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Dualities Over Dichotomies: Maureen O'Leary at Cristin Tierney Gallery

By VITTORIA BENZINE May 25, 2022



Maureen O'Leary, High Rise Neighbor, High Rise Neighbor, 2021, oil on linen, 40 x 30 inches, photo by Vittoria Benzine

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Mundane and intense, unhinged yet considered, boisterous but roaringly hushed. “Both/And”, the latest solo show by Long Island-based Maureen O’Leary, deals in dualities over dichotomies, blending the contemporary with the classic in depictions of everyday moments from the artist’s own inner monologue. On view at Cristin Tierney Gallery since April 22nd, the exhibition has now entered its final week—infusing fauvism’s anxious attachment to reality with wry punchlines that entreat viewers to see life through the artist’s own warped perspective.

“Both/And” collects 11 works of oil on linen from O’Leary’s practice since her last exhibition with Cristin Tierney back in Summer 2021. Making selections was no small feat given the prolific rate at which O’Leary paints, trained with a decisiveness in mark making. The wall to the left upon entering reads like an exposition—two big portrait canvases surround a smaller square scene in the middle. The show’s opposite wall offers four more works that build the substance of a plot to be determined. A few paintings on the other side of a bookshelf present final clues.

Distorted by a keyed-up palette that challenges the artist’s interest in formal color theory, figuration still makes its stand—rooted in remembered images from moments that affected O’Leary over the past year. Discernible figures prevail despite their deconstructing bright hues, shapes spurring the eye to assemble narrative threads. The exhibition’s mostly clockwise arrangement creates a red herring that belies linear paths forward. From a balanced vantage point at the show’s center, color and then light emerge the real, non-linear narrative devices.

O’Leary dodges predictability with location and subject matter—while her works might appear anonymous, the series compiles an intimate diary of soul homes near and dear. Some scenery stems from the artist’s own home on Long Island, built from a Sears catalog circa the 1940s. When cold weather renders studio ventilation tenuous, she flies South for a self-imposed residency in Puerto Rico, where temporary living and warmer weather demand a faster pace of painting. O’Leary and her husband also regularly visit her mother in-law, age 100, in Santa Monica, California. Sometimes the Pacific Ocean feels like the end of the Earth to this East Coast artist, reflecting frenzied golden light.



Left:

The Road #2, 2020

oil on linen

48 x 32 inches

Right:

Feral Palm Tree, Santa Monica Backyard, 2021

oil on linen

32 x 32 inches

If there were a story here, trees would be its central protagonist—varied as the landscapes across these artworks. In “Feral Palm Tree, Santa Monica Backyard,” a plant with animal instincts runs rampant outside a run-down home, sprouting paracosms of yellow only accented by more serene green. Too vivacious even for dull shadows, the tree throws deep red shades echoed by the two

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works surrounding it: a berry-hued portal emerging from trees in “The Road #2,” and the sumptuous coat of a traveler in “Commuter Platform with Dogwood (My Mother).”

“Pruned Tree and Gate” on the other hand, admires the tenacity of another tree left all but barren—its paltry form casting a deep shadow like an exclamation point, perhaps the show’s secret climax, painted with thick black paint that ironically reflects light off the canvas beneath. Trees tower from the sidewalk in nearby “Ficus, Santa Monica,” an unsettling scene where O’Leary’s strong lines act as a metronome. The blazing yellow sky finds its counterpart in that reappearing purple, which punctuates the suburban roads reimagined here as clear blue rivers.

Formally trained at Yale University, the Art Students League, and the International Center of Photography, O’Leary started as a plein air painter, but traded her outdoor easel for the studio since she couldn’t stomach so many curious interruptions. The artist takes her most foundational inspirations from the canon—Matisse and Alice Neel, mostly. She also participates in the art historical tradition of remaining conversant with her peers, even seeing Stanley Whitney’s work in the many layers of purple that make up her most striking shadow in the foreground of “Ficus.”

Only eight works in this show eschew foliage for flesh—another type of case study which the artist likened to musical scales. “Both/And” displays “Untitled” and “Scholar on a Tour” side by side. The former is just one work in a long series where O’Leary practices painting skin through the lens of raw chicken, which offers practical benefits like formal resemblance but also multiplicitous parallels—the life/death/life cycle, humor, even commentaries on factory farming.

That background lends nuance to “Scholar” where a man (actually, a relative) holds a newspaper in front of his face, his forehead poking above the periodical and creating a lighthearted comparison in size and shade with the chicken to his left.

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Scholar on a Tour, 2022, oil on linen, 32 x 32 inches, photo by Vittoria Benzine

Although flesh appears only in quick flashes, “Both/And” harbors a pulp fiction feel from its very first work, where one lone car speeds both away from one place and also towards another—the viewer can’t know for sure—evoking the iconic opening scene from cinematic thriller “Mulholland Drive.” A suspiciously similar vehicle appears at the exhibition’s ostensible end, around the bookshelf, illuminating green and yellow leaves in a widescreen work titled “The Hill.” Under the rare cover of darkness, is O’Leary predator or prey? Is she stalking or being stalked? The best answer: “Both/And.”

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"The Hill" Installation view, photo by Elisabeth Bernstein

O'Leary's core preoccupation with ordinary existence constitutes romance of the classical, not colloquial, variety—a matter of attention rather than beauty. Experiential intensity sears these memories in her mind prior to painting, but that power typically comes from annoyance over admiration. Though critics sometimes saddle the artist with a sense of voyeurism, O'Leary hasn't even witnessed some of the stolen scenes in this show. She only smelled, for example, the

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actions of hands imagined in “High Rise Neighbor,” whose cigarette smoke wafted next door into her studio in Puerto Rico. Like this, O’Leary can even transmute annoyance into affection.

It’s all a matter of perspective, though spending time with this show will pull you into O’Leary’s first and foremost. There’s no right or wrong answer on these walls, no agenda or story to tell, just fervent contemplations by an artist making sense of dynamics in her own surroundings.

Standard conventions make way for reality’s true nature upon accepting that it’s all a projection. **WM**



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