



## Josephine Halvorson

SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO.

Josephine Halvorson's small oils of archaic machines and overlooked domestic and industrial surfaces channel the lost tradition of American still life—a genre ghettoized, even in its late-nineteenth-century heyday, as “novelty art.” Like her precursors John Peto and William Harnett, whose trompe l’oeil confections depicted pistols and hanging game, old books and musical instruments, Halvorson creates tightly cropped registrations of the world at literal arm’s length, mining a tangible, profoundly sensate landscape of material things. An ode to Americana—or better, *Americanana*, as Katy Siegel dubbed her 2010 show in the gallery at Hunter College, where Halvorson’s *Cabinet*, 2009, resonated with the likes of Robert Gober’s barnacle-encrusted butter churn—Halvorson’s work likewise and quite differently tends toward abstraction (and to a utilitarian vernacular of Shaker furniture and geometric quilts). But while nonobjectivity might be a frequent effect in her depictions of walls, planks, and patinated shells, one senses that it is not the telos of her practice, precisely because of the strength of her commitment to realism.

Making an object by hand is, for Halvorson, “a radical act with ethical implications.” She paints on-site, usually completing a piece in one sitting, meaning that looking and painting are coincident, or that painting is the precondition for looking. (The press materials for this exhibition, titled “What Looks Back,” list Shoshone, California; Canaan, New York; Akureyri, Iceland; and Shoreham, UK, as some of these locations, though they do not correlate canvas and place and neither do Halvorson’s titles. Even as the location is important for Halvorson, she does not propose an indexical model whereby such contingencies of making are consequential.) Much of the burgeoning literature on Halvorson’s work nods to the physicality implicit in her method, to the testing of bodily limits. Yet Halvorson is no Vito Acconci, and the discipline here is one of another sort. Indeed, a competing strain of commentary focuses on the meditative, even spiritual dimension of her practice, her seated communion with her subjects. Both appraisals vouch for the integrity—even fidelity, however mediated, however partial—of the transcription that subtends the image. Her lush application of paint, speckled with globs and textured with the bugs that stuck to the wet surface (see *Sign Holders*, 2010, for example, with its viscous commingling of gnats and paint), marks the duration and space of creation. Likewise, the distantiated compositions of *Inlaid Stones*

or *Plank Door*, both 2011, evidence an investment of time—the close observation that causes a thing to dilate into a collection of colors and shapes.

In contrast with earlier bodies of work, which frequently incorporate painted language (e.g., on newspapers, book spines, and tombstones), “What Looks Back” suggests a preoccupation with the means of pictorial representation. Her compositions crop ready-made expanses of surface in well-defined illusionistic portals and often include rectangles, which can be understood as allusions to the canvas’s edge (as in the frame within a frame of *Tregardock* or *Generator*, both 2011), and which re-double the paintings’ flat grounds. Elsewhere, this planarity is interrupted: by the shadows under the bolts in *Mine Site*, 2011, and their strange orientation relative to the picture plane; the oblique positioning of the tools in *Grippers*, 2011; or the receding cavities in *Steam Donkey Valve*, 2011. A *mise en abyme* of reflexivity, the show comprised paintings about paintings that are also, crucially, paintings about how the medium trains us to see. Still, this project feels a world away from Josef Albers’s optimism about vision molded by aesthetic education. Less utopic than poignant, even bathetic, Halvorson’s conflation of painting and the obsolete tools that are her subjects bespeaks a desire to overcome novelty and banality alike through a patience and disarming sincerity that indeed might prove a radical act.

—Suzanne Hudson



Josephine Halvorson,  
*Tregardock*, 2011,  
 oil on linen, 19 x 15".

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