

ON THE CUTTING BOARD

There are what we call images of things
stripped off the surface layers of substances
... These we can call,
as it were, membranes or bark, for each one
possesses an appearance and a form that resemble
whatever the object is
from which we say it was shed and wanders...

Lucretius, On the Nature of Things¹

Helene Appel looks at things and paints them, as faithfully as possible, with consummate skill. She has been doing this since the mid 2000s, training her attention on all manner of subjects – big and small, beautiful and ugly, organic and inorganic. In this exhibition, conjured as if by magic on rectangular linen canvases, we see a twig and a large piece of red cloth; car lights; a section of paving slabs; stone, sand, scattered detritus; an envelope; some chopped fennel. It is in certain ways a modest project. Appel makes no claims for the significance of what she depicts, or her own role in depicting them. There is no obvious narrative, symbolism, or theme: what you see is what you get. Yet this apparent simplicity belies the ambition that underpins Appel's paintings, which participate in the long – and often quite fraught – tradition of philosophical and practical investigation into the relationship between art and reality. They are her contribution to the cause of what you might call “realism”: the pursuit of a mode of art-making that captures the truth of the world, as encountered through the vision and mind of the artist.

Like the realists of French nineteenth-century painting and literature, Appel finds her subjects in her everyday surroundings: objects and spaces that exist in the here and now. As Gustave Courbet, the leading realist artist, declared in 1861, “painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist of the presentation of *real and existing things*.”² The notion of presentation (as opposed to representation) is key: the realist project is to create as unfiltered a view of things as possible, stripping away moral, metaphysical, or aesthetic interpretation. Hence, for instance, the titles of Appel's paintings, which baldly inform us of what they depict: *Loose Red Fabric* (2023), *Sandbox* (2023), and so on. Similarly, although her subjects are often rooted in the domestic, Appel does not tweak or arrange them, as a painter of still life might. For the nineteenth-century realists, this commitment to the mundanity of matter – the refusal to elevate or otherwise transform it – was a radical challenge to the idealising conventions of academic art. Today, in a system where art is regularly expected to justify its own existence, to expound on its meanings or to perform its social and political uses, Appel's obstinate realism is just as heterodox.

In terms of fidelity to the subject depicted, Appel takes things further than her forebears. “I don't want to change how the object looks,” Appel has told me. “I want to make a painting that really resembles in its materiality the thing.”³ Most obviously, she paints

images at precisely the same height and width as their three-dimensional counterparts, determining the overall size of the canvas only once the depiction is complete. Her painting of a red fabric curtain is almost three metres tall; her envelope, a few centimetres. Equally as important as scale are the other visual elements – shapes and colours and textures – all of which Appel renders with an uncanny accuracy that brings to mind the illusionistic tactics of *trompe l'oeil* painting. But Appel is not trying to trick the eye: she wants to be as honest as possible. For each material that she depicts, Appel will seek a new work method to draw out its particular qualities. Her paving slabs, for example, were created using pencil frottage, to achieve their rough texture. The red cloth was painted using a thinned-out watercolour on raw hessian, literally dying the fabric. This renunciation of a consistent medium or technique is important for Appel. In this way, the artist is, as she put it to me⁴, “led by the object”: an intriguing turn of phrase, which seems to ascribe agency to these inanimate things, effacing the role of the artist in rendering them on canvas.

But is such self-effacement possible? Realism is sometimes considered old-fashioned or naïve for its apparent faith in an objective reality which art can perfectly reflect, stripped of artifice, unmediated. As Linda Nochlin observed in her landmark study of the movement in the nineteenth century, *Realism* (1971): “In painting, no matter how honest or unhackneyed the artist's vision may be, the visible world must be transformed to accommodate it to the flat surface of the canvas.”⁵ Appel makes no attempt to disguise this process. Her paintings are just as concerned with their own materiality as that of her depicted subjects, which are placed like cut outs on the raw greyish-brown linen. In some cases, this canvas is covered by the full-colour image, or integrated into the image itself, as in Appel's renderings of sand. In others, the image appears to cast a faint shadow on the support, which is nakedly visible – like one of Lucio Fontana's plain ripped canvases. Appel in fact began her career making gestural abstractions: perhaps these representational paintings have more in common with her earlier work than first appears. It's not only a matter of exposed canvas; witness how, from a certain distance, the paving slabs morph into a geometric pattern, or how close-up the sand becomes nothing but dots of paint. Blink and look again: there it is, an image so vivid you want to reach out and touch it.

For Appel, painting is about entering a relationship with the things she depicts, in which both parties are transformed by their encounter with the other. The artist is led by her subject, altering her canvas size and technique according to its scale and form and texture, but the subject also depends on the artist and her choices to become something entirely new: a painting. The surfaces of her canvases are records of this generative dynamic. With their subtle enchantments, they demonstrate an obvious but rarely acknowledged truth: that painting does not simply present but rather produces reality.

1. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Ian Johnston, <http://johnstonitexts.x10host.com/lucretius/lucretiustofc.html> (2010/17), accessed 9 February 2023.

2. Gustave Courbet, open letter in *Courrier du Dimanche*, 25 December 1861; cited in Linda Nochlin, *Realism and Tradition in Art, 1848–1900: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1966), p. 35.

3. Helene Appel, conversation with the author, 6 January 2023.

4. Ibid.

5. Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), pp.14–15.