

TWO COATS OF PAINT

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JJ Manford's domestic stages for acid daydreams



Contributed by Liz Ainslie / Each of JJ Manford's vividly realized paintings in the Project Room at Derek Eller draws us into a tightly confined interior space – notionally, an apartment – in which a kinetic, centrally-placed meta-image vibrates. The paintings serve as containers for fantastical projections of the mind, such as a dinosaur painting, a fish tank television set, or an insanely colorful coat. Elongated shadows and colloquial architecture dominate their compositional structure while a haze of vibrant reds, violets, and oranges permeate walls, windows, and furniture. As tiny blips of burlap push through oil stick, oil pastel, and Flashe, the tranquility of home gives way to an emergent intensity. The light in moonlit hallways and afternoon windows is ominously fleeting, but leavened by the wry drama of stretched shadows and shafts.

Invariably in Manford's work, there is wit. In *Goodnight Keys*, Manford has incorporated tiny, beautifully crafted geometric paintings that sidle into the frame like visiting abstract specters

haunting substantially representational work. Similarly, art objects become menacing characters disrupting the banality of homely scenes in NYC Fire Escape Painting with a Kachina Doll. And Manford deploys art history asides with playful audacity in Room with Paul Klee Poster and Zapotec Rug. On one level, then, he seems to be exploring the purpose of painting. On another, he seems to be asserting and demonstrating its seductiveness. The frontal skew of Fish Tank TV beckons us to enter the frame, moving through rectangular levels – the wall, the rug, the television – until we get inside the tank, swimming with the tropical fish. The compositional structure is especially alluring in We Will Make Great Pets, where bent hallway window shadows flip forward and backward into space.

Serendipitously, the day before seeing Manford's show I was in DC and saw the exhibition Bonnard to Vuillard: The Intimate Portrait of Everyday Life at The Phillips Collection. Both Vuillard and Bonnard used the architecture of everyday rooms to create compositional structures that prompted discreet segues to abstraction. Like those nineteenth-century painters, Manford mimics the tactility of decorative domestic fabrics. He nods to the Nabi group in using color to evoke emotion through disruption: vibrating hues jolt the viewer back and forth between the picture and the surface. As with Bonnard, Manford's material confusion functions like a screen, buzzing forward as his sticky oil pastel resists the tooth of the sturdy burlap, upholstery fabric, or linen.

Unlike the earlier artists, of course, Manford omits the human figure. Statuesque cats sit in silhouette, bemused observers peering just beyond the edges of Room with Cherry Blossom Screen & Moroccan Rug and Fish Tank TV as well as Goodnight Keys. It may be tempting to construe the cats, plants, and jackets as stand-ins, but in his distinctly subdued contexts, such images rather amplify the absence of people. In Manford's silent rooms, the viewer stands alone with her fantasies. But, notwithstanding the warmly familiar imagery – plants, and dinosaurs, mid-century furniture and cats – those fantasies are not nostalgic. The precision of each combination keeps each painting from seeming twee or sentimental. In every case, a jarring, uninvited meta-image interrupts any hint of complacent serenity.

JJ Manford's paintings do present the notion of art as an escape, but with complex intelligence that defies easy romanticism. His paintings might have begun as bright-eyed daydreams, as he looked out the window, and they radiate the frisky humor of that kind of inception. But he has wisely shaded them with existential truth. His hazes of color conjure the drug-induced visions of the 1960s and 70s reined in, as they were, by the social structures of order and responsibility that must constrain our lives. If others long for the artist's life, the artist longs for theirs, too. Manford embraces and celebrates this durable reciprocity.

About the author: Brooklyn painter Liz Ainslie has had solo shows at Transmitter and Airplane in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and Creon Gallery in Manhattan. She received an MFA from Tyler School of Art in 2004 and a BFA from Alfred University.