

Josephine Halvorson

What Looks Back

Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,

New York, 2011.

WHAT LOOKS BACK

Sign Holders,
Ashy Baffles,
Plank Door,

Steam Donkey Valve,
Carcass,
Tregardock,

Barrier,
Grippers,
Inlaid Stones,

Cracked Back,
Cardboard Template,
Generator,

Water Link,
The Heat Inside,

Green Machine,
Mine Site.



Sign Holders, 2010, Oil on linen, 40 x 30 inches



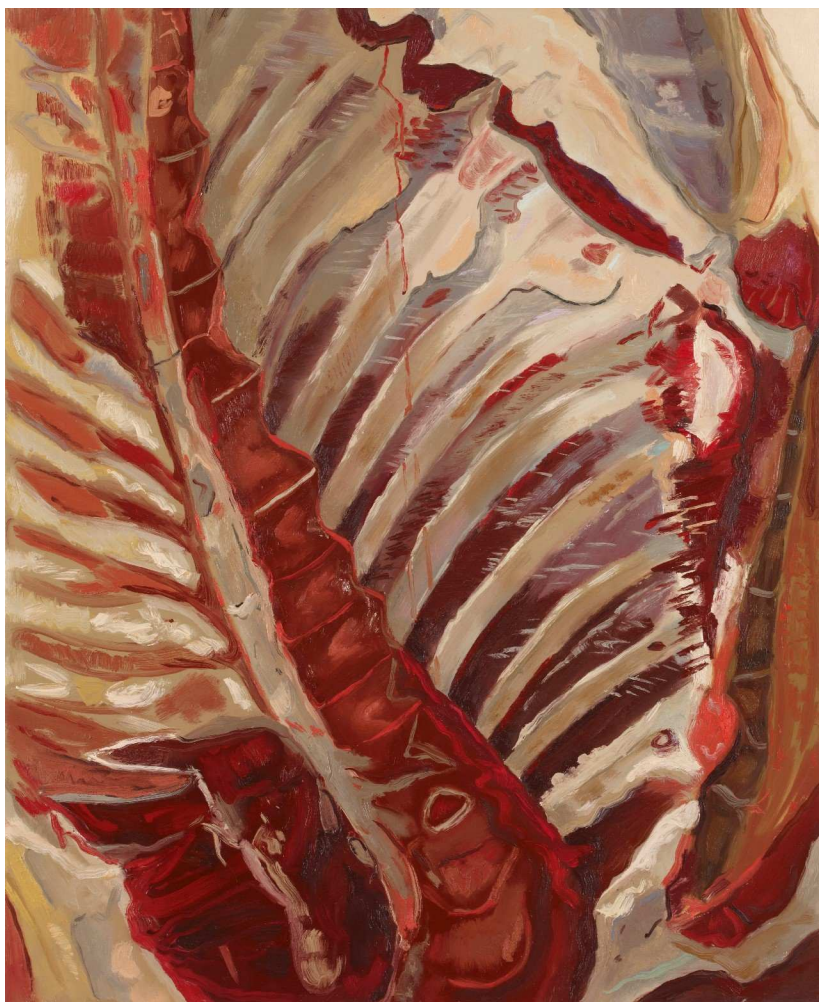
Ashy Baffles, 2011, Oil on linen, 22 x 17 inches



Plank Door, 2010, Oil on linen, 34 x 28 inches



Steam Donkey Valve, 2011, Oil on linen, 18 x 23 inches



Carcass, 2011, Oil on linen, 34 x 28 inches



Tregardock, 2011, Oil on linen, 19 x 15 inches



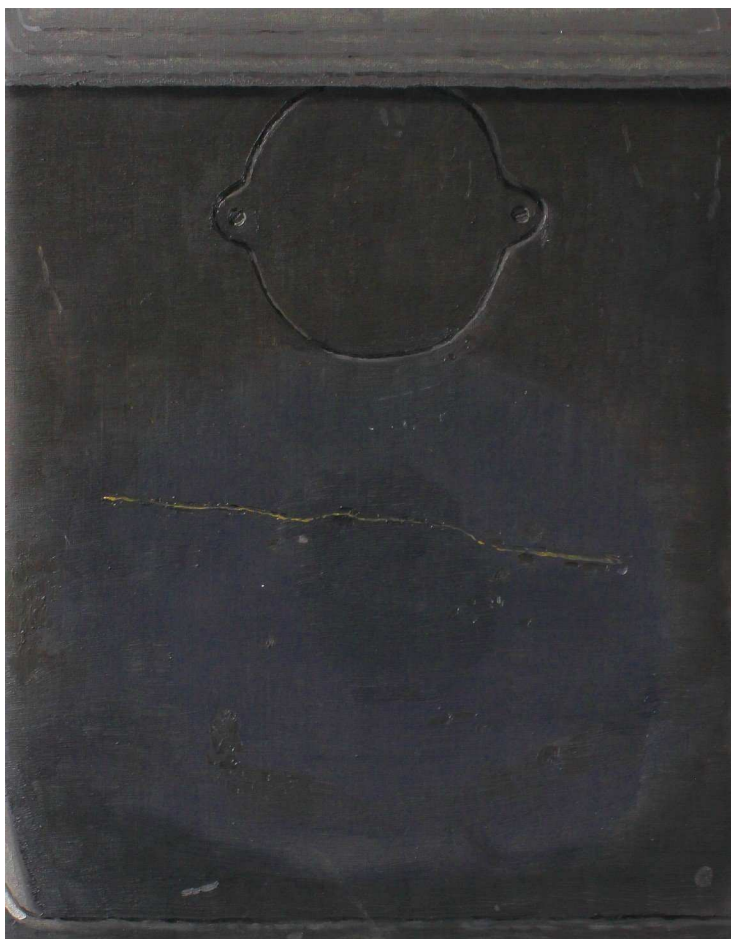
Barrier, 2011, Oil on linen, 36 x 42 inches



Grippers, 2011, Oil on linen, 18 x 23 inches



Inlaid Stones, 2011, Oil on linen, 32 x 38 inches



Cracked Back, 2011, Oil on linen, 18 x 14 inches



Cardboard Template, 2011, Oil on linen, 30 x 38 inches



Generator, 2011, Oil on linen, 34 x 28 inches



Water Link, 2011, Oil on linen, 28 x 34 inches



The Heat Inside, 2011, Oil on linen, 38 x 30 inches



Green Machine, 2011, Oil on linen, 30 x 40 inches



Mine Site, 2011, Oil on linen, 29 x 39 inches

Press release from the exhibition

Sikkema Jenkins & Co. is pleased to present *What Looks Back*, an exhibition of recent paintings by Josephine Halvorson on view from October 21 to December 3, 2011.

Josephine Halvorson has an itinerant practice. She searches for objects willing to 'look back'. Working perceptually on site, Halvorson's paintings contain the reciprocities that develop between artist and object, and become testaments to time spent. The exchanges, which take place in a single session, test the limits of the body, witness the vagaries of weather and light, attract passing strangers, and - when materialized in paint - take on unexpected meanings.

These paintings were made in places as diverse as Shoshone, California; Canaan, New York; Akureyri, Iceland; and Shoreham, England. Halvorson's explorations are not only geographical, but also psychological. Chance encounters with objects in their environments realize internal glimpses of paintings unmade yet somehow anticipated.

Halvorson considers a painting successful when it asserts a life independent of its power to represent either the original object or the experience of its own making. She hopes these paintings return the attention that produced them and, as a group, evoke an ever-evolving narrative.

On *What Looks Back*

By Erin Yerby

The title of this exhibition, *What Looks Back*, doubles as both a statement and a question. The statement is made by the paintings themselves, which seem to assert that they are “looking.” Yet, in the next moment they involve us in the uncertainty of a question: *what is it that looks back?* Here the painting is the embodiment of an answer to which Halvorson’s practice, in its singular attention to the object, is the question.

Josephine once told me that her practice of painting before the object makes her feel at times exposed, as if she were “sleeping in public.” There is something comical in this – the painter, a body encumbered with canvas, brushes, and oils, props herself up on the side of a road, to paint an object that most would overlook and certainly deem unworthy of so careful a painting. The door of an abandoned rail car, a roadside barrier, a crumbling windowpane... these are peripheral sites. Yet by placing her body before these overlooked objects – putting herself, literally, in their place – she exposes herself. Something is put at risk. She must wait for the object. She attends to the object, as if trying to enter into it. Here the painter is vulnerable like a somnambulist walking through the landscape of a dream, while the rest of the world is carrying on with its everyday movements.

Josephine’s attention before the object effects a double estrangement in both the body and the object. On one hand, if painting in the open is like “sleeping in public,” the absorption of painting disturbs the body’s automatic and habituated movements; on the other, the forgotten object, now put in relief through her attention, is called upon to “look back.” Bergson insisted that traumatic states of paralysis, wherein the body’s immediate reactions, which reduce perception to an almost “mechanical impulsion,” are suspended, actually open the body ever more intensely to the sensations acting upon it: “by sight, by hearing, it enters into relation with an ever greater number of things, and is subject to more and more distant influences.”⁽¹⁾ It is as if, through the practice of painting the encounter with the object, the body opens onto these “distant,” because subtle,

sensations acting upon us; attention before the object makes room in the body for those sensations that are pushed to the periphery of everyday experience yet continue to haunt the present. The painting, in its solidity of canvas and indelibility of color, becomes a record of this encounter with fugitive sensations.

The encounter takes time. She waits for the object, and in this waiting the inanimate object, the dead animal carcass, or the machine that has outlived its function, is freed to wait for her – to open itself to her. The practice of giving attention to the object, in its place, opens onto time's excess – beyond utility, beyond history. No longer put to work and reduced to a thing of utility, the object now enters a luxury of waiting, releasing sensations embedded in time and material. Josephine has said she is drawn to objects that wear time in themselves and can "convey this passage of time" to the one who looks. It is "the time the object has endured, rather than the nameability of the object or identity of the form," that her paintings seem to capture. In this way the objects she paints carry the marks of time and use on them, allowing them to enter into a mysterious proximity with the objects that paintings are: "a painting, if it does have eyes or feelings – on a wall of a museum or house or wherever – would witness all this activity. I feel this way about some objects as well."

Maybe this is why Josephine's paintings seem to slow down time. These paintings of forgotten objects, or of bodies arrested in action – I am here thinking of the flayed cow in "Carcass," as well as an earlier painting, not exhibited, of a dead rabbit caught in a barbed wire fence – display a stubborn resistance. The image invites us in only to push back at us – we cannot look through it, or past it – it asserts its presence, it asks that we couple our body to its body, our sensations to its sensations. In "Carcass" I look at the bones and the blood, I feel their consistency, the "perpetuity of blood," as Cezanne said. But I enter into the painting not through an identification of the figural body of the animal, but as a sensuous surface that suspends this identification. In this way the paintings subvert the violence of the gaze – which seeks to reduce the object to recognizable forms – asking you to wait, to slow down, to share time with them.

Josephine and I first shared time many years ago in Vienna. There, in her *fin de siecle* apartment, she asked me to sit for a portrait, and this, she told me recently, was the last portrait she made of a person. When asked why, she replied that it was in Vienna that the problem of place first asserted itself in her work. She wanted to figure out how the experience of a particular place or environment could be expressed in the object itself. It was in the inanimate things that compose daily life that she began to discover the presence of place and time congealed. While attention to the singularity of the surface of the object extracts it from its historical and thus narrative context, the painting nevertheless carries in it a milieu of space and time. Josephine has said, "if it documents anything, it is documenting my relationship to the painting in time." Yet this relationship contains within it, like an ephemeral atmosphere, a milieu of sensation hidden within the historical context. There is, released in this application of color to canvas, something "beyond its material existence."

In a world engrossed with mediatized images and subsumed in the virtuality of communication technologies, these paintings seem to assert the dignity of their own materiality, their "thingness." I see this not as a nostalgic desire to return to a simpler past, but as an active encounter with the materiality of the present – an encounter in which the painting becomes a record of how the sensuousness of the body, as much as of the paint, might access virtual relations of intimacy hidden within the materiality of objects. These images draw to the surface – *as painted confrontations with surfaces* of stone, metal, wood, and flesh – the invisible forces within things. Like the dense surface of skin, they saturate the eye and yet *there is room to breathe* – to enter into the painting. It is as if the only way to look at these paintings is through eyes returned to the tactility of the body – as if we are being taught to look not from the head but from the stomach, from the legs, from the hands.

About the artist

Josephine Halvorson lives and works out of Brooklyn, NY. She holds a BFA from The Cooper Union and an MFA from Columbia University. She also attended the Yale Norfolk School of Art. Halvorson is the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship to Vienna, Austria (2003-4), The Tiffany Foundation Award (2009), a NYFA Fellowship in painting (2010), and has spent yearlong residencies at the Fondation des États-Unis in Paris (2007-8) and the Marie Walsh Sharpe Space Program in Brooklyn (2009-10). Her work was recently included in the group exhibition *Americanana*, at Hunter College Art Galleries curated by Katy Siegel and is featured in the publication *Vitamin P2* published by Phaidon. Halvorson currently teaches painting at The Cooper Union and at Princeton University, and is a Core Critic in the MFA program at Yale University.

About the author

Erin Yerby lives and works in New York City. She is a doctoral candidate in Cultural Anthropology at Columbia University. She holds an M.T.S in Religion from Duke and an M.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of Minnesota. Her awards include a Fulbright Fellowship to Vienna, Austria (2003-4) and a Foreign Language Studies Award (2006) award to Iceland. Her current work engages the body and its gestures as sensory territories, in and through studies of mediumship, hysteria, and space.

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