

John Seal: Picture in Picture

30 Orchard St ▪ Jan 13 - Feb 20, 2022



Artists first started to make paintings of paintings about four hundred years ago in Antwerp. Even then, to make pictures of pictures was already to reflect on the status of image making in a way which many have thought to be quintessentially modern (or post-modern, depending on how you care to think about these well-worn debates). Their self-consciousness marks the intersection of two histories of art. One, just barely beginning to formulate itself at the time, looks from the outside in at art as the object of historical knowledge. The other emerges from the production of art itself. It is the immemorial extension of symbolic form, or art as the subject and genesis of its own historical imaginary. Where these two intersect, a certain inevitable tension stresses what we think we know and what we think we see. Pictures of pictures bring that tension into fleeting focus.

John Seal's latest body of work is a multivalent meditation on this peculiar and disjointed lineage. We are invited by the show's title to search out the pictures in Seal's pictures, and all but three of them deliver on this promise by explicitly picturing paintings. Some we may recognize easily, or uneasily. Henri Rousseau's *Exotic Landscape* (1910) is depicted

in Seal's *We've been here for ages*, perched in an orange tree growing out of a teacup against a typically Southern California backdrop of sycamore and eucalyptus. Claude Monet's *The Manneporte (Étretat)* (1883) is depicted in Seal's *Seeking truth in a mirror* on an easel staged in front of a Southern California coastal rock formation that mimics the iconic arches of Étretat. This picture offers the most condensed and crystalized array of allusions to the pictures-in-pictures genre in the show. Recalling René Magritte's *The Human Condition* (1933-5) with its mis-en-abyme doubling of the scene within the scene (the title, *Seeking truth in a mirror*, similarly recalls *The treachery of images*), we encounter here the three primary themes of the pictures-in-pictures genre: the game of reference and recognition, the potentially infinite enfolding of the frame within the frame, and the paradox of verisimilitude. But Seal has introduced a disjunction in this picture that signals still further horizons. First the tendency to read continuity between these two scenes is a ruse, rather like the seeming continuity of Rousseau's naive jungle scene with the backdrop of Southern California flora in *We've been here for ages*. At a denotative level this is about geographical—maybe even geo-political—difference. The oranges of Southern California arrived from Brazil, the eucalyptus from Australia, the Rousseau, which you can find at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena, came from France. But the semantic stakes of this disjunction are equally complex, and perhaps easier to register in terms of the painterliness of Monet's *Manneporte*, which sets the dead-pan photorealism of Seal's Southern California seascape backdrop into sharp relief.

Photography is the other kind of picturing that haunts Seal's pictures-in-pictures meditations. That we might think of photorealism as a technique of painting is already its own kind of picture-in-picture. Photography cannibalized by painting. Seal's *Falling into the present* and *Slipping between*, two of the three paintings in the show that do not at first seem to explicitly offer pictures of pictures, both press on the stuttered opticality of photographic exposure to force the question of what pictures of pictures can do in the seemingly eternal wake of the photographic image. They also dramatize a third, and arguably the most perilous, axis of Seal's project, which is the question of light. The paintings are almost without exception dominated by one of two kinds of light. The first is partly responsible for the photorealist effect of many of the paintings. It is the perfect flatness of mid-day sun, which delivers the world in instantaneous and unsettling clarity. The other is candle light, or faux candle light in the case of *Falling into the present*, which renders all things as though flickering at the threshold of visibility. The most remarkable exception to this is the painting titled *Heavy will the sea wait upon us*, which features another crisply rendered Southern California seascape, but instead of mid-day clarity we see the golden and pastel hues of dusk. Strikingly, rather than inserting a picture into this scene, it would seem that Seal's picture has itself been inserted as a backdrop into Pieter Claesz's *Still Life with Crab* (1644). The fundamental gesture of picture-in-picture is reversed, and the enfolding of frame within frame is elided by a kind of pastiche effect, which manages to render an absurd juxtaposition as though it were a moment of perfect continuity. This is also the moment at which Seal's meditation illuminates with greatest clarity the peculiar vertigo of our picture-in-picture present, where the aggregation of all that can be seen and known has left us dangling in the stark light of a contextless context.

—Edward Sterrett