

GLADSTONE GALLERY

R.C. Baker, "Sublime Shacks: The Vivid Enigmas of Maureen Gallace's Pastoral Visions" *The Village Voice*, April 26, 2017



Sublime Shacks: The Vivid Enigmas of Maureen Gallace's Pastoral Visions



Rainbow Road, Martha's Vineyard, oil on panel, 2015.

THE DURHAM COLLECTION,
DENVER. PHOTO BY DAVID B. SMITH.
IMAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST AND
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What are we actually looking at in a memory? How do we see the breeze we feel on our skin? Where is the divide between vision and viscera?

Such imponderables might come to mind as you wander P.S.1's quarter-century survey of Maureen Gallace's small-scale scenes of sea and

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country. A glance into the opening gallery reveals the seemingly narrow range of subjects in the 69 paintings gathered here: quiet vistas of shoreline, scrub, flowers, and sky, along with houses, barns, and beach shacks, which are often featureless save for the occasional door or window.

One first impression is that Gallace (born 1960) is a dead-on colorist. How many hues make up a sky? A painting aficionado studying *Roses, Beach* (2005) might think back to Constable's nineteenth-century visions of gradated clouds over England's blessed plot. And in Gallace's breakneck brushwork that same viewer might recall the roiling beauty of John Singer Sargent's gestures at the dawn of the twentieth century. But it's her wicked-smart formal aplomb that grounds Gallace's work in the present. A flower — a swift dab of pink pigment, to be exact — in the foreground of *Roses, Beach* seems to contain the exact ratio of light and color as the blushing expanse of sky behind, as if the petals had been ground down and distributed evenly across the background. This spectacular dilation proves emotionally startling, thoroughly out of proportion to the painting's nine-inch-high by twelve-inch-wide dimensions, a size within an inch or two of just about all the works here.

One of the earliest pieces in the show is from 1992, two stark white buildings in darkling woods, which channels the mix of gravitas, naïveté, and intimacy found in colonial artworks. Gallace went to art school amid the 1980s conceptual hurly-burles of appropriation, irony, identity politics, and that era's version of painting's demise, and so was well aware that she was embarking on a “practice a little out of step,” as she told an interviewer last year. With the exception of a few portraits,

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people and fauna exist only outside the frame, but they are not missed — over the decades her palette has become more animated, as structures and environments meld in lively compositions.

I sometimes do critiques with students in the graduate art program that Gallace oversees at New York University, but she and I have rarely discussed her own paintings. She is fully aware of the abyss between visual phenomena and the words available to describe them, and so would rather use our conversations to handicap the Yankees' playoff chances. I do know, however, that Gallace has long photographed the Connecticut coast and inland environs around where she grew up. A photograph may marinate in her studio for ten, fifteen years, besmirched with rings from a turpentine jar, as degraded as any memory. She allies her references with an incisive eye, often returning to places she knew as a child. Like Pop art, Gallace's imagery is instantly recognizable, but — as in only the very best of Pop — recognition quickly segues into a compelling matrix of abstract grace inextricably bound to evocative materials and expansive content.

In *Christmas Farm* (2002) we immediately take in three red sheds rising from the snow and punctuating a distant green tree line. One slow-burning question might be, What season is this? The trees are too rotund to be evergreens, and so too full for Yuletide. A peaked roof is asymmetrical, cheated to the right. This dollop of dissonance draws the gaze in: The snowy field shifts into four rectangles of juicy white paint in line with the dark structures — geometries as syncopated, abstract, and radiant as a Mondrian grid. That modern master spent decades distilling the perceived world into wholly nonobjective constructs; Gallace's

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conceptual alchemy combines both realms, creating an almost magical tension. The effect is of constant shape-shifting — nature reflected in the smooth surface of a pond suddenly fractured by ripples before steadily, gracefully reverting to serendipitous representation.

Gallace applies paint with a tightrope walker's finesse. The writhing strokes depicting a shadow on a roof in *Rainbow Road, Martha's Vineyard* (2015) give the impression that the leaves above are blowing about in a stiff breeze — leaf, roof, and shadow fused in paint. The off-kilter geometries of the gray barn in *October* (2013) are shot through with variegated flashes of light and dark, as ominous and gorgeous as a gathering thundercloud.

There are rare missteps in Gallace's high-wire performances. (I've heard her mention how often she "wipes out" a painting she's been working on before leaving the studio for the day.) Rainbows are the overwrought spectacles of nature, chromatic extravaganzas literally wrung from clouds by sunshine, and with a blackened sea contrasting multi-hued arcs, *Summer Rainbow, Cape Cod* (2006) feels like a tripped circuit breaker in nature's high-wattage display, perhaps already too abstract to abstract. But she discovers keening beauty in a pair of telephone poles in *Surf Road* (2015), the nearest cross rising in wavering grays, the more distant a pale negative, both adulterated by wetly abutting the scene's sand, scrub, and sky. Angled clouds, an off-center road stripe, and an orange flower in the extreme foreground converge with the poles to conjure forces as unseen but as inexorable as the curve of the earth. The klieg-light-bright wall of a nondescript shack might be too over the top

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for a Spielberg film, but in this heightened reality it's just another day at the beach.

Gallace's paintings of the Atlantic subsume postwar nostalgia into a sort of Jungian collective memory of lazy seashore days — these shacks looked in 1947 or 1977 pretty much the way they do now. Her illuminating hues recall Kodachromes of lingering coming-of-age memories, when emotions race fresh and selfish in advance of understanding or wisdom, but her hard-won formal virtuosity insists on an acceptance that past and present are forever interwoven even as they are constantly unraveling.

Beach shacks live by the sea, paintings live on walls, and Gallace long ago made the crucial decision not to frame her work. Her white pigments are luminous, often brighter than the walls the works are hung on, and curator Peter Eley has cannily poised some panels on the divides between painted white brick and smooth white support columns. Gallace's lithe yet unified surfaces radiate beyond image, and, once on the artist's wavelength of unsentimental observation, a viewer can become so immersed that the shadows depicted in paint and those underlying a thick brushstroke mingle with the shadows the canvas itself casts upon the wall.

Gallace is a painter's painter in the best sense of the phrase — secure in tradition even as she expands on it, keeping this most ancient of visual media relevant after more than thirty millennia. To complacent viewers her work might look too simple, even coarse. Such folk might be the descendants of those who reviled Philip Guston's first exhibit of cartoon

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figuration, in 1970. But no less an expert than Willem de Kooning said to his old abstract-expressionist colleague at the time, “Well, now you are on your own!” For over two decades, Gallace has been blazing her own path to a sui generis domain where journey and destination are inseparable. This concise, moving, and dazzling survey simply brings the rest of us up to speed.

Maureen Gallace: Clear Day

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