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An Extraordinary Studio Artist in a Post-Studio Era

by [John Yau](#) on February 1, 2015



Ann Gale, "Portrait with Grid" (2014), oil on masonite (all images courtesy Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects)

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As I have written previously, there is a lot of very good painting going on these days. It is just that you are not likely to see much of it at the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at least in recent memory. These institutions are too busy proving the “death of painting” to recognize that narrative as just one among many, while the hidden or lesser known ones are where the real vitality lies, even in what might be considered the most conservative approach: the studio artist painting from the model. But if you are hung up on such labels, then you are more content with what is offered at brand name retail outlets than you are with actual looking. After all, it is easier to have someone else make up your mind for you.

Ann Gale’s name is most likely an unfamiliar one, which is not to say that she is unknown; it is just to state the obvious. Still, she remains unidentified in New York, where she is having her first solo show at [Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects](#) (January 7–February 15, 2015). A professor of art at the University of Washington since 1995, Gale has had a solo show of eight paintings at the Portland Museum (October 13, 2007–February 10, 2008), and the work currently on view in New York was in her recent solo show at Rhode Island College, where she received her BFA in painting in 1988. By this account, Gale has been supported locally, but not in New York or nationally, at least not yet.

Gale is a studio artist focused on the encounter between the I and the you, on the space between seeing and being seen, which, on the face of it, seems to have little to do with what the art market has defined as ambitious, relevant art. She likes a hard surface and paints on panel, masonite or linen stretched over masonite. Five of the six paintings in

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her exhibition measured fourteen by eleven inches. Everything about her materials is utilitarian, down to the wood, which is often marked by her paint stained fingers, she uses to frame the paintings on masonite. Gale isn't playing the older master game.



Ann Gale, "Portrait with Scarf" (2014), graphite on paper with collage

Three of the four drawings in view are graphite on paper, while the other one is graphite, ink and watercolor on mylar and paper. In one graphite drawing, "Portrait with Scarf" (2014), Gale added a white collage to the cream-colored paper in order to redo the lower part of the subject's face. Nothing is hidden and there is nothing precious about her objects. Unlike Lucian Freud, with whom she has often been compared, Gale would never embalm her work in a gold frame. Rather, the humbleness of the presentation belies the fierceness of her intelligence and the acuteness of her rigor.

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Gale's ostensible subject is the record of an encounter between her and someone else, whether it is a model or her own face, which she presumably uses a mirror to scrutinize. However, unlike Philip Pearlstein, who is also a studio artist, Gale resists photo-like resemblance, overt signs of virtuosity, and the theatrical. But where observers have connected Gale to Freud and Pearlstein, as well as Alberto Giacometti, I think that the differences between her work and theirs, which elevates it into a category all its own, lie in her unlikely affinities with the Abstract Expressionists and the Minimalists.

Virtuosity, which Pearlstein and Freud find many ways to demonstrate, is something many of the artists associated with Abstract Expressionism either tried to subvert or flat-out scorned. Mark Rothko was interested in making a painting that was naked, a work pared down to its essentials. Gale is also committed to stripping down her paintings, to getting rid of everything that she considers inessential. Gale wants to depict a figure in a real space, but refuses to rely on a viewpoint or schematic lines. It is a direct one-on-one encounter. This is what connects her to Giacometti, while her preoccupation with the phenomenology of seeing connects her to Paul Cezanne. For all the modesty of her marks and means, Gale is an incredibly ambitious painter devoted to a meticulous inquiry of the act of looking at another human being, to registering the optics of her inquisitiveness.

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Ann Gale, "Peter with Striped Kimono" (2014), oil on canvas

For her, the months and months of poring over a figure generally leads back to looking at the person's face and eyes. The Ancient Greeks believed the eyes were the gateway to the soul. In "Peter with Striped Kimono" (oil on canvas, 50 x 44 inches, 2014), the one large painting in the exhibition, a rotund, naked, middle-aged, white man sits spread-legged in a chair, seemingly in a room of no distinction. The vertical and horizontal lines of the ground form a loose grid. Otherwise, everything seems to have been pared way down, even the sitter, whose head, particularly the eyes, is the most prominent feature of the painting. The hands, not nearly as articulated as the face and eyes, are on the brink of illegibility. We know what they are because of where they are. It is hard not to read into those eyes, to not feel empathetic, but you do not feel manipulated, as one

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often does by signs of virtuosity. It is like the eyes are magnets, which in some sense they are.

“Peter with Striped Kimono” is largely made up of small, modest marks with areas readjusted, wiped out and gone over. His round, Buddha-like belly is made up of layers of visceral hues running toward washed-out greens, grays, and pale fleshy pinks. Gale’s non-colors share something with the Minimalists, particularly early Brice Marden and Robert Mangold.



Ann gale, “Portrait with Cap” (2014), oil on linen with wrapped masonite

From the diffuse light playing across the belly’s globular surface to the subdued hues evoking the interplay of solid flesh and slowly changing light, everything about the painting pulls you into the encounter. You end up examining and staring, just as Gale must have done to make this deeply moving painting. There are visible pencil marks,

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seemingly indicating that some kind of measuring or adjusting was needed. An area of modest marks calls to mind mosaics worn down by time. Gale isn't trying to render a figure in an instant of time; rather, she is trying to be honest to both time passing and the figure in time.

Gale's refusal to demonstrate virtuosity or be expressionistic lifts these works out of any simple narrative. Is the diffuse light the result of the artist's studio being in Seattle, Washington, where the weather report repeats the phrase, "occasionally sunny today." Or is it a vision of bleakness and despair? Are Gale's flinty, stripped-down depictions a refusal to cater to the tastes of the rich and their curator friends (the 1%), as the gap grows wider between them and the rest of us? Gale's paintings do not offer answers; they raise questions. More importantly, they remind us of how fundamentally strange and necessary it is to be inquisitive about another human being. By not reaching a judgment, Gale reminds us that our penchant for appraising helps block the possibility of dialogue and understanding. Why does Peter look forlorn? And why, for some of us, does that look speak to us on the deepest level?

[Ann Gale: Paintings and Drawings](#) continues at *Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects* (208 Forsyth Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through February 15.

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