

Marenne Welten: Deep Pillow

30 Orchard St, Gallery 1 ▪ May 13 - June 17, 2023



Harkawik is pleased to present *Deep Pillow*, our second solo exhibition with Dutch painter Marenne Welten. The exhibition marks a crucial point in Welten's artistic development, as she explores new mid and large-scale formats, creating a series of striking pictures that interrogate the interplay between memory and architecture. *Deep Pillow* sees Welten intensifying the sculptural qualities of her paintings, creating works as fragmented, densely layered and unfixed as memories themselves. They are borne from an obsessive, lifelong investigation into the repercussions of a singular family trauma; here she is both storyteller and psychologist, composing pictures and reconstructing early life memories in the same unified gesture.

Welten's process is perfectly matched to the investigation central to her work. It is impossible to imagine her

technique, which involves composing the picture in layers of heavy white oils, then carving back in with dabs of color, applied to another subject, and equally difficult to see how any other approach could suit her. As she hews interior spaces from busy, buttressed regions of teeming pastels, she generously opens a door towards intimacy, offering the viewer vignettes of everyday life, rife with melancholy, loss, and contemplations that are at once deeply idiosyncratic and universal. Welten offers us a view of a delicate process of reconstruction; in that sense, her project recalls Mike Kelley's "Educational Complex" (1995), Gregor Schneider's ongoing work, "Haus u r," or Kaari Upson's speculative "Larry Project." Indeed, it is the dilemma that every sculptor faces—whether to work in an additive or subtractive fashion—that Welten embraces and extrapolates onto the picture plane.

Welten's paintings have a tendency to reorient the viewer's perception of color, depth and scale. Because she buries vibrant bursts of color in sheets of white and dark paint, subtle chromatic gestures are initially hard to discern. In *Like Alice*, and *Livingroom*, subjects emerge like apparitions, as if conjured from a dream, or else "pasted" into their environment. In *Birthday Present*, and *Table & Chairs*, colorful textiles threaten to overtake their users; parsing the compositional landscape of these works is an additional journey through perceptual phenomena. *4 Chairs 4 Dishes* features no subjects yet brims with life, stacked dishes and dinner chairs protruding from the table, laughs floating in from a nearby room; yet as dense and psychologically loaded as Welten's paintings are, moments of uncanny humor and coincidence abound. Here, pants drape off the table, as if the lack of a body to fill them is a means to bring levity to absence, to the specter of death.

In these works, Welten demonstrates how the objects we are surrounded by acquire meaning; signifiers of our personal histories that ignite paths towards remembrance. The objects that fill her paintings attain the exalted status of an artifact, and stand as a gentle testimony to the private nature of life's most significant moments. Underneath the swirled surfaces of her paintings, one cannot help but feel like a child peering down a corridor towards their own mother or father standing in the doorway. Some of "Deep Pillow's" most surprising paintings pick up earlier works, like 2013's *Kitchen I*, in their use of swooping gestures that casually delineate volume. The orb-ed chandeliers of *Falling Night* hover over a family like ghostly bodies, their thin marks both depicting levity and providing a respite from the painting's thick impasto. *Between Stairs and Cupboard* and *Innocent IV* make further use of these broad, swooping regions.

Welten's canvases themselves underscore the physicality of the object. In *Like Alice*, a figure, composed of the same shaggy stuff of her surroundings, looms in the foreground, her neck craned awkwardly to accommodate the top edge of the painting. In *Man*, and *The Last Sleep*, we see the mutable properties of a doorway; turned lengthwise, it becomes a coffin. In the exhibition's title work, the implied weight of a sleeping figure leaves a physical indentation on its surface, gobs of white paint pushing into the canvas to accommodate her. This "push" might be the exhibition's most poignant moment, in which we see most clearly the gentle embrace of a final respite—nothing to fear, another of life's many passages.