

Art in America

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

DECEMBER 2015



Allison Katz:
*Marienbad Fountain
On*, 2015, acrylic
on canvas, 98%
by 62% inches; at
the Kunstverein
Freiburg.

ALLISON KATZ Kunstverein Freiburg

Describing the work of the American poet Frederick Seidel, the poet and critic Michael Hofmann has argued that “it’s important to understand that the poet is not in the lines”; this despite the fact that Seidel is writing mostly in the first person. In Allison Katz’s 2015 collage of videos (one her own, the others made by friends or found on the Internet) titled *Intake*—part of the 35-year-old Canadian artist’s first solo institutional exhibition, at Kunstverein Freiburg—Seidel reads his poem “Racer” (“I climb on a motorcycle / I climb on a cloud and rain . . .”). The clip ties his poetry’s louche globalism into what Camilla Wills, in a segment from her film *Channels* (2015), calls the “connectionist society.”

Katz is certainly a “connectionist.” Contemporary art luminaries (Kerstin Brätsch, Ei Arakawa) pop up in the video, sometimes performing with her, invoking an international context for her art. That Katz is primarily a painter—and painting is the least “connectionist” pictorial medium, the most inclined to abstraction—seems perverse, but her use of the medium challenges the diversity of her imagery, grounding an eclectic range of references in the here-and-now of a brushstroke’s trace, and the site-specificity of paintings designed to occupy a particular space.

The particular is here synonymous with the subjective. Like Seidel, Katz both is and isn’t in her art. The title of the exhibition, “All Is On,” puns her first name with a phrase suggesting cultural relativism. The ranging of Katz’s video over cultures and continents—from a trailer for a 1974 film following David Hockney in London, New York and Los Angeles to part of a 1977 interview with the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector in the last year of her life—is as varied as her painting’s juggling of idioms, from

geometric abstraction to magic realism to a sinuous figuration.

This installation, comprising 10 paintings in addition to the video, was notable for the absence of the decor elements—such as printed screens and floor-based, decorative sand compositions—with which Katz has previously tended to complement her paintings. Site-specificity defaulted to the paintings themselves, their flighty virtuosity called back at the last minute, made to connect to the exhibition space and the other paintings sharing it. Although it is based on an Indonesian fabric, an untitled work from 2015, which checkers dark grays and blacks around two upright white rectangles, fortuitously echoed the columns dividing entrance from gallery. *Marienbad Fountain On* (2015) reproduces, with trompe l’oeil verisimilitude, the red ceramic tiles and grotesque mask of a fountain in a neighboring theater.

And yet, in Katz’s hands, this give-and-take between picture and model ultimately serves to highlight their dissimilitude. The consummate seductiveness of her painterly illusionism is made self-reflexive. The gamut of the forms her motifs adopt with shape-shifting fluidity suggests a critical metaphor for digital culture’s dematerializing of images by infinitely morphing them. *I* (2015), depicting an egg, as though for an exercise in academic painterly modeling, reflects the fantastic, hovering planet in *Belo Horizonte* (2013-15), the fish-eyed kaleidoscope of *Half and Half* (2012) and the “O” forming the mouth of a sphinx in *All Is On* (2015), its features composed out of the three titular parts of the artist’s name. These various “O”s are reconciled as the I of the artist. Katz sets chains of diverse imagery into far-flung motion, then brings them into congruence by assimilating them to a space of her own that is both the artistic world her painting makes of them and the ground beneath the viewer’s feet.

—Mark Prince