

# ARTFORUM

## OPENINGS: HAYLEY BARKER

By Barry Schwabsky



Hayley Barker, *Front Yard at Dusk with Visitor*, 2020, oil on linen, 82 × 100".

**I FEEL LIKE I'M SEEING EVERYTHING** from a distance these days. It's disconcerting, but the seeing is no less precious for that—maybe the opposite.

Something of that sensation is captured for me in Hayley Barker's painting *Front Yard at Dusk with Visitor* (all works 2020); as quotidian as the ostensible subject may be, her treatment of it possesses a kind of visionary grandeur. The flower garden her tableau leads us into and through is a chromatic symphony all the more seductive for the fact that the artist has applied her colors so lightly, so sparingly. She has orchestrated the composition by giving a leading role to the omnipresent dull beige of the unpainted linen. To an astonishing degree, she has combined a strict parsimony of materials with pictorial extravagance, here and in many of her recent paintings.

It has taken Barker a long time to get to this place. Born forty-seven years ago in Oregon, she didn't set out to be a painter. She studied performance, first at the University of Oregon and then at the University of Iowa, where she received her MFA in 2001 before establishing herself in Portland. Her early, Riot Grrrl-influenced performances ("Lots of angry ranting and confessional texts . . . with songs and noises" incorporating video, says Barker) were more at home on the club circuit than in the white cube. But "secretly and on the side, because it wasn't really cool," she was also drawing and painting naturalistic observations of the world around her—and the works on paper, perhaps surprisingly, began to be noticed by the people who had been attracted by her far more aggressive output as a performer and video artist. Gradually, her drawing practice became her focus, but it was only when she moved from Oregon to Los Angeles about five years ago that it began to spill over into painting in a concerted way. Looking back at the changes her art has undergone, Barker reflects that, now, "enjoying beauty and flowers seems more radical to me."

“

Looking back at the changes her art has undergone, Barker reflects that, now, “enjoying beauty and flowers seems more radical to me.”

Which brings me back to *Front Yard at Dusk with Visitor*. The space between the viewer, implicitly positioned on a doorstep, and a socially distanced caller may be no more than the length of a front yard—but it seems vast. I think that incalculable distance is Barker's true subject. The pair of feet at the bottom of the big canvas, which one might miss at first sight, means that the painting embodies a shifting viewpoint, a steady tilt from a downward glance at something nearby to a deep-focused horizontal outlook toward the masked visitor with her dog. I count twenty-odd flagstones between those feet and this distant figure—what would that be, about seven yards? But it feels like two hundred. And the way her brown hair melts into her brown outfit makes her seem more like an indefinable apparition than like a person. Her dog, however, is the most ordinary and simply rendered thing in the picture, a sort of guarantee that while the woman might appear a cloaked specter, there's something reassuringly commonplace in this encounter across an expanse of lush garden, with seductively Bonnardesque dabs and splotches that almost inexplicably resolve into bloom.



Hayley Barker, *Red Fire Morning*, 2020, oil on linen, 26 × 22".

Speaking of Bonnard, Barker's recent work is filled with subtle (and sometimes very overt) references to the Nabis and their Symbolist, Post-Impressionist, and early-modernist precursors and fellow travelers—Gauguin, Kupka, Munch, and Redon, among others. Sometimes they are quite directly quoted; more often they are loosely suggested. From them, Barker has learned to show how otherworldly this world can be. The efflorescent profusion of *Front Yard at Dusk with Visitor* and other recent works—including *End of Day* and *Red Fire Morning*, whose palette reflects the recent wildfires in California—is undoubtedly a celebration of indomitable life; but as another canvas, *Mourning*, makes explicit, it also demonstrates the need for comfort at a time of loss. The blossoms in *All the Roses* come forward to meet the viewer as a hopeful offering—the moment you look at them, you feel like you have already plunged your face into this patch of loveliness to breathe in the aroma. But behind the flora in the picture's upper-left corner lurk shadows that might be distant watchers or simply more flowers. In any case, that murkiness is eerie, just like the slightly hyperreal, almost *Neue Sachlichkeit* sunflowers of *The Sky Is Green and Grass Is Blue*, the painting that lent its title to her New York solo debut at SHRINE, at which all these works were on view.

Barker's paintings elaborate spaces that can't be nailed down and identified. She calls them “spaces of passage,” of transition—across the immeasurable distance from life to death, perhaps, but also within life, from one physical or spiritual state to another. Her works speak of mystery, loss: intimations of what lies beyond the boundaries of the self.

Barry Schwabsky is a coeditor of international reviews for Artforum. His most recent book is Gillian Carnegie (*Lund Humphries*, 2020).

MORE:  
FEATURES JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021