

The approach

Kiki Mazzucchelli, "Allison Katz: *We boil at different degrees*," *ArtReview*, December 2016

Allison Katz *We boil at different degrees* *The Approach, London* 18 September – 23 October

Ten paintings by London-based Canadian artist Allison Katz are hung in a line, in order of scale, across the gallery's four walls. Almost as tall as the wall, the largest, *Broader Than Broadway* (2016), depicts a curved, tree-lined dirt road. That thoroughfare spans the whole width of the bottom half of the canvas – creating a perspective that encourages a 'lifesize', one-to-one scale relationship between viewers' bodies and pictorial space – before disappearing off into its upper left. Other works on show – *Giant* (2013–16), an oversize, spectral female figure hovering over a townscape, and *Giant Cock* (2016), a painting of a crowing cockerel, the surface scattered with real rice grains – evince a similar sensitivity to scale, albeit here relying on titles to make the connection explicit, as does the last work in this sequence, the diminutive *Fairy* (2016), in which a glowing pixie figure floats against a dark background.

In typical Katz fashion, this collection of apparently mundane and arcane imagery is intimately linked to a process of notetaking that is a prominent feature of her working method. Such notes often include first-person accounts

of lived situations, written like diary entries or direct quotations by other authors and taken from books and magazines. Her texts are fragmentary compilations of short, evocative snapshots of unrelated ideas and personal experiences that work in an associative manner while generating a series of images and motifs that may or may not be reproduced in the paintings. In the notes reproduced in the exhibition's accompanying handout, for instance, Katz recounts a tense encounter with a gun-toting guard when driving inadvertently into mining territory in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, followed by a sudden encounter with cows 'clustered on the tufted grass island in the middle of the road, like a Dutch painting', as she describes it. In another entry, she narrates a fairy-hunting experience (and examining flowers in search of evidence of their presence) in London.

While these stories are not exactly represented in Katz's paintings, they create visual reverberations, such as the road in *Broader Than Broadway* and, of course, *Fairy*. Far from illustrating the artist's fragmented plots, her works operate within a pictorial system that feeds on

written language to experiment with the nature of representation and the meanings that can be generated through image association. Words are merely a starting point for the incorporation of seemingly disparate symbols that form a subjective visual lexicon, in which the narrative element is constantly being interrupted, never reaching a conclusive meaning. *We boil at different degrees* also includes some of Katz's trademark tropes, such as the picture of a cabbage and a figure in profile (*Cabbage (and Philip) No. 5*, 2013) – which have been recurring motifs in past works – and the explicit reference to the self in *Schrödinger's Katz* (2016), in which the depictions of a living and a dead cat (alluding to the homonymous Austrian scientist's thought experiment 'Schrödinger's cat') are superimposed with the image of a female hand, possibly the artist's own. These are works that seem to address the mediated character of representation by highlighting the gaps between words and images, and Katz manages to tackle this issue with a lot of humour and wit, as well as through deceptively simple and engaging paintings.

Kiki Mazzucchelli



We boil at different degrees (installation view), 2016. © the artist.
Courtesy the artist and The Approach, London