

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Kate Liebman, "Maureen Gallace at MOMA" *The New Criterion*, June 1, 2017

The New Criterion

Maureen Gallace at MOMA

On a retrospective of the contemporary landscape painter.



Maureen Gallace, Summer House / Dunes, 2009, Oil on panel, 303 Gallery, on display at MoMA PS1.

For more than twenty-five years, the American painter Maureen Gallace has dedicated herself to making small still life and landscape paintings, in oil, often on panel, that feature a combination of only a few elements formed by brisk brush strokes: sea, sky, sand, trees, roads, flowers, barns, houses, telephone poles. These are pretty pictures. At first glance, Gallace's paintings seem to be traditional plein air representations, and in both image and praxis appear unfussy, inviting, and clear. MOMA PS1 has collected more than seventy of Gallace's paintings, mostly from the last ten years, for her

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largest exhibition to date in “Maureen Gallace: Clear Day,” on view through September 10.

Gallace’s paintings are small, but of an indeterminate size. Situated somewhere between the size of a postcard and window, her images replicate that banal, seductive scene of a beach house on a cloudless day. Gallace often puts her structures in the middle of the panels, sandwiched between land and sky, with an equal band of each framing the building. This format lends her works a certain quietness and compositional stability, but one that is upended when you realize that the houses are somehow off. In *Beach Shack, Door* (2015), for example, the shack’s width is almost entirely made of a glass door, and the shack’s depth, indicated only by a careful dark shadow behind the doorframe, is ambiguous. If you were to enter, could you turn around?

The structures often feel too big for their settings, but also too small; the shacks and houses, sometimes windowless, hover at an odd distance from the viewer. They seem close because they exist on the surface of the picture plane, rendered in truncated, controlled brushwork, but they also feel far, or like dollhouses, because they are no more than six inches across. This unexpected relationship between the sizes of the buildings and the landscapes around them might be a result of Gallace’s process: she makes these paintings in her New York studio, using sketches, photographs, and memory.

Born in Stamford, Connecticut in 1960, Gallace has been deeply invested in New England, as a place to paint, throughout her

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career. One of the earliest paintings in the exhibition (from 1988) pictures a copse of trees, in darker greens, and on an oval canvas. Since the 1990s, Gallace's paintings have crystallized the New England landscape and its architecture to flat and triangular forms under clear, sometimes slightly cloudy, blue skies. The seriality of the work demonstrates that she has a sustained interest in this landscape, yet she resists narrative reads of her paintings, and has said that "the house doesn't mean anything, per se. It's an empty vessel"; she uses the house and the landscape to make paintings that are about painting: about paint handling, about color, about size and scale, about composition. Yet this statement points to a central tension in the work: when an artist resists symbolic or narrative meaning, can an interpretation of the work go beyond, or exist in tandem with, a discussion of the paint?

Gallace's gestures sit on the surface of the picture plane so that one can decipher how the paintings were made. For example, she defines the roof's edge by painting the sky after she paints the house. Her brushwork makes it look as if the roof displaces the sky; its thrust moves the air. In this desire to keep praxis visible and her tendency toward seriality, Gallace is inspired by Cézanne. Her interpretation of Cézanne's paintings of apples helps to explain what depicting the same subjects repeatedly can mean for a painter:

It wasn't about the one painting that was going to be the masterpiece. I mean, I think, that was the point. To keep going keep going keep going, and get better and better and better. . . . I think he was trying to put everything that he knew about painting

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into each object. It's hard, but I think it's a real thing that some painters have: the need to distill things down, to get at the essence of what painting is.

But this desire to distill form to “get at the essence of what painting is” is complicated by the specificity of the forms themselves: they are recognizable if you have been to the islands off the Northeastern coast: Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket, or Cape Cod, places that were once home to Native tribes like the Wampanoag, were once titans of the whaling industry, and are now popular vacation spots. Though made in her studio, the paintings rely on intimate observations shadows, of the profusion of flora, of shifting skylscapes. This intimacy is related to the complex notion of ‘belonging’: who belongs to what, to which landscape, and the architecture that makes belonging visible. Belonging, alternatively understood as a sense of being-at-home in the world, is reflected in the architecture of a place, in structures that link their builders to their history and made to shelter their inhabitants from the uniqueness of that environment, structures like two-level barns, or shingled cottages, and bleached white buildings. Gallace plays with these forms in each painting, rearranging, recoloring, and resizing.

Yet there are no people in Gallace's distilled landscapes; it is as if they are abandoned, or if the figures who live or vacation here are just out of the plane. Or perhaps these lone buildings, painted in a studio a few hours from where they might actually exist, physicalize an artist's desire for solitude in the woods, a desire similar to that which motivated Thoreau to withdraw from society and use that

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solitude to live “deep” and “close” with himself. As he wrote in *Walden*,

I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life . . . to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

Emptiness, abandonment, solitude, and loneliness are related but not interchangeable states of being, and Gallace’s images seem to reflect this overlap. The buildings in the paintings are alternatively uninhabited, inaccessible, or isolated, yet almost always under an irresistibly inviting bright blue sky.