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Jason Farago, "Maureen Gallace's Restrained Palette of House, Sea, Sky," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2017

ART REVIEW

Maureen Gallace's Restrained Palette of House, Sea, Sky



Maureen Gallace's "Clear Day" (2011-12) at MoMA PSL. Courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery

By Jason Farago

April 20, 2017

As museums continue expanding, as exhibitions smack more and more of spectacle, to spend an hour with the tranquil paintings of Maureen Gallace feels almost like an act of defiance. This unshowy, reliable New York artist has spent nearly three decades painting landscapes and genre scenes of country Connecticut and the coast of New England — always small in scale, and balanced between restraint and vulnerability. Her paintings, while rooted in the American Northeast, make little concession to escapist fantasies. Spend a few minutes with them, and you may find them anodyne; stick with them, and their subtle intelligence is revealed.

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Ms. Gallace's most substantial retrospective to date, featuring more than 70 of her paintings, has begun a generous five-month run at MoMA PS1 in Queens. Outside the doors to "[Maureen Gallace: Clear Day](#)," videos blare from nearby galleries, and visitors speak loudly. Inside, her art quickly disciplines spectators into silent contemplation. The paintings here, most no bigger than a legal pad, translate the countryside and the sea into elusive blocks and squiggles, rendered in colors so serene you could call them New England Xanax. But Ms. Gallace's poised and thoughtful paintings, lovely as they are, do not merely offer a restorative pause amid the roar of New York. They offer something better: a workout for the brain as much as for the eyes.



Ms. Gallace's "Storm," oil on panel. Courtesy of the artist and Durham Collection, Denver, 303 Gallery

Ms. Gallace was born in Stamford, Conn., in 1960. The earliest work here, dating to 1988 and painted on a rare oval canvas, just barely depicts a quartet of trees as thick, dark splotches of green. It rhymes, chromatically, with the landscapes of Dutch masters like [Jacob van Ruisdael](#) and Meindert Hobbema. But by the 1990s, her palette had lightened considerably, and her format had stabilized. She began to paint houses, barns and seaside cottages, though the

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gap between the built structures and the natural world quickly became negligible.

Often, Ms. Gallace presents both a house and the sky or the sea beyond in the same flat compositional plane, rather than in the standard relationship of figure to ground. Vegetation, by contrast, is depicted with assertive overlays of thick pigment that crawl across the canvases' surfaces. A 2015 painting of a house in Martha's Vineyard is interrupted by a shuddering sapling, its leaves gobbling up the shingled roof. A beach shack in Cape Cod, done in 2006, gives onto grass rendered in oils so wet that they look almost fingerpainted. The impressionistic markings of olive and hunter green make a bold contrast with the buildings Ms. Gallace paints, which can appear as simple as three solid polygons.

In many cases, those houses and barns are portrayed without windows, translated into eerie panes of gray, periwinkle or falu red. People, too, are completely absent in these paintings, and so is much of modernity. A couple of works from the last two years feature a single electric pole. Only one painting, of the Merritt Parkway in Connecticut, crossed by one of its many bridges but absent of cars, gives any sense that we've really reached the 20th century.



"Summer House/Dunes" (2009). Courtesy of the artist and 303 Gallery

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Critically, though, Ms. Gallace does not paint en plein air. These seemingly regional artworks are created in a New York City studio far from the hush of New England, with the help of sketches and photographs. Note how, in her best works, the cabin or cabana stands slightly off center, and always occupies just a bit too much of the canvas for comfort. Her gaze is more ornery and distanced than those of other contemporary American realists, like the great Catherine Murphy or the young Massachusetts artist Josephine Halvorson, who paint residential details from sight. With Ms. Gallace, by contrast, each Connecticut or Cape Cod scene remains awkwardly but satisfyingly poised between faithful likeness and pure form. Much modern still-life painting — Cézanne's and Morandi's, especially — has that tension. It is less common in landscape, though one relevant predecessor may be the downbeat, ghostly [barns and churches painted in the 1940s by the American regionalist George Ault](#).

Are there moments when you ask yourself whether Ms. Gallace's unpretentious landscapes really differ that much from the daubings of a Sunday painter? Or, even, from the souvenir canvases sold in the cash-and-carry galleries of Nantucket or Rockport? There are, I'm afraid.

Ms. Gallace's less frequent floral still lifes lack the equanimity of her country and beach scenes, and one close-up depiction of summer flowers is a ragged tangle of greens and magenta. A sunset over the water from 2008 is one of several seascapes that, though never dipping into sentiment, feel immaterial and lackluster, and badly need the ballast that houses and cabins provide to her best pictures.

But it is a sign of Ms. Gallace's mastery that she is unafraid of such reckonings — that she comes into PS1 so lightly armed. Though her paintings may be small, their confidence is giant. She trusts in her technical command and her engagement with art history, and she is unafraid to be mistaken for a mere observer. The houses, barns, cottages and cabanas, stripped of their fenestration and pared down to their faces, aren't quite faithful depictions, but they aren't unfulfilled abstractions, either. They're slow, serious attempts to turn the world into images, and still hang onto the breath of life.

Maureen Gallace: Clear Day

Through Sept. 10 at MoMA PS1, Queens; 718-784-2084, momaps1.org.