

DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

Ann Gale

New Paintings

Gale's startlingly intimate portraits stop us in our tracks. These are paintings that capture the essence of the human condition with such depth and sensitivity that we not only see but feel them. Her nuanced awareness of our inner lives and handling of sensory phenomena allow us to enter fully into her painted worlds and empathize with their subjects, inviting us to experience our own longings and vulnerabilities along the way.

The artist has longstanding relationships with her models, some of whom she has worked with for decades and considers to be friends. "We talk and share our lives but are also comfortable being quiet for long periods of time with each other," she explains. The portraits are unique in that they are not so much exposés of a given person as they are expressions of the way that person—their body, their way of being—exists in relation to the setting and the artist herself. "That's how it looks *between us*," Gale responds when her models ask, often incredulously, if they look like the figures in the paintings. And yet, so intimate are the images that they are at times almost unbearable to look at. The models draw us into realms that cannot be easily resolved, while their bodies strike us as exposed and boldly corporeal, even when clothed.

Though each of Gale's paintings starts from a different place, they are often prompted by a specific memory of a model she wants to investigate. This memory might remind her of something in her own body or emotional life, or it might be of a particularly compelling moment she felt urged to paint in order to understand. The very act of painting and the memory of seeing other artists' paintings can also move her; she notes, for example, an enduring attraction to the art of Pierre Bonnard, the French Post-Impressionist known for his keen ability to filter the world through strokes of color.

In an effort to control for light, her models visit her studio at the same time each day and stay for several hours. It can take months if not years to complete a single painting, the vast accumulation of marks serving as a visual record of the passage of time. The tactility of the painted surface yields a physical dimension to this passage, conveying a sense of movement through moments amassed and reminding us of the artist's hand in the act of creation. Working directly from life, Gale builds her paintings up using glimmering patches and planes of color to express light, atmosphere, motion, gesture, and form. Sometimes she begins with a graphite sketch, occasionally even drawing onto the painted surface; other times, she blocks in forms with color first, opening up the painting as wide as possible before she starts to close it back down.

One of the distinguishing features of Gale's paintings is her ability to break the world down into its elemental parts, a feat of observation that she then charges with the roiling, churning pathos of

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our fractured inner lives—the model's, the artist's, our own. “The abstract elements,” she notes, “are just as emotive and interesting to me as the look on someone's face.” Her blending of abstraction and figuration heightens this tension between the optical and emotional, her brushstrokes coalescing into naturalistic forms before fracturing again. We feel air and light as it caresses skin, the ache of a certain pose, the weight of a body pressing into its seat. In this way, Gale's portraits exist somewhere between Impressionism and Expressionism, mining both the expressive qualities of sensation and the psychological connection between sitter and artist.

Gale reveals that, in the past few years, she has become much more aware of the process of observation as she works. Previously, she would seek a fuller understanding of a painting before starting. But with the world in flux during the long months of 2020, interruptions in her practice drew her attention to time and change. “I'll notice this churn or this change in time that I wasn't aware of before, and I'll try to track that,” she explains. “How can I get that in the painting, and where am I? Why am I more aware of it? I feel something about this and want to get in touch with that.” By describing shifts across time and space, Gale brings the figures and their enigmatic worlds into fuller view. She is not just observing a scene, she is engaging with it so that she—and we—might reach or walk right in.

Scale can also encourage this sense of inhabitation. At 72 by 48 inches, *Standing* (2020) is among her largest works to date. The figure occupies most of the composition's vertical space so that she is nearly life-size. She gazes directly out as if contemplating the viewer, her vulnerability laid bare yet balanced by the solidity of her stance and steadiness of her demeanor. Plywood in the background is rendered in painstaking detail, its individual veins and fibers swirling together to emphasize how, much like painting, everything is connected by a greater scheme. Wood is also fleshlike, Gale notes, observing how its knots are like eyes looking back at you. In *Standing*, these knots fall in a row across the top of the composition, near the figure's eye line, underscoring the act of seeing—and being seen.

In a time when images are produced, consumed, and discarded in quick succession, Gale's carefully studied, time-intensive portraits are a revelation. The energy and emotion that suffuse each work are a testament to her singular engagement with processes of seeing, the psychology of human interaction, and the physicality of her medium. Sifted through the alembic of Gale's artistic talent, the world is presented to us as flickering chords of sensation and stillness that reverberate all the way to our core.

Ann Gale was born in 1966 and earned her BFA from Rhode Island College and MFA from Yale University. In addition to exhibiting across North America, Gale is the recipient of numerous awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2007, a Washington Arts Council Fellowship in 2006, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1996, among others. Her work can be

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found in the collections of the National Academy of Art and Design, New York; the Portland Museum of Art, Oregon; and the Tucson Museum of Art. This is her third solo show at Dolby Chadwick Gallery.