

TWO COATS OF PAINT

SOLO SHOWS

Kate Spencer Stewart's liminal spaces



Kate Spencer Stewart at Bureau, installation view. At left: Waine, 2022, oil on linen, 66 × 66 inches. At right: Lith, 2022, oil on linen, 66 × 66 inches

Contributed by Jackson O'Brasky / In her solo exhibition "Convention" at Bureau on the Lower East Side, Kate Spencer Stewart has rendered dialogues of the long, dark night of the soul into paint. Facilitating her mission is the clever arrangement of paintings of identical size around the viewer, like members of a committee rendering judgment. The paintings seem to project themselves forward, walking in time to sinister music. They are all perfect squares, and the certainty inherent in this geometry fixes the eye on the center of a storm of experimentation. Stewart strategically refuses to completely resolve what remain in essence abstractions. Some, like *Esker* and *Waine*, sink or billow out as color fields in the manner of Rothko. Others, like the twinned *Barrow* and *Trench*, are gesturally spattered, suggesting a crime scene. The artist is attempting to paint "nothing, or the void," and it is in a radiant absence that we eventually discern an unfolding glossolalia, from noise to signal.



Kate Spencer Stewart, Comb, 2022, oil on linen, 66 × 66 inches

It is easy to dismiss many examples of contemporary abstract work as “hotel art,” an aesthetic category that in fact deserves some explanation. Such art, despite its name, also appears in coffee shops, restaurants, airport lounges, and offices. It often scans as a parody of fine abstraction, with calming colors and inoffensive subjects such as windowpanes, flowers, and the open ocean. Stewart offers a sly and brilliantly elevated variation on hotel art. In *Skarbie*, she presents flowers, but they appear as if in a photonegative, eliciting an elegiac pang in the viewer’s breast. When depicting the sea, as in *Comb*, she flecks it with a few incisive bursts of orange, conveying the disquieting reflection of a sunset smothered in clouds of wildfire smoke that cover the canvas like a flag of burning oil.



Kate Spencer Stewart, Trench, 2022, Oil on linen, 66 × 66 in.

The artist is familiar with liminal space: transitional areas between more firmly established situations of home, work, and celebration, which customarily tend to define real experience and take deep root in memory. We are inclined to forget the parking garages, waiting rooms, and hotels, but also more likely to meet the void in such places. The art hung traditionally in them is intended to quiet anxieties that arise in unfamiliar locales – a strange bed or a doctor's office. But Stewart is interested not in anaesthetizing us to such layovers but rather in awakening us to their existential significance – especially as grand palaces are bulldozed to make way for an expanding labyrinth of open-plan offices and modular condominiums once confined to suburbia. If you find yourself in such a space, and the droning hum of an HVAC system becomes an intelligible voice, it may be Kate Spencer Stewart's.