



CATE NELSON
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The Fourth Wall
November 14, 2020 – January 9, 2021

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There exists a space in between then and now, between this and that, and between my relationships to places, objects, memories, and myself in an increasingly mediated and, at times, alienating existence. - Cate Nelson



I Guess We All Have Secrets, 2020, oil on linen, 30 x 40 in.

Cate Nelson's oil on linen paintings, many done during the pandemic, have a remarkable physical presence. They are primarily about surface, but simultaneously intersect with Nelson's history in time-based media. She studied film as an undergraduate and worked in the Los Angeles film industry before leaving to focus on painting. This background continues to influence her painting practice, which seems to align it with a postmodern tradition. While modernist thought held a belief that language and art must be treated separately, postmodern theory pushed against this with "a blatant disregard for aesthetic categories... words are often treated as purely visual phenomena, while visual images are offered as script to be deciphered."¹ Cate Nelson's paintings offer us a script to decipher. They relate to one another much like jump cuts in film, where the viewer assembles the meaning. In her work, the meaning resides between the paintings as well as within them.

On October 15, 2020, I interviewed Cate in a virtual studio visit as we both sheltered in place.

Marlene Angeja: I was surprised to learn about your background in film. I saw that you majored in it at Bard.

Cate Nelson: When I was there the film department was doing film and video. I did some analogue VHS. Digital was just coming in but it wasn't accessible really. People were editing on Avid but I never edited on the computer. I shot on 16mm film and cut on a Steenbeck flatbed editing table. I still have my Bolex. I would love to make

another film but it's all mostly digital now. After college, I moved to Los Angeles and worked in the film industry as an assistant director. But I decided to quit in order to paint.

MA: So you just decided you wanted to be a painter instead?

CN: Yes, but I think my paintings have a certain reference to cinema. I think my knowing so much about both film history and painting history... when I look at the paintings or when I'm thinking about them I'm subconsciously thinking about both.

MA: Were your films abstract or narrative?

CN: They were a combination. We studied artists like Brakhage so I hand processed and painted directly on film. I did a bunch of that but I think the films that I was most proud of or felt were most interesting had a weird narrative quality. I would edit in a way that was really choppy, assembling a kind of painting out of narrative imagery and then using sound to make something that felt like there was a story underneath.

MA: I did some hand processing of film myself in grad school and I loved the unpredictable results.

CN: Yea, I processed in a bucket. I wasn't trying to be clean about it so the images would overlap onto each other sometimes. That history is in my painting. It's not unrelated.

MA: It's such a drastic shift to be in the film industry in your twenties and then just quit to paint.

CN: It was exciting for a while to be a part of the industry but I was exhausted. I didn't have time to make anything. And you have producers screaming at you. It's stressful. I just wanted to make shit so I made the decision to quit. There were two guys near my house who got permission to take over a vacant building for two months over the summer. They painted side by side and I was hanging out with them and taking photographs of them. I had always made paintings and drawings. It wasn't something I thought about. It was just a part of me. Those guys inspired me to just go for it. I sold my paintings at a flea market every Sunday. On my left there was a couple selling handmade soap. On my right a guy who sold used tools. And there I was with my paintings. I sold a bunch for very little



Fried, 2020, oil on linen, 36 x 24 in.

but there is something... in your early twenties you feel empowered because you're paying for a booth where you're in charge and you're having direct relationships with all kinds of people. Someone's there looking for vintage t-shirts and happens to see your paintings. It's a very different experience than if you are just relegated to the art world. It was a good experience, but difficult.

MA: What got you to San Francisco?

CN: I decided I wanted to go to graduate school. I didn't know what it was going to be like, but I wanted some sort of critical thinking or dialogue around making art. I wanted some conversation and I've always been pretty intellectually driven. I love reading theory and I wanted to engage with people on that level. I thought, oh, San Francisco Art Institute, oldest art school west of the Mississippi, that's good enough for me. I got some of what I wanted out of it along with major debt. Grad school is such a strange thing.

MA: Yea, I think schools are going through so many changes right now and fighting for survival.

CN: I think there is something to be learned from going to graduate school. I just don't know that the amount of debt I incurred was worth it. In the end it's about relationships and about making good work. But that's what brought me up here and then I just stayed. I lived in San Francisco until 2014-2015 and then moved to Oakland. But the whole Bay has changed. The art scene has gone through huge waves and now who knows what's going to happen in this new landscape.

MA: How did you get involved with the Painting Salon?

CN: I had gone to a few sessions early on when it was more of a critique group, and later became a co-Director for a couple of years at which point it became a monthly, nomadic lecture series. We were able to get a Southern Exposure grant in 2016. A small group is running it now I think and it's nice that it keeps getting sort-of passed down through different artists to reimagine it and keep it in the community. It was a good, interesting project. I would like, at some point, to do something that's more about readings or something that fosters discussion among people reading things about art and literature. Something like that is maybe on the horizon. We'll see.

MA: In your paintings, do you think narratively?

CN: Do I think narratively?

MA: Well, when you are working on these grounds, the paintings seem to be about materiality. But then at the next stage they seem to bounce off of some theory or story.

CN: Yea, it's starting to change a little with some of the small works I did in January and some of the works I'm making now. But first I'm thinking about surfaces. I start with colors that are speaking to me on a visceral level and then, in terms of what it becomes, I think narratively and also about symbols and connections between language and image. But I still want the paintings to feel like paintings and not just pictorial representations of an idea so it's important for me to have a process that goes back and forth between color, texture and content, composition. So I'm thinking narratively and also reactively. I don't know ahead of time what I'm going to do. It tells me as I'm doing it. It takes a long time because I start and then move to something else. There's a story in my mind that sometimes takes a while to resolve on the canvas. I never do sketches. I've done some collages that have informed painting in the past, but I don't do that anymore because then it just becomes about executing something. For me it doesn't translate. And it's boring to make a study in one medium and then try to translate that to a painting. It takes the emotion out of it. So I spend a lot of time trying to create a mood with texture and color. And while that's happening, my mind is thinking of a related story or experience and the imagery comes from that.

MA: Can you say more about that?

CN: I think there is some influence, at least in my earlier explorations of the psychology of domestic space, of the house I grew up in. A huge colonial house in New England from the late 18th century, that for a time doubled as an antique store. The TV antenna was struck by lightning when I was little and was never replaced and so TV wasn't part of my vernacular growing up. The house always had the feeling of being in various states of repair or... It was an interesting house to grow up in and I think certainly informed some of my earlier work. And the sort-of psychology of space and objects definitely

permeated into adulthood in a way it may not have under different circumstances.

MA: I'm interested in that psychology of space – the way various images in your paintings work across space. It reminds me of the way two different images can come together in a film cut to create a narrative, which can be linear or not. I'm wondering if you think of them that way.

CN: Yea, I think that harkens back to my days of using film and photography while painting and drawing at the same time. It feels like scenes relating to one another and bouncing back and forth with my mind editing a long trajectory of narrative experience into these smaller compartmentalized things, which happen to be paintings. For me, the most exciting part of making film was not shooting it. It was editing, cutting and assembling.

MA: Where the concept gets physical.

CN: So, I think I'm approaching painting in the same way. It is narrative and I am thinking narratively but it's not... They relate to each other in terms of some internal thing. It comes out in a way that feels organic.

MA: And how do you think that relates to the viewer?

CN: I think there are always these questions like, as an artist, do you have a responsibility to respond to the moment. Do you have a responsibility to be political? Do you have a responsibility to the viewer? What is your responsibility? What does that mean when you are making it? Well, it is subjective. But I hope that the viewer is connecting the dots in a way that I'm not explicitly connecting them.

¹ Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October*, Vol. 12 (Spring, 1980), pp. 67-86, The MIT Press.



Screen, 2020, oil on linen, 70 x 55 in.



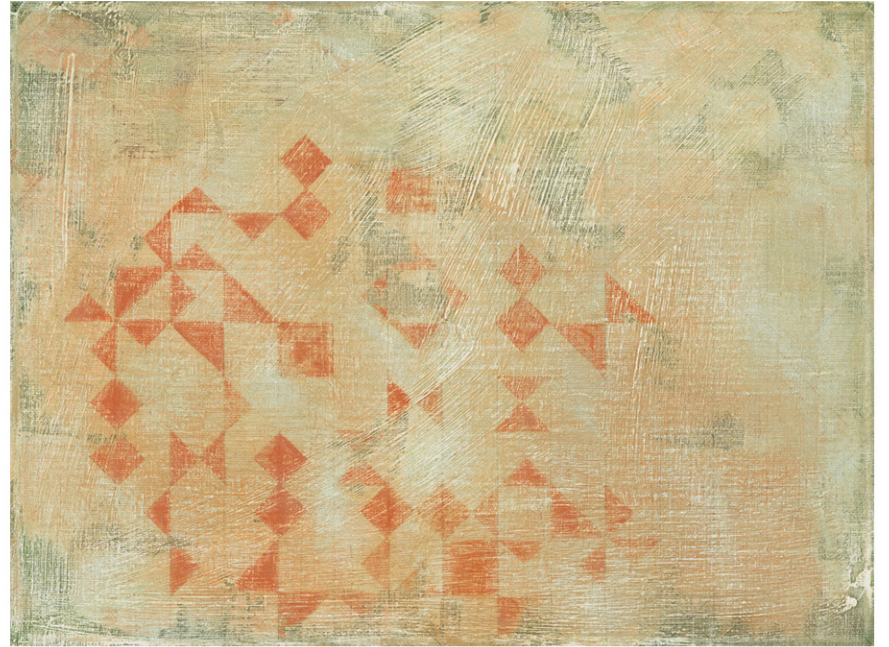
Untitled (The Guy I Like Slept with Someone Else So I Made Him Steak Dinner), 2019, oil on linen, 12x16in.



On, 2019, oil on linen, 16 x 12 in.



Untitled (Bottle), 2019, oil on linen, 12 x 16 in.



Palimpsest 1, 2020, oil on linen, 12 x 16 in.



Headline, 2020, oil on linen, 12 x 16 in.



Ups and Downs, 2020, oil on linen, 16 x 12 in.



Lights Out, 2020, oil on linen, 16 x 12 in.



Moving Slowly and Quietly Closer to You, 2020, oil on linen, 16 x 12 in.



Artifact of My Former Self, 2019, oil on linen, 12x16in.



Unfair Fight, 2019, oil on linen, 16 x 12 in.



Cate Nelson lives and works in Oakland, California. She received her MFA from The San Francisco Art Institute and her BA from Bard College in New York. Nelson has exhibited in both the Bay Area and Los Angeles. Recent awards include an Alternative Exposure grant from So-Ex in San Francisco and Affiliate Artist residency at Headlands Center for the Arts. Her work has been collected both in the US and abroad. In addition, Nelson has been involved in several community art projects in the Bay Area, including co-directing a monthly artist lecture series.

Jane's Dilemma, 2018, oil on linen, 60 x 48 in.



The Fourth Wall

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