

Allison Katz

Diary w/o Dates

In Lydia Davis's sparse yet densely articulated short story "Almost No Memory," a woman is described as having "a very sharp consciousness but almost no memory."¹ She spends her spare time reading and writing in countless notebooks. Her notes are clever and thoughtful—written in increasingly tiny handwriting—and when she grows tired of reading books, she opens up one of her old notebooks to re-read. Given her lack of memory, sometimes these notes feel totally fresh to her, at other times they feel uncannily familiar, and often she will annotate old notes with new ones. Yet soon those memories have faded, and when she opens each notebook again, her cycle of thinking, reading, and writing begins anew.

Returning to Allison Katz's exhibition *Diary w/o Dates* at the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Boston, six months after spending time with the show at Oakville Galleries in Oakville, Ontario, I feel an affinity to Davis's protagonist. Some imagery is recognizable, certain figures seem strange; I'm revisiting notes taken in early February and I'm writing on top of them. A suite of twelve paintings sits at the centre of this two-venue solo exhibition by the Canadian-born, London-based artist, yet their configurations couldn't feel more different. Many depict women, nude or in loose tunics; some feature birds, rabbits, and other creatures. Yet each is distinct: with impossibly varied techniques and tonal qualities, each is a world unto itself, perhaps fresh notes taken on a different subject. At Oakville Galleries, the paintings were hung in the round on a twelve-sided structure in the centre of the gallery; it was impossible to catch more than three of them from a single point of view. At the List Visual Arts Center, they are arranged in linear fashion at the far end of the gallery, visible in full upon entering the otherwise empty space. Save for a uniformity of size, the connective threads between the works remain slippery and difficult to articulate.

With twelve singular frames, *Diary w/o Dates* is, in fact, based on the structure of a calendar. And as Katz is more than well aware, chronicling the passage of time has as much to do with language as with each rising and setting sun. Researching historic calendar systems, she titled her paintings after an eighteenth-century British satire of the names of French Revolutionary months. Instead of Vendémiaire, Brumaire, and Frimaire, we have *Slippy*, *Drippy*, and *Nippy*; *Wheezy*, *Sneezy*, and *Freezy*. Reading their titles means getting caught in the current of a silly rhyme, the pleasures of language at play. And reading her paintings within this framework brings new meaning to their content: prompting questions of how women's bodies stand in as allegories for time—a springtime maiden, a wintry crone—and how we rely upon representation to structure something so vast and wholly unknowable. Who hasn't flipped through a calendar to their birth month, seeking an image that reflects back something of themselves?

I see something of myself in Davis's note-taking amnesiac, and I imagine Katz could as well. Diary-writing has historically been relegated to the realm of women's literature; a frivolous, perhaps gossipy, domestic mode of documenting the passage of time. Katz's diary is one without dates, a mode of self-reflection spilling beyond the grid-like structure of our days and weeks. In Oakville, the twelve-sided painting display was accompanied by another branch of the project at Gairloch Gardens, the gallery's second exhibition space located in a Tudor-style historic residence on the edge of Lake Ontario. Conspicuously, Gairloch Gardens was totally devoid of painting. Instead, the gallery's domestic-style rooms carried a series of material experiments that playfully extended the linguistic and associative reach of her calendar paintings.

One room—with a large window overlooking the lake and red-brown floor tiles resembling the patterning in Katz's painting *Wheezy*—included a tilted platform supporting a series of

Allison Katz

← *Diary w/o Dates*, installation view, Oakville Galleries, Centennial Square, 2018.

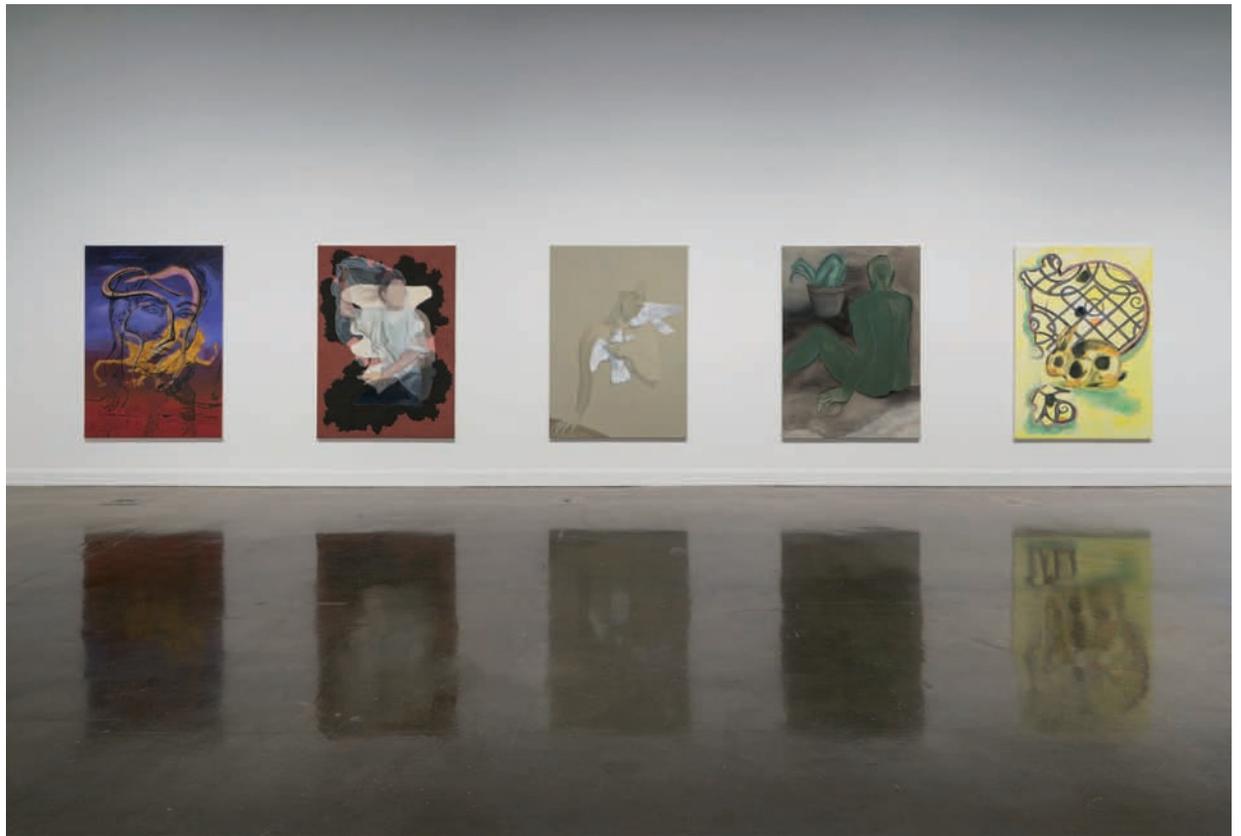
Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of Oakville Galleries

↑ *25 plates*, details, 2017–2018.

Photo : Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of Oakville Galleries

→ *Diary w/o Dates*, installation view, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Boston, 2018.

Photo : Peter Harris Studio, courtesy of the artist, The approach, London & Giò Marconi, Milan



ceramic plates with paintings of female figures and abstract forms. I imagine these like early attempts at her paintings, but maybe that's too chronological an impulse. Another housed a sprawling "drawing" produced in sand on the floor with her name rendered in the loops and dashes of Gregg Shorthand, alongside "Season 1" written in cursive—perhaps a playful nod to the exhibition's "second season," its upcoming life in Boston. Notably, a third room contained a series of digitally rendered posters designed by Katz, each announcing the exhibition (its title, her name, the location) in different designs and configurations. More Gregg and Pitman Shorthand appeared here, alongside geographic coordinates and architectural renderings of Oakville Galleries overlaid on doodles, research images, clock faces, and various experiments with typography. Her name, this work, this location in space and time; all written, re-written, translated, and reconfigured endlessly—as if she were trying to commit them to memory.

It's worth noting that in Davis's story, the woman's labour isn't framed as Sisyphean, like some worthless task or cautionary tale. When divorced from the linear sequencing of her own memory, she builds something new: a sedimented form of knowledge that exceeds both the reader and the character herself. Katz's paintings are installed in the round; like the face of a wristwatch. Or they are installed in a neat, even row; a timeline in a history textbook. They are extended through drawings, plates, posters; or perhaps they are not. Maybe there is no chronology here, no easy sequencing of Oakville first, Boston second. No logic following January to July. Instead, there are just daily musings and reflections, piles of notes subject to being amended and written again. Scribbled affirmations declaring that, at some indeterminate moment in the past/present/future, AK was here.

Daniella Sanader

1 — Lydia Davis, "Almost No Memory," in *The Collected Short Stories of Lydia Davis* (New York: Picador, 2009): 259.

Oakville Galleries, Oakville
January 21—March 18, 2018

MIT List Visual Arts Center, Boston
May 18—July 29, 2018