

JOSEPHINE HALVORSON

Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,
New York

Setting aside the tools and machine parts that have occupied her brush in recent years, Josephine Halvorson's latest exhibition, 'Facings', saw her attention turn to objects that, in a sense, already bear their own frames: doors, casings and windows. The title surely took its cue from the various portals and coverings featured in these works, but it also, perhaps, alluded to the treatment of the represented surfaces on display. Whether wooden siding or window casement, many of these things were already covered with their own layer of paint, enamel or other protective coating before the artist set about painting them. Seen up close, several of the façades conjured up a higher mathematics of frontage and facing.

Woodshed Door (2013) at first suggests the physical presence of its object, as if painted to scale. A section of earth at the base of the painting, however, gives the lie to that illusion. Propped up on a hefty lintel, the painting's closed, derelict door has seen better days, its hinges rusted and buckling, boards slowly rotting. Like *Woodshed Window* (*North Facing*) (2014), *Woodshed Vine*, 64 (2013) and *Yellow Clapboard* (2013), the image has required a feat seemingly facile but, in fact, quite complex: to paint an object that has itself been covered in paint. How to render such surfaces? For illusionistic painting – as Halvorson plainly undertakes here – presumes a fundamental difference between its representation and the object represented. Common to both, in this instance, dried paint threatens to collapse such a distinction.



The sill of *Woodshed Window* (*North Facing*) reveals a thin line of greenish-blue as if seen through the tint of glass, while a few splotches of mossy green betray the window's eponymous, northern orientation. Rendered in careful gradations of opacity, the white flecks that dot the blackened glass evoke wisps of errant paint and the residue of rainwater and the crusty craquelure of house paint along the pane's edge hosts a single nail, bent downward and without apparent purpose. In *Woodshed Vine* it is instead a solitary, thorny bramble – stripped of leaves or fruit – that interrupts the wan propriety of its window, here boarded up and daubed with the same flaking paint. With their faint winter shadows, several of the works recall James Welling's recent photographic series based on Andrew Wyeth's paintings, which likewise home in on architectural corners and casements, steeped in pallid shadows. Unlike the matt chill of northern façades, fire does not appear to be Halvorson's strong suit. The embers that burn in *Heat 1* cool, over the course of three separate works, to an ashy smolder in *Heat 3* (both 2013). Set in a the shallow space of a stove or fireplace, the slow burn of what look like coals is conveyed too stiffly to suggest fire's unpredictable flicker. It is instead the riveted top of the hearth, tucked just under the canvas's upper edge, which is most deftly rendered.

The subtractive pocks of the seven-panel *Foundation* (2013) strikingly evoke the sprawling concrete base of some unpictured structure. Random graffiti and the snaking trail of water stains further conjure the material's simultaneous solidity and porosity. In areas of several other works, however, the shorthand strokes deployed to inscribe detail – whether of rust, discolouration or the whorl of wood – hover somewhere between illusionism and its refusal. Take the stray, pinkish marks on *Form* (*Facing in*) (2013), for example: set next to the glinting reflection on the object's steely screws, these strokes seem exiled to a halfway house between figurative, material presence and something less convinced. Vaguely redolent of abstract divagations, they seem neither part of the object's fabric or nor its disintegration.

The earnestness and consistency with which Halvorson engages with academic tradition – from the *trompe l'oeil* painted marbles of Rome's Palatine palaces, to the late 19th-century examples by American artists like John Haberle and William Michael Harnett – begs certain questions. That Sikkema Jenkins represents Merlin James and has shown work by David Schutter – painters whose work probes (albeit in very different ways) the fictions and ironies of illusionistic representation – makes those questions all the more interesting. This is not to saddle her painting with the onus of justifying a fraught genre – one her work keeps alive in interesting, compelling ways. Rather, it is to push the artist to take those wayward strokes further: either closer to the strictures of figuration, or else its more frank unraveling.

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