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Ellen Siebers: Shaping Distance

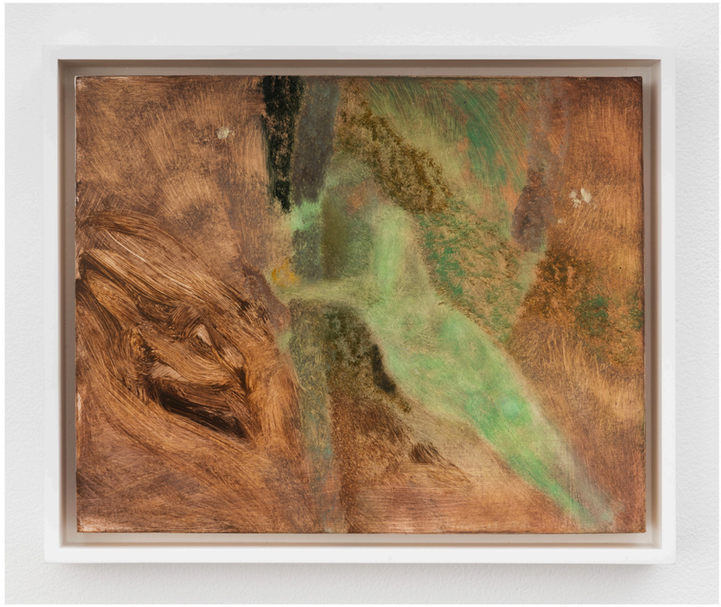


Poppies in the Rain, 2024, Oil on panel, 11"x11"

By IAN ETTER October 17, 2024

Ellen Siebers' paintings appear quiet at first glance, but beneath the surface, forms press and shift against one another. Each composition operates within a controlled spectrum, where soft, singular elements verge on disruption as they grapple for dominance. This interplay, initially apparent from afar, resolves as the viewer moves closer. Triangles materialize into petals, rectangles stretch into landscapes, and figures emerge, revealing imagery just beyond the edge of abstraction.

Bouquet, Siebers' first exhibition with Franklin Parrasch, features fourteen small paintings that resist closure, holding their intent just out of reach. Each work invites the viewer into an immersive act of looking, where motifs linger between recognition and indeterminacy. In *Poppies in the Rain*, two bright red blooms pulse against a muted grey field, approaching clarity. A dark taupe rhombus anchors the lower portion of the composition, flanked by faint, measured marks that hold the image in a state of suspension, subtly suggesting the presence of stems and leaves. Faceted washes reinforce a sense of unresolved energy, as the flowers hover in a state of becoming.



Aubade, 2024, Oil on panel, 8"x10"

Rooted in direct observation, Siebers' practice extends beyond traditional studies. There's a deliberate gap between the moment of seeing and the act of painting. Most subjects are drawn from Siebers' daily walks through the Hudson Valley, a practice rooted in her upbringing in rural Wisconsin, where spending time outdoors and observing her surroundings has long been a natural part of her routine. *Poppies in the Rain* originates from her garden, but in the studio, she paints from recollection—without relying on photos or sketches—allowing the paintings to evolve naturally. This separation reflects the ever-shifting nature of memory, and Siebers embraces the inherent compromises of fidelity, trusting painting to reconstruct her experience.

Her brushwork is distinctive, precise, and dynamic, amplifying the structural tension within each painting. Working on smooth panels, her gestures are intentional yet fluid, creating a visible record of constant reshaping. A restrained palette is further reduced by the near absence of white pigment. Instead of mixing tints, the white foundation lightens the paint, integrating directly into the composition. Siebers' early experience with watercolor profoundly shaped her artistic process, heightening her sensitivity to the dialogue of color and light. In the current oil paintings, the white ground functions not as a mere backdrop but as an active element, reinforcing the artist's presence in each image. Mixed with galkyd, the paint stiffens and gains transparency, revealing each bristle's path. The finely sanded surface enables her to manipulate the paint with precision, making her marks the driving force that keeps the image in flux.



Bowl and Tulips (after-Nicholson), 2024, Oil on panel, 6"x12"

Siebers' clarity of process is evident in *Aubade*, where a green figure emerges from a cohesive mass of brushwork. Varied strokes gently define the thighs, head, neck, and arm, while its chroma sets it apart from the surrounding landscape. To the right, the panel teems with color and movement, drawing the viewer into a vibrant valley. On the left, a cluster of winding marks, almost intestinal, heightens the painting's sense of dissonance. Behind this strange mass, a fan of thin, reductive strokes suggests foliage, revealing the distinctive trace of the blunt-tipped filbert brush. This intensifies the friction running through Siebers' painting and underscores the intricate interplay between her brushwork, material, and imagery.

While most of the work balances process and memory, a few make more direct references. *Bowl and Tulips (After Nicholson)*, painted from a still life assembled in the studio, grounds the practice in historical tradition. Loosely inspired by William Nicholson, the early 20th-century painter who merged modernist ideas with traditional motifs, the piece echoes his restraint. Though Nicholson famously limited his palette to just three pigments, a similar effect is achieved through a more nuanced range of hues. In referencing earlier painters, Siebers draws a direct, unbroken line to her predecessors. The work avoids irony or distance, opting for a quiet conversation with the past while asserting itself firmly in the present. This respect for tradition, combined with distinct mark-making, gives her work a timeless quality without slipping into nostalgia.

In a recent phone conversation, Siebers mentioned that her walks and observations are as much about building memory as they are about seeing. This intentional engagement shapes the work, pushing it beyond mere representation. Her paintings, drawn from past experiences, embody a unique visual language. Her brushwork, refined and deeply personal, transcends historical reference, continuously reshaping tradition. **WM**