

CATALOGUE ESSAY

Karen Wilkin - 2004

Rosenberg + Kaufman Fine Art

CLAIRE SEIDL

The first impression, on encountering Claire Seidl's work of the past few years, is of extraordinary diversity. Some pictures are constructed out of looming masses; others depend on calligraphic gestures. Some hold back, demanding that we navigate dense accretions of paint that seem to have been slowly accumulated; others reveal their material selves more quickly. Some appear to have been generated by geometric imperatives, others, to have evolved organically. Surfaces can be transparent, implacable, or anywhere in between. Scale is ambiguous. Conceptions of pictorial space seem subject to change. And if this weren't enough, there is also a dramatic change in disciplines to contend with. Seidl is not only an accomplished, experienced painter, but a serious, inventive photographer. To compound the problem, her photographs, at first acquaintance, seem to explore rather different notions than her paintings.

First impressions, however, are often wrong. The longer we spend with Seidl's work, the less significant its apparent variousness becomes. Instead, a sense of stubborn individuality and of singleness of purpose begin to make themselves felt. "Families" of pictures start to announce themselves, often rather extended ones. The edges of Seidl's largest, densest shapes, for example, quietly begin to declare their kinship with her calligraphic swoops and loops, reminding us that the boundaries between masses can also play the role of drawing. We begin to glimpse abrupt linear structures underneath delicate all-over expanses, reminding us that what is visible at any given moment is only one stage in the history of a picture's evolution. And more.

We soon become less conscious of the differences between Seidl's works – which is not to deny the existence of those differences – and instead, become increasingly aware that they are united by the thoughtful exploration of a single dominant theme. If we pay attention, it is plain that this unifying motif manifests itself in everything Seidl does, no matter what her chosen medium or discipline. Quite simply, in both her paintings and her photography, Seidl investigates the most fundamental aspect of making and responding to art: the act of seeing itself. The diversity of her recent work reflects both the largeness of her theme and the fact that that multiplicity is not only permitted, but demanded by her self-imposed task of inventing (and/or discovering) visual equivalents for a host of ways of seeing.

Seidl's images force us to consider the essential characteristics of different qualities of attention. They make us aware of things we usually ignore, such as the way we routinely, even unconsciously, employ different focal lengths in order to make sense of the world around us. Seidl's paintings and photographs pose wordless questions about the difference between looking at something directly or catching a glimpse of it from the corner of an eye. In her paintings, Seidl does this metaphorically. Some pictures executed over the past few years are seamless, subtly inflected expanses of soft-edged hues that appear to have been built of slow impositions of thin layers of paint. Previous states and underlying incidents are often veiled, like distant recollections or like things seen briefly long ago and now largely forgotten. These earlier pictorial events can remain more or less visible through the layers of paint on the canvas, but they can also be completely obscured, buried under the results

of new campaigns of painting, so that only the memory – if that – of a previous state exists. Paintings of this type compel us to consider surface and density in fresh ways, turning the attempt to penetrate an expanse visually into a recapitulation of the experience of finding our way through daily life with the aid of (sometimes misleading) visual clues. The many ways we can see something – as opposed to interpreting or identifying what is seen – have equivalents in Seidl's range of painting languages, from broad, brushy masses to tangles of animated lines, from accumulations of multiple gestures to sweeps of translucent washes.



It's tempting to say that in her photographs, Seidl investigates similar territory more literally, although the results are anything but literal and certainly not predictable – not even for their author, who approaches photography with the same wish to remain alert to things that happen in the course of making that informs her paintings. Many of Seidl's most arresting photographs are shot at night, with little available light, so that they require long exposures. The resulting images reveal things that elude normal vision. The passage of time required to make the photo leaves its visible traces on the image. The camera dispassionately records movement of all kinds, making evident even movement so slow, so inconsequential, or so sporadic – shifting stars, passing vehicles, stirring foliage – that it would escape not only ordinary attention but often ordinary modes of seeing, even if attention were paid. The camera's vision can be paradoxical; Seidl's photos about reflections in windows bring front and center things that are, in reality, behind her, in her choice of viewpoint, and so implicitly physically out of her sight. The camera collapses distance; in actuality, the eye would need to change focus in order to see, sequentially, the reflection, the surface on which it is reflected, the real things in front of the reflective glass surface, and the distant things beyond, visible through the glass. In these photographs, the camera brings everything up to single plane – testimony to yet another kind of seeing.

For some years, Seidl has kept her activities as painter and photographer parallel, but essentially separate. Her choice of motifs for photographs is not easily equated with her painting images and she doesn't make paintings that derive directly from her photographic images; when she has made an occasional move in that direction, she has not been entirely happy with the result. Each practice is quite specifically about the characteristics of each medium: what are the properties of paint? how can the painter impose herself on those properties? what can the camera do? and since Seidl prints her own work, what can the photographer do at each stage of process? Each body of work remains unmistakably distinct, but it is also apparent it is the product of the same highly individual sensibility, the same vision, the same obsession with the permutations of the act of looking, and by extension, with perception itself. With longer acquaintance, not only do the differences between Seidl's works in a single medium seem of less import than they did at first, but the connections between even her most disparate efforts in different disciplines become more and more evident. Once we attune ourselves to Seidl's voice – to change metaphors – its clarity and singularity seem obvious.

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