

What the Butler Saw

“Points of View”, Caitlin Lonagan at Susanne Vielmetter Gallery

Written by James Scarborough
July 9, 2018



Caitlin Lonagan: *Untitled (Part of P.O.V., 2015-2018), 2016*, oil, metallic oil, iridescent oil on wood panel, 28 x 22" [HxW] (71.12 x 55.88 cm) unframed; 29 x 23 x 1.75" [HxWxD] (73.66 x 58.42 x 4.44 cm) framed. Courtesy of Robert Wedemeyer.

“Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can’t use the wrong words. (...) Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than any words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it.” Virginia Woolf

INTRODUCTION. Caitlin Lonagan’s paintings riff on Abstract Expressionist marks and gestures. She orchestrates these riffs into atmospheric epic poems that suggest cosmological themes. The work bristles with ambiguous figure/ground relationships. These relationships reference simultaneous points of view. Hence, the show’s title. Even if you didn’t know that she works on the floor, on the wall, you’d apprehend it through the indeterminate shapes and figures that hover about this inchoate space. There’s no one way in to this work. There’s no one way out, either. Sometimes we’re at ground level, looking out. At other times we look down, as if from a bluff. It’s like beachcombing with a drone.

WHAT’S IT ABOUT? The exhibition features paintings Lonagan made between 2015 and 2018. The metallic and

iridescent oil she uses and the ridges and eddies she creates cause portions of the surfaces to glisten like ore. With their sepulchral light, the works look like they were painted by candle light. That explains the amorphous shapes and areas that seem to be worked on, in isolation, one bit at a time. If you didn’t know better, you’d think the works were painted in a cave.

With their murky atmosphere, indeterminate forms, and irregular light sources, the work certainly looks as if could have been painted in a cave. What better metaphor for an artist’s studio than a cave? The cave art trope also suggests magic and ritual. A desire for better weather. Animals, birds, something to hunt. Companionship, perhaps. Something cosmological like the separation of the sky, the ocean, and the land.

WHY DOES IT MATTER? Irrespective of platform (canvas, paper, panel), she works on several pieces at once. She questions the integrity of her observations. This in turns leads us to a consideration of art’s ability to create and sustain structured and enduring meaning.

CAITLIN LONEGAN

WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT IT? The way she plunges (we plunge, too) across or off the surfaces, up on down; diagonal. Then something happens. A pause of recognition, perhaps. She focuses on a patch of yellow that might be a Venetian sunset. Then she transits over to squalls of blue, which look like a J.M.W. Turner storm at sea. To harvests of greens and browns - a blustery afternoon of copses and shrubs. To off-white spectral figures, some wispy, some more substantial. A person, perhaps, a ghost - sure. A memory of someone. All these forms and impressions suggest things once-seen, then once-remembered. Built up, reassembled. Altered; altered again. She shuffles memories, impressions, and formal qualities, light especially, like a baccarat dealer.



Caitlin Lonegan: *Untitled (Part of P.O.V., 2015-2018)*, 2017, oil, metallic oil, iridescent oil on canvas, 86 x 80 x 1.5" [HxWxD] (218.44 x 203.2 x 3.81 cm). Courtesy of Robert Wedemeyer.



Caitlin Lonegan: *Untitled (Part of P.O.V., 2015-2018)*, 2016, oil, metallic oil, iridescent oil on wood panel, 28 x 22 x 1" [HxWxD] (71.12 x 55.88 x 2.54 cm) unframed; 29 x 23 x 1.75" [HxWxD] (73.66 x 58.42 x 4.44 cm) framed. Courtesy of Robert Wedemeyer.

THE VERDICT? Because the work yields its treasures slowly, it rewards rapt and protracted gazes and visits. Hurry, though, the show closes on Thursday, July 12th.

WHAT IF I JUST HAD 10 MINUTES? Feast upon *Untitled (the P.O.V., 2015 - 2018)*, 2017. The piece seems to breathe in and out, in and out. You don't know if you're looking at figures (or figural shapes) on the surface of the piece or else through the piece's picture plane deep into the implied space. At each moment on the canvas, your perspective shifts from deep to medium to shallow and then from across, up, and down. It never fixes to one point of view. Its instability is not a flaw, it's a virtue. It acknowledges the flux of experience.

WHO SHOULD SEE IT? People not in a hurry, and who would thereby abolish the abovementioned WHAT IF I JUST HAD 10 MINUTES? That is to say, cognoscenti of insights hewn from a single brushstroke, a subtle color combination, purposefully unstable compositions, and light sources that seem to come from nowhere.