

THE NEW YORKER



Given the portable size, about six by eight inches, of the paintings of **Eleanor Ray**, you might guess that the young Brooklyn-based artist works on location, maybe in the Great Basin Desert, a Tuscan church, a studio with a view, or one of the other locales she portrays. But Ray doesn't paint from life, and she doesn't use photographs, either. Instead, the twenty-seven attention-sustaining oil-on-panel works in her current show, at the Nicelle Beauchene gallery (on view through June 5), document memories. In her gentle touch and deceptively modest scale, Ray has something in common with the elusive Albert York, whose paintings, as Fairfield Porter once wrote, "contain an emotion that he discovered outside himself." Ray lavishes the same love and reverence on a little bird that lands on a post (in "Western Meadowlark," from 2020, above) as she does on the angels painted by Giotto in Padua's Scrovegni Chapel, the subject of one interior here.

— *Andrea K. Scott*

May 2021

The New Criterion

Dispatch May 10, 2021

The Critic's Notebook

by The Editors



Eleanor Ray, View Through Studio (Great Basin Desert), 2020, Oil on panel.

“Eleanor Ray,” at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery (through June 5): In 2019 I wrote about Eleanor Ray’s first solo exhibition of paintings at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery. Now the artist is showing again with the gallery, in their new space on Franklin Place in Tribeca. Ray’s small paintings, many of which probe relationships between the natural landscape and man-made geometries, are light-filled, evocative, and perceptually astute. They engage with both the generalizing distillation of memory and the particularity of first-hand experience. Though instantly seductive, several are, sneakily, quite strange. Fortuitous snapshot views begin to seem possibly artificial. In *View Through Studio (Great Basin Desert)*, a landscape seen through a floor-to-ceiling window appears magically to “continue” through the opaque wall of the interior space. (Is this itself the reflection of a much closer window, through which the entire scene is viewed? I thought of Lois Dodd’s *View through Elliot’s Shack Looking South, 1971*.) In *Western Meadowlark*, the cadmium yellow of the tiny eponymous subject’s belly seems to mirror the painted pole on which it is perched. Divergent lines and colors merge and intersect, upsetting easy understandings of light and space, asking us to look again.

— Andrew L. Shea

BOMB

Spirit of Inquiry: Eleanor Ray Interviewed by Paul Maziar

Small paintings of attuned attention.



Eleanor Ray, *June Windows (Great Basin Desert)*, 7.25 × 8.5 inches, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

May 18, 2021

BOMB

Eleanor Ray is a Brooklyn-based painter whose pictures suggest an embodied understanding of what she sees and experiences. In addition to being an artist, Ray is a student of the world: she observes and celebrates the beauty of birdlife, botany, and keeps a keen eye on history. While her compositions reference well-known sites and landscapes, their effect replaces homage or cultural recognition, taking her viewers out of their heads and into newly imagined spaces. Having struck up a dialogue with her a few years back, I've sensed shared affinities that I was eager to learn more about. Her peace-provoking depictions of land and space along with her curious eye to nature—especially during the last year—have made me, in turn, eager to learn about her creative life.

—Paul Maziar

Paul Maziar

Eleanor, some of what I'd like to know about is how you got here and what keeps you going. When did you first begin making art?

Eleanor Ray

In college, my first studio focus was photography. I liked working in the darkroom and making prints, seeing an image appear on the photo paper. As I looked at more painters, I noticed I was drawn to the feeling of double meaning in paintings, with the life of the paint interacting with the image or subject in different ways. That opened a window for me into painting as this exciting and generative terrain. Fantastic shows of Giorgio Morandi and Pierre Bonnard came to the Met then, and seeing their work helped convince me to focus on painting. Before that, my favorite painters as a kid were Johannes Vermeer and Claude Monet.

BOMB

Vermeer, with his use of the camera obscura, now seems to me like an especially interesting case of a painter working close to the photographic but also pointing to some important differences between painting and photography in the feeling of the time and duration an image contains, and in the mysterious status of the image relative to the place depicted, as a specific record and also not quite. I see this especially in his two landscapes, *View of Delft* (ca. 1659–61) and *The Little Street* (ca. 1657–58).

PM

Mysterious is the word. I imagine how this kind of image-appearing might also happen in your painting process. Each of your pictures looks like you take them to the sharp periphery of verisimilitude, like the look of a dream. And soft tones enhance this dreamlike quality.

ER

There's a certain satisfaction in painting something and then seeing it more clearly or in a different way. Seeing it again through the visual decisions made in painting.

PM

Your paintings often invoke artists you admire. At the same time, there's so much feeling from them, making the referential aspect sort of disappear. Your work is more spiritual than it is academic or intellectual. I think that's important.

ER

That's nice to hear. It reminds me of the feeling of some of those places, like Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), where the name of the artist fades from your mind in the moment, and it becomes more anonymous. For me, painting specific art sites also has to do with identifying with the

BOMB

art, beyond admiring it or being directly influenced by it in a stylistic way. Seeing art in person is this heightened, conversational encounter. You bring your own focused attention to work that was thoughtfully made, and the time that went into it is compressed. Not all of these experiences lend themselves to being painted, but some do, for me.



Eleanor Ray, *Arezzo (Piero's Saint Mary Magdalene)*, 6.5 × 8 inches, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

May 18, 2021

BOMB

PM

I'm thinking about paradoxes that, to me, your paintings convey. There's a deep "heart-of-things" feel in their diminutive scale, your palette, the sense of space in calm landscapes. But some of the subject matter—specifically the geometric architectural forms—conveys a deceptively cool content. In that, there's play between exterior and interior worlds, protean emotion and structural order. And then there's the vastness in your compositions that belies the diminutive size of your canvases.

ER

I like that idea of paradoxes. Architectural structure and the grid against the organic curve of a horizon. I think so much of what we see is shaped by contrasts, on a small and large scale—simple contrasts of light and shadow, changes in weather and time of day, and then larger changes, like moving from one place to another and seeing the place you just came from in a new way. There's a paradox there, too, in that we see things in relation to each other but also in isolation, and things retain their discrete characters. That's something I notice in Piero della Francesca's work. Your question also reminds me of some of Ad Reinhardt's great aphoristic lines, like "The invisibility of art is visible," and "Limits in art are not limits."

PM

Seeing your paintings in person for the first time at the Roosevelt Hotel in 2019, I was blown away by how small they are. This smaller format can be seen as a limitation that gives way to freedom. Freedom through constraint. And then scale brings us right back to the personal, the contemplative.

ER

It's interesting to find out that the size of these paintings is often a

BOMB

surprise to people seeing them for the first time! I enjoy that kind of surprise myself when seeing a new painting in person. The fixed size of the surface can contain a scale that's more imaginative and open, and the relationship often isn't quite what I expected.

PM

Right! It's the fact that the spaces of imagination are as you say, open, and also vast, maybe infinite. I've been thinking of Agnes Martin's notion of "innocence" in her grids. And this Smithson statement, regarding the inner life and the physical world: "There is no escape from the physical nor is there any escape from the mind. The two are in a constant collision course."

ER

Ah, yes, I love both Martin's and Smithson's writings. They get at some related ideas with such different styles and tones. They both had an approach to abstraction that's not quite about purity, where imperfection is not seen as a flaw. Smithson wrote like a fiction writer, giving these ideas a dramatic flair, whereas Martin had a different plainness. As she said, "Perfection, of course, cannot be represented. The slightest indication of it is eagerly grasped by observers." Another paradox, of sorts! I also love her emphasis on responsiveness and attentiveness as inexhaustible sources, values.

PM

How do you register emotion in art as a viewer and a painter?

ER

Internal scale, the individual handwriting of an artist, the amounts of different colors. Emotion can be more understated and slow in visual art than in other art forms, which is something I appreciate. You're given

BOMB

more room as a viewer to come to something in your own time, and there's room for abstract emotions. Awareness of beauty, an artist responding to beauty—that's an abstract emotion that comes through across time.



Eleanor Ray, *Westfjords, July*, 6.5 × 9 inches, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

In some ways painting is the fastest art form to perceive, since a whole painting is visible in an instant; but in other ways it's unusually slow, and you can develop a relationship with a painting that you return to over time. And it can be mood dependent; we can be available to certain paintings at some times and not others.

BOMB

PM

This slowness aspect is so true. It reminds me of seeing Martin's massive grid paintings. From a few feet away, I couldn't "see" the painting. Going close up, I could catch its fine particularities but no longer had a clear sense of it as a whole. This *floored* me, brought a tear of recognition: You can't fully "see" someone else, not all at once. But through glimpses and attention, over time, knowing their particularities and nuances, the picture comes in.

ER

Yes, there's an alternation between seeing the whole at once and seeing in time, seeing details. I've felt that especially strongly looking at some Jan van Eyck paintings, too.

PM

Can you tell me a bit about your relationship to nature? I'm thinking of the influence of place in your work and your delightful attention to and knowledge of birdlife and other animals.

ER

My interest in nature is definitely expanding. There's so much complexity and variety around us all the time, and with a little attention you start to see more. There's an unlimited amount to learn, which is a great source of pleasure. As with looking at art, one thing leads to another. If you go to see a particular painting, you find yourself in an interesting church or town, and you find other paintings, notice other unexpected details. If you go out to look for an uncommon bird species, you might find yourself in a place you wouldn't have otherwise gone, in a new type of habitat, noticing different plants. And the more familiar you are with what's common or typical, the more surprised you can be by something unusual, and the more you notice contrasts between

BOMB

places and times of year. Everything comes to life. Birds in particular have such a compelling combination of aesthetic appeal—vividly saturated or subtle color, distinctive voices and songs—and interesting behavior, with movements across great distances. And they're everywhere, of course! It's this parallel world, and noticing a bird takes you out of yourself and your momentary worries, reminding you of a larger structure. I love the appearance of specific birds in historical paintings, as in the Villa di Livia frescoes (30–20 BCE), Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Hunters in the Snow* (1565), Piero's *Nativity* (ca. 1470–75).

Eleanor Ray can be seen at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery in New York City until June 5.

Paul Maziar writes about art and books for various publications such as the Brooklyn Rail, Los Angeles Review of Books, Oregon ArtsWatch, L.A. Weekly, and RREALISM. A book of his art writings, One Foot in the Other World, was published by AC Books. To the Air, his poetry book in collaboration with artist Cynthia Lahti, was published by the Cooley Gallery at Reed College in 2020. He is a member of the Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art.

Eleanor Ray Shows Painting's Power to Capture the Passage of Time in Space

BY KYLE CHAYKA | May 12, 2021



Eleanor Ray's "June Windows (Great Basin Desert)", 2019

Looking at the Brooklyn-based painter Eleanor Ray's paintings is like recalling a glimpse caught while traveling to a new place or those moments when the world suddenly seems in harmony with itself: a sense of calm, everyday aesthetic grace. Ray maintains a focused set of themes. Her small oil paintings on board, each not much larger than a book page, depict austere architectural spaces; places of art-world pilgrimage like Marfa, Texas, and Spiral Jetty; and natural landscapes, sometimes inhabited by birds, following the artist's birding pastime, which she likens to painting itself.

Yet the specific subject matter is secondary to the painter's persistent gaze and the subtle texture of her brushstrokes, evoking the duration of looking and the passage of time. Photographs might

ARTnews

capture a scene with instantaneous realism, of one sort, but we don't experience places, spaces, or art instantaneously; it requires the prolonged engagement that painting provides. Ray plays that looking process back to her viewers.

A growing theme in Ray's work are rectangles of light cast by generous studio windows, like her series in Great Basin Desert or Montello, Nevada. The rectangles are a spectrum of soft yellows, the whiter sunlight of noon through to the deepening red of dusk. In the paintings, the light silhouettes are set next to actual windows that give a view of the landscape outside. The images capture the slow slide of day into night, the shifting perceptions that happen when you spend time within a space, which might be one of the fundamental, timeless achievements of visual art.

Ray's second solo show at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery is open through June 5. Surrounded by long stretches of white wall, the paintings themselves appear as tiny windows onto various moments. *ARTnews* talked to the painter about her choice of subjects, turning landscapes into images, and what French TV show she's been watching during the pandemic.



Eleanor Ray, "Snowy Owl", 2020

ARTnews

ARTnews: Your previous solo show at Nicelle Beauchene gallery showcased your paintings of Marfa and some of Donald Judd's Minimalist installations, along with landscapes and interior spaces. How has your subject matter shifted in the last few years?

Eleanor Ray: The paintings of the studio at the Montello Foundation [in Nevada] feel related to the Marfa paintings to me. The Montello studio does something similar to the Judd sculptures, focusing your attention on light and weather as events. And the architectural frame is a constant point of reference there; the sense of the scale and distance of the mountains changes according to how far you're standing from the windows.

I alternate between making paintings in series and more individually, and in the last few years I've been doing more of the latter, jumping between things. I've been painting more open landscapes, trying to get them to feel as self-contained as the interiors and art spaces — I've spent so much time outside in the last year.

ARTnews: What makes a natural landscape appealing to you as a subject for a painting?

Ray: I'm drawn to places where you can see farther, where a sense of geologic time is visible, and where there's some structure that lends itself to painting for me. It's something that feels whole as an image and surface rather than a fragment or snapshot. I love photographs for that documentary record of a single moment, maybe more of the "natural world as-is," but for me paintings do something different.

ARTnews: What appeals to you about depicting artworks or art spaces, as you did with the Marfa pieces and the ongoing paintings of antique church frescos?

Ray: Seeing art where it was made or deliberately installed can be such a memorable experience visually and emotionally. I've always been interested in painting moments of a kind of aspect change, of seeing something differently, transformed by weather or light. I started with the idea of painting the moment of walking through a door and first seeing a fresco or mosaic, and then got interested in more possibilities around that. There's something intellectually engaging to me about painting art spaces, too, responding to them in that medium—a certain tension and subjectivity.

ARTnews: You recently began depicting birds in your paintings. You post a lot of birding snapshots on your Instagram—has that inspired your painting practice as well? It seems like there's an affinity in the kind of close attention and noticing that goes into birdwatching.

Ray: I do feel like there's a strong affinity between birding and looking closely at art, or seeking out paintings to see. They're parallel sources of surprise and pleasure. With birding, an expanse of forest or marsh starts to seem full of potential the way the simple exterior of a medieval church does, when you know it contains certain paintings you've come to see. And there's something about the scale of a bird within a landscape that feels connected to the spatial concerns in my paintings. The sense that the landscape contains a lot that's unseen is an interesting thing to be aware of as a representational painter.

ARTnews: What have you been watching, reading, or listening to over the past while that these paintings have come together?

Ray: I got into Richard Rorty in recent years—his writing is so clear and conversational, and somehow both romantic and plain. And Thomas Bernhard, who seems at times like a darkly comic mirror-image of Agnes Martin's writings to me. Simone Weil. The art historian Joseph Koerner. Things I've watched recently and loved are Abbas Kiarostami's *Koker* Trilogy, and *The Bureau*.

ELEANOR RAY: SUGGESTING PARADISE AT THE HOLLYWOOD ROOSEVELT

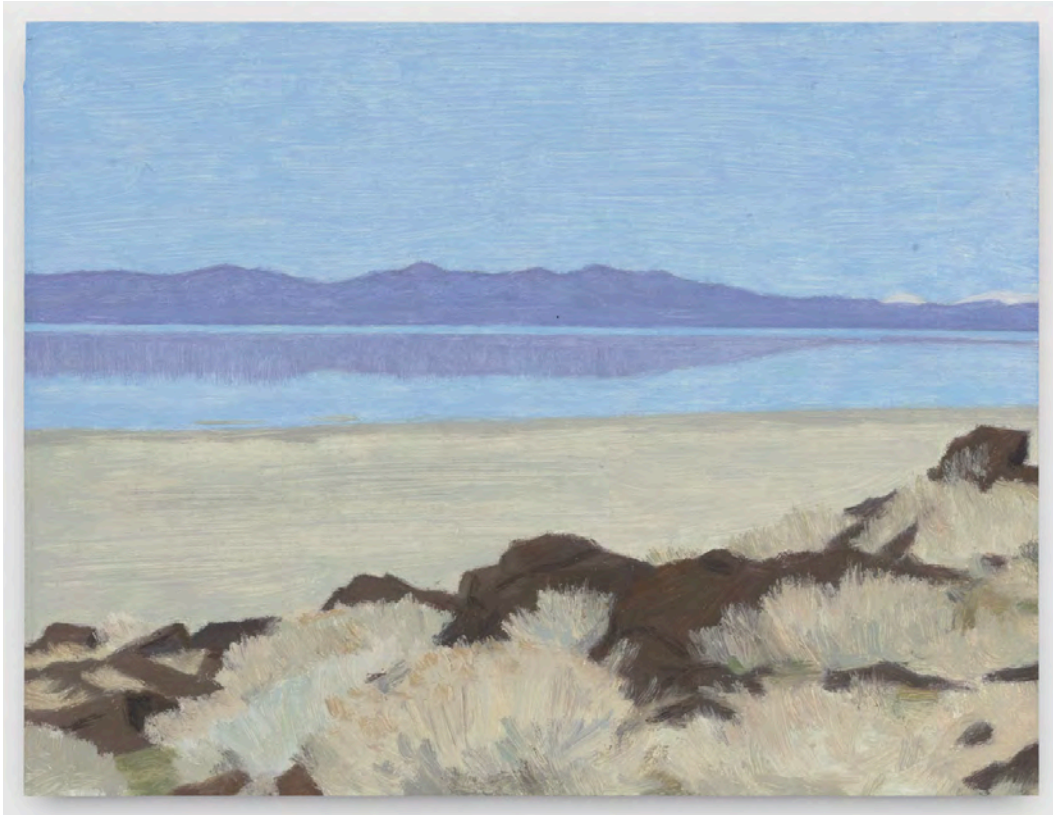
PAUL MAZIAR | FEBRUARY 18, 2020



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.



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.

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

the PARIS REVIEW

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.



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/exterior), 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.

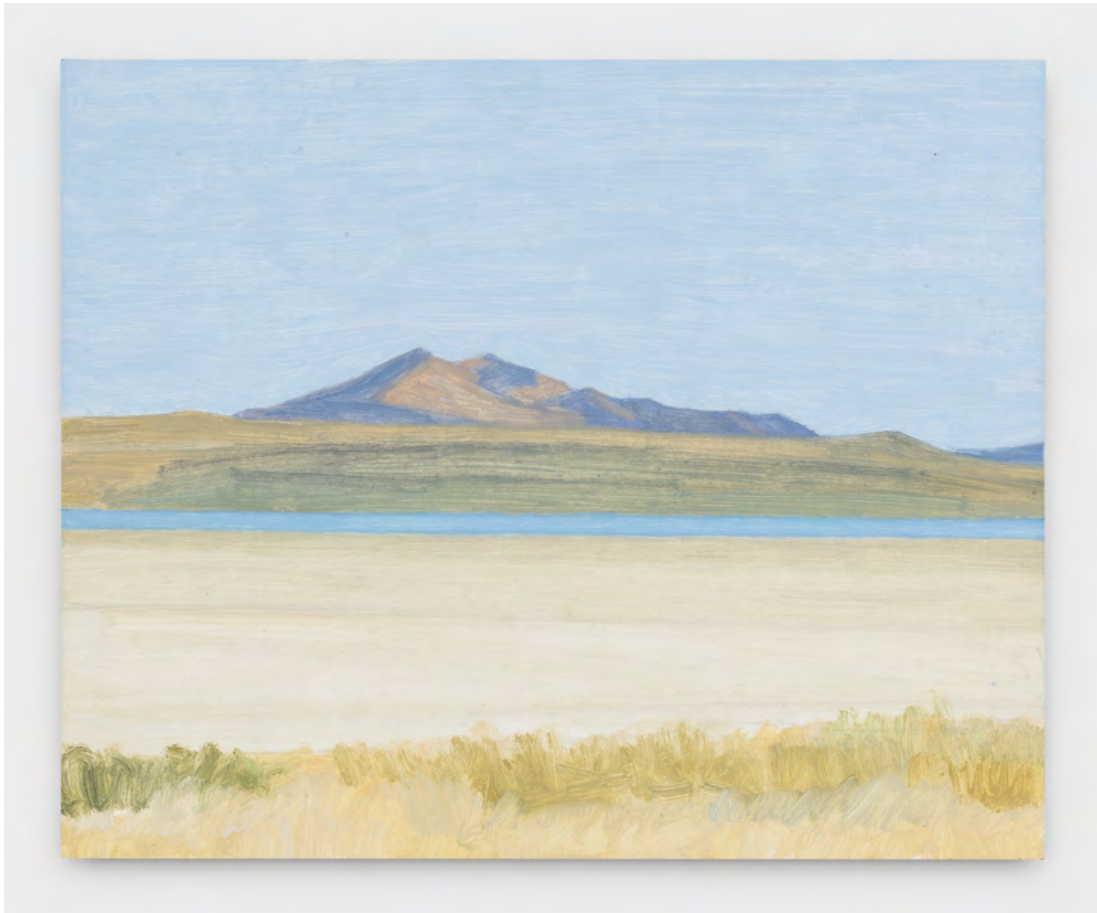
All but three panels are scenes of the American West. Many are locations important to twentieth-century art: Donald Judd's exhibition space in Marfa, Texas; Agnes Martin's home and studio in Galisteo, New Mexico; Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* at Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah. The three exceptions 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.

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.

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 (Assisi, 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.