

JULIANNA THIBODEAUX

Josephine Halvorson

Painting, like most enduring art forms, is continually reinventing itself. Or rather, artists continue to reinvent painting. One of these artists is Josephine Halvorson, who has worked for the last decade as a realist painter, although she is reluctant to own that association: “I’ve never quite felt comfortable with the term realism, because I think it’s such a tall order,” she says. “Maybe it’s just my profound respect for reality.” Like the hyper-realist Vija Celmins, Halvorson employs literalism as a means of more deeply understanding and interpreting her subject. While Halvorson’s work isn’t necessarily as photorealistic as that of Celmins, her process shares other similarities to photography. She likens the long days spent with her subjects to a long exposure: “I would be in front of something for the period of a day. The painting would feel like a cast of the time I spent, a cast of the day.”

Halvorson’s studio at Boston University—traffic careening below her window—is in stark contrast to the outdoors where she most often finds herself in the creation of her trompe l’oeil, to-scale paintings. Her subjects have included wooden shelves, faded shutters, stacks of hymn books in a church, German guns on the Normandy coast, gravestones, the carcass of a cow inside a slaughterhouse. She sees each subject as “a readymade still life”—calling forth

that other art tradition. Yet as Halvorson puts it, “I’m not really positioning anything.” In her 2016 exhibition *Outlooks* at the Storm King Art Center in New York State, she pushed this idea of scale to its outer limit by creating site-specific works in response to the 500-acre landscape, including a massive yardstick laid horizontally on the grass and a tree painting positioned vertically between actual trees.

Halvorson grew up on Cape Cod, the only child of two artist parents. “I’ve painted outside since the time I was a teenager,” she says. This experience seeded her love of painting en plein air, a method Halvorson has sustained even after attending the Cooper Union School of Art, Yale Norfolk and Columbia University’s School of the Arts, where she earned her MFA. Halvorson’s reinterpretations of this and other long-standing painting traditions have garnered substantial recognition in the art world, including a Fulbright Fellowship and numerous other fellowships and awards in the U.S. and abroad.

While Halvorson easily draws themes from her work after the fact—themes such as “the American post-industrial landscape”—she isn’t driven to create from them. “I wanted to develop a practice that focused on what it was that I was drawn to, what really caught my eye, and then see where that took me... Through that discipline and regular approach to painting certain themes emerged. It was important to me that the themes came through the painting, not a priori.”

Inside Halvorson’s studio, which she sees more as a place to develop ideas and experiment with materials than as a place to paint, she has found a way to merge her previous ideas while departing from their obvious constraints. Now, she said, she wants to put more inside the frame. This new approach resulted in a series of paintings with various screenprinted elements exhibited last year at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. Gallery in New York, which conveyed some of the ideas she had been exploring about “the traces of time.”

Her current works in progress, which she is planning to include in the 2019 James and Audrey Foster



Above: *Ground Register (First Frost)*, 2018, gouache, screen print, and site material on panel, 42 x 32" (2 panels). Image courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Below: Josephine Halvorson in her studio at Boston University, November 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Prize exhibition (of which she is one of four artists selected) opening next August at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art, continue this transition. Paintings of natural objects and detritus found in the landscape near her home in Western MA, created en plein air, in watercolor gouache rather than oil, are inset into panels. She has begun to experiment with pigments and different grounds, literally in some cases: grinding earth into a substance from which she creates a pigment. She then screenprints a smaller image on top of the panels to suggest scale or time: a color checker grid, a wristwatch, a ruler.

Regardless of how the forms of her expression are changing, Halvorson continues to return to painting—a form that allows her to relate to and honor what she sees. “Because it’s not enough to just look at it. I really have to make something of it or translate it in some way. Then the question is, who is the medium? Is it the paint, or is it me?”

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