

ArtSeen

Clare Grill: *At the Soft Stages*

By **Elizabeth Buhe****JUNE 2023**

Installation view: Clare Grill: *At the Soft Stages*, Derek Eller Gallery, New York, 2023. Courtesy Derek Eller Gallery.

Clare Grill's nine new paintings on linen at Derek Eller are breathtaking in their expansiveness. This is true in terms of scale—*Compass* (2023) exceeds six by seven feet—and in their open fields of textured ground, which record both the linear sweep of the brush and minute imperfections, like bumps created by an uneven weave in the linen. Grill emphasizes this tactility with additional paint, as in the sky-grey *Bell* (2023), but despite their texture, the ground of each canvas reads mostly as a single hue which becomes the defining feature against which all other compositional activity plays out. Electric purple, yellowy green, curry brown. In this indeterminate space, lozenge and fin-like abstract forms float alongside the remnants of what seems like a once-legible semiotic system. The newfound openness (the paintings really *breathe*) is partly the result of a change in process. Rather than building up layers of oil and then scraping them away to find her composition (a method which resulted in highly-worked, knotty surfaces), Grill here trusts what she lays down, looking for compelling passages of color or texture to accentuate.

ON VIEW

Derek EllerClare Grill: *At the Soft Stages*

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New York



Clare Grill, *Compass*, 2023. Oil on linen, 94 x 73 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery.

Usually I don't foreground my own embodied responses to art in my writing, preferring instead to extrapolate an observation that surfaces as interpretation. But my actual gasp before these paintings was so visceral that it warrants mention. This reaction seems to encode a more profound realization, one that I am starting to understand as the tension that the paintings stage between vision and touch. Like crushed velvet, the paintings invite touch, but in an affective register that does not require a finger on canvas. Surely this owes to Grill's signature feathery brushwork that is braided, in especially textured passages, from short sweeping strokes. Just as surely it owes to the sticky medium Grill adds to her oil paint to make it more viscous and therefore receptive to the give and take of the brush. It also has something to do with the subversive effects of touch understood

in a feminist sense, whereby sensory modalities beyond vision and the imperative to look find value. In this way of thinking, painting is a call and response between the painter and her materials rather than a unidirectional act of authorship. Beyond the immediacy of making and viewing, Grill's paintings conserve and uphold the tactility of handwork, like the needlepoint and calligraphy that are her source material in the first place, even as that tactility is transmuted through a different medium and process into something entirely her own. These are the many valences of touch that the paintings communicate—I am tempted to emphasize that word's root-sibling: "commune"—even if their message soaks in only over the long game of beholding.



Clare Grill, *Scuff*, 2023. Oil on linen, 94 x 73 inches. Courtesy the artist and Derek Eller Gallery.

Another reason Grill's paintings seem to communicate through an implicit sense of touch is that she forecloses their ability to signify in more conventional ways—via figurative imagery and text. Grill's paintings reroute our expectations for the process of creating meaning. They seem to ask: what would a world look like where we see and learn differently? Those off-white marks outlined in orange at the bottom of *Lamp* (2023) evoke a Canaanite language, but of course it isn't one. The dusty mountain peaks of *Belt* (2023) and the fish-like stripe in *Bell* offer spaces full of wonder in which things work differently. Note, for instance, the doubling of the purple and white pebbles scattered across the towering *Scuff* (2023). At first these seem to be shadows, but each is cast from an angle and distance that doesn't accord with the next. Instead it is as if they indicate the passage of time, like a burn mark left by acidic paper or a picture hung for all those years on the wall. This detachment from the laws of common observation makes sense, since Grill works from her own drawings of source materials, meaning that the paintings are created at many removes from "reality." In *At the Soft Stages*, several paintings are made from drawings made from specific passages of discarded paintings that the artist wanted to retain, a move that distances the final canvas even further. The slow and expansive world that Grill thus creates is confident in its execution but hesitant to issue absolute truths. The paintings' message is closer to their process: look, learn, trust, go.

Contributor

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