquil, unenclosed lands that affect the mind in profound ways. These four paintings turned out to be perfect for the forced attention that the barn-burner demanded.

The experience reminded us of a Simone Weil quotation that Ray sent via email last fall: "In the inner life, time takes the place of space." But in that room, it was paint that replaced space. Ray's works are moving and otherworldly, depicting earthly sites such as Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* in the Great Salt Lakes.

But beyond the satisfaction of recognizing the specific, actual sites the works depict, the paintings each have the power to become the room you're in, akin to the familiar cognitive absorption of watching a film. Looking into Ray's little panels is as good as any moving picture. On the 11th floor at the Hollywood Roosevelt, I shut the world out for a few brief minutes and became instead a guest of the heavenly space that Eleanor Ray made up.

Southwest Contemporary

West by Southwest:
Considering Landscape in Contemporary Art

FEATURE | Shane Tolbert | May 24, 2019

Eleanor Ray, *Spiral Jetty Dawn*, 2018, oil on panel, 5.5 x 7.75 in. Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, NY.

"The planet seen from extremely close up is called the ground." —Mary Ruefle

Landscape painting: the passé genre that dominates so much of the world's understanding of Southwest art. For me, first it conjures images of Albert Bierstadt (wrought with a minefield of American colonialism), the sappy, wistful romance of a Caspar David Friedrich abyss, and the airy, observational paintings of Provence by Paul Cézanne, thanks to the technological innovation of premixed paint in a tube that allowed him to travel light and work outside. Given the rapidly changing, often deteriorating state of the planet today, traditional landscapes are almost automatically tinged with nostalgia. But some contemporary artists are working to undermine, change, and redirect ways the Southwest landscape is interpreted. I've found landscape to be a central, but not primary, component in a number of artists working today. This shared region has served not only to keep the landscape relevant, but also as a reminder of the land as an undeniable foundation to many projects. The West functions in multiple areas:

as painting in the expanded field, as a social space, as body, and as quiet solitude in observational painting.

"I was undisturbed by humans, but maddened sometimes by fierce wind-driven dust, which would coat the fresh gobs of paint on my palette."
—Rackstraw Downes

Painting en plein air has long been the cornerstone of the tradition of landscape painting in the Southwest. Since the 1930s, Georgia O'Keeffe's enduring relationships to Cerro Pedernal and the geological layer cake of Abiquiú, New Mexico, have played a major role in defining the history of modernism. While many painters are still actively engaging the land through an observational technique, the decisions of "location" and their attached meaning vary wildly. Since the early '90s, almost evenly west and due south of Santa Fe, some of the most important landscape paintings depict not notable features like Pedernal but nondescript locations in the Chihuahuan Desert. Rackstraw Downes has dedicated himself to the minutiae of unassuming and otherwise banal locations, such as refinery-town culverts and the now-eerie, untenanted floors of the World Trade Center. Banal, that is, until seen through the eyes of Downes. His approach to perspective features two devices: fisheye structures for a shallower depth of field and a sweeping, panoramic horizon line mapping the curvature of the earth for expansive vistas. His work is done, patiently, en plein air, fully exposed to weather conditions (in three-hour increments due to changing light from the active participation of the sun). This is not a bucolic, Japanese-inspired water garden in Giverny.

Rackstraw Downes, *Looking West, North & Northeast: The South and North Horse Shelters*, 2006, oil on canvas, 15 x 120 in. Courtesy Texas Gallery.

The deserts of the West, while sublime, are unforgiving, open expanses with few breaks from the strong, bitter winds and offer no cover from the severe sun. In short, it can be an extreme environment to choose to paint outdoors. Downes's *Presidio Horse Racing Association Track* series, a set of four paintings along with studies and preparatory drawings developed between 2004 and 2007 and somewhere between the Chinati Mountains and Ojinaga, Mexico, demonstrate a clinical and sober approach to interpreting the land. Downes came of age as an artist during the height of minimalism, and I can't help but consider how, directly or indirectly, it has informed his method of system-based image making. Like his titles, which use cardinal directions, the structured logic of his framing decisions of the landscape are as dry as variations of a cube. *Looking West, North & Northeast: The South and North Horse Shelters*, 2006, is at first glance an empty setting. Aside from the pink Chinati range, center-right in the deep distance which sets a boundary on the horizon, patches of dead brush punctuate an otherwise open field, with three skeletal shade structures of pipe and corrugated metal and a welded-pipe fence that runs parallel in front of sandy hills of little distinction. Why here? At this moment of questioning, the horizontality begins to form and become present. The painting is 15 by 120 inches, a uniquely wide sprint of a format, to be certain. The horizon line arcs across the center, and the manmade elements, all painted economically in white, float to the surface and suggest a grid in the lattice structure of pipe fencing. In the foreground,

signs of human presence emerge on the surface of the desert floor in the carved marks of elliptical tire U-turn lines and footsteps that could only have made an impression after the rare occurrence of rain.

Van Hanos, a recent transplant to Marfa, Texas, is a deft paint handler who moves confidently through different modalities of image-making, ranging broadly from photo-based techniques to abstraction to plein air. I'm always amazed by his painterly invention of mirroring and inverting spaces—real and psychological. Hanos's recent landscapes charge the genre with new life through layered meaning. That is to say, the paintings are as much about landscape as they are something else. *Interior Landscape* is a well-rendered painting of the Chisos Formation, with an overlay of radiant, agave-like forms materializing from the center as a spring. Vibrant mark making forms the sky in textured layers in a way that summons the spirit of early German Expressionism, à la Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and the Die Brücke group. *Portrait of Our Mother as a Mountain* is a striking double portrait of the Window Trail in Big Bend National Park, Texas, at sunrise and sunset. Hanos's ability to collapse the passage of time into one image is both poetic and whip smart. There's a phenomenology to experiencing the changing colors of a sunset or sunrise that Hanos captures in paint that recalls the framing of a Turrell sky space and the hypersensitivity of color in Monet's *Rouen Cathedral* series.

Van Hanos, *Interior Landscape*, 2019, oil on linen, 20 x 25 in. Courtesy the artist, Chateau Shatto Gallery, and Tanya Leighton Gallery.

Eleanor Ray, based in Brooklyn and frequently in the Southwest, trained in observational painting at the New York Studio School. Ray, no longer tied to strict observation, chooses to work from memory and images sourced from her travel and time spent wandering around various sites. In an email exchange, Ray shared that "seeing in memory" is a way of opening up new compositions of past locations for her work. It comes across to me as an experiential painting practice of being in a space and knowing it by witnessing changing light and weather. This practice of observation never goes away, but the technical aspects of paint to canvas are kept in the studio. By and large, Ray's body of work consists of vacant landscapes, inward-facing exteriors and outward-facing interiors balancing sun-bleached hues to create space for light as subject matter. Ray makes clear her Southwest interests through the sites she chooses and, in the case of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, paints again and again. In *Galisteo (Agnes Martin)*, I couldn't help but think of a private life made public—even after Martin's death—only because Martin was so determined to live and work in solitude. That said, the painting is one of admiration for Martin, as it captures Martin's sensibility of harmony through her home's ability to blend into the landscape almost unnoticed. Ray renders the home's architecture as solid geometric blocks laid horizontally, with shadow breaks from eastern sunlight marking it as a structure in an otherwise open field of tan, dry prairie grass.

Only the right corner of the roof bisects the horizontal bands of brushwork that effectively define the gray cottonwoods along the Galisteo Creek and a wavering, dark blue line as a stand-in for the distant ridge that shapes the Galisteo Basin. The expansive presence of Ray's thinly painted, pale blue, cloudless sky feels true to form and also operates as a nod to Martin's serene palette.

Eleanor Ray, *Galisteo (Agnes Martin)*, 2018, oil on panel, 6.25 x 8.25 in. Courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, NY.

"Rose-colored sand on the ridge maintains a perimeter between chaos below and an almost numerical perfection of blue sky, when in fact blue radiates down to me."
—Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge

While these three painters continue to work with Southwest landscape painting in the most conventional sense, others seek to redefine what landscape can be to painting, using materials from daily life and new technological processes. Since the post-minimalism days of the early '70s, pioneering feminist artist Harmony Hammond has continually questioned traditional supports in painting with unconventional materials and processes and an emphasis on the embedded gender and sexuality of her materials. In 1988, Hammond began teaching at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Her annual commute from Galisteo to

Tucson and her time wandering the alleys of her Tucson neighborhood, Barrio Viejo, proved to be fruitful with an endless supply of abandoned materials to scavenge and form the body of work we now know as *Farm Ghosts*. Hammond has always been direct about her abstract paintings' relationship to class structures, marginalized communities, and queer identity in rural America, and its gravitas is refreshing. Hammond's *Farm Ghosts* series functions as a swan song to an agrarian life that has evaporated from most of rural America due to the rise of largescale commercial farming practices in the '80s, brought on by Reagan-era pro-corporate policies. Stamped tin panels, rusted corrugated metal sheets, charred fencing, fragments of linoleum tile, water basins, and dilapidated rain gutters are some of the scavenged objects that would find their way into Hammond's paintings. It's important to note that Hammond does not see the *Farm Ghosts* series as landscapes, but of the landscape and informed by rural places.

Harmony Hammond, *Farm Ghosts the Wife's Tale*, 1991, mixed media, 98.50 x 192 in. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © Harmony Hammond /Licensed by VAGA via ARS, New York.

The epic yet intimate *Farm Ghosts: The Wife's Tale* (1991) consists of oil on found stamped tin, linoleum tile fragments, and canvas, along with attached metal buckets and adjacent water basin with cloth. The gridwork of oxidized stamped tin panels, likely used as a ceiling treatment in its previous state, has a russet hue similar to dried blood and is punctuated by scattered cadmium red gestures that read as fresh violence. The center panel consists of a visually striking, complex, broken grid formed by layers of found linoleum that calls to mind both quilts and Rauschenberg's *Bed*. The reoccurring windmill in black weeps, floats in the frame, and casts a shade of melancholy over the tone of the painting. On Hammond's windmills, Lucy Lippard writes, "Hammond has taken the figure-like windmill, made it fragile and vulnerable, standing alone in the void, a proxy for the farmer's life and wife. She has seen it as a sun, and as a flower or a guardian of the landscape, as well as a symbolic "suicide tower," referring to the rash of farmers who took their own lives when they lost their farms in the '80s." This heavy painting establishes

a narrative of loss and labor. It acknowledges the labor of the wife, whose daily work both indoors and outside would otherwise go unnoticed. Also, Hammond suggests a vivid interior space for the narrative of the wife through materials with linoleum tile as flooring and stamped tin as ceiling. The text (CRY, LEAVES, LOAVES, GRASS) located across the center panel suggests interior labor and also pulls the narrative outside. Buckets hung across the painting and a water basin at the foot are objects of utility and call to mind tasks of carrying, cooking, washing.

For the past twenty years, a new mode of painting has pushed its way forward, without the need for paint, making use of Epson printers and ink. I affectionately refer to it as "CTRL P" painting, after the function keys used at the moment of production. Prominent visual artists making use of Epson printing for their paint practice that come to mind are Wade Guyton, with his coolly off-register monochromes, and Jeff Elrod's frictionless drawing technique. In this camp, artist Peter Sutherland's work is expansive in scope but mines images of the West (by proxy the highway), development/encroachment, and ski culture. The paintings in *Forests and Fires* from Sutherland's 2016 solo exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis depict a dense, idyllic forest landscape, complete with a lush bed of ferns and a canopy so dense that sunlight barely enters. This almost-cliché of a forest scene is inkjet printed on perforated vinyl and adhered to OSB board with gel matte medium, creating a powerful effect of incongruity. Oriented strand board (OSB), used commonly in new construction projects, is composed of shredded wood fragments and bonded with a controversial adhesive containing formaldehyde. The perforated vinyl creates a double image of the forest and its hyper-processed, demolished self, complete with a vertically printed barcode that stands as a column with the trees. This double image is the crux of the work, as neither image pushes forward, but both stay unstable and at odds, while raising questions of development and deforestation.

Landscape in the twenty-first century is a quietly unflinching genre and can be found in some of the most unconventional forms of image making today. Rackstraw Downes teaches us a lesson in beauty found in unassuming sites, while Harmony Hammond builds a psychological landscape through meaning embedded in materials. Interestingly, the continual march of new technology questions painting at its core, with Sutherland's use of Epson printers. The sober tragedy is that unlike past traditions of interpreting landscape in pristine beauty, contemporary themes reflect on the bleak outlook of an ecosystem exploited and destroyed by society. ×

the PARIS REVIEW

Eleanor Ray's Minimalist Memories

By Kyle Chayka | February 7, 2019

ELEANOR RAY, *MARFA WINDOW*, 2018.

In Marfa, Texas, three hours into the desert from El Paso, the artist Donald Judd installed a hundred geometric sculptures in two disused artillery sheds. Arrayed in a grid are boxes made of milled aluminum, all the same size but each uniquely composed with different patterns of segmented space. Through the sheds' massive windows, sun and blue sky and yellowed scrub reflect on the aluminum at shifting angles. As you walk through the space, it becomes hard to tell whether you're looking at a solid sheet of metal or only the illusion of one, created by light.

Photography is banned in the Marfa installation; only a few sanctioned images exist. Photos could never capture the experience of being surrounded by the boxes because pictures flatten the experience, turning it into a shallow singular impression—the Instagram version—rather than the active process of perception that Judd sought. Instead of photos, the young Brooklyn-based artist Eleanor Ray has depicted the boxes in a series of hardcover-book-size paintings that preserve the ambiguity. In Ray's

luminous oils, the walls, windows, and metal alike dissolve into thin brushstrokes that hover between landscape and abstraction. It's up to the viewer to decide what's what.

The Marfa paintings are part of Ray's exhibition at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in SoHo, on view through February 10. Since 2012, Ray has been drawn to this kind of ekphrastic painting, representing works of art while also capturing the peculiar sensation of looking at an art object, part sensory and part intellectual. Over time, she's gathered a specific canon of artists who have engaged with the act of seeing in space, some of them mid-century Minimalists and others much older. Ray has painted Judd's loft in SoHo, Agnes Martin's house in New Mexico, Piet Mondrian's geometric canvases hanging in a geometric gallery, and the early Renaissance painter Fra Angelico's crisp frescoes in San Marco.

Minimalism (a label that Judd and most of the other artists constantly complained about) never adhered to a monolithic austere style; rather, it was about creating work that did not depend on external reference points to communicate its message. As Frank Stella once put it, "What you see is what you see." Ray's paintings have a similar effect. They push the viewer into a new way of seeing without the need for massive scale or industrial materials. "I like the idea that the small painting is kind of monumental rather than miniature—that it can contain a bigger space, like the imaginative space of a book," she said in a 2015 interview with *Figure/Ground*.

Ray's interest in creating linear order may be classical and cold, but her colors are lush, as if it were always the golden hour. They bring to mind domestic painters like Pierre Bonnard or Giorgio Morandi, two obsessives who both lent an epic cast to the quotidian. The sensation of looking at Ray's work is pleasurably transient, like recalling a nostalgic memory or the traces of an artwork you saw long ago.

ARTFORUM

Eleanor Ray, *Wyoming Window, June*, 2018, oil on panel, 6 1/2 x 8".

Eleanor Ray

NICELLE BEAUCHENE GALLERY
327 Broome Street
January 6–February 10

I am standing in a sparse room, looking out a window. The view is familiar because of its frequent depiction. The bright light outside dictates harsh shadows, dark triangles within the concrete boxes of Donald Judd's sculptures arranged elegantly on the plains of Marfa, Texas.

The painting I describe, *Marfa Window*, 2017, is one in a group of works by Eleanor Ray. I stand close enough to her small panels that the images break down, becoming a series of soft geometric forms. The compositions have the tightness of photographs, and the light is plein air. Art and earth play shadow games. A window frame—from which we can see arid lands in places such as Utah and Wyoming—is depicted from different angles and distances across several pieces, so that the vantages onto the landscapes also shift. The longest wall in the gallery is hung with five paintings of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. On the opposite wall hangs a sixth representation of the renowned work of Land art; here the perspective is so low that the curves flatten into a line. Another painting, *Galisteo (Agnes Martin)*, 2018, is a rendering of the titular artist's house in New Mexico. The insertion of this painting provides a reason for the show's palette of desert hues: oranges, blues, mauves. Brush marks give texture to the brush.

I keep returning to *Wyoming Window, June*, 2018. Three golden rectangles float on the interior wall of a house—a glow thrown from a portal behind the painter as she captures a memory of dusk.

— Mira Dayal

THE NEW YORKER

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

ART GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Eleanor Ray

Ray's clever and studiously executed conceit is the compression of sweeping spaces and monumental art works—Robert Smithson's "Spiral Jetty" and Donald Judd's Minimalist compound in the desert in Marfa, Texas—into a diminutive format, roughly six by eight inches. Window-framed views of empty sky over Judd's austere, sun-baked boxes evoke Surrealist landscapes; renderings of Smithson's famous earthwork, coiling into Utah's Great Salt Lake, have a picturesque, tongue-in-cheek quality. Ray makes a joke of masculinist icons by rendering them in the ladylike tradition of small easel painting, but that's hardly the extent of her project—call it the triumph of painting—as a trio of exquisite interiors, offering glimpses of early-Renaissance altarpieces in Assisi, Padua, and Florence, Italy, make absorbingly clear.

— Johanna Fateman

Through Feb. 10. 2019

Nicelle Beauchene
327 Broome St.
Downtown

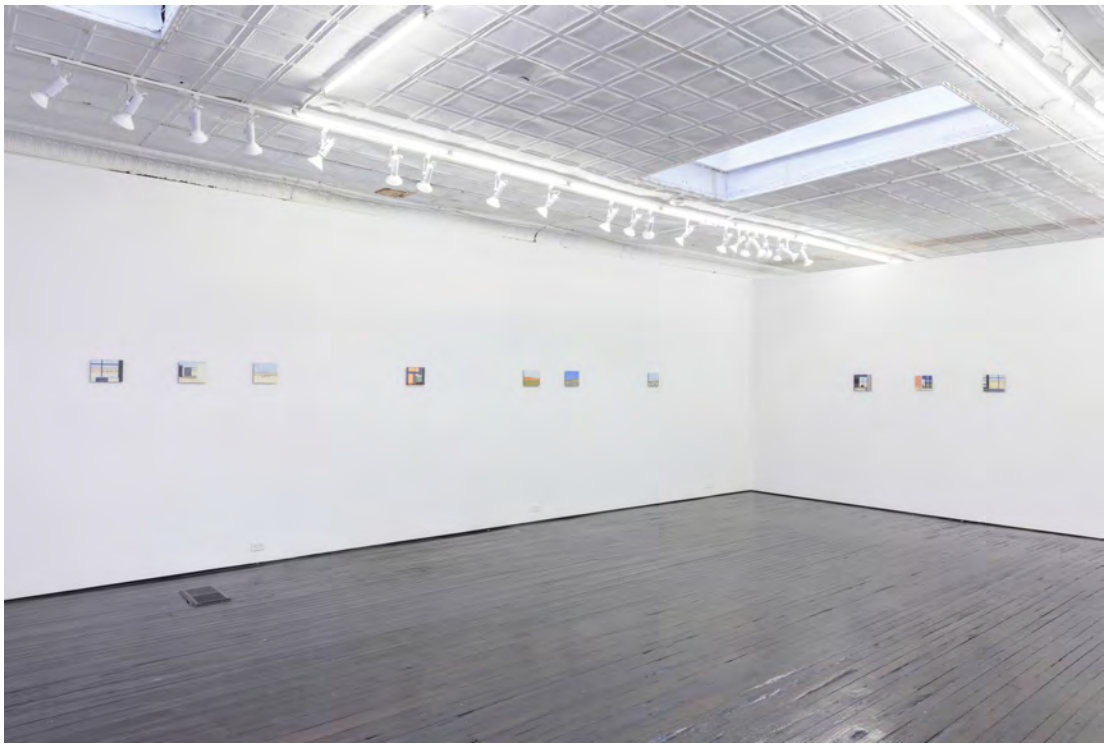
The New Criterion

Dispatch January 23, 2019 11:00 am

Eleanor Ray at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

by Andrew L. Shea

If the exhibition of paintings by Eleanor Ray at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery is a feast for the eyes, then it's a meal served in bite-sized portions. Since graduating from the New York Studio School in 2012, Ray has rarely shown paintings that exceed nine inches in either dimension, and the twenty-five oil panel paintings in her current exhibition are no exception. But the small physical presence of her panels, as well as their alluring attractiveness, can be disarming. Make no mistake—these are serious, intelligent works of deep ambition.



Installation view, "Eleanor Ray." Photo: Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

I'd say that these nimbly brushed panels punch above their weight, but that's probably not the right metaphor. Ray's unembellished interiors and exteriors (and interior/exteriors), rather, pull you in and open up. Some do "pop off the wall" and look good from a distance—especially the higher-contrast

and geometrical paintings of windows and windowpanes. But each panel also demands that you get up close, to understand better how the subtleties of its pale color and evocative brushwork alternately harmonize with and push against the overlaying drawing. If there's a didactic element to these paintings, it's to show how deceptively open and complex a small and "ordered" painting can be.

Eleanor Ray, Wyoming Window, June, *2018*, *Oil on panel*, *Nicelle Beauchene Gallery*.

All but three panels are scenes of the American West. Many are locations important to twentieth-century art: Donald Judd's exhibition space in Marfa, Texas; Agnes Martin's home and studio in Galisteo, New Mexico; Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* at Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah. The three exceptions are *in situ* depictions of Italian church frescoes from the Proto- and Early Renaissance: Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* in the Convento di San Marco, Florence; Giotto's *Saint Francis and the Birds* in the Basilica di San Francesco, Assisi; and the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua.

Eleanor Ray, Spiral Jetty, *2017*, *Oil on panel*, *Nicelle Beauchene Gallery*.

One might think this an unlikely collection of subjects: what brings these twentieth-century "minimalists" together with the Italian frescoers of centuries yore? Impossible to know for sure, but I'd venture that Ray was drawn to the way that each artist is deeply concerned with art's ability to transform the space it inhabits. Thought of in this way, they are natural subjects for a painter so concerned with evoking the dramatic potential of architectonic and landscape spaces. Further, whether secular (Judd and Smithson), religious (the Italian muralists), or somewhere between (Martin), these artists share a deep-seated, even existential belief in the metaphysical potential of their work. This powerful conviction is especially surprising to consider against the materially diminutive nature of Ray's own works.

Ray paints with a light and skillful touch. The eggshell-smooth surfaces of her panels allow her brushwork to sit up and hum, giving her geometric shapes a human sensitivity. Whether pushing a plane back into the painting's illusory space or asserting its inevitable flatness, each quiver of the brush seems considerate of the composition's all-over gestalt. Ray's paint is thin enough to let the light of the panel shine through, giving the work a pervading luminosity that befits her sun-drenched Western landscapes. She seems able to build complex and considered relationships of color in very few layers of paint, "hitting her mark" in only one or two tries.

Eleanor Ray, Antelope Island, *2018*, *Oil on panel*, *Nicelle Beauchene Gallery*.

Many of these physical characteristics reminded me of the paintings of Josef Albers, another modernist painter of small panels who was fascinated by color, geometry, and, as a revelatory exhibition at the Guggenheim demonstrated last winter, the plastic potential of the sculpture and vernacular architecture of Mexico and the American Southwest. Incorrectly thought of as a strict and even dogmatic theoretician, Albers was a painter who understood that color and light were perceptual phenomena, things to explore through *a posteriori* visual research. Ray's frontal geometries of natural color, in their uber-specificity and responsiveness to their own environment, feel particularly resonant with, if not indebted to, the late Bauhaus master.

In addition to his public painting practice, Albers also spent a good deal of time looking through the lens of a camera. His private photograph studies show a sustained interest in shifting angles and cropped fields of vision in a way that seems relevant to Ray's own painterly documentations. This resemblance may be best appreciated when viewing different works by Ray of the same subject in series. Her five paintings of a single window in Judd's building in Marfa are especially instructive. Each panel is distinct and offers its own set of compositional issues to tease out. As Ray moves towards and away from her subject and side to side, new flat planes of architectural detail get introduced to the frame of view, shifting lines of sight and weighting different edges of the rectangular panel. Often, the most chromatically intense shapes on the panel will be lined along one

of these edges, a compositional move that almost feels like a knowing wink to the viewer, as Ray intentionally brings our attention to the fact that she is in control over exactly what we are allowed to see.

Eleanor Ray, Marfa Window, *2017*, *Oil on panel*, *Nicelle Beauchene Gallery.*

In other window scenes, and in landscape series such as her paintings of Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Ray seems to respond primarily to changing weather and light. The concept might evoke Monet standing before his haystacks with an armful of canvases, switching from one to the other as the day progresses. A more likely antecedent is Bonnard. Like Bonnard, Ray doesn't paint from direct observation, but rather works from a combination of drawing sketches, color notes, photography, and memory. Her paintings aren't about "catching" or "recreating" a moment in time so much as they're about articulating a specific and independent idea about color, light, and space. Bonnard called himself "weak" while painting in front of his subject—with its barrage of ever-changing visual information—and believed that direct observation distracted him from his ultimate goal of recreating the "effect" of an experience. Ray's paintings work toward a similar end, and their direct, contemplative compositions testify that much can be achieved when unnecessary elements are stripped away.

Andrew L. Shea is Assistant Editor of *The New Criterion*.

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

Eleanor Ray's Sacred Spaces

There is a deep, warm solitude running through all of Eleanor Ray's paintings — a sense of being alone and luxuriating in the human silence and changing light.

John Yau 4 days ago

Eleanor Ray, "Spiral Jetty" (2017), oil on panel, 6 1/2 x 8 inches (all images courtesy Nicelle Beauchene Gallery)

I will say it again: I am an unabashed fan of Eleanor Ray's modest-sized paintings of interiors, exteriors, and the landscape. While I have followed her work for the past few years, and have written about it twice before, I realized that her debut exhibition at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery (January 6–February 10, 2019), simply titled *Eleanor Ray*, encompassed the largest number of her works that I have seen at any one time. There are 25 paintings done in oil on panel, most of which measure around six by eight inches, the size of an inexpensive paperback.

All the paintings are based on direct observation. The places include various interiors and exteriors of the Judd Foundation in Marfa, Texas; views of Robert Smithson's iconic earthwork, "Spiral Jetty," extending out into the Great Salt Lake in Utah; the inside and outside of a modernist house in Wyoming; Agnes Martin's adobe house in Galisteo, New Mexico; the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, Italy, with its cycle of

frescos by Giotto; the Convent of San Marco in Florence, with its frescoes by Fra Angelico; views of the hills and fields of Wyoming and New Mexico.

Eleanor Ray, “Marfa Exterior” (2018), oil on panel, 6 1/4 x 7 3/4 inches

When the subject is architectural, such as the various views she finds in Marfa or the house in Wyoming, she uses the structure of the walls and windows or Judd’s outdoor sculptures to geometrically section off the horizontal panel. The views are for the most part frontal and the space is layered, moving from the inside room to the outside view, or the reverse, from the outside wall to the inside room. In either case, the shift is marked by a darkened interior and a sunlit exterior — dark and cool or warm and bright set inside its opposite.

As much as we might read this configuration formally, it seems to me that Ray’s evocation of the two spaces (interior and exterior) can be interpreted a number of ways. The unoccupied interior or landscape becomes a sacred space, a place of solitude and reflection. The windows remind us that there is an exterior and interior world, and that we always occupy both.

Eleanor Ray, “Scrovegni Chapel, Padua”

The sites that Ray picks are where art has been made or carefully placed. In the case of the Scrovegni Chapel and the Convent of San Marco, the art is an inextricable part of the architecture, just as Smithson’s “Spiral Jetty” is a permanent part of the lake and surrounding landscape. It is clear that she visits and paints these places as a way of paying homage to her inspirations, the artists she regards as feeding her work.

(2018), oil on panel, 8 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches

The way she uses the architectural elements to section off her rectangular formats owe something to the asymmetrical compositions of Piet Mondrian, an artist she has evoked in some of her earlier paintings. The views she picks are never casual. When she depicts the inside or outside of a building, she is highly attuned to the way the underlying geometry merges with the landscape – the sky, field, and mountain. Strong vertical and horizontal bands are offset by shorter, thinner diagonals, as in "Marfa Window" (2018), where the top edges of Judd boxes become diagonal lines. There is something smart and quietly witty about rendering Judd's work as diagonals, given how strictly his world is dominated by x and y axes.

Ray uses thin textured paint, sometimes applied in layers, whose grained surface prevents us from reading the work as purely optical or solely as image. She is interested in light and reflection as palpable presences in a restrained, sensual world. The cropping makes us aware that the view is partial — we are seeing only a piece of the room we are standing in, while the window before us frames the landscape, allowing us to see only a small section of that as well. An open door reminds us that there is another room we have not entered. Standing outside, with the corner of a porch and the plains before us, we are reminded of the vastness of the world. There is a deep, warm solitude running through all the paintings in the exhibition – a sense of being alone and luxuriating in the human silence and changing light.

Eleanor Ray, "Wyoming Window, June" (2018), oil on panel, 6 1/2 x 8 inches

In the two paintings titled "Wyoming Window, June" (2018), the rectangle is divided into two distinct areas, with a vertical band running down the middle, from the top to bottom edge. There is a window in the lower right quadrant that is topped by a gray rectangle in one version; in the other, the rectangle is blue-gray.

What changes the view is the light, which is reflected in three distinct shapes on the wall above and to the left of the window. In one painting, a buttery yellow rectangle floats horizontally above two vertical ones

rising from the bottom edge.

In the companion painting, the rectangles are salmon-colored and aligned vertically and horizontally, echoing the architecture. In both paintings, the rectangles of light reflected on the cool, dark wall are as palpable as the architectural elements. Their fleeting presence reminds us that we exist in time, even if we think of this moment as timeless.

Eleanor Ray, "Wyoming Window, June" (2018), oil on panel, 6 1/2 x 8 inches

At the same time, the geometric shapes — which brought to mind the paintings of Burgoyne Diller — add another layer of perceptual complexity. Ray is interested in setting rectangles within rectangles, and shifting from dark tones to light ones, while also being attuned to tonal shifts. The colors are dusty and chalky. The division between abstraction and representation is porous, and the tension between flatness and layered space helps lock the compositions tightly together.

When Ray stacks up rectangles of color in a painting like "Marfa Exterior" (2018), she is merging Judd's modular "stacks" and interest in light — evidenced particularly in his use of Plexiglas — with hers. She is also satirizing Judd's famous claim that the problem with painting is that is rectangle on the wall, and that its shape determines the shapes inside.

At times, I have thought of Ray's paintings as moody and even softly haunted. Other times, I have felt that they were filled with a blissful solitude. The fact that they can be both and more is what elevates her work to a singular place in my mind. She has taken her love for art and for figures as distinct as Judd and Giotto and made their inspiration into something that is hers alone. In contrast to the solid structures housing their work, she has made small, easily transportable panels. That too is part of their meaning.

Eleanor Ray *continues at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery (327 Broome Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 10.*

BURNAWAY

The Voice of Art in the South

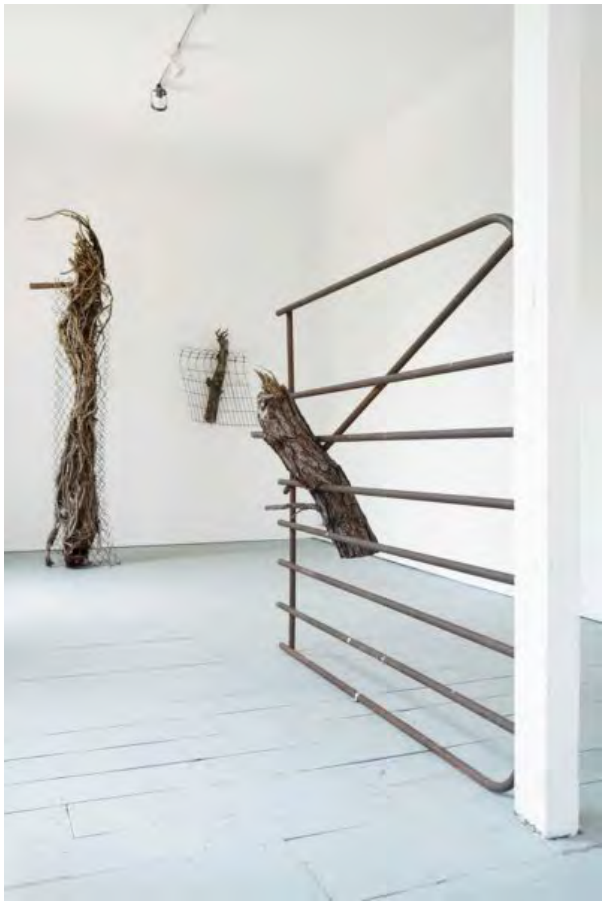
Charles Harlan, Eleanor Ray, and Ree Morton in Athens, GA

Madeline Bates - Sep 14, 2018 **in** Art Review

Installation view of Charles Harlan's "Trees" at Tif Sigfrids in Athens, GA.

The second set of exhibitions at the recently opened Tif Sigfrids (https://tifsigfrids.com/) and Howard's (https://www.howardsartgallery.com/)—two distinct galleries operating out of a shared, three-room space—brings the work of artists Charles Harlan, Eleanor Ray, and Ree Morton to Athens, GA. While the Harlan and Ray exhibitions are presented by gallerists Tif Sigfrids and Ridley Howard, respectively, Morton's work on display in the in the third space, a collaborative annex called Sigfrids/Howard's, was selected by guest curator Colleen Greenan of Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Harlan's LA gallery. Though the three small exhibitions were organized separately, they're united by the artists' shared concerns with process and material and their varied riffs on minimalist and postminimalist gestures.

The work of artist Charles Harlan, a native of Smyrna, GA, now based in Brooklyn, often provokes a quizzical response from viewers. By sculpturally combining industrial materials or reorienting objects to defy their logical function, Harlan poses philosophical riddles through a series of precarious conceptual balancing acts. (In the case of his work *Birdbath*, on view at Atlanta Contemporary (https://atlantacontemporary.org/exhibitions/charles-harlan) through December 15 in his solo exhibition "Language of the Birds," this balancing act is also quite literal: a stone birdbath tips a massive, fiberglass baptismal pool to one side, pinning it to the ground.) Despite the potential headiness of such acts of appropriation, the materials' humble familiarity saves Harlan's sculptures from being overly cold or self-referential, instead creating a playful opportunity for the viewer to wonder how and why they were made.



Installation view of Harlan's "Trees" at Tif Sigfrids in Athens, GA.

On view at Sigfrids, the works in Harlan's exhibition "Trees" are all comprised of trunks and limbs which have grown together with portions of wire fencing, metal signs, and, in one case, a rusted gate.The six sculptures on display demonstrate the artist's continued engagement with the readymade, although through refreshingly organic and time-worn found materials. Instead of being artificially fabricated by the artist, these works are simply removed from their original context in the wild and presented as artworks in a gallery. Harlan's distinctly vernacular variation on the readymade complicates commonly drawn connections between modernism and urban environments, inserting an artistic tradition historically associated with European and American cities into the environs of rural Alabama and New England.

A visual rhythm present in the works' installation in the gallery urges consideration of measured time, a theme reinforced in the rusting chain-link fencing and decaying wood. Dividing the gallery horizontally, the thick lines of a cattle gate ground the elements of the room like a staff tethers a flurry of musical notes, with a single, arm-length-long section of pine tree bulging through its metal bars. The two vertically-oriented works in "Trees"—a cropped tree trunk appearing to sprout a rusted sign from its side, and a tall pole enveloped in vines and wire— anchor either end of the cattle gate. Harlan's three wall-hung pieces, comprised of rough-hewn tree limbs suspended in gridlike wire fencing, can appear as almost painterly assemblages or as archeological artifacts, suggesting the struggle between human effort and the unyielding passage of time.

Nevertheless, Harlan's works in "Trees" are, quite simply, tangled bits of wood and wire: neglected relics from your grandparents' backyard or the landscape behind a roadside gas station. Harlan's work is engaging precisely because of this casual familiarity, which establishes a comfortable foundation from which the viewer can explore the more esoteric associations implied by his sculptures.

Charles Harlan, *Tree,* 2015; wood and steel.

In the adjacent gallery, Gainesville-born, Brooklyn-based artist Eleanor Ray (http://eleanorkray.com/) presents a set of paintings that are keenly attuned to place and space. Like many of Ray's recent oil paintings, the selection on view at Howard's captures images from the artist's recent travels; in this case, they primarily document landscapes in the American West. Of the seven tiny paintings on view, only four include any sort of architectural feature, but two others situate the viewer entirely indoors, a compelling departure for a painter who so often focuses on liminal spaces like doorways, windows, and corridors.

Microscopic portals to locales in Wyoming, Texas, and New Mexico, Ray's paintings are generously spaced across the gallery. Given the compact nature of the painted panels, the show could feel sparse, but instead it feels each work has been given sufficient breathing room. Ray's dry, loose application of paint is especially effective in rendering the dusty,

expansive landscapes that dominate the background of most of the scenes. Where there are weightier objects like buildings or a rock formation, the brushstrokes becomes smoother and bolder, creating deep shadows that promise respite from the suggested heat. While Ray's paintings don't show figures, they invariably betray some evidence of people: in the man-made buildings, clearly, but also in the direct observational perspective from which Ray paints. The viewpoints are subjective and somewhat sentimental, captured with the tender haziness of a fond but imperfect memory.

Eleanor Ray, *June Night, Wyoming*, 2018; oil on panel.

The standout of the show is the lusciously shadowed interior scene depicted in *June Night, Wyoming,* the only vertically oriented painting on view. Razor-edged light beams from an unseen window cut through the darkness enveloping the rest of the tightly cropped space, with the light warping over an otherwise obscured, brown horizontal plane, perhaps a church pew or bench. The painting shows a shade drawn halfway over a tall, vertical window, which frames sun-soaked shrubbery in the distance. While many of the other paintings feel somewhat static and offer little evidence of a particular time, *June Night, Wyoming* seems to capture a precious, almost tangible moment in paint.

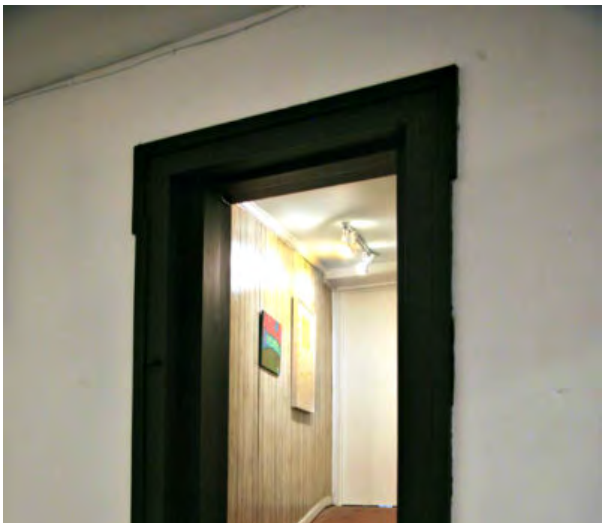
Ray's interest in space, light, and geometry reveals a tendency toward minimalist formality that, much like Harlan's use of the readymade, might feel isolating were it not for her unwavering sense of subtle subjectivity. The prominence of Ray's brushstroke and thoughtfully mixed colors in her consistently representational scenes imbues her paintings with a distinct idiosyncrasy that balances their visual formalism.

Eleanor Ray, *Wyoming Solstice*, 2018; oil on panel.

Works by Ree Morton (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/29/t-magazine/ree-morton-artist-mother.html) (1936-1977) are tucked into a bizarre annex attached to Howard's, a squat, elevated mini-hallway-to-nowhere lined with faux wood paneling. This surreal setting makes for an effective presentation of Morton's work, which explores themes of domesticity, love, and child-rearing while incorporating and subverting traditionally feminine craft-based practices. Morton was an influential if lesser-known artist whose paintings and mixed-media installations during the 1970s are noted for embracing personal and emotional subject matter in a time when the austere, impersonal, and industrial qualities associated with minimalism were in critical favor. The show organized by Grennan in the Sigfrid's/Howard's annex is comprised of just two works from different points in the artist's brief but impactful career.

Ree Morton's *Atmospheres* and untitled *Game Drawing*, on view at Sigfrids/Howard's.

The painting from which the exhibition takes its name, *Atmospheres*, is part of the body of work that lead to Morton's penultimate 1976 installation *Signs of Love*, which included elements such as ribbon-adorned yellow ladders leaning against gallery walls, picnic baskets overflowing with ribbons and roses resting on the floor, and curtain-draped landscapes painted with childlike abandon. The painting at Sigfrid's/Howard's is slightly more representational: gobs of garishly colored paint render a barely legible moonlit meadow, and the word "Atmospheres" is scrawled in dry paint across the horizon.



The other work by Morton on view, *Untitled (Game Drawing)*, predates the artist's decision to pursue her interest in the decorative as it relates to femininity and domesticity. Significantly more reserved in its composition than *Atmospheres*, this pencil-and-watercolor work on paper appears like a map for a game a child might invent on a summer afternoon. Two columns of yellow shapes line either side of a patch of green, below which dashed lines and an arrow suggest strategic movement.

All three exhibitions remain on view at Tif Sigfrids and Howard's Art Gallery in Athens, Georgia, through Saturday, October 6.

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

For the Love of Paint

John Yau | December 20, 2015

Eleanor Ray, "Sculpture Studio" (2015), oil on panel, 7 x 8 inches (all Images courtesy of Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects)

Ambition has nothing to do with scale. The largest painting in *Eleanor Ray: paintings* at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (November 18–December 24, 2015) measures 10 x 8 inches. Rather than a sign of the artist's modesty, I see Ray's intimately scaled paintings as an implicit rebuke of the art world's current obsession with McMansion scale. This was also true of Thomas Nozkowski's decision in the late 1970s to work on store-bought, prepared canvases measuring 16 x 20 inches, which registered his rejection of large-scale, post-easel paintings and, later, the Neo-Expressionists' oversized declarations of innate genius. By halving Nozkowski's scale, Ray ups the ante, as she quietly reminds us that the shrinking middle class must settle for smaller digs these days.

The art world is an amnesia machine that's as quick to forget its oversights as it is to cover up its former enthusiasms. Persistence and a belief in paint and painting — which isn't about how much something sells for — is another matter.

Eleanor Ray, “Nora’s Studio” (2015), oil on panel, 7 1/4 x 8 inches

What I love about Eleanor Ray’s recent paintings is that she makes it possible to cite Donald Judd and Giorgio Morandi in the same sentence. Until I saw her current show I did not stop to think about what these two artists — an American Minimalist sculptor whose sleek works were fabricated by others and an Italian painter known for his hushed, hand-hewn still lifes — could have had in common, namely: an interest in light, geometry, gravity, symmetry and asymmetry, transparency and the relationship between interior and exterior space. Albeit in very different ways, both artists pared away what they thought was unnecessary, as if the world was too much with them, too cluttered and messy. Both ended up living reclusively.

If admiring both Judd and Morandi, as she does, initially seems like a contradiction, Ray doesn’t stop there. She is a restrained painter who loves to tease nuance and tonal shifts out of thin layers of textured paint applied to lean wood panels whose edges are often chipped. As much as Ray admires Judd and, I suspect, Robert Ryman, a subtle tonalist in his own right, she is decidedly unfussy. She isn’t preoccupied with the object, but with translating a three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional surface, of finding a way to use color and composition to give weight and weightlessness to things, which is where her love for Morandi comes in.

As for subjects, Ray has painted exterior and interior views of Judd’s 101 Spring Street loft (the doors are French blue!); Paul Cezanne’s last studio in Aix en Provence; the outside of Henri Matisse’s Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence; historical exteriors and interiors in Italy (Assissi, Ravenna, Florence and Rome, among them) and the Brooklyn studio of her friend, Nora Griffin. The exhibition forms a diary of the artists and art she holds in high esteem, what the poet Robert Creeley would have called her “company.”

Eleanor Ray, “Spring Street Doorway” (2015), oil on panel

Being a late arriver — which is to say coming after hundreds of years of great, inimitable art — doesn’t mean you have to reject it, dismiss it, or copy it. Ray’s unironic paintings are both homages and straightforward ways of locating herself, of making up the history (family tree) to which she has chosen to belong. She doesn’t seem driven to overthrow the past so much as absorb what she can of it into her own practice. In this regard, she is fearless and open rather than egotistical and competitive.

Eleanor Ray, “San Marco Stairs” (2014), oil on panel, 6 x 5 1/2 inches

There’s a painting by Ray of Fra Angelico’s fresco of the “Annunciation” as seen from the bottom of the maroon-carpeted stairs in the Convent of San Marcos in Florence. By positioning the viewer at the bottom of the stairs and framing the fresco with the doorway, she initiates a dialogue between the modernist pressure toward flatness and Fra Angelico’s unsystematized evocation of space. Ray’s lopsided framing — only one side of an arched doorway is visible on the right-hand side — echoes the off-centeredness of the “Annunciation,” suggesting that the dynamic relationship between surface and space, and order and disorder, can still be discovered and personal. Ray finds a lot of these connections and echoes in her work, which adds another layer to them.

Ray uses a limited palette that often runs from whites and grays to blues and browns, with bits of red and yellow popping up like flowers in a plain room. Her desaturated colors share something with those employed by the great Danish painter Wilhelm Hammershoi. Her often chalky colors evoke autumn and winter, while the subdued light infuses many of her views with a melancholic whisper. Typically, Ray employs the architecture of her subject (walls, windows, doorways) to divide the painting's surface into distinct areas, with careful attention paid to solid and transparent surfaces, tonal and coloristic shifts, light and shadow. Within the order established by the subject's structure, she is keenly attuned to what interrupts and inflects the proportions. The tension between flatness and space locks many of Ray's paintings into place, makes us aware that we are looking at and through things. In some works, she seems to want to paint the dusty air of an uninhabited room where a wan sun is casting its light.

Eleanor Ray, "Atelier Cézanne, Aix" (2015), oil on panel, 5 1/4 x 5 3/4 inches

Umber door hinges, snow in light and shadow, the white walls of connected studios receding in space — Ray brings a level of attention to the surface of these paintings that invites us to reconsider what it means to be attentive. I am reminded of Jasper Johns, who said that he chose the flag and the target because "[they] were both things seen and not looked at." The art world's obsession with McMansion scale is about the opposite–it is art to be swooned over, not looked at or thought about.

Ray uses severe cropping to define a layered space in which a change in color or tone might indicate a spatial shift. The framing establishes a formal tension between surface and space, a friction that makes us conscious of looking. We see only part of Judd's blue doorway, with the variously sized rectangles recalling Mondrian's Purist paintings — a deliberate trace on Ray's part. Her cropping also reminds us that every view is partial. We cannot step back and

see everything; we can only get closer. Within these demarcated areas, Ray uses a lightly textured skin of paint to delicately register tonal changes, compelling us to look even closer, to see that the painting is both an architectonic space and physical paint. She wants us to recognize the dialogue that paint can establish between surface and space, which to some people means that she is a conservative artist. That designation ignores what is radical and resistant about Ray's work. There is something moody and quietly haunted about her paintings, a sense that everything you see is visited alone, imbuing the views with an awareness of mortality, a depth of feeling that is all too rare in much of today's art.

Eleanor Ray: paintings *continues at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (208 Forsyth Street and 237 Eldridge Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 24.*

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Power of Tiny Paintings

John Goodrich | April 16, 2014

Installation view, Eleanor Ray at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

At the age of 27, painter Eleanor Ray has already made something of a critical splash. Last year, *New Republic* art critic Jed Perl wrote about her first solo show at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects; *New York* magazine art critic Jerry Saltz listed the exhibition as one his 10 best of 2013. As of this writing, her second show of 40 paintings at the gallery has very nearly sold out.

Ray's success is notable not only because of her youth but also because of the stylistic caution of her work, which consists almost entirely of tiny landscapes, city scenes, and interiors painted in a fairly traditional style. Her brushwork and surfaces suggest a modest, straightforward efficiency, and she rarely strays from a certain strategy for light: natural dramas of illumination, with glimpses of scenes framed by windows and doorways.

Why the acclaim then? A lot of current art relies on spectacle and effect, and Ray's rejection of these could be considered a kind of performance in itself. But her paintings reveal other qualities, too — ones more compelling

than their style or subject matter. These have to do with the historically intrinsic and unique powers of painting. Ray possesses a keen sense of the weight of color; she weights hues so that they tangibly embody, rather than merely denote, the visual aspects of a scene.

Eleanor Ray, "Woodstock Snow" (2012), oil on panel, 5 3/8 x 6 7/8 in (image courtesy Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects)

In the five-inch-wide "Woodstock Snow" (2012), for instance, a swath of ultramarine blue resonates as the shadowed half of a snowy field. The remarkably spacious depths of this blue are contained by hues of very different character: the brilliant, cool lights of the field's sunlit portions, the sky's unmodulated cerulean blue, insistent yet remote. In this seemingly simple scene, Ray makes every element count; she captures a group of houses — jostling in various degrees of half-light — within shadows that are in turn circumscribed by sunlit planes: worlds within worlds. A handful of colors tell us what it means to be earth and sky — or more exactly, *this* earth and sky.

Eleanor Ray, "San Marco" (2013), oil on panel, 5 7/16 x 7 in (image courtesy Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects) (click to enlarge)

Ray preserves a colorfulness even between the highest lights and lowest darks. She ruminates among at least a dozen individual shades in "Sculpture Studio at Dusk" (2013) — warm, cool, heavy, elusive — before moving to a distant, brightly lit doorway. In another particularly vivid painting, "San Marco" (2013), the rich reddish-brown and blue rectangles of a doorway evocatively frame another glimpse of distant lights.

Occasionally the artist's observations seem merely clever. A painting of an umbrella opened on the ground feels more like an idea of intrigue than its visual expression; its colors are surprisingly inert. A notion of a wrought-iron gate before an orange plane remains exactly that: a notion. And at points throughout the exhibition, one senses a certain lassitude of drawing: a passive appreciation of the overall order, as if one had simply to sort through the aftermath of selecting a motif. Such paintings tend to be bright in their moments of color, but anticlimactic in the gathering of events.

But when Ray hits the mark, the results are quite stunning. "Big Painting Studio" (2013) palpably captures, in warm and cool grays, the solemn luminosity of tall walls rising above the small darks of chairs. Its discreet radiance recalls Vuillard. Almost as compelling is "February Windows" (2014), an exuberant tussle between the horizontals and verticals of a coffee shop's interior. Viewed through the floor-to-ceiling window, the street and buildings outside become medium-blues, dense and deep enough to turn the dull ochres of tabletop, wall, and floor into buoyant notes. Surrounded by chair backs and intervals of the blue street, the beige of the table hovers deliciously in space. The painting's densest warm note — the side of the counter — deflects the speeding horizontals of table, floor, panes of window. Echoing these streaming rhythms, two orange-red flowerpots anchor either end of a long shelf.

Eleanor Ray, "February Windows" (2014), oil on panel, 5 3/8 x 6 7/8 in (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

It's just a coffee shop — in fact, only a visual impression of it — but we sense we are in the middle of a remarkable conversation. Painters as various as Giotto, Rembrandt, and Mondrian show us that the most irreducible elements of painting — patches of pigment, rhythmically arranged — can characterize deeply. Whether through instinct or study, Ray has clearly caught on, and the eloquence of her color looms large in this small panel.

Eleanor Ray *continues at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects (208 Forsyth Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through April 20.*

NEW YORK

The 10 Best Art Shows of the Year

By Jerry Saltz

Published Dec 8, 2013

Mike Kelley's 'Deodorized Central Mass With Satellites' (1991–99).
(Photo: Joshua White/Courtesy of Perry Rubenstein Gallery, Los Angeles. © Estate of Mike Kelley.)

1. "Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1"
Curated by Phong Bui
I call birdbrained-bullshit on all those who snip that New York is a pure trading floor, one that's lost its place as a nexus of artistic activity. Every inch of "Come Together: Surviving Sandy, Year 1" organized by *Brooklyn Rail* publisher Phong Bui—a show of 627 works by nearly 250 local artists in a spectacular setting—gives the lie to this idiotic swipe. With well-known names but mainly lesser-known local artists, this exhibition verified that New York is as alive and brilliant as ever. Maybe more so, with artists spread out into all the boroughs, living poor but with style. Which is one of the foundational conditions of any great indigenous art scene. Naysayers, get out into the fray or stay home and stay silly.

2. Mike Kelley

At MoMA PS1

There are few young artists who don't owe the late Mike Kelley some gratitude. This building-filling show proves that he remains the rare talent who could fill up PS1 and still make you want more. You are missed, Mike Kelley. You didn't have to do it.

3. *Boxer at Rest*

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art

This astounding Hellenistic bronze masterpiece, briefly lent and shown in the long main hall of the Met's Greek and Roman wing, struck me dumb the first time I saw it. Everything within me collapsed. I beheld some ultimate rendition of humanity, immeasurable depths, mysteries.

4. Carol Bove, "RA, or Why Is an Orange Like a Bell?" and "Qor Corporation: Lionel Ziprin, Harry Smith and the Inner Language of Laminates"

At Maccarone (organized with Philip Smith)

This excellent artist didn't sound an artistic off-note in either of her simultaneous gallery shows (or in her "MoMA Project," also up this summer). In "Qor," Bove co-curated the work of an overlooked cabal of shamanic artists; in "RA," which was all her own, she gave us something worthy of a MacArthur.

5. Lucy Dodd

At David Lewis Gallery

This 32-year-old pulled off the super-rare feat of making two of the ten best solo shows I saw this year. First, in an Upper East Side townhouse, she showed a handful of huge abstract paintings that looked like caviar organizing itself into knowable patterns of communication. Then, in her current outing, her speckled, stained, and splotched paintings sing the body mysterious. I spy a great talent in the offing; also maybe a great gallery.

6. Ragnar Kjartansson, "A Lot of Sorrow" and "The Visitors"

At MoMA PS1 and Luhring Augustine

This Icelander showed himself master of the razor-thin world between sincerity and irony—a new place for emotion, maybe called ironerity or sinrony. Unspooling this space, he gave us the National performing "Sorrow" for six hours straight until bliss erupted; in his gallery exhibition, he showed us what the artist Laurie Simmons has called "the music of regret."

7. Eleanor Ray

At Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects

When I stumbled on the small oil paintings of this very young artist at this tiny Lower East Side gallery, I gleaned what might be the power of the conservative. Figuration, older ideas about space, surface, and paint in intimate interiors, street scenes, and winter landscapes—all evince delicate touch, acute eye, and quiet power.

8. Larry Bamburg

At Simone Subal

Mobiles made of bird bones, terrariums with living logs with crafted porcelain "wood," mushroom ecosystems growing on grafted bark in vitrines with nearly 100 percent humidity: This artist's ideas of unusual materials, form, space, and coloration make him a sculptor-alchemist to be reckoned with. This gallery has some of that wild alchemy, too.

9. Katherine Bernhardt
At the Hole
The art world digs guys who paint big, gestural, and figurative. Not so much the women who do it. Enter the always unruly Katherine Bernhardt, who's been wowing me with her wild-style painting for ten years. Here, she teamed up with her Moroccan rug-dealer husband to create a cross between great painting and the Casbah.

10. In the Affirming Spirit of "Surviving Sandy," Seven Artists and Events That Made New York Great This Year
Thomas Hirschhorn's *Gramsci Monument;* Trisha Baga at Greene Naftali and the Whitney; William Copley and Bjarne Melgaard at Venus Over Manhattan; Trisha Donnelly at MoMA and Rosemarie Trockel at the New Museum, lingering from the end of 2012; and Banksy's month of art in New York. Just kidding about that last one.

Rose Mandel Archive

NEW REPUBLIC

The Rectangular Canvas is Dead

Richard Diebenkorn and the problems of modern painting

BY **JED PERL**

September 7, 2013

You have probably never heard of the young painter Eleanor Ray, but she is a virtuoso, no question about it. She also has a bad case of what I would call the teensies. Frankly, I worry that it may be terminal. Fresh out of graduate school, with a show at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects on the Lower East Side over the winter, Ray brings a tightly controlled painterly panache to her itsy-bitsy glimpses of the view through a window, or some empty shelves, or a bicycle locked to a post. The sizes of the panels on which she paints—one is two and one-quarter inches by two and three-quarters inches and the biggest is five by seven inches—suggest a reverse hubris, a pride in how much she can do with so little. There is something about Ray's hunkered-down facility that strikes me as symptomatic of a fearfulness that overtakes all too many serious painters today. As much as I worry about the power of the trashmeisters who now dominate so many of our galleries and museums, I worry more about an atmosphere that makes it so difficult for painters who are actually engaged with the possibilities of brushes and pigments to feel free.

Eleanor Ray is in her mid-twenties. That is a time in artists' lives when they ought to be trying things out, unafraid to make a bad painting. The best artists—the greatest artists—are not afraid to fail. As for Ray, instead of allowing herself to experiment, she remains armored inside her minuscule vignettes. Why this should be I can't say for sure. But I have a theory. I wonder if Ray, coming of age at a time when painting is said by so many to be dead or dying, believes that the best she can do as a painter is keep a few tiny embers alive. You

cannot help but feel a certain respect for her perfectly ordered minuscule vignettes, with their meticulously modulated grays and their knowing allusions to Morandi's compositional strategies. When Ray paints light reflected off snow or coming through a crack in a door, she goes for a dashing verisimilitude—a sort of painterly déjà vu. The trouble is that the sizes of the paintings are designed to wrap up any unresolved conflicts in a perfect little package. You cannot really access these paintings. They're so damn small that they feel as if they're in lockdown. There is a sensibility here, but it is imprisoned. Whatever interesting conflicts and contradictions the subjects might provoke have been squared away without ever really being addressed.

Painting, which for centuries reigned supreme among the visual arts, has fallen from grace. I am quite sure that Eleanor Ray is aware of this. Every serious painter is. Which is not to say that painting is dead, or dying, or even in eclipse: excellent paintings have been done in the last few years, and there are masterpieces that date from the past quarter of a century. But the painter's basic challenge, the manipulation of colors and forms and metaphors on the flat plane with its almost inevitably rectangular shape, is no longer generally seen as art's alpha and omega, as the primary place in the visual arts where meaning and mystery are believed to come together. Everybody I know who paints or cares about painting worries about how we are going to respond to this turn of events. Ray is not alone in going into a defensive posture. With her lyrical painterly postcards, she strikes me as too willing to accept the idea that what has vanished in recent years, perhaps never to return, is painting as an expansive and foundational value or idea—as something worth boldly working for. There is no fight in her work. Behind the elegance of her effects, I sense the sadness of defeat. She is much too young for that.

What is to be done? Nothing at all, some would say. Many people who closely follow the visual arts subscribe to a cheerful chaos theory. And judged from such a perspective, anything goes: painting's fall from grace is an interesting data point, nothing more. But the how and the why of that fall from grace remain to be understood. And understanding what has happened is an urgent matter, not only for the painters whose work still dominates many of the contemporary galleries but also for the gallerygoers and museumgoers who still look to their work. The arrival of a new painter in a blue-chip gallery can even now inspire enthusiasm, as Julie Mehretu's first solo show at Marian Goodman's New York gallery did this spring. Brett Baker, a painter who had an incisive and boisterous show of small abstract paintings at Elizabeth Harris this past winter, edits an online magazine called *Painters'*

Table, which reflects the invigorating range of intellectual conversation still inspired by the painter's art. Painting's fall from grace has precipitated quite a few exhibitions dedicated to revisionist and alternative histories of painting, including "Reinventing Abstraction: New York Painting in the 1980s," organized by the critic Raphael Rubinstein at Cheim & Read in New York over the summer. This show examines the work of fifteen artists, including Carroll Dunham, Bill Jensen, and Joan Snyder, with the goal of rethinking the state of painting in light of transformations in abstraction that began a generation ago. For those who want to look even farther back for promising directions that painters might further explore, there are certainly insights to be gained from an important survey of Richard Diebenkorn's work from the 1950s and 1960s, currently at the de Young Museum in San Francisco.

Ever since the Renaissance, painting has been the grandest intellectual adventure in the visual arts, a titanic effort to encompass the glorious instability and variability of experience within the stability of a sharply delimited two-dimensional space. I think there is no question that the increasing marginalization of painting in recent decades has everything to do with a growing skepticism about even the possibility of stability. This skepticism now dominates thinking in the art schools, art history departments, museums, and international exhibitions where the shape of the artistic future is by and large determined. As every painter knows, of course, a certain amount of skepticism is part and parcel of the creative act, and the grandeur of painting's stability has everything to do with all the ways in which the artist challenges and complicates that stability. Painting predicates an irrevocable fact—the plane of the canvas or panel on which the artist works—and then challenges that fundamental truth in an endless variety of ways. And that paradoxical situation may bring us to the reason why painting has fallen from grace. To uphold an absolute as well as all the arguments against that absolute, and to entertain both those positions at the same time, is something that our go-with-the-flow culture finds exceedingly uncomfortable.

Painters are aware of the problem. Nearly everybody now agrees that Clement Greenberg's brief for the irrevocable stability of painting, a brief at once elegantly plainspoken and maddeningly pontifical, paid far too little attention to the varieties of instability that painting can embrace. There is a widespread suspicion that painting's fall from grace can be blamed on the artists and the critics who conceived of its history in overly exclusionary terms. And so a thousand alternative histories have bloomed. The painter Carroll Dunham—who exhibits his widely praised and darkly comic canvases at Barbara Gladstone and also

writes from time to time for *Artforum*—recently observed that "there are all kinds of parallel or shadow histories of the twentieth century that are constantly being reshuffled and rediscovered." Who can disagree? You can find Dunham's comment in a conversation with the painter Mark Greenwold, published in the catalogue of Greenwold's show at Sperone Westwater in the Bowery this past spring. Greenwold's show marked something of an apotheosis for an artist who is nothing if not a re-shuffler of histories and has until now mostly been admired by other artists. Greenwold's paintings are deranged contemporary Boschian soap operas, in which the artist and his family and friends are represented with overgrown heads, crammed into claustrophobic interior spaces. In his recent paintings Greenwold has allowed bits of abstract imagery—what Dunham calls "Martian peacock" elements—to erupt in front of a face or above a person's head. Greenwold is rejecting what he calls "this kind of sanitized notion that abstraction is on one side and figuration is the other side, and God forbid they should ever mix in art or in anything."

Although I sometimes enjoy the finicky punctiliousness of Greenwold's painterly technique, his work ultimately strikes me as sodden and melodramatic—Kafkaesque kitsch. But Greenwold is obviously an immensely intelligent man, and his conversation with Dunham reveals a good deal about how a serious contemporary painter grapples with the conflict between painting's stability and painting's instability. Greenwold struggles with what he describes as his training in "Greenbergian modernism." While his work is loaded with local color, knotty narratives, psychological suggestions, and wacky humor, he comments somewhat confusingly that he is "not interested in, as I said, narrative and all that stuff. So my premise is Greenberg's." What I surmise he is trying to say is that he is interested in the construction of a painting as a formal act. In Greenwold's case, the formal act is informed by a range of concerns that some might label literary. In addition to speaking about other painters, he comments on Philip Roth, the Yiddish theater, and Woody Allen's roles in the movies he directs. He obviously admires Allen's ability to do double-duty as director and actor. Greenwold similarly likes to take a starring part in his own compositions, with his round, bearded, bespectacled head and (often) buck-naked body front and center in his crazed conversation pieces. That Greenwold wants to present life as a freak show does not strike me as strange, not at all, but he fails to integrate the dissonant elements into a convincing whole.

This brings us to the crux of the problem. What is a stable whole that sufficiently acknowledges painting's life-giving instability? That is the question that preoccupies

painters today. And it comes as no surprise that Carroll Dunham, who obviously relishes his conversation with Greenwold, appears as one of the protagonists in the critic Raphael Rubinstein's exhibition exploring the varieties of instability that nourish recent abstract painting. Looking back to what more than a dozen abstract artists were doing in the 1980s, Rubinstein discovers something rather like Dunham's "parallel or shadow histories"—what Rubinstein calls "an alternative genealogy for contemporary painting." Seen at Cheim & Read, "Reinventing Abstraction" certainly has its pleasures. These include Dunham's elegantly eccentric *Horizontal Bands* (1982–1983), the cool formal title giving no hint as to the jam-up of witty, bulbous, bulb-and-root forms; Joan Snyder's rapturous lyric pastoral *Beanfield With Music* (1984), with its luxuriantly orchestrated cacophony of greens; and Bill Jensen's *The Tempest* (1980–1981), a floating enigma like an astral starfish with a sci-fi snout, at once melancholy and oracular. The other artists in the show are Louise Fishman, Mary Heilmann, Jonathan Lasker, Stephen Mueller, Elizabeth Murray, Thomas Nozkowski, David Reed, Pat Steir, Gary Stephan, Stanley Whitney, Jack Whitten, and Terry Winters.

Rubinstein wants to move beyond the shopworn talk about the death of painting or the return of painting to "the urgent task of building a bridge from the radical, deconstructive abstraction of the late 1960s and 1970s (which many of [the artists in the show] had been marked by) toward a larger painting history and more subjective approaches." What Rubinstein is arguing for is the polar opposite of Eliot's impersonal view of the past in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"—the "larger painting history" he advocates is nourished by a wide range of highly personal, subjective approaches. The fact that the works included in "Reinventing Abstraction" look very different from one another is precisely the point. If the artists are joined in their taste for heterogeneity, that taste also divides them, for each is heterogeneous in his or her own way. We find here more or less painterly ways of painting, experiments with a range of flat and relatively deep spaces, and the incorporation of elements ranging from nearly naturalistic to thoroughly nonobjective. If I understand Rubinstein correctly, he wants to rediscover avenues in recent artistic tradition too little seen or understood, and in so doing to excavate routes from the more distant past to the present.

I am sympathetic with Rubinstein's project. Certainly you can make a strong case that the history of painting consists of nothing more than the individual histories of painters. But as Rubinstein is also well aware, the history of painting must ultimately be something more than an anthology of individual histories. If the danger of a totally integrated history of

painting is that it degenerates into a frozen academicism, the danger of a thousand individual histories is that painting becomes no more than another competitor in the bazaar that is contemporary art, a take-it-or-leave-it proposition, with no more claim on our attention than anything else.

One would hope that some more general principle could be derived from the personal histories that rivet us. It is precisely the possibility of discovering the general within the particular that drew me to San Francisco, for a major exhibition at the de Young Museum of the work that Richard Diebenkorn did as a relatively young man in the 1950s and 1960s. "Richard Diebenkorn: The Berkeley Years: 1953–1966" was organized by Timothy Anglin Burgard, a curator at the de Young (which is part of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco); the exhibition goes to the Palm Springs Art Museum in the fall. While everybody knows that Diebenkorn painted his figures, still lifes, and landscapes under the impact of Matisse, the lessons that he drew from Matisse are far richer and more paradoxical than has generally been acknowledged. Diebenkorn cuts straight through the reductive formal strategies that are all too often said to be Matisse's central gift to twentieth-century art, and recovers Matisse's concern with the painting as symbolist experience.

Beginning with the abstract landscapes of the early 1950s, Diebenkorn refuses to allow his paintings to make sense either in purely naturalistic or purely abstract terms. He walks a tightrope in his figures and landscapes of the late 1950s and early 1960s—the best work he ever did—as he moves from passages of almost atmospheric tonal color to strident arrangements of full-strength red, orange, purple, yellow, green, and blue. He convinces me that it is the force of his feelings that precipitates his hyperbolic colors and forms. And his feelings seem to keep changing, even within a single painting, so that sometimes a woman's arm is a woman's arm and a wedge of sky is a wedge of sky, and sometimes a woman's arm is a dead weight and a wedge of sky is an abyss.

Particularly fascinating is the relationship between Diebenkorn's paintings and the considerable number of drawings in the de Young show, especially of female figures clothed and nude. Although most of the drawings included date from after the preponderance of the figure paintings were done in the late 1950s, a photograph of Diebenkorn at a drawing session in 1956 and another photograph, this one by Hans Namuth, of Diebenkorn drawing his wife in 1958 make it clear that drawing and painting proceeded at least on parallel tracks. Diebenkorn's drawings of women, whether still quite young or on the cusp of middle

age, reveal a considerable range of emotions: sexual charm and challenge are mingled with anguish, anxiety, and ennui. With their casual haircuts, unselfconscious glances, and long, sexy legs, these women suggest all the tensions and roiling excitement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the Eisenhower years were ending and ambitions erotic and otherwise were increasingly openly expressed. (The only other artist whose drawings of that time suggest such a grown-up feeling for male-female relations is R. B. Kitaj, and the two painters became friends when Kitaj spent time in California in the 1960s.) If Diebenkorn always regarded drawing and painting as separate activities—and is generally more of a naturalist on paper than on canvas—we can also see how the psychological crosscurrents in the drawings are enlarged and in a way allegorized in the paintings, where the increasingly abstract use of color and shape take on an emblematic power.

I have heard it said by some painters that Diebenkorn was unable to place his figures in a legible three-dimensional space. But he was perfectly capable of doing so in the drawings—so who can doubt that when he turned to painting he wanted to do something rather different? In *Woman on a Porch* (1958), one of the finest of the paintings in which figure and landscape are joined or juxtaposed, we do not know that the woman is on a porch, and that is probably what Diebenkorn intended. The figure, seated in what looks like a wicker chair, seen from the knees up, her head downward cast, is set against a landscape of strong horizontal forms. The color is extravagant, maybe gaudy, with oranges that verge on the lurid and with blackish, purplish blues. The woman's body, solid and sensual, is monumentalized. She is a totem, an icon, a pure contemplative power merging with the blocky forms of the landscape, a human puzzle knit into the puzzle of the landscape. Although certainly not abstract, the painting is also not exactly representational, certainly not a representation of reality. The landscape's strong colors and enigmatically simplified forms become emblematic of the woman's state of mind. What does she feel? The answer is to be discovered in how the colors and forms feel. And if that is difficult to determine—well, aren't a person's feelings often difficult to explain?

In the late 1950s, Diebenkorn said that "all paintings start out of a mood, out of a relationship with things or people, out of a complete visual impression. To call this expression abstract seems to me often to confuse the issue." Diebenkorn is associating himself with a tradition that I would characterize in the broadest sense as symbolist. The enigma of human consciousness is revealed indirectly, through a pictorial environment in which naturalistic perceptions have been transformed by the myriad processes and

pressures of the imagination. The frame of a window becomes a prison. The blue of the horizon becomes a promise. Diebenkorn's figures are a considerable contribution to a modern symbolist tradition that includes Redon's phantasmagorical portraits, Vuillard's luxuriantly perfervid interiors, Matisse's studies of Madame Matisse crowned by extraordinary hats, and Bonnard's climactic painting of his wife in the bathtub, in which the white tile walls explode in a riot of ardent color.

Considering how unwilling Diebenkorn was to retreat to the safety of a format or a formula in the 1950s and early 1960s, it is thrilling to realize how many good and maybe even great paintings there are. *Santa Cruz I* (1962), a view of ocean and ocean-side buildings, is as convincing a portrait of the California coastline as I know, a worthy successor to Matisse's views of the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. Some tiny still lifes done in 1963—a knife in a glass of water, a knife cutting through a tomato—are in the tradition of Manet's quick little compositions and may well be superior to them in their firm architecture and unsentimental lucidity. There are some extraordinary interiors in which a human presence is suggested with haunting circumspection by means of a painting of a woman's head leaning against a wall or a group of figure drawings pinned to the studio wall. Diebenkorn's restlessness is one of the fascinations of midcentury art, as he moves from the almost crude figural style of *Coffee* (1959) to the Ingresque sensuality of *Sleeping Woman* (1961). Diebenkorn is of course hardly alone in the directions he took in those years. On the East Coast quite a few artists who had emerged amid the culture of abstraction were evolving original figurative styles, among them Fairfield Porter and Louisa Matthiasdottir—but Diebenkorn may be the only artist who at least for a time managed to impose so insistently abstract and symbolic an imagination on the figure and the landscape without yielding to simplistic solutions.

Diebenkorn's figures, landscapes, and still lifes from the late 1950s and early 1960s are a reminder of how much instability must be encompassed within the stability of a painting. As for the *Ocean Park* series that preoccupied Diebenkorn as he grew older (he died in 1993), I wonder if the more formalized and regularized abstract processes involved in those paintings did not reflect the worries of an artist who had once upon a time put stability at such considerable risk. I would not want to press too hard on a psychological interpretation of Diebenkorn's development. Suffice it to say that the conundrum for painters in the past several decades has been how to maintain some dependable conception of what painting is all about while insisting on the freedom of action needed to keep that concept alive. To do

so successfully involves quite a juggling act. In the past couple of years I have sensed in the work of painters who hold a particular interest for significant numbers of other painters—they include John Dubrow, Bill Jensen, Joan Snyder, and Thornton Willis—the sobering challenges involved in maintaining both some reliable standard and the freedom to take fresh risks. There is always the necessity to hold the line even as one goes over the line, to maintain some sense of what painting is before all else in the face of an environment in which anything goes.

The evolution of painting is inevitably as much a matter of repetition as it is a matter of change. But what is too little change and what is too much? As Rubinstein observes in the catalogue of "Reinventing Abstraction," it is significant that after all the talk in the 1960s and 1970s of the shaped canvas and the end of the tyranny of the rectangle, the artists in his show—with the exception of Elizabeth Murray—have found themselves loyal to the framing rectangle. With painting, we recognize the excitement of the new not so much through its distance from earlier work as in the extent to which the old ways are given some new sting or attack or power. The wide panoramic abstractions in Julie Mehretu's show at Marian Goodman this spring, with their layering of architectural elements and their dramatically deep space, put me in mind of Al Held's later work, which also had a cinematic and even a sci-fi quality. And that connection interested me, reviving as it did unresolved feelings I have always had about Held's pictorial dramaturgy. As for the lush, thickly applied color in Brett Baker's small abstractions, at Elizabeth Harris over the winter, they brought to mind Paul Klee's Magic Squares and the weavings of Anni Albers and Sheila Hicks—the question became how Baker's own feeling for sensuous coloristic hedonism is strengthened and deepened by the restraining power of a grid. The beauty of painting is that we experience the individualism of the painter but never exactly in isolation. The painter is always simultaneously in the community of painters, of the present and of the past.

To assert that painting is a great tradition is to assert the obvious. Nobody would disagree, even those who take no interest whatsoever in contemporary painting. The problem for contemporary painters begins with the collapse of the framing rectangle as the artist's essential way

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of experiencing the world. I am not sure to what degree the stabilizing supremacy of that rectangle has been undermined by the technology that surrounds us, whether the layered space of the computer screen, the roving eye of the digital camera, or the increasing ubiquity of 3-D movies. But even if the rectangle remains essential, its centrality unexpectedly reaffirmed by the shape of the iPad and the iPhone, there is no question that we are increasingly encouraged to regard continuous visual flux as the fundamental artistic experience. When the Dadaists in the 1920s and even the postmodernists in the 1970s and 1980s turned their backs on painting, they tended to assume that it was still there, behind them, a stable fact. Now painting itself is frequently seen as simply another dissident form, a way of turning one's back on moving images or performance art or assemblage. All too often today, when painters walk out of their studios, they find themselves in a defensive posture or an offensive one, with painting their shield or their battering ram. The trouble is that you cannot really get down to the business of painting when you are forced into either a defensive or an offensive pose.

The great question now is how to preserve and even honor the age-old stability of painting without falling into the trap of a frozen academicism. Richard Diebenkorn, in his figure and landscape paintings of the late 1950s and early 1960s, suggests a provocative balance, one worth reinvestigating. The bottom line is that each artist must now begin pretty much from scratch, obliged to develop both a personal conservatism and a personal radicalism. This is the painter's predicament.

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