

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Sam Korman, "In the New York-based artist's work, place becomes perception the moment we turn away from the view," *ArtReview*, Summer 2017

ArtReview

Maureen Gallace



Summer Shack (Door), 2016, oil on panel, 23 x 31 cm

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In the New York-based artist's work, place becomes perception the moment we turn away from the view

by Sam Korman



June 24th, 2016, oil on panel, 23 × 31 cm

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top Cloud/WaveBeach,2016,oilonpanel,28×36cm

above BeachWaveOctober,2016,oilonpanel,28×36cm

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The name Maureen Gallace is all that appears on the cover of the slim hardback. The letters are blocky, the ink so thick that you reckon the book has been set in some sort of provincial, homemade typeface. The volume accompanied the American painter's exhibition at Dublin's Douglas Hyde Gallery in 2004. The clunky design is meant to imitate a well-worn estate agent's brochure.

The book offers a brief catalogue of Gallace's paintings of rural and coastal New England landscapes, which frequently depict stout, windowless houses. The colour of the cover stock complements certain skies, seas and foliage reproduced on the pages – mixing all the colours of Gallace's palette would yield this same faded seafoam, which also gives the book the officious and unpretentious feeling of a technical manual. Each prepossessing title reads like a two- or three-word poem, or notes on DIY home renovations: *Surf Drive*, *Cape Cod October*, *Stormy Farmhouse*, *Summer Porch*.

The book is a supremely understated example of what can happen when literary and artistic worlds nestle into each other's frameworks. Novelist Rick Moody's 'Monroe Realty. Ronald Gant, Licensed Broker' acts as its introduction, drawing on Gallace's paintings for examples and delivering an immensely compelling, honest and sympathetic tutorial about property sales that doubles as a deeply humane polemic about place. The story possesses the tone of a schmaltzy so-you-think-you-have-what-it-takes sales pitch; it's not long, however, before we realise how seriously the narrator, 'Ronald Gant, licensed real estate broker, bonded in the state of Connecticut', takes his job. He defiantly invites projections. 'Think of domesticity as a tendency with a history,' he advises, discussing the pair of beach bungalows in *Cape Cod in October* (2002); they are alive for Gant, almost humanly animated by the same melancholic drive for the perfection of home. In the end, the salesman and the artist aren't so different. She's an old friend, 'probably wearing a Cheap Trick t-shirt, or a Def Leppard t-shirt, all of these things because she's just a woman who once lived here in this town, and who learned something from looking at these houses'. He's stuck here, divorced, and having never done well in school, but real estate offers him a sly reversal of fortune: his home is a retreat from the world, where he contemplates his townie metaphysics. Gallace embraces the same provincial ennui, and her ongoing investigation into landscape – and indeed into looking – concerns how place becomes perception the moment we turn away.

Gallace is a confounding figure. She has dedicated the last 25 years or so to painting New England landscapes, though the occasional floral still life and portrait make appearances as well. While there are elements of craft and hobby present in her work, to be clear: Gallace has lived in New York for most of that time, and her anachronistic dedication to landscape painting reflects both measured disinterest in more popular conversations about painting (and most urbane art discourse) and a desire for the freedom and self-determination that can actually be achieved on the scene's periphery. She eschews the steeplechase for a patient interiority and rigour. Her paintings seldom vary from her preferred 9-by-12-inch size; they are all painted from snapshots; their palette is muted, never straying from the windblown finishes of New England; every exhibition basically looks alike, with just a dozen or so paintings hung evenly throughout a gallery; she only uses oils.

If pressed on the issue, I'd call her works history painting, in the sense that they are a somewhat erudite personification of the austere landscape. They are meticulous studies of the medium of painting and shrewdly combine strains of American realism and abstraction – think Ellsworth Kelly crossed with Edward Hopper. Or don't, because Gallace's paintings are defiantly unspectacular, their pastoral subjects exhibiting a romantic distance and cool resolve. I am led to believe that the paintings are as self-possessed as the artist.

Going through Gallace's back catalogue, one quickly realises that there are almost never any people in these paintings. It's a common trope of real-estate photography. In Gallace's work, the houses, barns, bungalows and other architectural artefacts are the closest human surrogates. Occasionally they are painted with doors and windows, which lends the buildings numinous interiority. The house in *Rainbow Road, Martha's Vineyard* (2015) is all the more inviting for its screen door, presenting a scene of possible homecoming; the garage door in *Summer Shade* (2013) and its line of windows encourages a creepy wonderment at what might be stowed inside. Paintings like *Cape Cod* (2011) bring us closer to Gallace's more typical style: the house's facade is formally parallel to the picture plane, and the oceanic vista's horizon line is visible all the way through the house from its front door. She further eschews the melodrama of synthesising the house and landscape

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in *Lake House with Forsythia* (2006). The blocky collection of shapes and shades affects little more than walls and roof, pervading the scene with

the omniscient detachment of formalist convention. Meanwhile the lush landscape dances and abounds.

New England might be the most manicured corner of the United States. Since the Puritans fled religious persecution and colonised the area, a puritanical ethic stubbornly shapes the landscape; it represents both an alternative and denial. What that means for Gallace is that this is a landscape full of tense reserve, its virtues only visible in small details and shifts in perspective. Many examples of such are on view in her current MOMA PS1 survey, *Clear Day*. The show clusters around obvious affinities between works in lieu of more obvious thematic arrangements. Barns go with barns, waves go with waves, bungalows go with bungalows, though the distinctions aren't strict, and seeing a room in which barns exist in a variety of settings and seasons and colours traces something like a figure-eight path around the subject. It winds throughout Gallace's embedded vision of the region.

Organised by curator Peter Eleey, the show begins with a wall text that locates the artist's work in the context of the current rise in nationalism, and suggestively poses Gallace's hardboiled approach as an antidote to the nostalgia and sentimentality that fuels these regressive politics – the title, *Clear Day*, evocative of her sober reckoning. Walking into a room that contains *White Flower July* (2015), a wide-mouthed vase with what look like three peonies or roses, or *Summer Rainbow, Cape Cod* (2006), a stormy double rainbow, can be challenging if expectations skew more overtly radical. Nonetheless, Gallace's work is modest, and quickly attunes us to the respite offered by quietude and slowness. In the context of the show, her paintings make the emotional intensity of current politics feel distant, but they are transportive regardless of the situation, unyielding of their position apart. For Gallace, to think about looking is to think about thinking, and her landscapes externalise and rethink models of being and seeing.

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top Long Island (with Vance), 2014, oil on panel, 31x31cm

above Pink Flowers/Ocean, 2016, oil on panel, 25x25cm

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The black barns are an equally tense and demure castle amidst a swirl of clouds in *October* (2013); *Storm* (2014) presents a tumultuous shoreline painted from a safe distance; and *Winter Storm Connecticut* (2016) would be a sunny wintry scene, were it not for its frenetic shadows and claustrophobic snowdrift. There's always a sense of escape in Gallace's paintings – it's a quality that inheres to these vacation leiscapes as much as to a contemplative gaze. Such patient acts of looking, however, hone our perspective, and continue to inform new ways to visualise powerfully contradictory sentiments, or appreciate old.

There are surprises, too – the show is not without its joys. Rounding a corner, *Roses, Beach* (2008) earns a double take: a sunset seascape with an otherwise blasé composition. Our phones are filled with millions of such images, reducing the pleasure we take from the scenery to a matter of framing, though Gallace retrieves the accident at the heart of the original encounter. In the foreground she's daubed a little rose; it seems it was captured by an inattentive eye, but rediscovered through the painting's composition, the rose lends the picture the instantaneousness of first sight. She's a master of cathartic levity, employing elements of the landscape to give the heaviest signifiers some buoyancy and play. In *Grassy Beach House* (2007), sea grass painted with Cézanne-like brushstrokes obscures the foundations of the eponymous edifice, making it appear to float like a houseboat or tanker on the aquamarine sea. That a home represents an inescapable relationship, growing into a mundane responsibility over time, is an ever-present bother, and Gallace renders the house as an ascetic collection of nondescript blocks. Security, over time, grows dull, but Gallace adeptly retools it to grant access to the pathos of familiarity.

I've lived in many places over the course of the last ten years, since I left my hometown in Buffalo, New York, though it's with Buffalonians that I continue to find the unspoken comfort of particular manners. In general, it's in writing that these patterns of behaviour become apparent, and while I spent many years claiming to be from the East Coast, Buffalo is located eight hours from the eastern seaboard; I commonly soften to the sincere tone of the Midwest, rather than the harsh directness that characterises citizens of the US's northeastern corridor. Manners are a matter of tone and temperament, and my turn to criticism in recent years wags the orthodoxy of niceness this region better understands.

An experience I had while living in Portland, Oregon, beguiles my better reasoning, as much as it elucidates the value of this line of work. In turn, it might also suggest Gallace's work as a form of painterly criticism that encircles its subject in myriad analyses, dissecting it with many shades of argument. My ex-girlfriend and I saw Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* (2010), which is set primarily in Martha's Vineyard. Waiting for me at the exit was an attack best described as yearning, longing, homesickness – well, *lack*, though of what, I cannot claim to know even today.

It was evoked by the landscape, and I soon left to recover it. What about the movie instilled these feelings? It was about a writer, yes, who is contracted to ghostwrite the memoir of a controversial political figure accused of war crimes. In effect, it's about the power he does and doesn't have to shape history, and the movie frequently uses the

landscape as a dark escape, the off-season back channel in which the mechanics of power and history churn quietly out of sight. Solitude provokes the ghostwriter, who, writing another man's biography, is literally confronted with the text of self. The discomfiting truths he discovers lead to his eventual and total erasure from the story.

Windswept sea grass blankets these low-lying dunes and present a drama that could be described as the landscape of the mind. Certainly, it remains as palpably relevant to the New England in Gallace's paintings, into which the human form disappears into coastal banks, snowdrifts and blank houses. It's tempting to relegate the subtle beauty to a matter of access, but whether it intimates us to the landscape, or to memories thereof, Gallace's paintings include a staunch interrogation of how we present the real.

It's an easily overlooked part of these paintings that the regional landscape can just as easily embody a fearsomeness, isolation and derangement associated with the more apparently provincial quarters of the United States. *Down the Road from my Brother's House* (2002) is an innocent enough composition: a house with an attached garage and another structure partially obscured by a slight hill. A tangled sense of belonging and dispossession pervades the painting: this house is a suspect hanger-on to the memories of home and family that frame

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it. In various wave paintings, Gallace is at her most severe. No houses ground our perspective in works such as *Beach/Wave* (2013), *Clouds on a Beach* (2012) and *Beach #2* (2013). Instead we are positioned alone on the beach, where sloshy white waves obscure the horizon line and threaten realism with the inscrutable drama of abstraction. The beach paintings most clearly represent Gallace's dissection of picture-making.

What keeps Gallace returning to this landscape? And what makes her a pressing subject of a career survey amid the tumult of early 2017? Poet Louise Glück's essay 'American Originality' (collected in *American Originality: Essays on Poetry*, published earlier this year), which offers quite practical insights into the expectations of an artist in the United States, lends an excellent vantage point on Gallace's quizzical and enduring attraction to New England. Addressing American literature generally, Glück writes: 'Original work, in our literature, must seem somehow to break trails, to found dynasties. That is, it has to be capable of replication. What we call original must serve as a model or template, binding the future into coherence and, simultaneously, though less crucially, affirming the coherence of the outstripped past.' Originality, the spectacular establishment of a new order, seldom considers its fallout. In some sense, the idea of reality is contingent on it not being authored, because it would suggest some contrivance, and therefore suspicion. Embedded in this idea of originality, however, is a sense of return, the overriding condition of Gallace's subdued irreverence – she is not preoccupied with proof of belonging, but rather long-term critical investment in such peripheral locations, especially one as historically loaded as New England. The paintings are plainly stated, and give up all their secrets to bring, relentlessly, new pictures into the world. ar

Maureen Gallace: *Clear Day is on view at MOMA PS1, New York, through 10 September*