On Aubrey Levinthal's *Winter Park*, 2022

By Alexi Worth

"Why can't there be a Diet Coke?"

Remembering her teacher Kathy Bradford's question, Aubrey Levinthal smiles. It was years ago, during a studio visit at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Levinthal's student canvases had been overshadowed by Bonnard and Vuillard, by her love of painting's illustrious European past. A hypothetical Diet Coke was the spell-breaker, the ticket back to her own life.

That life is visible everywhere in Levinthal's work, with its yoga mats and take-out cartons, baristas, children, and young parents. A new painting, *Winter Park*, shows us the Philadelphia park she walks through every day while taking her son to school. Its name, Columbus Square Park, rhymes with the square proportions of the canvas itself. The "Diet Coke" moment here might be the familiar tiny white curl at upper left: an Apple Airpod. Or, just as irrefutably contemporary, the dangling green fist of a dog-owner's poop bag.

These little details confirm Levinthal's self-description: "For me, being a painter is about *looking out at* the world. It's observational." And yet part of the charm of these details is that they can feel unexpected or even slightly jarring. Why is that? I think it's because Levinthal's paintings don't match our expectations of contemporaneity. They are full of weathered grays, of scrubby thin surfaces, of artfully awkward freehand shapes—in a word, of things we associate with the past, with the world before Airpods.

Last year, at her Monya Rowe Gallery exhibition, I remember coming across Levinthal's painting of a dessert display, full of frosted cakes, evidently a nod to Wayne Thiebaud, who had just recently passed away. But all Thiebaud's rich cobalts and golden yellows had evaporated, replaced with somber olives and taupes. Californian high chroma had given way to east coast austerity; the bright, insistent present to an amber atmosphere, harder to place in time. Behind the dessert counter stood a young woman, assessing us with a look that suggested fatigue, patience, and resignation. She might have been one of Walker Evan's dustbowl housewives.

The link between our strange, depressing Covid era and the actual Great Depression is something Levinthal herself occasionally hints at in her work. The tired customers queuing in *Bagel Line*, 2022, feel like a nod to the earlier era's bread lines. Everywhere Levinthal seems to offer subdued echoes of the subdued styles of the 1930s and 40s, summoning up memories of Ben Shahn, Reginald Marsh, the Soyer brothers, early Alice Neel, and Lester Johnson. More than any other painting, *Winter Park* is the one where this Depression connection leaps out. With its mounds of old snow, bare, spindly trees, and isolated figures in their long coats, the scene before us seems deprived, washed out, almost barren. No sky. No greenery. Hardly a warm color in sight. And no human interaction, except for the collision on the right, where the man in the ocher coat steps forward, cropping the woman in green. Belatedly, we realize there's a kind of comedy there. The way her hair fits with a strange neatness into his collar, so that they become a single, four-footed creature. Likewise, there's something comic, even ridiculous, about the woman in the indigo coat, who seems to want to headbutt the left edge of the canvas. *Winter Park* might be less about Covid than about coats. Their tall shapes march across the canvas like Egyptian pharaohs. Across the coats, snowflakes appear with a dainty, improbable neatness, each one a single brush touch.

"So much of it is about having fun with the paint," says Levinthal. If we focus on that, on the tactile variety of *Winter Park*, it becomes a very different painting. Not the melancholy scene we see at first, but a painting full of dabs and scratches, of swipes and scrubbing gestures, of improvisatory painterly pleasures. Its barrenness becomes a kind of unostentatious, whimsical beauty. That's true of so much of Levinthal's work. The austerity, the mysterious anachronistic feeling—those never melt away. But they're only part of the picture, offset by the sense of her energetic freehandedness. Always sure, never academic, her brush turns every shape into something blocky, wobbly, electric, and memorable.

Levinthal's painterly confidence brings to mind contemporaries like Salman Toor, Louis Fratino, Jennifer Packer, and Danica Lundy. Like hers, their paintings are improvisatory, loosely diaristic, and freewheeling in their use of past styles. But it's too early to spell out Levinthal's relationship to her peers, or to the past. The main thing is that her work feels distinctive and unexpected, as cool and delicate as *Winter Park's* snowfall.