

Review

*Claire Seidl: If It's Not One Thing It's Another*

One Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, NY 11238

Curator: Fran Kaufman

December 23 – March 30, 2022

Peter Malone

A compelling survey of Claire Seidl's work currently at One Grand Army Plaza's exhibition spaces presented under the banner, "If It's Not One Thing It's Another", transcends its wry packaging with a rare opportunity for viewers to decipher an abstract painter's deeper language. An uncommon experience these days as the sheer number of active abstract painters has caused a collective appetite for hyper originality that distracts from engaging with the subject matter that defines an abstract painter's motivation. Nostalgia may be a poor foundation for critical analysis, but there was a time when schools of abstract painting provided shared criteria that balanced objective assessment against the radical subjectivity that for better or worse remains the core of this most resilient art form. For good reason, we are done with art movements and must rely on the willingness of individual painters to offer their own subjective context to the viewer.

Seidl's approach to abstraction meets this demand visually, without elaborate statements. To grasp her interest in the vagaries of perception is to enrich one's reading of her work. By the adept use of a limited palette, an understated variety of painting supports, and through a parallel photographic project, examples of which curator Fran Kaufman astutely featured equally in the exhibition, a viewer learns of Seidl's fascination with temporal perception. Engaging both canvases and photographs in the same exhibition uncovers the artist's elusive subject matter more effectively than if each project had been presented exclusive of the other.

By a parallel project I mean a project that shares in Seidl's painterly fascination with time. It's an unusual pairing. Each medium's fundamentals are respected. The photographs do not mimic the paintings, nor do the paintings mimic the photographs. But engaging with them alternately (they are installed in small groups of three or four) a viewer is exposed to a mindset inclined toward dissecting time and preserving what residue of memory survives the process. Linked only by the artist's pursuit of obscure visual events, a viewer is escorted through related discoveries in both mediums.

Photography and painting are quite different. Painting is proactive. It relies on a counterpoint of spontaneity and intervention. Though there is no evidence of a strict protocol, Seidl's paintings read as activated initially with light fields of warm hues in the greenish-yellow spectrum overlaid many times with drawing and brushwork executed in dark, near black hues. In contrast, the photographs are passive, taken in long exposures of low light subjects that burn background information into abstracted form while foreground objects and figures blur to near invisibility. Shooting on film, the artist allows the camera considerable autonomy. Hence, two normally disparate methods — constructed paintings and deconstructed photographs — meld conceptually by virtue of their service to the artist's vision.

For instance, a photograph titled "Dinner, Hand" reveals lawn furniture and the silhouette of a candle's wick among less definitive shapes and textures. Dominating the picture are ghosts of seated figures, including an unclaimed hand. Whatever figurative hierarchy had existed outside the lens has been reduced by a lengthy exposure into layers of light and form. It is, in a sense, a painting created by an autonomous camera, improvising the way a painter improvises, rather than the way a photographer typically hopes to capture a fully realized moment.

Most of Seidl's canvases are easel size, to revive the gauge Clement Greenberg invented for explaining the heroic scale of mid-century abstraction. In today's environment where bloated canvases preen in absurdly bloated gallery spaces, arms-length canvas dimensions offer the thoughtful painter a respite from market distractions and a more promising engagement with an attentive viewer. With notable irony, easel painting's once AbEx-diminished status is now more suitable for planting roots in the still vital mid-century soil. Seidl's "easel painting" enhances a viewer's appreciation of her subject. Purging the style of both its hyperbolic showmanship and its theoretical constraints, the artist is free to explore its full potential.

In fact, the breadth of Seidl's variations on mid-century abstraction is barely hinted at in this gathering. Even so, identifying her main precursors from what's been chosen for the show displays the depth of her historical understanding. The calligraphic outlines left behind troweled passages in "Its Always Something", 2019 channel the delicacy of Arshile Gorky's mature work, while the spatial implications of "The Eye of the Non-Combatant, 1994" echo Joan Mitchell's bold hybrid of Action painting and late Monet. Seidl thus embraces the alpha and omega of the AbEx experiment — Gorky at his zenith, Mitchell in her most daring mutations.

Artistically and curatorially the show is flawless. And with a shrinking number of non-commercial exhibition spaces available, the very existence of One GAP is commendable. However, despite a generous sum of square footage, the layout is not ideal. Richard Meier's design leaves no shortage of pristine wall space. But the rooms designated for art exhibitions share an array of other building functions and are spread out in a labyrinth of doorways and upper floor corridors. A smaller space dedicated fully to exhibitions would be an improvement.

February 24, 2022