

ARTFORUM

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Josephine Halvorson

SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO.

Josephine Halvorson,
Woodshed Vine, 2013,
oil on linen, 36 x 28".



In this show—her second solo exhibition at the gallery—Josephine Halvorson presented ten formidable paintings portraying artful decay. All created freehand and most in plein air, the canvases depict flattish or relief-like surfaces found in the vicinity of her studio and

home in rural western Massachusetts: a boarded-up window frame, a panel used as a mold to pour a cement foundation, a shallow fireplace, a woodshed door. As in Halvorson's earlier work, the application of paint reveals keen powers of observation married to an impressive facility with her medium. A person could spend quite some time marveling at how simply and forcefully the horizontal white bands of *Woodshed Vine*, 2013, convey the texture of chipping house paint, or at the economy with which brushstrokes of ochre in the seven-panel work *Foundation*, 2013, conjure a deep, tactile sensation of caked, dried mud. Yet for all the seemingly effortless rigor with which the works were produced, the painterly illusion is always incomplete; these aren't titanium-cold simulations—rather, they are boldly, imperfectly homespun.

The works embody a convincing sense of objecthood—the things they depict seem to occupy real space. Part of the feeling of presence comes about because of the cropping: The picture plane and the surface of the relief-like subject are nearly coterminous, and the mainly rectilinear subjects are simultaneously contained by and seem to define the edges of the canvas. But it also results from Halvorson's approach to color. In a recent interview with the *Brooklyn Rail*'s Phong Bui, the artist said, “[W]e’re told . . . that color is this elusive, slippery, scientific kind of substance, a coating on the real. But for me it’s actually the opposite: Color is what gives identity to form.” This alchemical invocation of essence via hue—a quasi-medieval collapse of signifier and signified—is evident, for example, in *64*, 2013, for which Halvorson portrays rough timbers slathered with red paint by incising crimson pigment into a thick impasto.

In an essay written by the artist and published in the winter 2012 edition of *Art Journal*, Halvorson characterizes her practice as a kind of “interpretive labor.” She cites Thoreau’s description of his bean field, which, when he tilled it, “disturbed the ashes of unchronicled nations who in primeval years lived under these heavens, and their small implements of war and hunting were brought to the light of this modern day.” Like farming, plein air painting enables a direct, embodied encounter with one’s material surroundings, and its various activities—finding and selecting things to paint, mixing pigment and brushing it onto a canvas, and looking at things very, very closely—lead to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of those surroundings and their history. The act is not only observational—it is hermeneutical. But what does this mean for the viewer? Halvorson, working in extreme close-up, evokes this attractive, deteriorating New England world powerfully and persuasively. The paintings seem to want to tell us something. Yet the insights Halvorson has gained from the experience of making them—whether social, historical, or even atmospheric—remain beyond the margins. In focusing on surfaces, Halvorson presents ciphers. When communicating an interpretation of the world, sometimes it’s important to zoom out.

—Lloyd Wise