

Owen Westberg

Thicket

March 22nd – May 17th 2025

Tops Gallery
 400 S Front street
 Memphis, TN 38103

Owen Westberg's paintings make me picture the inside of an eye. Not so much the retina, lens, and optic nerves—that frequently mentioned conduit of vision, which beholds the external world and packages it for perception—but the flickering, gelatinous, sclera-wrapped *stuff* that props up the whole enterprise of seeing. The vitreous body, the aqueous humor.

On five-by-seven slices of aluminum flashing, and slightly larger slabs of sanded birch, Westberg paints still lifes, views through a window, and landscapes captured in the vicinity of where he lives and works in Pittsburgh. Sometimes the composition is complicated by combining two or more of these modes; other times he introduces fictive space by painting floral patterns lifted from vintage fabric swatches, the result being evenly proportioned French gardens of the mind.

Outdoors he'll paint watercolors, and then bring them back into the studio to transfer them to oil. There is no pencil, he sketches in pigment. The paintings, sometimes completed over two to three sessions, sometimes one and done, are characterized by a keyed-down palette, out of which Westberg squeezes a surprising amount of light, like dawn bursting from a lemon. They also share a tight focal range, although that term is somewhat misleading, as nothing is quite in focus. With a touch of bathos, dramatic gestures threaten to capsize the miniature compositions, in which an overlarge brush is dragged, heroically, wet-into-wet through the picture.

This last thing is what got me thinking about the inside of eyeballs. Westberg has captured a tangible way of seeing. Tracing with his hand how light transports the world into the corridors of perception.

The result: seeing something for the first time. While seeing something *with fresh eyes* is the bandied about phrase, Westberg suggests that exhaustion as well brings insight. Exhaustion as in the byproduct of combustion—something that has happened before the fact. These paintings look back, to Lois Dodd and

Fairfield Porter, to Bonnard and Corot, and yet remain unhitched and unencumbered, ahistorical, afloat in the now. A dirty pair of New Balances is the only way I've been able to anchor these in time.

Temporally, they exist more in terms of dramatic narrative. They're imbued with the percussive power of the best short fiction, which speaks to Westberg's love of Chekhov. Something is about to happen, something just happened, or something is happening, just beyond the frame in which these pictures float. In the tight cropping there's a sense of restraint. In the small scale and economy of brushstrokes and tightly modulated chords of color there is a sense of restraint. And yet, in the lush tactility of the surface, in the coaxed out glow, there is no sense of restraint, just rejoicing in the act of seeing, and the stubborn, lasting life of that which is seen.

The works in *Thicket* follow one after another, allowing the iterative gaps supplied by the intervening wall space to provide a grammatical scaffolding. How great to see them in Tops' subterranean gallery, floating between brilliant white floor and the coal chute above.

In Nabokov's *Pnin*, the narrator thinks back to spring Sunday in 1911—"one of those silly incidents that remain forever in a child's receptive mind." A speck of coal dust lodged itself in his eye, and had to be removed by a doctor ("with glasses like Chekhov"). "I wonder where that speck is now? The dull, mad fact that it *does* exist somewhere."

Maybe it made its way to Memphis, via Pittsburgh.

– Hunter Braithwaite