

SOLDES

Daryl Bergman
Nocturne

ON VIEW

September 14, 2024 –
October 5, 2024

EXHIBITION OPENING

September 14, 2024, 5–8pm

For Immediate Release

In *Nocturne*, Daryl Bergman offers six new paintings whose intimate scale, atmospheric richness, and contemplative mood wash over the beholder in liquid streams of affective power. If at first their deeply saturated blues appear to exhibit a dispassionately cool surface, their tonal resemblance to cyanotypes gives way to an eerie, crepuscular glow that seems to emanate from within. The content of these paintings reveals a similarly subtle complexity that percolates with extended viewing: among them we find a cluster of grapes purloined from a Roger Fenton photograph (with broader art historical allusions to trompe l’oeil and still life); a pair of pansies printed out from Google Images; and a landscape photograph of St. Cloud by Eugène Atget in which the foliage reflected on the mirrored surface of a fountain doubles like the midline of a Rorschach inkblot.

Bergman’s conceptual frame of nineteenth and early twentieth century photography invites alternative ways to think about what we mean by “content.” Writing in fin-de-siècle Vienna, the art historian Alois Riegl coined the term *Stimmung*, recently translated as “mood” (but which we might render even more colloquially as “vibe”) to describe the true content of modern art.¹ For Riegl, what makes “mood” distinctly modern is that it captures something dynamic and relational about the subjective experience between viewers and art objects, one that he likened to a kind of visual touch. If “mood” had an afterlife in Walter Benjamin’s famous concept of the “aura” as “a strange weave of time and place, a unique appearance of a distance, no matter how close,” it’s important to note that for Benjamin, mechanical reproducibility rendered the photograph *stimmungslos*, or “moodless.” Riegl, however, held that the experience of a work of art was scarcely diminished through reproductive media since a kind of mechanical mentality had already intervened. Not coincidentally, the early charac-

[1] Lucia Allais and Andrei Pop, “Mood for Modernists: An Introduction to Three Riegl Translations,” *Grey Room* 80 (2020), 6–25.

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terization of photography as “mechanical” was already grounded in a prior discourse about the role of rote copying in traditional forms of artistic production such as illustration.²

In her deceptively straightforward images, Bergman does more than simply invest the ostensibly moodless photographic image with painterly aura. Rather, she makes visible the contemporary stakes of older historical arguments about the relationship between painting and photography and their media materialities. In one painting, Fenton’s cluster of grapes are reproduced in their “correct” orientation in the frame of a fictive postcard, but painstakingly reversed in another, signaling a mode of thought and a capacity to work backwards familiar to any analog photographer or print-maker, of which Bergman is both. Her monochrome paintings recall the technical challenges of early photography in registering monochromatic images, especially green landscapes, since processes at the time were mainly sensitive to blue radiation and required longer exposures. Similarly, her use of Prussian blue paint, the first modern synthetic pigment, at once signifies and is consubstantial with Prussian blue, or Ferric ferrocyanide, that forms in the chemical reaction of making cyanotypes. The reverse alchemy encoded in these gestures both indexes and overturns traditional distinctions between the positive and the negative, the synthetic and the natural.

Exemplified by the delectable, juicy grapes that tempt us with surfaces that are either glassy and mirror-like or dull with yeasty bloom, these paintings toggle between modes of mimetic transparency and opacity that share in the recursive challenge of depiction. Bergman’s preoccupation with grapes betrays her canny interest in this challenge that goes well beyond mere subject-matter. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder recounts the legendary competition between two of the most famous Greek painters of the Classical period, Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Zeuxis threw down the gauntlet by producing a painting of grapes so deceptive that birds flew right up to peck at them. Parrhasius, for his part, painted an image of a curtain so convincing that Zeuxis, pleased with the “verdict” (*iudicio*) of the birds, asked that the curtain be drawn and the painting displayed for his appraisal. Upon realizing his mistake, Zeuxis modestly admitted defeat since his painting had only deceived the birds, while his opponent’s had deceived himself, a painter.

But if Bergman traffics in the visual language of *trompe l’oeil*, most astonishingly in the subtle detail of transparent tape attaching a postcard to an

[2] Joel Snyder, “Res Ipsa Loquitur,” in Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 195–221.

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undefined surface, it's clear that there's more at stake here than mere illusion or even an admirable display of technical virtuosity. Although trompe l'oeil is traditionally regarded as a kind of filigree or illusionistic embellishment of still life, Bernhard Siegert has argued that the latter emerged out of trompe l'oeil experiments in illuminated book manuscripts that played with the two-sidedness of the page.³ In other words, still life collapsed the spatial order of the three-dimensional book onto a two-dimensional plane image. Thus, as Siegert would say, the ontological distinction between still life and trompe l'oeil emerged out of a change in material operations. In her new paintings, Bergman engages in a similar interplay of material operations but subordinates the question of space with a tonalism of deep blues that creates atmospheric zones of spatial indeterminacy akin to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of night:

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Night is not an object before me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses...it is pure depth without foreground or background, without surfaces and without distance separating it from me.⁴

–Patrick R. Crowley

[3] Bernhard Siegert, "Figures of Self-Reference: A Media Genealogy of the Trompe l'oeil in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life," in *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York: Fordham University Press), 164-191.

[4] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge, 2003), 330.