



HYPERALLERGIC

THE EMERGENCE OF AUBREY LEVINTHAL

What distinguishes Levinthal from her contemporaries is her ability to evoke a melancholic state that has been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

by John Yau
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I could start off by stating the obvious — that Aubrey Levinthal is one of the most interesting and engaging figurative painters at a time when many artists are working in this vein. But that alone does not get to what makes this artist special.

What distinguishes Levinthal from her contemporaries is her ability to evoke a melancholic state that speaks directly to the pervasive, daily sense of unease and vulnerability that has been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 12 paintings in her current exhibition, *Aubrey Levinthal: Vacancy* at Monya Rowe Gallery (September 10 – October 31, 2020) — her first with this intrepid enterprise — all but one is dated 2020.

Levinthal's palette is muted, dominated by gray, which she builds up with layers of thin, semi-transparent washes, and scrapes down with a razor. Her subjects are all close to home: herself and her family, friends, and colleagues.

Four of the paintings depict a woman alone. Through color, materiality, and composition — the bedrocks of painting — Levinthal conveys an inchoate interiority in each of them, the swirl of constantly changing apprehensions that preoccupy us, usually when alone.

What further enhances the paintings is Levinthal's attention to detail and placement of all elements, not only the figure. Just as important is her decision to mute their presence so that we don't see as much as discover them in our looking. No matter how familiar, ordinary, or lugubrious the situation, the artist evokes its innate strangeness. She is an artist of nuances.

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In “Worry (Spaghetti)” (2020), Levinthal depicts a young, black-haired woman clutching her head. She has large, sorrowful eyes and a downturned mouth. In front of her, closer to the foreground, is a faintly painted white fork with a strand of brown spaghetti winding around one of its tines, near a few more strands lying on the table. By all rights, such an extreme scene might seem maudlin, but it does not come off this way, at least to this viewer.

The first thing that struck me was the woman’s severe and uncommon pose. Cut off from the world, she seems on the brink of being overwhelmed by her interior feelings. Whereas an Expressionist or Symbolist artist, such as Käthe Kollwitz or Edvard Munch, might exaggerate this state, as the latter did in “Ashes” (1894), Levinthal portrays it with restraint, beginning with her use of a washed-out yellow to articulate the wall behind her, as well as her garment, which combine to hold her head in place.



Aubrey Levinthal, “Worry (Spaghetti)” (2020), oil on panel

It is only after homing in on shifts in hue or changes in scale that you might notice the size of her hands or the height of her shoulders, which are enormous, in relation to the head. Focusing on these details, you are likely to realize the oddness of the scene. What happened to the plate? Why do we see only the fork and some spaghetti, seemingly neatly arranged on the table? The sparseness becomes quirky and unsettling without ever falling into the overly dramatic. This is one of the qualities that makes Levinthal a compelling artist.

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Another indication of her painterly acuity is her use of color. Blue is associated with melancholy, especially after Picasso used it so extensively in his Blue Period (1900-1904). With “Worry (Spaghetti)”’s washed-out yellow, Levinthal picks a color associated with warmth, sunlight, and joy to express melancholy, counteracting the viewer’s expectations.



Aubrey Levinthal, “Weighty Table” (2020), oil on panel



Aubrey Levinthal, “Egg Breakfast” (2020)

She uses a very different yellow in “Egg Breakfast” and “Weighty Table” (both 2020) because she is interested not in types, but in individuals. At the same time, within the domestic space she evokes, it seems she is trying to get at the elusive and unsettling without developing a narrative that can be easily extracted by the viewer; she is in pursuit of the ambiguous, uncanny, and withdrawn as integral features of everyday life.

In the square “Bed (April)” (2020), Levinthal tilts the bed up until it is nearly parallel with the picture plane. A black-haired woman in a dark shirt and pants is lying on her stomach, her feet at the top of the painting and her head at the bottom, resting on her folded arms. She is staring at an open laptop.

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Aubrey Levinthal, "Bed (April)" (2020), oil on panel

Again, the details, and the choreographed interplay between them and with the ground (the bed's patterned covering), make this painting more than just the sum of its parts. The woman's bare feet hang off the edge of the bed, which underscores the physical weight of her body, gravity's downward pull, as well as establishes a relationship with other paintings of an inverted figure, such as Titian's haunting, late-in-life masterpiece "Flaying of Marsyas" (1570-76). Levinthal is in dialogue with painters of all periods, from the classical to the contemporary.

Levinthal moves this extreme situation into the most private domestic interior, the bedroom, and replaces Titian's suffering male figure with a female looking at her computer. One by one, the details come into focus. At the bottom of the painting, we see that the woman has painted her fingernails black. At the top of the bed, on the left side, there is a wristwatch with a black face and a muted, dusty pink wristband, an odd color combination. It presides over the painting, reminding us that we all live in time. About a third of the way down the bed is a remote control, placed so that the pattern of the bed covering snakes around its edge, visually holding it in place. This line reinforces the feeling of gravity established by the placement of the woman's feet.

And yet, as with the fork and spaghetti in "Worry (Spaghetti)," nothing in Levinthal's paintings is heavy handed. This allows her to deal with loaded subjects and not become redundant or didactic. Instead, she elicits from the viewer sympathy and identification, which, I think, is her preoccupation: Can she evoke an extreme state of feeling without romanticizing it? Can she shift these extreme states into a larger state of collective experience? Even when she centers herself (or someone who resembles her) as the subject, I never felt the paintings were about her. They never closed me out, never made me feel like a voyeur.

By moving an extreme situation of terror into a domestic interior in "Bed (April)," and replacing the suffering male figure with a self-reflective female, Levinthal gets at the sense

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of isolation we have all experienced during the pandemic and lockdown — which she underscores by including “April” in her title.

Her ability to embed details within the painting is one of her many strengths. At a time when the art world seems to prefer the overt, Levinthal has elected to go down a very different path, one that pursues gradations of feeling and doubt. Rather than telling us something, each of her works gently and tenderly pushes us to ask: What is going on?



Aubrey Levinthal, “Men’s Faculty Meeting” (2020)

In “Men’s Faculty Meeting” (2020), we see six heads (four in full profile and slivers of the two others) thrust out over the table, facing each other, three on each side. The top of an empty chair peers above the far end of the long, dusty pink table, which is angled away from the picture plane. At the bottom of the painting is a woman’s face, seen from her eyes up, as the rest is cropped by the painting’s bottom edge. This cropping brought to mind Philip Guston’s “The Artist” (1977). Why are the men at the table ignoring her? Why is she facing away from them? What is the object that looks like a banana lying on the table? Why is it completely black? What about the finger that is pointing straight down, like at nail, at the black-ringed report?

In “Weighty Table” (2020), which measures 36 by 48 inches and is the largest work in the exhibition, we see a young man on his hand and knees, beneath a table on which sits a hairbrush, loaf of bread, and other items. A muted detail is the bearded figure standing at the far left, squeezed by the table’s edge and cropped by the painting’s left edge. The pale figure clutches a coffee mug perched on the table’s lower left edge. We don’t discern him right away, but when we do, he immediately changes how we see the painting.

This exhibition establishes Levinthal as a major figurative painter following her own trajectory. Still in her early 30s, and having shown each year since 2016, she has staked out a singular territory marked by melancholy, isolation, tenderness, and gentle humor.