THE BROOKLYN RAIL

ARTSEEN | SEPTEMBER 2024

Ellen Siebers: *Bouquet*

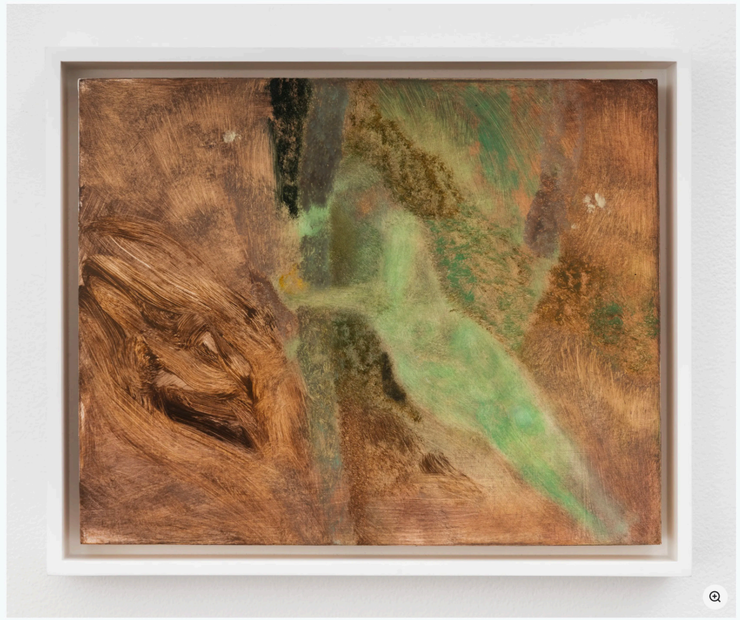
By Elizabeth Buhe

Some of the words I wrote down just after entering Ellen Siebers's fourteen-painting show on the Upper East Side were "velvet," "Inness forest," "autumn," and "ghost." It is striking that most of these associations suggest an expansiveness evoked by texture or the fullness of depth, because Siebers paints relatively small, on square or rectangular birch panels of 12 by 12 inches or less. Even though several compositions are structured as uneven grids in the manner of Paul Klee and punctuated with a single figurative scene (containing, say, a seated woman, as in *Plaid Blanket*), the overall effect is not the recessive pictorial space of an aperture, but the diffuse, dappled space of memory. We see poppies, peaches, the strong verticals of tree trunks, and single bathers awash in the sea. None of these seem arrayed in a measurable space. Reaching out to touch them would be like grasping in the dark. Although this fuzziness or embrace of undefined coordinates is especially evident in the olive gray atmosphere of *March* (all works 2024) and the golden luminosity of *Cone Flower and Lily*, it runs straight through the show, prompting us to consider what memory looks or feels like for each of us.



Installation view: Ellen Siebers: *Bouquet*, Franklin Parrasch Gallery, New York, 2024. Courtesy Franklin Parrasch Gallery.

Mental worlds beyond our own remain unknowable. Yet Siebers's feathery brushwork, achieved by alternating between boar and synthetic sable brushes, generates scenes of varying transparency and opacity that suggest an equivalence between the imagery of an artwork and the visual experiences of psychological interiority. Balanced by a thick application of brown on one side of *Aubade*'s composition, the specter of an absinthe-green woman on the other appears downright immaterial. She is encircled by a glow of negative space, her knees subtly articulated by orbs of slightly denser paint. Siebers seems to offer us not so much what "exists" as what is seen, smelled, heard, or dreamt, and the paintings in many ways seem to be about intersections between these sensory modalities.



Ellen Siebers, *Aubade*, 2024. Oil on panel, 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy the artist and Franklin Parrasch Gallery.

The artist has said that she possesses a quasi-photographic memory, and in this exhibition I had the overwhelming sense that the paintings are but one component of a rather exceptional tessellated and three-dimensional world of the mind that Siebers is able to conjure, alter at will, and call into service while painting. To differing degrees of fidelity, she refers to works by Félix Vallotton, William Nicholson, and Pierre Bonnard, as if she can walk into other canvases she has witnessed and borrow—a form, a color pairing—selectively. Any such mental visions do not solidify until the moment of painting, when she manifests the contours of each immaterial component with her brushwork in an unpremeditated act that is a "conglomeration of equal parts: past, experience, and sensation," as she put it in an interview. In line with recent attention to neurodivergence as an attribute of identity, Siebers's work proves that *how* one thinks matters a great deal. The paintings are not merely the conclusions of this process, but also invitations to her audiences to attune ourselves to poetic thought.

The paintings suggest constellation, accretion, and overlap rather than linearity as their defining logic. We do not read them left to right like a book, nor look deep into them like a receding perspective view, but rather absorb into them as if entering a pasture filled with fog. This is most evident in the way Siebers structures her minute scenes-within-a-scene (*Green Vase*, *Plaid Blanket*) and those overlaid with a veil of staccato marks (*Spring Snow*, the sky of *Bather*). It is as if visual quotes pile up on top of each other into chromatic intensity while they simultaneously dissolve, so that the diffuse vision present in one moment is forever changed in the next. We might imagine, for example—though I do not know—that Siebers experienced the white flecks of *Spring Snow* in one moment of sensory experience, and the trees at another. The visual phenomenon of synthesis that I am hypothesizing implicates time via the varying temporal registers in which constituent parts or layers of a visual image (in our minds, in Siebers's, or on the surface of the panel) might exist.

For those paintings that contain a figural vignette, the relationship between two painted zones might even be causal. The forms, patterns, or fields surrounding the figure, Siebers has said, can articulate "the feelings that I imagine the figure would feel in the landscape through the language of abstraction." Presumably this causality could cut either way—the enclosed woman could materialize in accordance with a felt emotion or its recollection, just as she could be its originator. Time is implied here, too, as chromatic gradients like *Green Vase*'s muddy brown, rouge, white, and green camouflage field suggest the shading of calmness into hope or satisfaction into boredom. It is not all that often, after all, that different temporal worlds coexist non-didactically in a single painting. Siebers's work is exceptionally sensitive to these transfers between the imaginal and the material.



Ellen Siebers, *Bather*, 2024. Oil on panel, 8 x 8 inches. Courtesy the artist and Franklin Parrasch Gallery.