

Josephine Halvorson

Sikkema Jenkins & Co. November 19, 2008 – January 10, 2009 **Lifia Perta**

On a street near the Hudson River in the heart of the commercial art world, a small painting hangs at eye level in the side room of Sikkema Jenkins & Co. The piece is a 17 x 22 inch rectangle that bears within it another rectangular frame, this one slanted and rimmed in black—what looks to be the smudged surface of a vehicle window. This was not one of the three paintings I had intended to write about here—and that's often how Josephine Halvorson's paintings work: they surprise you because they stay. This one, called simply "Dirty Window," stayed with me through the holiday delays of an eight-hour train ride. I sat near a window much like the one in the painting; also slanted, rimmed in black, and bearing the scuffs and stains that marked its age and the miles it had traveled. As I looked out the window, I tried hard to keep my mind trained on the scuffs, to focus my eyes on the stains. Playing at this experiment for even a single hour exhausted me, and I began to think again about the little painting of a similar window hanging in the gallery in Chelsea. Slowly, miles away from the painting itself, a meaning I'd not considered before began to open itself up inside me.

I first met Josephine Halvorson on a spring afternoon in 2007 in the space where Columbia University had presented its MFA show that year. In a corner of one of the two floors of loft space dominated by clever installations and oversized neon canvases with catchy phrases painted on them, Halvorson's work hung—almost

serenely—on its own. The small area she had carved out for herself was like an oasis of quiet in an otherwise noisy crowd. Her paintings did not insert themselves into the eye as consciousness as much as they receded from it. The action reminded me of waves retreating after they break on the shore: as the water sucks back, a hidden part of the beach is revealed, a space hitherto unseen. Here in this newness, the relationship between the one doing the viewing and the object being viewed took on a strange and unfamiliar quality, one that left subject and object positions by the wayside, almost irrelevant in their inability to speak to the movements generated by Halvorson's canvases. What seemed to happen in this complex space, what seemed to generate the sense of a radical otherness between viewer and painting, was the seeping in of a slower and more tactile notion of time.

Although I did not see it at first, "Dirty Window" is in many ways an excellent example of Halvorson's project and the intricacies it both provokes and entails. The subjects she chooses to paint, the things that seem to catch her eye, are often those same things that go completely overlooked as objects in and of themselves. We look through windows, we see the world from them—indeed, a window's very function moves our gaze away from its own surface. And yet, in "Dirty Window," Halvorson has made the window itself the focus of the work. It is not that she denies the glass its transparency—this is rendered too, as colors visible behind the window—it's

simply that her attention, her care, has been given to the often overlooked (indeed, the looked-through) surface of the glass. This is the case with a number of paintings in the show: Halvorson's choice is to spend time with things that we look right through or see only as inconsequential steps to something else. She paints the cavity in a fireplace where a fire would go, the bindings of albums we would open, the remains of food on wax paper that we would throw away as garbage. By choosing to be with these objects, Halvorson interrupts our everyday time and opens up a slower, wider kind of time—one that does not depend on fast-paced, product-oriented commerce and consumption—one that, indeed, refuses it.

There is a long tradition of artists looking at objects that often remain unconsidered; what is different about the nine paintings that hang at Sikkema Jenkins is that the artist does not simply drag the unseen into the realm of the seen and the noticed. This work has less to do with offering representation to under-represented subject matter than it does with an investment of time, of being-with the object during the painting process itself. As such, the movement of the work feels less like an exposure than an invitation to being-with the painting, as object, in much the same way the artist had been in order to render it. This mimesis in which the ethics of the artist's viewing moves through the act of painting to encompass our own act of looking is part of what makes

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these paintings stay with you. This work explores the process of sitting with something, staying with something, for an unusually long amount of time. It is said that in deep meditation, the rigidity of subject and object melts away so that the one studying and the thing being studied merge into a single pointed focus where reality reveals itself as fundamentally interdependent and contiguous—all things touching upon each other, no spaces. Inside Halvorson's small rectangles, we feel the ground beginning to shift as the possibility of another way of being in the world subtly weaves itself into our consciousness—sometimes long after the viewing experience itself.

In a world that organizes itself around commerce and relationships of consumption, it is essential for advanced capitalism to instill an ever-hastening notion of time—that there is not enough, that pause is wasteful, that if you linger, you lose. When people slow down enough to realize that the last thing they bought, the thing they so enjoyed when they brought it home, has since lost its

luster and no longer makes them happy, the very real danger that they might seek happiness outside of commercial rhythms opens its jaws wide. Halvorson's work upsets this constant motion and opens up stillness as a radical act. Her method involves a diligent and rigorous investment of time and, in the end, her focus is not on the product but on whether or not she considers her process successful. She does not paint from photographs, she does not paint in multiple sittings. She chooses her object and stays with it for as many hours as it takes for her to feel that some union has been arrived at, some deep being with another object in the world has been given the time to unfold. If she is not physically and mentally exhausted by the time she is through, she considers the piece a failure, regardless of what the canvas may or may not look like. The rigor of this methodology might be a selling point in and of itself—a novelty factor added to the work in the same vein as marathon performance art, without the performance. But Halvorson does not foreground her process and in some ways, she even ef-

faces it: inviting us instead to open up our own process within her work, gently coaxing us to slow ourselves down into stillness before it.

One of the three paintings I had originally intended to write about here opens a close view of a tombstone. The epigraph reads: Death is a debt to nature which I have paid and so must you. The work could almost be speaking of itself: this closeness, this being-with something until intimacy stretches out before you—this is a debt that the work, through the artist, has paid to nature. Halvorson has faceted the meaning of "still life": she stills life, slowing things to a point at which intimacy is made possible. And at the same time, the work pushes us to see all things as still life: nothing is too small to merit prolonged, profound attention. The more overlooked a dice of reality is, the more it calls for such focus, precisely because it is so rarely seen as an end, a perfection, in and of itself. This is the debt Halvorson pays to nature. And, she seems to say—to upset the flow of ubiquitous, late-capitalist time—so must we. ■