

JOSEPHINE HALVORSON: FACINGS

AT SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO. BY CLARITY HAYNES



Josephine Halvorson grew up in Brewster, Massachusetts. She is the daughter of a sheet-metal worker mother and a blacksmith father — a biographical detail which shines light on her chosen subject matter: quotidian, utilitarian industrial objects that often possess a kind of New England austerity.

I've been trying to put a finger on what it is exactly I find so thrilling about Halvorson's work. It has something to do with the way her subjects translate spatially within the format of a painting. The painting is a thing, and the subject is a thing; the scale seems to match. The edges of the painting and the edges of the subject are often nearly the same. There is something radical in this insistent, almost sculptural equivalence, or as Tom McGrath describes it in his excellent catalogue essay for Halvorson's current show, the "compression of image and surface."

Facings is Josephine Halvorson's third solo exhibition at New York's Sikkema Jenkins & Co. Having long admired her work in reproductions, I had an idea of what to expect. But I felt a palpable sense of delight when confronted for the first time with her paintings in

their simple physicality.

The mostly small paintings are surrounded by ample wall space in the large, open gallery, and resemble plain, weathered jewels. The often-flat subjects — steel panels, clapboards, wooden doors — engage with the ancient concept of a painting as a window into something; but as John Yau has pointed out, in Halvorson's work they are mostly views denied into something. We see, instead, the surface — a more recent, 20th century metaphor — the painting as object, refusing the illusion of deep space.

64 is a fantastic small painting of a wood panel, with the 6 and 4 spread lushly in glowing orange paint on its surface. The *Heat* series depicts the grate of a small industrial fireplace. In *Heat, 2* the enclosure holds burning red embers. In *Heat, 3* the coals seem to have burnt themselves out. A row of rusty (painted) nails dot the tops of the paintings (also the tops of the subjects.) There are several larger works in the show, such as the life-sized *Woodshed (Door)*. *Foundation* is a long, seven-panel painting of a series of



"I guess I do think of painting as a frame, as a surface, a record. I guess I am American." — Josephine Halvorson with Phong Bui, *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2, 2011

Josephine Halvorson: *Heat 2* (2014)
oil on linen, 16" x 19" - detail
(Courtesy of the Artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.)



Josephine Halvorson: *Woodshed Vine* (2013) oil on linen, 36" x 28" - detail (Courtesy of the Artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.)

concrete slabs, pockmarked and weathered.

What almost all of Halvorson's subjects have in common is that their surfaces serve as direct, playful metaphors for the act of painting. There is something unabashedly sensual and fun about these paintings; it is clear that the artist delighted in making them. It's almost as if she chose her subjects because they already were paintings, their surfaces marked with inevitability. An animated, painterly surface is almost always visible, whether in the form of wood grain, painted letters or numbers, cracked paint, oxidation, scratches, scars, years of exposure to sun and rain... the surface is the surface of the painting which is about painting.

It is important to know that Halvorson's creations are the result of intense, intimate encounters with the landscape. She is a plein air painter, and her paintings are portraits of found objects in their

outdoor environments. She often travels and searches extensively to find what she wants to paint. Once she has chosen her subject, she sets up her easel and works without pre-planning. She stands quite close to the scene she is observing, focusing for many hours at a stretch, and rarely spends more than a day on a painting. If she feels the day's composition doesn't work, rather than revisiting the same painting, she tries again with a new canvas. Sometimes she paints the same subject many times before coming up with what she considers to be a successful piece. The artist's *alla prima*, or wet-on-wet, approach to painting is central to her work. She has said that to return to a painting — to add another layer — would feel like a concealment, a deception.

What is singular about Halvorson's art, I believe, is that these strange objects she creates are both paintings and not paintings. One feels as if her images are not so much described as, some-

how, directly transcribed. It is useful to contextualize her work in relation to that of artists working in other media, for example, Rachel Whiteread, who creates sculptures of objects by casting their negative spaces in plaster. The object itself, pressing against the drying plaster, creates the form that becomes the work; in Halvorson's case, something just as direct, just as felt, has happened in the communion of found object to painted object. Halvorson is deeply invested in the objects she paints, and is interested in their function and history. Her process — in that it is about time, listening to the object in the landscape, and learning its history through her materials — also suggests a connection to an artist like Nancy Holt, whose outdoor sculptures explore the profound relationship between human beings and the earth.

Halvorson has said that she doesn't think of herself as a painter; she describes her paintings as by-products of her time spent with her subjects in their environment. But isn't this what the best painting is? The record of an authentic experience, a struggle, a love? Halvorson's work possesses an uncanny tension between facture and story: they are old, weathered things painted with a kind of sparkling economy. In this way, although the work often seems to be about an industrial past, it is anything but nostalgic. The work feels very fresh, and about the now.

When viewed from about ten feet away, *Woodshed (Vine)* appears to be a tightly rendered, meticulous trompe l'oeil replica of its subject -- a rectangle of wood, perhaps a space where a window once was, painted in cracked, aged white paint. A single dark twig grows up from the bottom of the frame. Stepping closer to the work, one can see how openly painted it is, with confident, straightforward brushwork. The cracks in the white paint on the subject are laid on concisely, one by one, with a simple, almost calligraphic mark.

As relatively quickly as the paintings might have been constructed, however — the lucid, fluent approach calls to mind artists like Alex Katz, Lois Dodd, and Robert Bordo -- the overall effect is that of a profound slow reveal. There is a resonant, haunting depth to Halvorson's work that transforms banal objects into miraculous scenes of mysterious significance.

As I walked from painting to painting, I realized that what makes Halvorson's work feel so psychological, even emotional, is its somatic quality. The body — with its awkwardness, vulnerability, idiosyncrasies — its failures and its beauty — is undeniably present in the paintings, despite its literal absence. Halvorson has said of her process: "It's really just your body and your relationship to the



Josephine Halvorson: 64 (2013) oil on linen, 17" x 12"
(Courtesy of the Artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co.)

world. Using the senses is not anti-intellectual." That is probably true of all good painting. But this artist conjures paintings and subjects with especially visceral materiality — objects whose surfaces reveal their history as clearly as living skin.

Facing by Josephine Halvorson was on view at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. (www.sikkemajenkinsco.com) from January 23 - March 1, 2014.

Clarity Haynes is an artist, writer and educator who has taught and lectured at numerous institutions, including the New York Academy of Art, Brooklyn College, CUNY, Rutgers University, and Adelphi University. Haynes lives and works in Brooklyn, New York, and is a member of the tART collective.