

ARTSEEN

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MAUREEN GALLACE: *CLEAR DAY*

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by David Rhodes

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This sparingly hung exhibition, including over seventy works, is the largest gathering to-date of Connecticut born artist Maureen Gallace's (b. 1960) small-scale paintings. While it is easy to see precedents for these paintings—Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher, Lois Dodd, and Alex Katz—the paintings are distinctly singular; in a genre tradition, but certainly not generic. Gallace has been producing oil on panel still lifes and views of the New England landscape and coast for over 25 years. What is striking when moving through the exhibition, one painting to the next, each a few paces apart, is the accumulative sense of an ongoing blankness. And I don't mean this negatively.

Scenes are empty of people. No eyes are looking back at us, or at least none that we can see. Often, buildings are depicted without doors or windows; they are containers, ostensibly shapes and structures like anything else that appears in the paintings, such as trees or rocks. Of course, the difference is that the man-made shelters used here—cabins, houses, and garages—have a radically different significance. Just as trees or rocks are indifferent to human presence, so are the man-made structures. To the subjectivity of the viewer or, presumably, also to Gallace, narratives are here to be invented; nothing is provided other than the trace of a loaded brush over a surface. Even if her paintings are indexical, they are paintings—not postcards. We are left asking, where is this? Who might live here, and is anyone home? What time is it? What would I be doing/thinking if standing, staring at this?



Maureen Gallace, *Clear Day*, 2011/2012. © Maureen Gallace, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York.

The paintings have much to enjoy in formal, painterly terms. Additionally, the uncomfortable—rather than reassuring—aspect of ordinariness, or time spent in between purposeful action, seeps into one's thoughts. This is true of Bonnard's paintings when we get caught in the visual delight of paint and wonder why the corner of a mid-afternoon interior should be the subject of a painting. The formal and psychological aid and abet each other. In the brushwork, spilling around a roof or pressing the side of a tree, Gallace's passages of color mimic our own passage of thought or transits from moment to moment. This down-home, provincial sublime is not easy-going—it is as noncommittal as it is unavoidable. The compositions can be aggregates of several actual places, though there is nothing to actually tell us this, which enhances the analogic improvisation of a painting's process. The point is not to represent a fixed time and site. Again, it's not a post-card picture—it's a painting.

Rainbow Road Martha's Vineyard (2015) is 9 by 12 inches. The unassuming view of a bungalow or cabin at the curve in the road with a driveway forking off to the right is straightforward and picturesque. A plain grey roof slopes up from a wall facing us. It has a glazed door in the middle with one horizontal bar and what looks like a partially drawn screen, beyond which is a dark interior. Next to the house, on the left side, is a tree. The color is fresh, light crosses the surface, shadows are blue or purple, and sharp. There is ease in apprehending what we see; we can identify with the view—it's a familiar one and yet it's not to be taken for granted, modest as it is. It seems both fleeting and permanent.

At the same size, *Storm* (2014) is just as commanding as *Rainbow Road Martha's Vineyard*. Clouds and waves move in the sea breezes; the paint, however, is moving with the same measure across the rocks and trees of the foreground as up in the sky or out to sea. It's a typically unpretentious scenario, like the choice of painting the side of a house or a curving road, rendered fluid and succinct, that hooks us without dramatic effect.



Maureen Gallace, *Summer Shade*, 2015, oil on panel. The Durham Collection, Denver, CO. Photo by David B. Smith. Image courtesy the artist and 303 Gallery.

CONTRIBUTOR

David Rhodes

DAVID RHODES is a New York-based artist and writer, originally from Manchester, UK. He has published reviews in the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Artforum*, and *Artcritical*, among other publications.