

Clare Grill's Untranslatable Paint

Grill's diaphanous brushstrokes and floating forms express a world in a state of unavoidable change.



John Yau April 24, 2021



Clare Grill, "Finch" (2020), oil on linen, 35 x 42 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery, NY. Photos by Adam Reich)

Today is the last day of *Clare Grill: There's the Air* at Derek Eller Gallery, the artist's exhibition. I strongly recommend everyone go and see it. Together, the nine oil paintings of varying sizes and the five similarly sized works on paper add up to a quietly powerful — and powerfully quiet — gathering.

In a time when the art world prizes easily digestible content and flamboyant, expensive gestures, Grill's resistance to discursive language, well-known critical tropes, the influence of social media, and reductive explication is practically heroic. Her faith in painting — I don't know what else to call it — means that she is committed to making abstract paintings that cannot be simply or effortlessly translated into meaningful sound bites. She believes in paint's capacity to conjure unnamable states and feelings.

In a statement that Grill made for the artist-run magazine *Maake*, she stated:

My work often borrows from antique embroidery samplers. I like their obsessive handiwork, gorgeous materiality, their somber mood and feminine energy. I unravel their imagery, layering over and then picking at it with brushes and fingers, burying it and dusting it off until each painting seems to breathe and buzz in its own color climate.

Grill's straightforward description of her inspirations and process underscores her goal, to have the painting move away from the source until it inhabits "its own color climate." Her description is better than anything I could come up with, so I will start with that.



Clare Grill, "Gull" (2021), oil on linen, 74 x 56 inches

Building up thin, gauzy layers of washed-out colors, Grill floats a variety of shapes and marks within the paint's porous stratum. In "Gull" (oil on linen, 74 by 56 inches, 2021), amid the crisscrossing, diaphanous gray brushstrokes, we see a layering of many shapes and forms that stop just short of being namable.

Embedded within the painting's gossamer streaks of whitish gray, the aggregation of different-colored forms and marks, from reddish-pink to browns, blues, and various off-whites, seems to be preserved in the slow tumult of semi-transparent brushstrokes. Grill applied wide, gray, veil-like brushstrokes along the sides and top and bottom edges of the painting, evoking a state of containment.

Sensitive to the distinct viscosities of her materials, the ground varies from translucent to granular, the brushstrokes from wet to dry. The “color climate” ranges from washy brown to red to dark grayish-black, each radiating its own muffled light. Her brushwork encompasses solid marks, streaky surfaces, and delicate caresses. And yet, for all the fragility the diaphanous brushstrokes convey, something nearly the opposite happens in the paintings: the understated tenacity of the forms and marks becomes palpable.



Installation view, Clare Grill: *There's the Air* at Derek Eller Gallery, New York

While the marks and forms are abstract, they summon associations with ribbons, cursive letters, children's drawings, dried flowers, mittens and baseball gloves, bananas and scimitar moons, locks of hair, wreaths, girls' dress collars, and pieces of fabric. The compositions are gatherings of these scrap-like shapes, which one might associate with domestic labors, such as sewing and patching. And yet, even as these correspondences come to mind, they float — like Grill's forms— beyond the realm of names, leaving the viewer in a state of nameless looking.

By pushing into the unnamable, Grill eschews the sentimentality that is synonymous with 19th-century artifacts made by women and children attempting to express grief and remembrance.

In her paintings, I see an artist simultaneously excavating and burying forms, with particular attention paid to color combinations as well as the relationship between solidity and transparency, names and namelessness. Her floating forms express a world in a state of unavoidable change. The muted light emanating from these paintings elicits various aspects of one's interior weather. The feeling I get from them is paradoxical; they are joyous and melancholic. They memorialize a cluster of emotions, memories, and longings without ever specifying them.



Clare Grill, "Amy" (2021), oil on paper, 19 x 15 inches framed

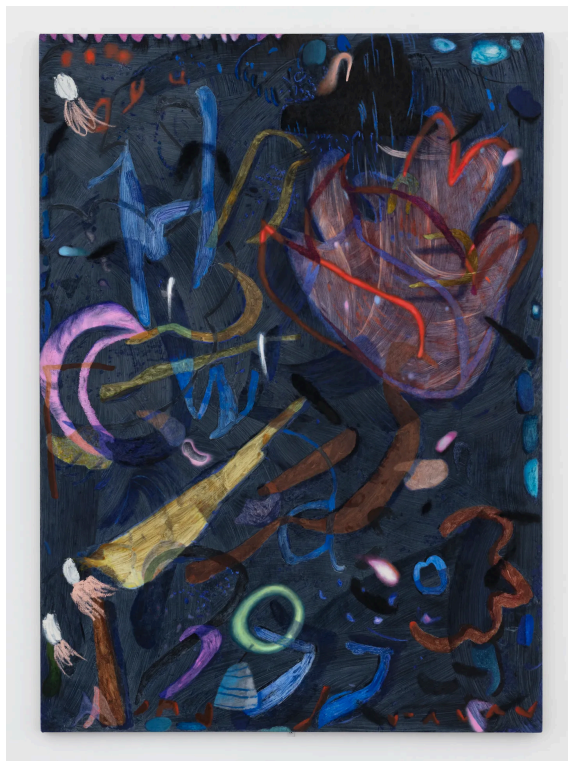
In the drawings, which inform the paintings but constitute a distinct and separate body of work within Grill's oeuvre, letters and almost legible words can be discerned. "Amy" (oil on paper, 19 by 15 inches, 2021) is uncharacteristic — a symmetrical composition bordered by pink abstract blossoms. Is this a portrait of Amy? If so, how does it reflect her? This is one of the main strengths of Grill's work: even when she uses a name in her title, the connection between the name and the imagery is never literal or clear-cut.

One quality about Grill I especially liked in the interviews I read was her forthrightness. Instead of calling attention to herself or to the meaningfulness of her work, or to her embrace of big themes, she emphasizes her process and the things that engage her. Still, this did not prepare me for the gallery press release, which she wrote and signed, and which I feel is relevant to a discussion of her work. This is how she begins her statement:

My friend Mary had a miscarriage 14 years ago and she named the baby Cass. I'll never forget that name. She had a feeling it was a girl, but it was too soon to find out, so she chose Cass. She suggested I name the ones I lost too. I lost three in the span of eight months. It was about a year ago. She thought it would help heal my heart, give some closure to call them a name. I suppose we name to show love, to honor, to let live, to let go.

A little later, she writes:

These paintings aren't about grief or loss or anything really, but they've been made in it and with it. They've absorbed it, been touched by it. They've been steeped in it these past couple years, flooded and then aired out, stitched over time with version upon version of it. They're ready to go now. They have their names.



Clare Grill, "Hare" (2021), oil on linen, 64 x 46 inches

We all live in time and there is no escaping it. However, it is one thing to seek or make distractions and another to shape your passage in time, while remaining conscious of the outcome. When Grill writes “these paintings aren’t about [...] anything really,” my respect for her deepens. Rather than making any claims for her work, she invites us to be open to them and to discover what inchoate feelings they stir up in us, what states of melancholy and silent joy they might provoke. I sensed that the pleasure Grill gained from these works was in making them, rather than producing a product.

Products are based on the idea that naming is a form of possession and ownership; it gives the one who names dominion over the ones who are named. In her paintings and works on paper, Grill shows us that there is another way.

Clare Grill: There’s the Air *continues at Derek Eller Gallery (300 Broome Street, Manhattan) through April 24.*