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JOSEPHINE HALVORSON *What Looks Back*

by John Yau

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Josephine Halvorson is a contemporary observational painter whose work enters into a lively philosophical dialogue with an unaffiliated group of international artists that includes the German painter Peter Dreher, the Spaniards Antonio Lopez and Isabella Quintanilla, and the Americans Lois Dodd, Catherine Murphy, and Sylvia Plimack-Mangold. All of these artists are engaged in scrutinizing their immediate circumstances, and have neither been swayed by the elsewhere nor deterred by the downgrading of sight by many thinkers. Let it be stated here that Halvorson's work neither suffers by comparison nor is it burdened by these connections. As with the artists in the aforementioned list, her overriding subject isn't the object, but the time it has endured. In some cases, this means the object's original function is no longer apparent. Often, the artist focuses on a portion of the thing, so that we are unable to discern exactly what we are looking at.

In this exhibition, Halvorson never steps back, never allows the thing to be seen in its entirety. As a viewer, it is a disquieting and claustrophobic position to be put in. You always want to know what you're looking at, in case it is capable of turning into Medusa.

When it comes to color, Halvorson is a tonalist. She uses a muted palette and a number of the paintings are different hues of gray. In paintings such as "Steam Donkey Valve," "Inlaid Stones," and "Grippers" (all 2011), we confront a space that, because we are not in quite the right position, is usually a little too high or low, so that we cannot see what is inside. In direct counterpoint to these paintings of open but not quite visible space, there are paintings such as the "Shaker Hinges," "The Heat Inside," "Tregardock," and "Generator" (also all 2011), which are of an object whose door or doors are closed. We see the "face" of a thing, rather than the thing itself. In "Water Link" (2011), we see a machine-punched section of a tin ceiling that has been painted over and repaired a number of times.

Despite the straightforwardness of Halvorson's approach, or more likely because of it, these paintings do not seem literal at all. In fact, just the opposite—they invite speculation and metaphor on the part of the viewer. The closed and the semi-visible open spaces, some of which contain a protruding phallic-like shape, evoke female and male body parts. The "face" of things, which contain a closed door or doors, also seem anthropomorphic. They are bodies that contain a secret space that is open only part of the time. Or it is a body (or face) that remains shut and impenetrable. The obvious erotic component is contradicted by the mute, monochromatic, often gray palette. Or, in the case of the salmon-colored "Shaker Hinges" or the red and gray "Generator," a feeling of understated conflict saturates the painting. There is no simplifying or reductive way to read Halvorson's paintings. Finally, their timeworn state reminds the viewer that mortality haunts us all, even when we hide our awareness of it from others and put on an impassive face.

And yet, even as I have these thoughts about Halvorson's paintings, another set of possibilities occurs to me. Halvorson's non-functional, obsolete objects are surrogates for painting and the death of painting. We are looking at different areas of painting's "carcass," as she titles one of her paintings, but only a small section of the body is visible to us at any one time. Given that so much in the artist's paintings evokes a world that is hidden or beyond our purview, it is as if we have yet to see the whole "picture" (or body) despite painting having already been pronounced dead. It is this state of mortality and death that would seem to trouble Halvorson. But instead of averting her eyes, she moves closer. Rather than being content to listen to what others have said, she wants to see for herself. This is why she has earned a place at the table with Dodd, Dreher, Lopez, Murphy, and a few others. Observational painting of the kind practiced by these artists is as radical as any art form that relies on technology, something which we once thought would bring us utopia and immortality.



Josephine Halvorson, "Water link," 2011. Oil on linen. 28 × 34". © Josephine Halvorson; Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.