

Large-scale paintings of landscapes are on the ground floor of the gallery. They seem to be set at late evening or night; one can the gloaming stretch out beyond the grass. In one we seem to be looking through a window or a doorway out at the landscape, in the others we are standing in the grass. The works hang against the walls unstretched. Elsewhere in the space there is a mirror, reflecting the street outside the gallery through its rather odd windows, and pot plants.

Landscape, like still life, was thought by the theories of the Academy to be one of the lower rungs of painting, well down from History Painting and Portraiture. Whilst the latter two could take man (and the gender here is specific) as the measure of all things, Landscape was relegated because of its lack of human subject matter.

And yet of course the human presence is here; in the presence of the viewer, in the presences of those passing by on the street reflected into the gallery by the mirror. Even in the presence of the assumed action of tending the plants (one imagines there are instructions for the gallery workers to keep the plants alive). Yet perhaps a different sort of presence comes into play here; one that is not the type pictured by the History genre; one that is more everyday, not always-male, mindful of mundane responsibilities (water that plant).

Downstairs there are more unstretched paintings. Their status as not being stretched again gently tugs at those hierarchies. An abstract expressionist would have stretched them, and then posed stern-faced for that famous photo with Hedda Stern, the only female artist pictured posed awkwardly higher than the men (the irony!) There are also two works that are stretched but on closer inspection they are not paintings. They are prints, both referencing paintings that are in the show. On closer inspection it is possible to see the evidence of the printing process, some parts, for example, are somewhat pixellated.

To get downstairs you have to go through a door which then enters into a communal space shared with the flats above the gallery and then down some stairs which are not particularly well signposted. As you leave the ground floor space, another mirror reflects back at you finding your way through a somewhat unreconstructed small corridor. The mirror through the doorway does not quite reflect a painting of a doorway on the wall opposite.

Then also downstairs, another doorway opposite you as you enter the space, reflecting the space you've just been through. or perhaps offering an alternative way out, a different future. And finally a landscape fully at night.

One can see the passage of time happening, in the translation of one medium to another, in the everyday that is happening outside, in the slightly odd, awkward passage from one gallery to another, in the way that you walk through the spaces of the gallery, constantly reminded of where you have just been or where you might have to return to.

Hierarchies are provisional. In art history, art historians and theorists spent vast amounts of time articulating why, in their view, certain types of art practice were more valued than others. It seems slightly baffling from a contemporary perspective as to why history painting should be more valued than portraiture or landscape, or why painting itself should be more valued above other mediums such as photography and print-making. And why all those mediums should be seen as more valuable than what are termed the 'decorative arts'.

In the last forty years or so, many theorists and curators have worked to debunk those hierarchies. The canon has been 'differenced' through critiques based on theories about class, gender and race. Museums have been re-hung to displace the clunky hand of chronology. Ways of making art that were thought to have less validity have been increasingly used by artists. Biennials fall over themselves to include works that might not have been consciously made as art objects in the western tradition.

And yet painting persists as first among equals, dominating the markets of art fairs and auction houses. Sometimes it is difficult to remember that at regular intervals in between the 1980s and the early 2000s, an artist, critic or curator would proclaim the end of painting, echoing Paul Delaroche's reported words after seeing

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a daguerrotype for the first time. Ad Reinhardt proclaimed it was all over for the medium after he produced black monochromes. Gerhard Richter said painting was “pure idiocy”. Lucio Fontana would slash his canvases.

Hierarchies are strangely persistent. Despite weighing in on the death of painting, Richter, Fontana and to a less degree Reinhardt would become mainstays of the auction merry-go-round of painting. The death of painting was a peculiarly male thing; as if only male artists had the space where they might proclaim the death of the medium before cashing in on the non-death of painting. In her essay ‘The Architect and The Housewife’ Frances Stark asks: “Were these men not unlike architects in that they were constantly carrying out plans—giving instructions, making constructions?” before using the deliberately “simplistic and reductive: categories of the Architect and the Housewife that could still usefully describe gendered structures of the conditions of making art. The Architects with their grand plans, big studios and statements, the Housewife making work from a domestic situation in a way Stark likens to running the home, “the house not being a site of accumulating production but a site of series of simultaneous productions which bear no evidence of productivity—save for the fact that the home isn’t falling apart.”

It has been observed by a number of writers that Juliette Blightman’s practice tends towards the transient and the deliberately withheld or obscured. Yet this simply could be another way of saying that her work, rather aiming for timelessness, is located within time. As noted earlier time does not stand still whilst looking at her work, instead it flows by; through the windows of this gallery, through the presence of plants in other exhibitions by her, growing, changing, perhaps fading if the gallery workers are not good with plants, through the progress of the viewer through the spaces of the gallery. She is not an Architect, pursuing an authoritative statement, instead there is an inconclusiveness to her practice, which is sometimes deliberately reductive, not to seek the perfection of minimalism, but to sometimes just leave things out. Leaving things out, the grand statements, the market-ready product, is perhaps the only way to think about some simple questions; what is it to make a painting today? What does it do? What does the viewer do when looking at it? How do we do this without setting up another set of hierarchies?

ABOUT JULIETTE BLIGHTMAN

Since the mid 2000s, Juliette Blightman has worked across painting, photography, film, drawing, performance, installation and text to produce a body of work that meticulously puts together the fragments of the everyday, and within that re-tell Blightman’s lived experiences. Through this her work nods at movements in literature and art (such as the Imagist poets) that have eschewed grand themes in favour of the minutia of what surrounds us; friends, family, travel, the details of interiors, the small observations that make up each day that passes.

Portraiture, both of people and the spaces they inhabit is a unifying thread across her work, as is the technique of montage that conveys a fragmentary sense of experiencing the world. Blightman’s oeuvre is rooted within the poetics of everyday life but from within that space, the works gently interrogate questions around the physical and mental spaces that social structures have constructed for the gendered subject. Her work asks: what is it to be present in the world, and what traces do we leave for others around us?

Blightman has exhibited widely at a number of institutions both as a solo artist or in collaboration with other artists, including Lafayette Anticipations (2023), Haus am Waldsee (2023), Vleeshal (2021), Kölnischer Kunstverein (2020), Western Front, Vancouver (2018), Kunsthalle Bern (2016), South London Gallery (2016) and Badischer Kunstverein (2015).