



ART REVIEW: Elizabeth Osborne Solves Riddle of Abstract/Figurative Balance

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by Peter Malone

Elizabeth Osborne's *Self Portrait in Studio* (1965), at the season-opening exhibition at Danese Corey Gallery in Chelsea, does not look at all like the 50-year-old canvas its label affirms. For a variety of reasons—not the least of which is how the work harmonizes with the more recent paintings that comprise the rest of “Elizabeth Osborne: People and Places”—this early painting appears as fresh as if it were completed last week. Its vibrant and pristine condition, a credit to Osborne's skill as a builder of painted surfaces, is impressive, but so too is the painting's very contemporary feel.



“Self Portrait in Studio” by Elizabeth Osborne, 1965. Oil on canvas, 56.5 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Danese/Corey and the artist.

Despite the show's retrospective reach, all the work on view sings with one voice, the voice of a painter concerned for decades with how pictures are constructed, how they hold together visually. With so many today struggling with the abstract/figurative riddle, “[Elizabeth Osborne: People and Places](#)” advances the work of an artist that suggests the secret to solving this perennial modernist puzzle is to avoid overthinking it. Her unambiguous pictorial solutions are serenely direct and thoroughly integrated into each subject. Each composition reads as no less important than the figures she weaves into the warp and woof of its underlying structure.

With a focus on figures in interior spaces, environment and occupant share each canvas equally, as do techniques as disparate as loose painterly clouds and geometric forms with clearly defined edges. The rectangular bookshelf and mirror frame of *Self Portrait in Studio* forms a counterpoint to painterly intrusions representing draped cloth and stacked canvases. Together they merge the picture's equilibrium into its subject matter.



“Self Portrait in Studio” (detail) by Elizabeth Osborne, 1965. Oil on canvas, 56.5 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Danese/Corey and the artist.

Another work, *RPW Reading* (2015), demonstrates this balance of organization and portrayal by placing the male figure down in the lower right corner of the frame, his diagonally rendered form interrupting the horizontal and vertical elements that dominate the composition. Painted in pale tints that recede behind the more intense color of the symmetrically placed bookshelf, the figure maintains a ghostly presence, lost in thought, sitting in an isolated corner as intense readers are apt to do.



“RPW Reading” by Elizabeth Osborne, 2015. Oil on canvas diptych, 48 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Danese/Corey and the artist.

Portrait of Audrey (1994) maintains the same objective distance and formality. The figure of a young woman sitting at the foot of a bed, a book left open momentarily on her lap, bears a facial expression more available to the viewer than that of the reader in *RPW Reading*, but no less reductive than the schematic outlines of the bed and the darkened niche it occupies. Space is readable but ambiguous.



“Portrait of Audrey” by Elizabeth Osborne, 1994. Oil on canvas, 62 x 72 inches. Courtesy of Danese/Corey and the artist.

Stacked books become assertive strokes of pure color. Typical of Osborne’s interiors, the room’s light remains diffused. Her color tends to be luminous. Even in *Maine Portrait* (2016), in which a female figure and a grey cat lie awash in the pale blue tints of a shaded room, vividly painted yellow windows do not disturb the subdued atmosphere.



“Maine Portrait” by Elizabeth Osborne, 2016. Oil on canvas diptych, 54 x 54 inches. Courtesy of Danese/Corey and the artist.

I imagine [Elizabeth Osborne](#) spending a great deal of time considering each picture's elements prior to applying the assertively uncomplicated forms that give them their vitality. Absent studies a viewer might have compared to the final work, one is left wondering how she arrives at her compositions. They seem so well planned yet look so spontaneous. Color is often applied in thin transparent layers that are built up to opaque layers wherever the artist feels it necessary to do so. But nothing looks overworked.

At times the order is reversed, as in *Studio* (2014), in which a transparent rectangle is painted over the upper half of a vessel holding paint brushes. There is a small potted plant in the 1965 self-portrait—to return once again to that absorbing canvas—that is little more than a mirage of pale greens delicately applied over a section where the upper left corner of the mirror meets the upper right corner of the bookshelf. Its diaphanous presence functions like a well-placed shrub before a needy architectural node.



“Studio” by Elizabeth Osborne, 2014. Oil on canvas diptych, 48 x 96 inches.
Courtesy of Danese/Corey and the artist.

The guiding principle of less is more—typical of mid-century representational painters like [Janet Fish](#), [Alex Katz](#), [Neil Welliver](#), and reflective of mid-century abstraction's influence—is visible in Osborne's work as well, though I would cite [Robert De Niro Sr.](#) as a truly kindred spirit. De Niro's reductive figuration, transparent color, his loyalty to Matisse's economical drawing, and his discounting of facial expression to greater compositional objectives are features found in Osborne's work as well.

Fortunately, as this exhibition illustrates, an expanding artworld overheated by bloated art fairs can also produce welcome side effects, like the introduction to the New York gallery environment of a talent that has flourished outside New York for decades, and obviously deserves the attention this show will hopefully provide.

BASIC FACTS: “Elizabeth Osborne: People and Places” is on view September 7 to October 20, 2018 at Danese Corey Gallery, 511 West 22nd Street, New York, NY 10011. www.danesecorey.com

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