

Thoughts on Scenes, Places, and Chewing

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The term “chewing the scenery” is used in the acting world to describe when an actor greatly engages with scenery and props in a physical manner. Often a derogatory or critical term, a prop master might request less chewing in order to ensure their work remains in tact between performances, or a director might ask an actor to refrain while delivering an intense monologue as it distracts the audience. It’s a phrase that denotes someone taking exaggerated physical action within a made-up scene, speaking words someone else wrote while inhabiting a character that is often fictional as well.

In the context of Niki Kriese’s paintings, I go back and forth in considering the theatrical approach to aesthetics and compositions she presents us. Her colors are vivid and saturated, yet sometimes believable in their application. Objects like guard rails, bricks, or fences come in and out of legibility, creating something beyond pure abstraction. These scenes are for sure exaggerated yet relatable -- she is chewing on the scenery she inhabits while crafting them. Are we looking at a fiction, an abstracted reality, or somewhere in between?

During my final studio visit with Niki where we chose the paintings to be included, we had a brief conversation surrounding the differences between a “scene” and a “place”. Semantics aside, I feel there are conceptual differences between the two ideas that are important to consider, especially in looking at these paintings. I have to ask again, what are we looking at here?

Scenes encourage the viewer to project their experiences and feelings onto an idea. They can be specific to the point of offering context, such as how the specificity of New Orleans culturally informs much of the behaviors and ideas in Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Non-Louisianans are able to understand the significance of it’s scene through aesthetic choices in dialogue, acting, and, yes, scenic design. We don’t need to know which street specifically the characters live on, because

our concepts of “Louisiana”, accurately or otherwise, fill in the blanks. Contemporary productions of Shakespeare don’t shy away from radically changing the scene to relate text to audiences in a new manner (I think of my high school production of *Twelfth Night* set in Hawaii). Scenes exist to allow the narrative something to stand on.

Places, on the other hand, are intimate. Places create a hyper-specific moment so meaningful to one person, often the creator, that the viewer can engage in a way different from projecting experiences or feelings. Places are diary entries that artist is allowing us to read, revealing something that they wouldn’t normally. For places, specificity is the entry point where viewers can engage in a work and practice humanity. Where scenes create recognition, places create empathy.

Rather than sitting in as a base for narrative, *place is the narrative*.

After getting to know her and her work throughout this process, I believe Niki’s paintings depict places. Of course, she utilizes the language of scenes to bring the viewer into her compositions—moments of legibility and recognizable architecture remind us of our own homes or workplaces or gardens. It’s through her abstraction and distortion of these structures that she invites us into her world, rather than incorporate them into ours.

Repetitious marks resembling tiles remind me of trips to the pool, my mother renovating



Side Fire • 2018 • 30" x 26" • acrylic on canvas

our bathroom by herself, my current sense of "home," all while remaining specific to Niki and her life. Clever layering of paint and stenciling creates a wall of bricks and mortar that are recognizable, but clearly "othered" through texture and color. Her collage-like practice of placing imagery and shapes next to each other creates a haptic sense of place, never allowing itself to become static.

I'm reminded of a small study hung up in her studio I fell in love with upon my first visit. She depicted a moment where her young sons surrounded their grill with small orange pylons in a semicircle, creating an easily obstructable barrier. The scene was a subtle, child-like absurdity. The intention, I assume, was to promote safety around the hot coals and warn of the potential danger. In creating this intervention of pylons, her

sons actually created a moment of domestic levity. This little painting is what originally set me off on considering the difference between a scene and a place. This place in particular contained the intersection of so many ideas (motherhood, suburban living, perceived violence



A view from our final studio visit together on January 12, 2019

and danger, among others), pointing to a direct and specific moment in Niki's life that I was invited into. Where I am incapable of projecting my own experience onto this moment, I can relate to the action of her sons through my own memories of a childhood in Omaha.

I never want to hear a fictional story told using the paintings in *Chewing the Scenery* as a backdrop, because the implication of their realities is much more interesting.



Can you really blame me for loving this weird little thing?



Niki Kriese • *Chewing the Scenery*

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