

Aubrey Levinthal Chronicles the Estrangement in Everyday Encounters

Finding her subject matter in ordinary, everyday encounters, Levinthal hints at a subject's interiority and to the way strangers are separated from each other.



John Yau September 21, 2022



Aubrey Levinthal, "Bagel Line" (2022), oil on panel, 30 x 40 inches (all images courtesy Monya Rowe Gallery, New York)

I have been following Aubrey Levinthal since I first saw and reviewed her debut exhibition at Monya Rowe Gallery (September 10–October 31, 2020) in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown (months before the vaccine), aptly titled *Vacancy*. As I wrote in that review, I was immediately convinced that Levinthal is “one of the most interesting and engaging figurative painters at a time when many artists are working in this vein.” Consisting of 12 paintings, mostly modest in scale, Levinthal’s second solo exhibition, *Neighbors, Strangers, Gazers, Bathers*, also at Monya Rowe Gallery (September 8–October 22, 2023), further convinced me that I was right about her potential.

Although Levinthal has started gaining serious attention, she has not become formulaic, nor does she stay within the parameters she’s already established for herself. She finds her subject matter in ordinary, everyday encounters — such as a young woman standing behind a counter in “Coffee Shop (Barista)” (2022) — but she does not settle for documenting it. Rather, she regards this encounter as a challenge, and is attentive to details that hint at a subject’s interiority and to the way strangers are separated from each other. Everything she puts into her spare paintings, rendered in washed-out color, is telling.

Levinthal chronicles her everyday life, friends and family, passing moments she experiences or witnesses in her neighborhood, which happens to be in Philadelphia. In the earlier work, a number of paintings depicted a woman alone, riding the subway, lying in bed, sitting before a nearly empty plate. What came across was the feeling of isolation and melancholy one experienced during the months of lockdown.



Aubrey Levinthal, "Crab Shack" (2022), oil on panel, 20 x 16 inches

In the recent paintings (all dated 2022), Levinthal finds her subjects in daily life, as the city begins its return to something resembling normalcy. She continues to use a muted palette, applying paint in thin washes and then scraping it down with a razor. Compositionally, she creates layered spaces by placing one thing in front of another. “Crab Shack” (2022) is dominated by two rectangles rising from the bottom edge of the canvas. They are brown paper bags, one inside a celadon plastic bag, placed on a counter, waiting to be picked up.

Behind the bags is a young woman with blue hair, her head tilted to the right, possibly lost in thought. The red letters on her T-shirt, glimpsed between the two bags, appear to correspond to the painting’s title. Is she the customer or the employee? What is she doing? Initially, I thought she was wiping her hair with a towel, but after a closer look I was no longer sure. The ability to create ambiguity is one of Levinthal’s strengths. I noticed that both bags seem slightly too tall and are in the foreground of the painting, closer to the customer (or viewer) than the woman.

Are the woman’s eyes too large? Is that why they are riveting? What tonal shifts and jumps does Levinthal achieve by using washy browns and gray-greens atop a ground the color of poached salmon? What mood do the colors establish? The woman’s blue hair jumps out in relation to the painting’s overall soft palette. The tilt of her head allows her to fit within the painting’s rectangle.



Aubrey Levinthal, "Coffee Shop (Barista)" (2022), oil on panel, 24 x 30 inches

Levinthal uses the layered space to convey the levels of estrangement that have become a deep part of our everyday life. She has carefully considered the placement of each element within the picture plane, as in the woman’s tilting head. Her use of color and her sense of scale are in service of her subject matter, which explores passing moments and the different unvoiced feelings, such as tenderness, that are stirred up when we have a transaction with a stranger.

Dozens of tomes have been devoted to Edward Hopper’s depictions of urban isolation. Hopper, however, was disinterested in close encounters; he observed everything from a distance, where he felt safe and in control. In his paintings, the isolation is felt by others; in Levinthal’s paintings, the feeling of separateness and sense of silence happen to all of us.

The young woman in “Coffee Shop (Barista),” with its pale yellow ground, is standing behind a two-shelf display case in which we see a plate of Linzer cookies, an uncut carrot cake with cream cheese frosting, a slice of chocolate cake with white frosting, and other items. The glass case comes up to the woman’s face just below her nose. What might we read into this ordinary detail?

The barista wears a dark green long-sleeved pullover with an unreadable figure printed on the front. On her left are two iced coffees waiting to be picked up. On her right, we see part of a man's face in profile within a slightly brighter yellow rectangle. A glass case separates us from the barista, while the man in the kitchen is framed within his own rectangle and partly obscured by a jar of biscotti. Everyone exists in their own space, with some kind of physical barrier underscoring these partitions.



Aubrey Levinthal, "C + J (Sister-in-Law)" (2022), oil on panel, 24 x 20 inches

Levinthal's layered space shares something with Philip Guston's breakthrough paintings, such as "Portrait" (1969), where he depicted his hooded figures in interior spaces defined by a bubblegum pink ground. The difference is that Levinthal implicates us as viewers by drawing us into the same space as her subjects, but often physically separating us from them. Whereas Guston's loaded-brush pinks evoke cheerfulness and viscera, adding a twist to his unsettling subject matter, Levinthal's palette of wan yellows, grays, and ochers infects her domestic paintings with haggard feelings, traces of melancholia, and emotional imbalance. Levinthal, like Guston, does not spell things out. She makes complexly nuanced paintings that brim with unexpected tensions and unlikely surprises out of everyday scenes of mothers and children, two women crossing the street or browsing a rack of clothes, a woman practicing yoga, another lying in a hospital, or someone leaning out of a window and smoking.

There is nothing dramatic or intrinsically interesting about Levinthal's scenes, which is why I think she is such an interesting artist; from composition to color to her choice of details, she makes everything happen in the paint. In this exhibition, she has started to enlarge her repertoire of figures, as well as explore different facial expressions, as in the haunting "C + J (Sister-in-Law)" (2022), which depicts a mother with a jaundiced complexion holding her newborn in a hospital room with gray walls. The mother's large, sunken eyes and oversized hands add another layer of feeling to this gloomy painting.

In "Yoga Mat" (2022), which, according to the gallery press release, was "directly inspired by the Egyptian sculpture titled *Statue of Sitepehu* (1479-1458 BCE) [in] the permanent collection [of] the Penn Museum, Philadelphia," Levinthal has transformed the sandstone sculpture into a portrait of a self-contained woman in black sitting on a yoga mat. The black trapezoid formed by her slightly darker leggings and outfit becomes an impenetrable wall above which her head and neck rise. Her long black hair further frames and protects her, as it reaches to the edges of the trapezoid. The synthesis of astute observation, memory, imagination, and openness to art history is a potent mixture. I look forward to seeing what Levinthal will do next.



Aubrey Levinthal, "Yoga Mat" (2022), oil on panel, 30 x 24 inches

Aubrey Levinthal: Neighbors, Strangers, Gazers, Bathers *continues at Monya Rowe Gallery (224 West 30th Street, #1005, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 22. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.*