

BORDERCROSSINGS

Paintings That Go on Somewhere Else

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In 2014, after living in Brooklyn for 10 years, the Canadian painter Beth Letain moved to Berlin. She has always lived and worked in the neighbourhood around Kreuzberg, an area she describes as “a little shabby and literally covered in graffiti and posters. I find it especially enjoyable because it means there are a lot of people here marking things.”

Letain is one of those people for whom marking means a good deal. She has evolved an art practice that is a rich combination of drawing and painting. For her, drawing is both an autonomous process and a generative one, so her drawings can be stand-alone explorations of form and colour and they can also lead to larger paintings, which do have what is an intuitive determination. “I know which drawing I’m going to use when I make a painting, but I’m not holding it up and saying, did I do the same number of squares down the side? The drawings are the material but the paintings are rarely a direct one-to-one translation. There’s some feeling held within the drawing that I’m trying to capture again in the painting.” The drawings can go through as many as 15 different variations before they undergo the translation into painting. What makes the drawings attractive is that they allow her the freedom to move ideas around very quickly without the investment of a massive amount of material.

Interestingly, one of the effects of her move to Berlin was the change it brought about in the way she made paintings. She’s not entirely sure whether the shift was aesthetic, emotional or spatial. “In New York my paintings were more full, there were more objects in them, more lines and more marks. When I moved to Berlin I noticed it was a lower city architecturally and less densely populated. My paintings, like the city, became less dense in mark and form.” The other condition of her new life in Germany was that she had more studio time. “In New York I was trying to put every idea and every thought into every painting because I didn’t know when I’d get the chance to paint again, whereas here I was able to work in the studio every day so I could spread my thinking over more canvases.”

One of her most compelling ideas engages the relationship between what we see on the canvas and the suggestion of what is implied off the canvas. Letain has a special understanding of points of exit. A group of paintings made in 2017 indicates the range of her compositional strategy: *Stick-in-the-mud* is contained within the frame of the painting surface, but *Public Affection* leaves the edges of the canvas in four places; *Ballast* has six of those moments, and in *Piebald* there are eight places where the painting leaves the surface. “I obviously like this idea of paintings that can continue in the mind’s eye off the canvas, or this idea of an infinite expansion. There is something a bit comedic about a limited set of marks that could go on infinitely. I also love that weird flip-flop of what’s the painting and what’s the wall.”



Beth Letain, *Winkles*, 2018, oil on canvas, 75 x 67 inches. Images courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin.

PERES PROJECTS



Beth Letain, *Either Other*, 2018, oil on canvas, 87 x 75 inches.



Beth Letain, *High in the Canyon*, 2018, oil on canvas, 87 x 75 inches.

As with the work of all serious and good painters, looking at Letain's work is a process of looking at things other painters have also touched on. You can see hints of a range of artists as different as Agnes Martin, Ellsworth Kelly, Jonathan Lasker, Daniel Buren, Jack Bush and Barnett Newman, but their appearance is less about a direct or conscious engagement than the operation of an acute retinal memory. "That knowledge of looking is there and I hope what I'm making is part of that dialogue. I think of painting as a conversation where you're saying something to the people who came before you and you're trying to contribute something to the people who will come after." The pair of artists who have said the most to her are Blinky Palermo, especially in her more densely articulated paintings, like *Winkles*, *Concrete Costume* and *High in the Canyon* (all from 2018), and in her recognition that painting is "ungrandiose," and Donald Judd, with whom she shares an ability to take a relatively simple idea and then examine it from many points of view.

Letain's very particular sense of colour privileges super-saturation and what she calls "high impact false colours. They're not from nature; they're kind of cranked up. Seeing them next to each other satisfies something in me. It makes my eyes happy." She has said that she often arrives at a form that pleases her, but then the struggle is to find the colour that makes sense of the form, which is when she makes another of her "idiosyncratic, intuitive decisions." In *Capacity*, 2018, she has painted a simple blue square on a gesso ground that goes off the canvas on the bottom and top right-hand corners. But the line at the top is moved slightly further to the right, which insinuates the most delicate disorientation. There is also a pair of thin, insistent drip marks that draw our attention to their downward plumb line. Like so many of Letain's paintings, very little goes on and very much is gained from that very little. What she is sure about is what she has made, and no less certain that the colour she chose was the appropriate one. "These forms couldn't be any colour. I couldn't paint *Capacity* in orange," she says. "It just wouldn't make sense. For me, colour and form are inseparable.

Letain's conjunction is reminiscent of WB Yeats's timeless rhetorical question in the last line of "Among School Children." Yeats frames his inseparable pair in asking, "How can you know the dancer from the dance?" For Beth Letain, the form is the dancer and the colour is the dance. In her tantalizingly eccentric paintings, the thing made and the colour of that making are one and the same.