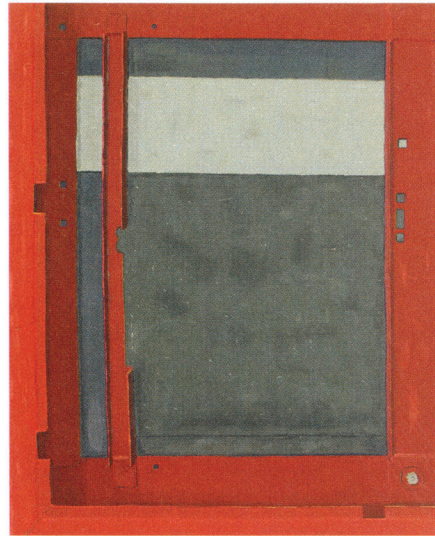




Josephine Halvorson:
Generator, 2011,
 oil on linen,
 34 by 28 inches;
 at Sikkema Jenkins.



JOSEPHINE HALVORSON SIKKEMA JENKINS

In Josephine Halvorson's resolutely airless and mute new paintings, everything happens right on the surface. Like classic trompe l'oeil masters, Halvorson comes in close to objects whose raised features or appended materials seem to extend beyond the picture plane: a few square feet of pressed tin, its cream-colored paint chipped; a gray-painted wooden door, a crossbeam protruding at the top; a sheet of corrugated cardboard to which a piece of brown paper has been taped.

Several times, frames appear within the frame of the painting, generally a little askew. The red-painted metal struts of *Generator*, for example, angle away slightly from the edges of the canvas (like all the works shown, it is just a few feet on each side), setting up a striking spatial puzzle. Discrete objects—tools, machines—are tightly cropped, and identifying marks or distinctive features suppressed. The dully gleaming metal implements in *Grippers* advance in military ranks, extending beyond the horizontal band at the painting's lower edge to threaten the viewer with almost comic vigor.

Although some paintings, like *Cracked Back*, represent blank surfaces with considerable subtlety and contain marginal flourishes that gracefully define the barest threshold of depth, Halvorson (a New

York resident born in 1981) is not given to displays of virtuoso technique. She works quickly, completing a painting in a single session, as if to capture a fleeting moment of light or atmosphere, although the illumination of her subjects, all of them static, is diffuse and often dim. While her work is clearly rooted in the still-life tradition—in an artist's talk, she noted a long-standing interest in Chardin and Morandi, and admitted "bumping up against" Harnett and Peto—Halvorson works entirely outdoors, preferably in overcast conditions. The dissonance between her sometimes visibly hasty brushwork and the inert, timeworn objects it describes is, like the cramped pictorial space, surprisingly unsettling.

The title of this exhibition, "What Looks Back," seems to invoke the hoary theoretical proposition that in the culturally shaped field of signification, "inanimate objects to some extent always look back on the perceiver," as Norman Bryson put it. Halvorson claims, more simply, that she needs to feel she has made "eye contact" with a subject before embarking on a painting. Happy to be working at a time when, she says, painting is not considered to be in mortal danger, she is committed to recording the experience of coming face to face with familiar but unyielding things. Rackstraw Downes, another devoted plein-air painter, once wrote that he didn't take up painting from life in order to see nature afresh so much as he used nature to provide new ways of looking at painting. It is an approach that serves Halvorson exceedingly well.

—Nancy Princenthal