



Cait Porter, *Window at 11pm*, 2021, oil on canvas, 24 × 20".

Cait Porter

MARINARO

Observing Cait Porter's New York solo debut "Within These Walls," one might have found it easy (and one wouldn't have been exactly wrong) to peg the artist as an old-fashioned realist putting time-tested techniques in the service of contemporary quotidian. In the paintings on view here her attention was fixed on what we could assume was her own domestic environment and its distinctly banal, insignificant details: a drain with some suds bubbling around it,

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jumbled clothing inside an open chest of drawers with a stray power cord on top of it, a robe draped over a wooden door. These were not exactly still lifes, because they didn't necessarily depict the more familiar arrangement of freestanding objects typical of that mode. Neither did they belong to that rather less common class of the architectural interior, since they gave little if any sense of a room as a whole. And, of course, they hardly counted as genre painting, since the human protagonists were missing (with the possible exception of the blur visible behind the condensation in *Mirror with Steam*, 2021—but who can say for sure). Yet all these types of work are evoked, some more than others; so we sensed the artist was at once flirting with and swerving away from tradition, with its distinct categories (and hierarchies) of subject.

Finally, it seems that Porter is a painter not so much of places or things as of surfaces. And that's where realism falls away: Those surfaces always feel fluid or even gaseous, not quite solid. We are always aware of them as being mirage-like, fictitious. Porter is particularly drawn to curious light effects—shadows and reflections that might confuse the eye, such as the weirdly shaped, tenebrous, roughly figurative form surrounded by a mottle of bright spots in *Lid with Reflection*, 2021, or the distorted, almost illegible features of the room imaged in the bulging glass sides of the nearly empty *Coffee Pot*, 2021. In that painting, the kitchen appliance practically disappears as a thing in itself, becoming merely the bearer of distorted mirrorings. The effect is as if the very stuff one relies on day to day, the objects that are always ready to hand and familiar, might be little more than phantasms. Hers is an alienated perception. The items in these paintings are mostly seen close-up, tightly cropped, and yet without minute detail, as if everything is too near to the eye for us to focus on. The effect is claustrophobic, and the rare promise of deep space is abrogated: The corridor shown in *Hallway*, 2021, is narrow, without side entrances or windows, and leads only to a door that appears to float at some unattainable distance; the walls seem to close in on you like an Edgar Allan Poe nightmare. And you can't actually see outside in *Bouquet on Windowsill*, though if you can in *Window at 11pm*, both 2021, you are able to only exiguously.

In these paintings, we see so much, but never quite the thing itself. One was tempted to consider *Drain*, 2020, a sort of portrait of the eye—a receptacle into which everything flows indifferently, leaving only some traces of foam. And yet what resists the eye yields to the hand: The painter's brush seems to meet all objects as familiar. It's not her gaze—contrary to what artist and writer Meredith Sellers says in the exhibition's press release—but rather her touch that is, to borrow Sellers's words, "gently caressing [the depicted objects] with soft light and shadow." Porter's

painterly facture always reminds us that, even if her images are only contingent apparitions whose apparent companionability is deceptive, the act of painting offers us the possibility and pleasure of knowing them, stroke by stroke.

— Barry Schwabsky