

On Niki Kriese's Chewing the Scenery: *A Reprieve from this Dimension*

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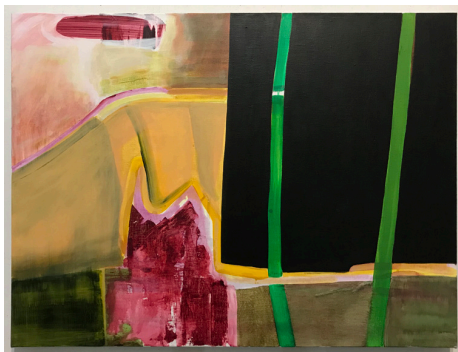
My form comes from the figure whether it is the figure or not so why not do it for a while?

Eva Hesse

Images are not still. They are moving things. They come, they go, they disappear, they approach, they recede, and they are not even visual -- ultimately they are pure feeling. They're like something that calls you through a fog or a cloud.

Etel Adnan

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Forces, acrylic on linen, 2018

In one image, a friend stands at the edge of a frame, peering into another frame. Before this photograph was taken, she asked if she should move. I told her, *no*, become a piece in the remembered scenery:

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On the bus ride back from Hartford, I imagine a voice-over that would play as a looped whisper, from a pair of headsets in the gallery:

Consider the sensation of passing through surfaces: gardens, parks, architectures, pools. Allow your form to become absorbed into the acrylic soil. You will not be told how to understand what swells.

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Within the space of a month-long residency, I met Niki Kriese. On those winter evenings, we shared meals with four other artists, at a table that eventually overlooked an expanse of snow. Often, we spoke about the daily lives that had become disarticulated during this stay in the woods. At the end of one dinner, the subject of gardening surfaced. Kriese mentioned that community gardens emerged in her work a year ago; I gently probed, wanting to hear more. Another visual artist mentioned that she had recently started a garden back home in South Carolina.

Kriese spoke about how she had begun to see how the gardens she was painting were less about the literal gardens, but rather gardening as a metaphor for making. *Sometimes it goes back into the dirt, and sometimes it becomes something*, she said.

That night, I returned to the studio and recorded this in a notebook entry: *Dinner, 11/2/18.*

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Kriese's relation to other artists seems intrinsic to her practice; one can find a list of names on her website, offering her work as part of a constellation of other artists and their work—some of whom she may have met at RISD, where she received her MFA in Painting. During her time there, she began to exceed the singular medium, experimenting with practices in installation, video art, and sculpture. While she has returned to working with acrylic paint, these practices remain corporeal in her current paintings.

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Pigment was once made entirely by deriving elements from the earth. The earth yields color; the earth yields gesture. This process became denaturalized. We mechanized color, seeking to name and derive in the same motion. In the act of making, the human hand performs an undoing of this—a gesture that exceeds the origin of mechanization and severance.

I return to an essay collection by feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz: *Chaos, Territory, and Art*. Grosz writes, *Thus the first gesture of art is not, as Nietzsche believed, the exteriorization of one's own bodily forces and energies, the transformation of flesh and blood into canvas and oil but a more primary gesture that requires a body's prior separation of nature from its world.*

The bodies in Kriese's painting are removed from specific personhoods. While the context is detached from any direct denotation, a near equilibrium is offered between figure and background. Kriese refuses the traditional object-subject severance that once permeated art's narrative, wherein the background is subordinate to the subject of the foreground. I find this refusal wholly intentional, as there are early seeds in Kriese's online archive. Of a collection titled "Cancelled Memories," she writes: *As an investigation into souvenirs and snapshots as inadequate containers of memory, I began to paint people who had died out of my personal photo album.*



Removing, acrylic on canvas, 2018

The subjects of these snapshots are rendered ghosts, voids, gaps; the background replaces,

or begins to enact a body's memory. If we are viewing the trace of people--their memories, their outline--rendered as textures, the background may become a person. When we call people "figures," as in the painting lexicon, are we trying to render them back into "nature"?

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Painted Arms (Still), 2007

In this video, my husband and I "wrap" our arms together using black paint, Kriese describes in her 2007 archive. Even though I am not married, I feel my own wrist wet with paint--the layers accumulating, the discomfort as the hairs on the wrist are tugged. Kriese discusses this video project in a series of artist talks she organized at Parsons School of Design. She creates a verbal map of her work--stages of a garden in variety of conditions. What distinguishes this mapping is its non-linear accessibility.

Kriese's path is not clean and flawless. She articulates falters, failures, and a ceaseless questioning: what am I trying to grow, for whom, and how? The conditions remain: materials, light, hands. If the paint in this video still is a symbol of marriage, of bond, is relation a dance of obfuscation? What parts of the self do we obscure when we come into relation? Do our voids become tethered?

Life comes to elaborate itself through making its bodily forms and its archaic territories, pleasing (or annoying), performative, which is to say, intensified through their integration into form and their impact on bodies, Elizabeth Grosz writes. The stale conversation of life vs. art is refused by Kriese's work because both are at stake---daily performances that proffer the body and its surroundings as constant forms of making and un-making.

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I loop back to Eva Hesse's work with the desire to unearth Kriese's lineage -- to find an artist who too considered her materials as containers of a history, or rather, palimpsests. Eva Hesse's private journals are now published as a scroll-like series:

December 10, 1964

For me painting has become that [anti-climactic]. 'Making Art'-'painting a painting.' The Art, the history, the tradition, is too much there. I want to be surprised. To find something new.

I wonder if Hesse felt that painting had failed her, had constrained her into a homogenous,

American, and male-dominated making that could not yield the space that she desired, that she needed at that time. In her early paintings, I encounter her latent mediums as shards of potential, not failure. Like Kriese, Hesse often worked with a figure and background. The figures are genderless, peculiar beings, offering an energy that emanates from the surface--while the background is gestural, ephemeral as memory, trauma, displacement. The immediacy of Hesse's textures and gestures feel synchronous with Kriese's. When I visited her studio, fragments of magazines and printed images were strewn over every surface. While this collage origin is not often literally embedded in the final paintings, the actions of cutting, layering, revealing, obfuscating, tethering remains.

I am reminded of one piece where the earth at the bottom of the frame appears to be almost cut out with a tool, perhaps an x-acto knife, to reveal what appears to be the texture of a storm: a reprieve from this dimension.

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To walk amongst these eight works, or linger on the couch in the gallery's entrance where the paintings can be seen between brick columns, is to experience a garden of memory, ghosts, traces--scars of light in their making.

My friend, a poet, who joined me for this journey from Brooklyn to Hartford, appreciated the ability to experience the work from afar; sunlight from the front window of the building collaborates with the synthetic lights. Kriese's paint seems to understand it has been separated from the earth, just as the painter knows the relation between her figures is both present and veiled.

As I ride the bus home, I'm reminded of a scene in a recent film by director Hirokazu Kore-eda, *Shoplifters*, wherein a woman and child hold out their arms that contain scars. *We are the same*, one says. "Scar:" *a mark left at the point of separation of a leaf, frond, or other part from a plant.* "Relation:" that which scars yield when they touch as two seeds, sewn in unison.



Chewing the Scenery, installation view, 2019

Niki Kriese • *Chewing the Scenery*

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