The New Criterion

Dispatch January 23, 2019 11:00 am

Eleanor Ray at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery

by Andrew L. Shea

If the exhibition of paintings by Eleanor Ray at Nicelle Beauchene Gallery is a feast for the eyes, then it's a meal served in bite-sized portions. Since graduating from the New York Studio School in 2012, Ray has rarely shown paintings that exceed nine inches in either dimension, and the twenty-five oil panel paintings in her current exhibition are no exception. But the small physical presence of her panels, as well as their alluring attractiveness, can be disarming. Make no mistake—these are serious, intelligent works of deep ambition.

Installation view, "Eleanor Ray." Photos courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York.

I'd say that these nimbly brushed panels punch above their weight, but that's probably not the right metaphor. Ray's unembellished interiors and exteriors (and interior/exteriors), rather, pull you in and open up. Some do "pop off the wall" and look good from a distance—especially the higher-contrast geometrical paintings of windows and windowpanes. But each panel also demands

that you get up close, to understand better how the subtleties of its pale color and evocative brushwork alternately harmonize with and push against the overlaying drawing. If there's a didactic element to these works, it's to show how deceptively open and complex a small and "ordered" painting can be.

Eleanor Ray, Wyoming Window, June, *2018*, *Oil on panel*, *Nicelle Beauchene Gallery*. *Photo courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York.*

All but three panels are scenes of the American West. Many are locations important to twentieth-century art: Donald Judd's exhibition space in Marfa, Texas; Agnes Martin's home and studio in Galisteo, New Mexico; Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* at Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah. The three exceptions are *in situ* depictions of Italian church frescoes from the Proto- and Early Renaissance: Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* in the Convento di San Marco, Florence; Giotto's *Saint Francis and the Birds* in the Basilica di San Francesco, Assisi; and the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua.

Eleanor Ray, Spiral Jetty, *2017, Oil on panel, Nicelle Beauchene Gallery. Photo courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York.*

One might think this an unlikely collection of subjects: what brings these twentieth-century "minimalists" together with the Italian frescoers of centuries yore? Impossible to know for sure, but I'd venture that Ray was drawn to the way that each artist is deeply concerned with art's ability to transform the space it inhabits. Thought of in this way, they are natural subjects for a painter so concerned with evoking the dramatic potential of architectonic and landscape spaces. Further, whether secular (Judd and Smithson), religious (the Italian muralists), or somewhere between (Martin), these artists share a deep-seated, even existential belief in the metaphysical potential of their work. This powerful conviction is especially surprising to consider against the materially diminutive nature of Ray's own works.

Ray paints with a light and skillful touch. The eggshell-smooth surfaces of her panels allow her brushwork to sit up and hum, giving her geometric shapes a human sensitivity. Whether pushing a plane back into the painting's illusory space or asserting its inevitable flatness, each quiver of the brush seems considerate of the composition's all-over gestalt. Ray's paint is thin enough to let the light of the panel shine through, giving the work a pervading luminosity that befits her sun-drenched Western landscapes. She seems able to build complex and considered relationships of color in very few layers of paint, "hitting her mark" in only one or two tries.

Eleanor Ray, Antelope Island, *2018*, *Oil on panel*, *Nicelle Beauchene Gallery*. *Photo courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York.*

Many of these physical characteristics reminded me of the paintings of Josef Albers, another modernist painter of small panels who was fascinated by color, geometry, and, as a revelatory exhibition at the Guggenheim demonstrated last winter, the plastic potential of the sculpture and vernacular architecture of Mexico and the American Southwest. Incorrectly thought of as a strict and even dogmatic theoretician, Albers was a painter who understood that color and light were perceptual phenomena, things to explore through *a posteriori* visual research. Ray's frontal geometries of natural color, in their uber-specificity and responsiveness to their own environment, feel particularly resonant with, if not indebted to, the late Bauhaus master.

In addition to his public painting practice, Albers also spent a good deal of time looking through the lens of a camera. His private photograph studies show a sustained interest in shifting angles and cropped fields of vision in a way that seems relevant to Ray's own painterly documentations. This resemblance may be best appreciated when viewing different works by Ray of the same subject in series. Her five paintings of a single window in Judd's building in Marfa are especially instructive. Each panel is distinct and offers its own set of compositional issues to tease out. As Ray moves towards and away from her subject and side to side, new flat planes of architectural detail get introduced to the frame of view, shifting lines of sight and weighting different edges of the rectangular panel. Often, the most chromatically intense shapes on the panel will be lined along one of these edges, a compositional move that almost feels like a knowing wink to the viewer, as

Ray intentionally brings our attention to the fact that she is in control over exactly what we are allowed to see.

Eleanor Ray, Marfa Window, *2017, Oil on panel*, *Nicelle Beauchene Gallery. Photo courtesy of the artist and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery, New York.*

In other window scenes, and in landscape series such as her paintings of Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Ray seems to respond primarily to changing weather and light. The concept might evoke Monet standing before his haystacks with an armful of canvases, switching from one to the other as the day progresses. A more likely antecedent is Bonnard. Like Bonnard, Ray doesn't paint from direct observation, but rather works from a combination of drawing sketches, color notes, photography, and memory. Her paintings aren't about "catching" or "recreating" a moment in time so much as they're about articulating a specific and independent idea about color, light, and space. Bonnard called himself "weak" while painting in front of his subject—with its barrage of ever-changing visual information—and believed that direct observation distracted him from his ultimate goal of recreating the "effect" of an experience. Ray's paintings work toward a similar end, and their direct, contemplative compositions testify that much can be achieved when unnecessary elements are stripped away.

Andrew L. Shea is a painter and writer.