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BROOKLYN RAIL

Aubrey Levinthal: *Neighbors, Strangers, Gazers, Bathers*

by Andrew L. Shea
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In *Bagel Line* (2022), one of twelve new oil paintings—all made in 2022—included in Aubrey Levinthal's current exhibition at Monya Rowe Gallery, five adult figures huddle together in the cold. Arranged along the picture plane a bit like a crowd of auxiliary characters in a Giotto, they're at the front of a long queue that turns back into the space behind them. It's a lazy Sunday morning in the city: the figures look tired and bedraggled—and perhaps hungover, judging by their queasy, impatient glares. A man sports a five o'clock shadow. A woman rests her chin on her friend's shoulder, eyes closed. No one combed their hair.

The painting's spare and sensitive forms are rendered in a muted palette, composed mostly

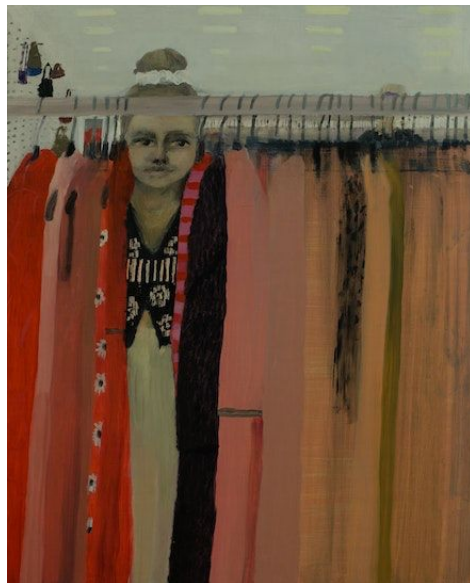
of chromatic grays and pale yellows. It sets an emotional atmosphere that extends through the rest of the exhibition: a little melancholic, a little funny, suffused with a pervasive boredom and unease. This is familiar territory for Levinthal, but the scene also exemplifies a subtle and important shift in the painter's subject matter. Whereas previous bodies of work consisted primarily of autobiographical and domestic scenes, here Levinthal ventures forth to engage with the outside world and the figures she encounters there.

These people, mostly women, have large, dark eyes and strong, sculptural noses. Their stylized faces hold psychological weight, anchoring our own experience of the pictures. Levinthal finds a kind of unexpected Proustian electricity in these transient, mysterious, seemingly one-off encounters. A glimpse of a stranger in passing—a barista, a crab-shack cashier, a yoga student—clings to the mind, details coming in and out of focus, leaving an accumulation of traces that solidify into an image. We tend to meet these figures face-to-face, but it's not clear what kind of exchange, if any, takes place. What are they looking at? Are they peering at us, or through us? Are they absorbed in thought, or bored out of their mind? What do they think about the drab, dispiriting environments in which they sit, stand, and move? Are these indeed strangers, or self-portraits by half?

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Painting attuned to the ennui of the everyday can easily become bogged down by angsty self-importance, but Levinthal navigates these moments with a remarkable lightness of touch, and a sensitivity to the nuances of material and experience. She tends to use the light of the gessoed ground, and her thinned-out oils converse with the textures and tones of previous layers. Milky pigments are brushed on, rubbed out, scraped off, and sanded down. Her brushwork trembles silently, collecting into surfaces that are haptic and expressive but that eschew bravado and pedantry.

A similarly light touch is detectable in Levinthal's let-be compositional sensibility. Though her images are constructions, Levinthal insists on seeking out the arbitrariness of life seen as it is, putting her in conversation with painters like Pierre Bonnard, Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher, and others. Porter himself was fond of quoting Wallace Stevens's adage, from *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), that "To impose is not / To discover," and Levinthal would seem to agree, based on the way that pastries strew about on the display case in *Coffee Shop (Barista)*, each slice of cake and plate of cookies expressing a peculiar individuality, putting delicate pressures on the space around it. These shelved desserts are so engrossing that one forgets for a moment that the whole painting, with its pouting lady standing behind the counter, is a conspicuous riff on Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882).



Elsewhere, Levinthal is looking at motherhood. In *Playdate*, mom is a Madonna della Misericordia, a statuesque presence that envelops and protects the infant in her black-jeaned lap. In *C+J (Sister-in-Law)*, a woman swathes a baby against her chest with arms and hands that stretch like elastic. She's sitting up in what appears to be a hospital bed, and the interior is clinically sterile. Her haunting, unforgettable eyes are sunken, and pallid skin is pulled taut over her face's skeletal structure. Here, Levinthal makes us witness to post-partum exhaustion, just subsequent to the moment of creation, and reminds us, even now—especially now—*memento mori*.

Other paintings point to more mundane cyclicalities. There's a lot of plastic, a lot of reduce, reuse, recycle. In *Goodwill* we face a woman peering into a rack of pre-worn dresses, arranged red to orange, left to right. Cheap ceiling fluorescents recede into space; a smattering of handbags hang on pins on the wall to the left. The woman's head and body are swallowed by the slot of negative space she's opened up among the dresses, and she looks uncertain about the floral-patterned garment under consideration. Will it spark joy? Probably not, but maybe so.