



ART REVIEW: Maja Lisa Engelhardt's Abstraction Tackles Biblical Creation

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by Peter Malone

[Maja Lisa Engelhardt](#), in “The Seventh Day/Genesis” at [Elizabeth Harris](#) in Chelsea, wishes to engage viewers with her visual musings on creation. This is the kind of all-encompassing subject that can prompt the question whether highly personal visualizations like these—further restrained by the perspective of a single point in space—can possibly compete with the declarative immensity of a few short words, such as “let there be light.”

As the exhibition title suggests, Engelhardt astutely avoids the predicament by approaching the first six days of Genesis as prelude to the seventh, the day God rested and therefore the day when human imagining commenced.



“The Seventh Day (28)” by Maja Lisa Engelhardt, 2017. Acrylic on canvas.
Courtesy of Elizabeth Harris Gallery.

With an unwieldy subject thus reduced to manageable scale, the intimate dimensions of each canvas—approximately three by two feet—prove more than adequate for the artist’s personal ruminations on a primeval atmosphere, allowing her to expend less effort on referencing specific aspects of the text and focus instead on abstract painting’s inherent immediacy. Interestingly, Engelhardt takes a near opposite approach in an appendix to the main exhibition, a series of lithographs that correspond more overtly to the text, though they are no less abstract in general appearance.

Both series are compelling, but the paintings moreso, as they attend largely to the mysteries of the painting process. Allusions to luminous horizons above, dark loam below, and swirling waters between cleave to their painterly beginnings. Light is also a concern, as I learned in a brief encounter with the artist at the gallery, and not just as a reflection of Genesis, but as an expression of the artist’s feelings for the preciously short hours of winter sunlight in her native Denmark.



“The Seventh Day (30)” by Maja Lisa Engelhardt, 2017. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Elizabeth Harris Gallery.

She spoke not only of her love for the effects of sunlight, but admiration for the artists of the late 19th century Skagen School, who were devoted to the strange light effects found north of the 55th parallel. One does not grasp the latter association immediately, as Engelhardt’s imagery, at least in the “Seventh Day” series, appears closer in tone and feeling to the scumbled chaos of [J.M.W. Turner’s](#) storms than to [Peder Krøyer’s](#) twilight melancholy.



“The Seventh Day (18)” by Maja Lisa Engelhardt, 2017. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Elizabeth Harris Gallery.

Presented in no particular order (every canvas in the series is titled *Seventh Day*) the density of the painted surfaces, with their apparent layering and reworking, holds one’s attention to the artist’s efforts to find a unified solution to each improvised composition. Consistent with abstract painting’s vernacular, some canvases erupt into dramatic gestural assertions. For example, the extended process behind *Seventh Day (15)* seems to have concluded with a vertical slash of white thundering down the left side of the picture, its disruptive presence bringing closure to the image with the finality of a mic-drop.

The dense texture of Engelhardt’s surface is modern, yet contains numerous passages in which lighter colors are applied over somber earth tones, lending much of the series a pre-modern look. Whether or not she initiates each canvas with a dark ground is difficult to determine. There are too many layers in the final image to permit the eye to explore that deeply. But her copious use of umbers overpainted with intense primaries creates a similar effect, an effect tempered here and there by clearly modernist references, like the Munch-inspired sky in *Seventh Day (31)*, all of which raises the question of her puzzling choice of medium.

It is unusual to find a painter who prefers acrylics for a method that calls for heavy reworking. Slow-drying oil seems to me better suited to the surface abuse of enthusiastic revision. Engelhardt prefers the dried scarred look of a surface visited many times, a method that leaves so many changes visible that they read like a Joycean staccato of ends and beginnings—creation relived over and over.



“The Seventh Day (14)” by Maja Lisa Engelhardt, 2017. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Elizabeth Harris Gallery.

In some canvases the residual tension left by apparent interruptions forms intriguing juxtapositions. *Seventh Day (29)* implies an architectural setting, with a foreground that might be construed as a boat landing on a shoreline, but with sections segregated by an omission of connecting elements. In other canvases, the unity of surface, image and space remains untroubled, as in *Seventh Day (31)*, which clearly suggests a gloomy landscape.

As a viewer progresses toward an appreciation of the series as a whole, a few obstacles persist. Some pictures like *Seventh Day (19)* look out of place. Awkward curves superimposed over an obvious grid structure seem to ignore the frame, which struck me as a misstep. But when the realization takes hold that it may have been intended as a cropped vignette of a much larger vista, I was suddenly re-acclimated to Engelhardt’s elastic metaphor. And it is with that realization that a viewer comes to appreciate that perhaps the unmanageable size of the subject, as tackled by a determined painter, is precisely what makes the series so compelling.

BASIC FACTS: “Maja Lisa Engelhardt: The Seventh Day/Genesis” is on view November 11 through December 23, 2017 at the Elizabeth Harris Gallery, 529 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10001
www.ehgallery.com

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