

Patti Oleon

By Molly Enhoim

A haunting aura of mystery inhabits the paintings of nostalgic, lavish interiors made by San Francisco artist Patti Oleon. While the scenes at first seem inviting, Oleon manipulates the works' light, reflection and shadow, to complicate their architectural structure, and undermine the viewer's expectations. This disorientation is central to Oleon's practice, which focuses on dichotomies of reality and illusion; her Old Master style is countered with a postmodern conceptual twist. "What appears to be real--what feels realistically rendered and natural--is not necessarily so," explains Oleon. "You are drawn to it, but uncomfortable and not able to place yourself rationally within that space."



Ascending Windows, 2011, oil on
hardwood panel, 55x38 inches

The idea of displacement finds origins in the artist's background. Born in St. Louis, Oleon's family moved to Southern California when she was three. Looking back, Oleon recalls how the persistent sunshine ironically created "a sense of melancholy" for her, along with a disappointing lack of mystery in her surroundings. "I craved something darker," she explains. Oleon also describes her fascination with medieval Germanic culture, which she was able to explore during her Fulbright/DAAD Fellowship that led her to Munich in 1979 (just one year after receiving her MFA in Painting from UCLA), as an influence to her technique. She describes a particularly stormy night soon after her arrival in Munich, in a house secured by storm shutters completely blacking out the windows and any sense of the outdoors, except the eerie sounds of the wailing

storm. "It was very disturbing," Oleon recollects.

More impactful for the artist was her first-hand experience of the castles in Europe, particularly Vienna and Munich, and her subsequent visits to the recreated period rooms at the Met and the Frick Museum, in New York. The displacement of the private interiors of the latter reconstructed across time and place in the public

domain, in particular, intrigued her. "I loved the idea," says Oleon. "It's like theater, like the idea of a stage set." This fascination manifests in her subject matter, which includes photographs of the museum's period interiors, movie sets, hotel lobbies, preserved historic mansions, and the side chapel of an abandoned church all captured by Oleon using Kodachrome 64 film in her hand-held Nikon. The artificiality of the constructed rooms is heightened by Oleon's manipulation of their color, her fracturing reality through creating mirror images, and more recently, layering the objects and structure of the actual environment.

Oleon further manipulates her photographs through filters and layering in Photoshop to create composite images from which her paintings begin. And although the compositions go through a similar process of visualization, the conception of space is unique to each. *Throne* (2009) offers a solemn scene, frontality rendered in transcendent shades of cobalt, while the dizzying refractions of *Green Room* (2011) create an almost vertigo-like sensation. *Ascending Curtains* (2011) offers a subtle impossibility, through horizontal reflections along base of the composition, which leave the viewer disconcertingly ungrounded.

Examining the ornate interiors of Oleon's compositions, it is unsurprising that she counts Flemish painters and Germanic medieval work among her influences. Less expected is her equal passion for Rothko and his "mesmerizing floating apparitions of color and light." "When you are able to sit and be in the presence of Rothko's paintings," Oleon says, "it is an experience that is almost religious." While acknowledging the antithetical appearance of her work, her objectives are very much in line with the spirituality Rothko sought in his non-objective abstractions. "Although my work is rooted in reality, it is so much about light, I could marry these ideas together. And by creating a space so brilliant--one is immersed in a space that is all light, you cannot make out anything--light is transforming one's sense of reality."

Oleon, who will be featured in two exhibitions late spring at Modernism in San Francisco and George Lawson Gallery in Culver City, continues to evoke a sense of confusion in her paintings, but in her latest work, she adds to the idea of "the room as object" to focus--or unfocus--attention on the bewildering and spiritual effects of light.