

Art in America

FEBRUARY 2014

EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Lesley Vance:
Untitled, 2013, oil
on linen, 10 by 12
inches; at David
Kordansky.

LESLEY VANCE

David Kordansky

With no apparent fronts or backs, the forms in Lesley Vance's paintings are slippery as Möbius strips. Edge becomes plane, plane dissolves. Broad ribbons fold over and peel away. Inner elides into outer, outer into inner. Bulges flatten, and flat planes swell. The impenetrable turns permeable before dissipating entirely.

Six or seven years ago, Vance, based in Los Angeles, was painting still lifes haunted by Zurburán and Cotán. She continues to work from studio arrangements of rocks, shells, horns and ceramic objects that she sets up inside a cardboard box, lights dramatically and photographs. Her Spanish forebears have receded somewhat; they are traceable mostly in the exquisite play of sheer luminosity emerging from deep dark ground. The legibility and palpability of her subjects have markedly diminished. What remains might be read as time performing itself in space. Slippery.

The oil paintings (all 2013) are modest in size, many as small as 9 by 11 inches, making for intimate encounters. Vance paints wet on wet, finishing each piece in one or two days. They are less meditations on than responses to the history of potent, mysterious image-making (she counts Magritte and de Chirico as formative) and, more directly, to the kind of still-life photography in which the image is rendered as a matter of light and dark tonal passages on a single plane. What she conceives is a distinctive sort of illusionistic abstraction, its visual presence a balance between elusive secret and seductive fact.

The work has an uncannily strong kinship with Francis Bruguière's 1920s photographs of cut paper, similar in their spatial

ambiguity, and in the way tangible forms lose substantiality and become pure light, shadow and motion. The lyrical accretion of fragments in Vance's recent endeavors invokes collage, while their rhythmic interplay of solid and void conjures the sculptural space of, for example, works by Archipenko.

For all this cross-disciplinary affinity, Vance's practice is fundamentally rooted in the liquidity of paint and the balletic, improvisational movements of the hand. Scraping with a palette knife, Vance thins her strokes to a gleaming translucency, occasionally baring the weave of the supporting canvas. As she invests the linear forms with directional energy, she brings notions of pace and duration to the fore. Shapes overlap and interpenetrate, viscous plumes stretch, curl and bend. Some have firm contours and blurred interiors, some are rimmed by light and some made weighty by shadow. Gravity may be alluded to, but is moot. Landscape suggests itself, as do bodily curves, angles and depressions. One area of a canvas might grant the traction of comprehension, in terms of spatial logic and coherence, but others will fruitfully contradict it. These paintings are not, in any case, maps serving destinations as much as promising roads, drawing themselves as they go.

—Leah Ollman