

PAINTINGS AND PHOTOS: THE TWAIN DO MEET

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CLAIRE SEIDL

There was a time when photography was largely pictorial. Sentimental and self-conscious, it lurked along the margins of fine arts. Painters could indulge themselves within the limits of their talents, and photographers bowed deeply to them.

We now live in an age in which virtually all of the visual information we receive comes to us through some form of photography. Ascendancy of status, if it is even an issue, is not a serious matter, and photographs have become both a tool for painters and, as we are learning, underlie a significant part of their work.

A show at ICON Contemporary Art reverses this history by raising the subject of painting movie toward photography. This isn't entirely novel Degas sometimes used his eye like a camera lens, photo realists have levels of skill that are dumbfounding and there are others as well but we don't see them very often. Generally, painters exhibit paintings and photographs exhibit photographs and the twain do meet in public. The ICON show, thus, while not unique, is refreshing. In it Claire Seidl offers both paintings and toned silver gelatin prints.

Seidl's work as a painter has a gravity, a weight that does not easily yield. It has to be approached cautiously. It is not a matter of somber introspection although some of it does have a wrenching force; it is more a question of personal intellectuality compounded by a diverse visual language.

Seidl appears to be painting for herself. If you counter with the argument that many good artists do that, then I respond with the contention that this is more so in her case. Her paintings seem driven by intellectual

force. I have spoken to artists who tell me that they approach a blank canvas waiting for a moment of vision, an impulse unimpaired by either prior knowledge or memory. I think those occasions must be rare, but in work like Seidl's I believe that they do happen as an adjunct to intellect.

If I have to use a descriptive visual term, gestural abstraction will do. The paintings employ, I think, references to landscapes, to figures, to atmospheric mood, and it is helpful in attempts to gauge their intention to see them in company with one another. It is not a matter of formal innovation; it is a matter of drawing from many formal sources to express intelligence and weight. It is the kind of effort that appeals deeply to me.

As I pointed out, Seidl also makes photographs. There is a gallery of them. Their language is more specific than that of the paintings. They speak of celestial events, of spectral roofs, of trails of mysterious lights in a dark and barely revealed landscape. They are more narrative, more giving than the paintings, but not less intense. For all of their soft focus and less-demanding themes, they are well-plotted excursions.

At this point, go back to the painting galleries and look at "Array," "Ink" and "White Lies." They emerge as coming from the same hand and eye as the photographs, but which is the magnet? I can believe that the latter are the drawing force. They have an urgency that will be hard for the paintings to deny. They beckon them from their intellectual bastion.

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