303 GALLERY
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AMERICA AT THE EDGES

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

I love the tiny landscape paintings of Maureen Gallace, currently on view at the 303 Gallery, so intensely that it worries me. Since the early nineteen-nineties, Gallace, who is from Connecticut and earned an M.F.A. at Rutgers University, in 1983, has been refreshing jaded art-world eyes with slightly abstracted views of New England cottages and barns, empty roads, and unpeopled beaches. She won fans early on with her work’s retro look and exaggerated modesty. Though the appeal seemed self-conscious and a bit fey, it was fun, on days of gallery-going in Chelsea, to find yourself looking at her pictures of blocky, featureless little houses in vestigial, woodsy terrain. Then, in recent years, something started to take hold: a charm so powerful that it reordered my sense of what contemporary painting can be. The crux is a mind’s surrender to—for want of a more precise word—nature, both external and internal to the artist.

Gallace’s means are narrow: she employs uniformly quick, daubed brushwork and colors kept to a mid-range of tones that makes whites jump out. Her end is description, not of how things look but of how they seem. What is a breaking ocean wave like? Gallace answers with stabs of creamy off-white and gray-blue shadow. It’s her best guess, as is the specific blue of the sky on the given day. In one picture, single blue strokes approximate tidal pools. Elsewhere, a slight touch of green in the sea hints at fathomless deeps. Qualities of light, too, feel gamely speculative. (To me, they tend to evoke morning hours, when the visible world, well rested, has something almost eager about it.) The houses often lack doors and windows. Gallace is plainly shy of anyone or anything that might even seem to return her gaze. She conveys a vulnerable aloneness wholly given over to absorption in appearances. Looking at the paintings, I feel that I am always just beginning to look.

Besides suggesting kinships to Edward Hopper’s scenes of solitude and the meditative still-lifes of the Italian modern master Giorgio Morandi, Gallace’s way of painting—it hardly seems a style—has affinities with a New York tradition of painterly realism that was developed in the nineteen-fifties by Fairfield Porter and pursued by, among others, Jane Freilicher and Lois Dodd. But Gallace seems less to revive that impulse than to arrive at its basis, in a view of modern art that values the visual poetics of life observed in the living of it. (Porter, a superb critic as well as artist, liked to argue that modernism went astray by hewing to Cézanne rather than to Vuillard.) This accounts for the surprising force of her pictures. The effect is like a fresh invention of perceptual landscape painting, as if there had been no thought of it before. My joy in it may abate with time, but right now I want to launch a small, considerately quiet firework in Gallace’s honor. ♦