

Patti Oleon Paintings

By Wes Freese

The Lora Schlesinger Gallery in Santa Monica will open the 2009-2010 exhibition season with new and recent paintings by Patti Oleon. Opening reception is September 12. From a press release by Jody Zellen:

“For her exhibition entitled “Phantom Spaces,” San Francisco-based painter Patti Oleon depicts period rooms and lobby spaces that are illuminated by both natural and artificial light. Oleon’s process has been to make photographs of the rooms, taking advantage of the camera’s ability to distort and flatten space. Evident too are the particular qualities of light captured by now obsolete Kodachrome film. The glow from interior lamps emanates a warmth that is contrasted with cool natural light, flowing from the windows. She indulges in these juxtapositions of opposing luminosities, translating them into a bracing visual encounter.”

I previously posted some personal reflections on Patti’s work here. Over the summer I posed some questions to Patti about her work and received some thoughtful responses from her. Below is an excerpt of some of the correspondence.

I’ve read the artist statement from your website. Is the experience you describe in your statement an actual experience, or an allegorical description of something else?

It is both allegorical and real. These series of rooms exist in different museums; the Metropolitan in New York, for example is one such place and is where much of my work has been derived from. The sensation of displacement in time and location is what I experience and what I would like the viewer to experience as well.

The newest paintings I’m working on are pared down to a more critical essence – the light and sense of isolation – expansion of the imagery. I want the paintings to be read as an almost iconic sense of space and light, almost as if, even though it is still “real” imagery, it has been converted into something intangible. I want to get to the essence of what a Rothko experience is like for me, a floating, soaring, almost

religious experience. I want this abstraction to have transformed from the “real”.

The paintings exhibit a high sense of order, but at the same time your artist statement talks about experiencing a sense of disorientation, which at first would seem paradoxical. But I don't think you mean to describe a sense of being drunk or dizzy, but rather of experiencing a shift of perception. In anthropological terms, when civilizations would settle, they first would build temples devoted to God that would be highly ordered wherein the citizens could go to escape the harshness of the elements in nature. In that closed, human ordered environment people become calmed and their minds are quieted which is a kind of disorientation from their normal day-to-day reality. My question is, what is that disorientation that you talk about in your statement?

By disorientation I mean that one is presented with a scene that at first glance, seems utterly real: a real place, real light, believable; one could walk into the room etc. It is comfortable, soothing to know things are solid, that everyone experiences the same. But there is a sense of something subtly disturbing, either the light seems to be not quite right (perhaps it is too much the same on each side – as the light is identical when the image is mirrored), etc. and this could not exist in reality. So I'm hoping that one is initially fooled (and comforted) by the idea of what we all accept as a real, plausible environment that we can count on, but which is, in fact, a manipulated, deceptive environment. I want the sense of unquiet, where all appears normal but something is slightly askew. - that causes one to question the possibilities of what is perceived as reality. To feel more, to think more, to experience more from the most mundane experiences. The more realistically it is painted (presented), the more this disorientation could take place.

Do you see flaws in your meticulously crafted paintings? Do you look back and say, I would re-work this section of a painting?

Naturally I see flaws in my paintings. Because I work from the photographs which are already finished pieces of art that I have made, my particular creation and vision – I want the paintings to be exactly like the photographs – slick, almost machine

made as if no hand was involved in the making. But they are far more painterly in person and then melt away into abstracted paint as light on closer inspection. I have to hone in again and again on adjusting the light to make the image come alive for me and to have the sense of transformation that enchanted me with the image in the beginning. The painting has to work as a painting in and of itself, and it is sometimes very difficult to attain that; the process is very painstaking. I will rework any section of a painting that I believe is not working to the level I need it to get the totality of the illusion I am after. Once it is varnished, then it's done, for better or for worse.

How do you transfer the imagery in your photographs to the canvas (i.e. a grid system, a projector, or some other device or process)?

I take the photograph myself. I use Kodachrome film, which is an archaic, very warm daylight film in artificial and daylight situations that distorts the actual environment. I then import the slides into Photoshop and manipulate the images (I change the transparency, color, focus, layer, mirror, etc). I then I have the image blown up at a Kinko's in black and white to the scale of the panel, and then transfer the image with graphite paper. I paint from this conglomerate amalgam of an image.

I generally prepare a hardboard panel with between three to five layers of acrylic gesso, sanding each layer in-between with very fine sandpaper to get an absolutely smooth surface. I don't want any brushstrokes to be visible. Then I sketch out the image with graphite pencils. After this, I do a quick full oil color rendering as an underpainting. I let this dry, and sand it. I then do another, but more in depth painting of the entire panel from the photograph I had created. I then let this dry and sand again, and then do this process again a third time. So there are actually three complete paintings of the image. After letting it sit for some time, I then really hone all the subtleties and nuances of the light and detail that make the image live for me, to have it embody the mystery of the original image I was working from. The painting has to work on its own, obviously separate from the photograph it was conceived from.

What types of paints do you use? What is the varnish you use when the painting is finished?

I use Winsor Newton, Old Holland, Le Franc and Bourgeois, and Holbein oils; I use a spray (Kamar) acrylic varnish when the paintings are completely dry.

Patti's paintings will be on exhibit from September 4 through October 10, 2009. She'll also concurrently be in a group exhibition at Carl Berg Projects at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles. An exciting start to the exhibition season in Santa Monica and Los Angeles.