

GLADSTONE GALLERY

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Maureen Gallace, *Ice Storm, Easton (With Robert)*, 2015.

Framing the View

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

Does anyone today still believe that landscape can be the subject of great painting? Artists as renowned as Gerhard Richter and Alex Katz have made memorable landscape paintings—albeit under the sign of photography in Richter's case, abstraction in Katz's, and therefore ostensibly evading the charge of anachronism. Nevertheless, the unspoken assumption of the contemporary art world is that landscape is old-fashioned,

a dusty souvenir of the 19th century.

Maureen Gallace thinks otherwise. The 12 small paintings of hers from 2013 to 2015 recently exhibited at the 303 Gallery in New York City could probably, from the viewpoint of technique, have been made at any point in the last 150 years. Their size alone—ranging from nine by 12 inches to 10 by 13—all but dares you to dismiss them as minor. And their subject matter is timeless: trees, flowers, the ocean, houses so plain and

rendered with so little detail that dating them seems beside the point. Only the white line down the middle of a road flanked by utility poles indicates the automobile age. Yet there is nothing stale or dowdy about these works. Gallace's self-consciousness about the conventions of painting (her "postmodernism," I think it fair to say of an artist who was educated in the 1980s and has been exhibiting since 1990) clicks into place with a fresh, ingenious responsiveness to things observed

in a manner that feels new or at least unfamiliar, no matter the kinship you might sense with Edwin Dickinson or Giorgio Morandi, Lois Dodd or Albert York.

Then again, perhaps it's misleading to settle on landscape as the subject of Gallace's work. I myself once compared her paintings to those of Josef Albers, seeing them as "fundamentally abstract, the house [being] not so much a house as the form of a house, a given shape, a certain geometry," like those endless squares painted by the ex-Bauhaus colorist. No one would talk about Albers as a square painter (except perhaps in the '60s-slang sense). Likewise, there's a strong case for saying that Gallace shouldn't be called a landscape painter; she's simply a painter, full stop. Landscape imagery is the visual language she uses to explore her interest in what paint does when it is observantly and succinctly organized into a picture. Her paintings suggest that she's spent a lot more time thinking about and looking at paint and paintings than she has thinking about and looking at scenery. This being the case, shouldn't I put the question of landscape out of my mind?

Maybe so, but I can't. All my hard-earned formalism won't push the question away or transform it into an answer, because Gallace's paintings are enigmatic; it's hard to know what to "do" with them. They seem to solicit interpretation with the same quiet insistence that stymies it. They also seem permeated with nostalgia, both in their subject matter and technique, which has prompted some critics to dismiss them as "comfort food for the eye." That view overlooks the way these paintings are, in the end, indifferent to the nostalgia that might color them. They don't insist on a mood. It would be easy to see them as naive, and easier still as faux-naive, but it's also not so hard to see them making use of a representational convention about which they are ultimately agnostic.

Still, though, it's tempting to project one's own experiences onto Gallace's paintings. Because they evoke the idea of landscape more than they do a specific terrain, they can seem familiar to people who have never seen the places that inspired them—mostly, I believe, in Connecticut. "People start to tell me where they grew up, about their childhood holidays—no matter where they are from, people recognize something in them," the artist once remarked. And yet as she's gone on, starting in the late '90s and all the more in recent years, the paintings have little by little become more particularized, more definite about referring to specific times and places.

In a way, each of Gallace's paintings is somehow two paintings at once: rigorously

abstract (not in the sense that an abstract painting is abstract, but in the sense that a syllogism is abstract—a form or template whose particular contents can be filled in) and generic, yet also haunted by feelings, memories, and reverberations that may be profoundly subjective and therefore private and in part incommunicable.

The art of the 20th century included a great many "last paintings," from Rodchenko to Reinhardt and on, and perhaps just as many "first paintings," for which the model might be—not least because of its emblematic title—Barnett Newman's *Onement, I* (1948). But these efforts to close the book on painting and start again from scratch had something important in common: the hope to isolate some essence of the art, its minimal necessary features.

Gallace, too, goes to the root of her art and is a maker of first paintings, albeit in a very different way from Newman. Paradoxically, her paintings seem to have become more innocent as she has matured. While her earlier works certainly appear more "naive" technically than the ones she is painting today, her latter paintings seem emotionally darker, more clouded; then, somewhere along the way, they begin to take on a dawnlike clarity.

The change is hard to trace from painting to painting, but less so if you compare two works made several years apart. In a fairly typical early painting from 1996, the canvas is divided into three horizontal zones. The top half of the painting, more or less, is occupied by a sky that is not dark, not twilight, yet whose blue contains far less brightness than its hue would seem to promise. The painting's bottom quarter shows, on the left, a nearly featureless patch of grassy ground, though a bit of red blush implies that there might be some flowers in there somewhere; and on the right, the semicircular blue of a lake, with the boundary between these two areas marked by squat, dark bushes.

The painting's middle zone is the real focus of attention: a deeply shadowed stand of trees closely huddled together, by far the darkest portion of the painting. But from within this darkness shines the brightest light: two small houses, ghostly white except for their brick-red roofs—as if made of, say, frosted Plexiglas with fluorescent tubes inside, like photographic light boxes—and the crescent of an equally white canoe.

There's an echo of Magritte here, if I'm not mistaken—the Magritte who spoke of his paintings as "visible images which conceal nothing...they evoke mystery," he continued, "and, indeed, when one sees one of my pic-

tures, one asks oneself this simple question, 'What does it mean?' It does not mean anything, because mystery means nothing either, it is unknowable." In his well-known painting *The Empire of Lights* (1954, collection of the Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique), Magritte depicted a white house nestled amid darkling trees, its lights shimmering in a nocturnal pool of water—yet with the sky above it showing daylight. But whereas Magritte's painting is crisp, clear, and linear—it is about an idea of light, not an experience of it—Gallace has painted hers with great softness and atmosphere, and the self-contradictory illumination it conveys is all the stranger because of the way the light seems to suffuse the canvas in such a natural fashion. Indeed, the deep, dark green of her central stand of trees seems to somehow percolate upward into the overarching blue—so why should the daylight fail to reach the trees? Perhaps it's that they're not as dark as they seem, but simply appear so in contrast to the blazing white of the houses and boat they frame, which shine out like warning beacons.

One of Gallace's recent paintings, *Ice Storm, Easton (With Rubert)* (2015), might almost serve as a rejoinder to the one she painted nearly 20 years earlier. Again, two faceless houses—but red, so are they barns?—occupy the center of the canvas, which is on the same small scale as before. The buildings are surrounded by the skeletal outlines of bare trees, almost indistinguishable from their own shadows in the glare of the snow-covered ground. But how things have changed otherwise! The title confirms what one might have guessed anyway: that these are not in the first instance symbolic houses, a symbolic forest and lake like those of fairy tales, as they were in the work of 1996—entities conjured primarily by those elemental words themselves as our imaginations go to work on them: *house, forest, lake*. Instead, this painting was inspired by a specific place seen at a particular time and in a particular person's company, though the purpose of the painting is hardly to provide a minute description of these details, but rather to generalize them.

Even so, what sits under those roofs seems just as mysterious as it did before. Art-historically, one is no longer tempted to think of a Surrealist like Magritte; the painting's mystery now lies even less in its strangeness, even more in its ordinariness. Here, the old modernist way of looking at the world abstractly just seems the best way of rendering the everyday world. Gallace's technical bluntness indicates a desire for the paint to be

GLADSTONE GALLERY

The Nation

December 14, 2015

seen for what it is—paint—as well as for what it depicts. The feathery softness of touch in the earlier piece has changed into something more forthright; the facture is notably juicier, with more of a sense of paint as paint.

And yet this unshowy, no-nonsense style is defied by the closed status of the houses—still as blind and as hermetically sealed as they were in the earlier work. Yes, they're a bit less obviously anomalous insofar as they're now shadowed on their near sides; they no longer shine out with a minatory brightness. But for all that, they still remind us that something remains hidden, inaccessible. The scenes appear hushed, stationary, inert. Signs of human activity are rare. Indeed, except in the few portraits (mostly self-portraits) that she's occasionally exhibited—there were none in the recent solo show, her first in New York since 2006—Gallace leaves her paintings uninhabited. The houses don't quite belong to the places where they hunker down. They might as well have just landed there like flying saucers. They seem outside history.

A house, these paintings seem to imply, is to the landscape in which it nestles as a painting is to the world in which it sits: alien and incommunicative—all exteriority. It contains, if anything, the knowledge that what is most familiar is most unknowable, that what is most stable changes inwardly. What is enclosed in these faceless houses may simply be the opacity and uncanniness of being in the world.

One of the paintings in the show turns the facelessness of most of Gallace's houses inside out. *Beach Shack, Door, August 14* (2015) shows the little gray hut straight on; it could almost be a theatrical flat. Behind it is the sea. But in the center of the facade lies a glass door, and it seems there is another, similar door on the side of the shack that faces the water, for through the glass can be seen not the building's interior, but sea and sky. It's as if the shack was nothing more than a framing device for a view of what's beyond it. It made me think of Alighiero Boetti's motto, "Nothing to see, nothing to hide," which among other things he used as the title for a sculpture consisting of a grid of glass panes framed in iron and leaning against a wall.

Gallace, painting the view through a couple of glass doors, seems to issue a similar disclaimer about the interior of the beach shack she's painted: The house can be seen through entirely, and is as much of a blank as the ones without doors or windows. The same might be said about the door itself—it's invisible. And yet not quite, for Gallace has managed to paint, ever so delicately, the light reflected

on the face of the glass as well as the view through it. Even where there's nothing to see, the paint that makes it so is always there to be seen—and even when what we can see isn't hiding anything, there's always at least a bit of interference caused by its visibility.

Beach Shack, Door, August 14 put me in mind of something that the French architect and theorist Bernard Cache wrote in his 1995 book *Earth Mover: The Furnishing of Territories*. Cache makes the provocative statement that, "strictly speaking, architects design frames"; in short, that the primordial work of building is to delimit and select a territory. "The model of architectural form would thus be the frame of a painting," Cache asserts, and, reciprocally, "Paintings would finalize, as it were, the series of frames that make up a building." *Beach Shack, Door, August 14* could almost serve as an illustration of Cache's idea: The building frames a view of the empty horizon, while being framed by the same horizon, which is framed in turn by the edges of the rectangle on which it has been painted; the painting is intended always to hang inside a room, allowing the architecture in which one encounters it to be framed, mentally, by an evocation of the outside.

When I first saw Renzo Piano's new Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City a couple of months ago, I was struck by how the building's nondescript outward appearance seems fundamentally related to the way it succeeds in framing the works of art inside it. I was surprised, too, at how the play between inside and outside that I experienced in the museum seemed belied by the relatively characterless and unrevealing views of the edifice from the street. (One might have a very different experience looking at and into the museum from a boat on the river.) And probably these thoughts about the architecture of the building led me to the surprising realization that, far from being the exposé of slumlord perfidy I'd always assumed it was, Hans Haacke's *Sbapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* was really a work about opacity—about how little a building's facade tells about what goes on inside of it, as well as how little the official record of its ownership reveals about who really controls it. But I never would have imagined that paintings like Gallace's—delicate little depictions of rural or exurban landscapes dotted with isolated houses—would have anything in common with Haacke's photographic documentation of gritty urban slums. Yet in both cases, it can be said, with Cache, that in taking architecture as a kind of abstraction, "we are

GLADSTONE GALLERY

December 14, 2015

The Nation

31

then back to thinking of form as form, which means that we take things as images, with no relation to depth, to anteriority, or to use."

But if the architect's task is to construct frames, is the painter's vocation then to imbue the frame with light, with life—to fill and overfill it with an artificial terrain that would be more imaginatively expansive, more enveloping than the real or natural one could ever have been? That's what I imagine, anyway, when I'm surrounded by Gallace's

paintings. They invoke a geography bigger than the room that frames them.

Not all of Gallace's paintings show houses, of course, though most of them do—six of the dozen in the recent show. But this recurrent image teaches us to see each one of the paintings as though the idea of the house were implicit—as if the seascapes, for example, had been glimpsed not from just anywhere on the beach, but from the patio of a house facing the sea. And they teach us

(keeping in mind Cache's assertion that the frame is but the beginning of a house) to see the painting itself as the house containing the landscape. They are not just paintings but a philosophy of painting. And by "finalizing," as Cache says, the series of frames through which we impose ourselves on the world, they convey a series of views on the relationship between the built world—everything people have made—and the unbuilt, or what we sometimes call nature. ■