

EV Grieve

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The Gallery Watch Q&A: Ellen Siebers on 'A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends'



*Interview by Clare Gemima
Photos courtesy of March gallery; interior shots by Cary Whittier*

"A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends" showcases work that has culminated from the experiential and research-rich studio practice of [Ellen Siebers](#), a painter based in Hudson, N.Y.

In response to a curator-led discussion at [March gallery](#), I reached out to Siebers to understand more about her process, art-historic influences and thoughts on the gallery's simultaneous show, "[I See This Echoing](#)" by John Brooks.

Both exhibits run until May 28 at March gallery, 62-64 Avenue A between Fourth Street and Fifth Street.

In a quote of yours, you claim the mind's eye is a powerful presence in the digestion of daily experience. What is your understanding of the term "mind's eye," and can you describe how the oil paintings in "A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends" encompass or visualize this concept?

I understand the mind's eye as an ever-changing recollection of every kind of perception, which comes together to serve as the foundation of subjective experience. If I ask someone to imagine an apple, most of us are able to do so, but the actual form of that image in the mind is really wild when you focus on it.

Since one can imagine what it looks like doesn't mean it is something so clear that they could make a drawing from it – it is a kind of conglomeration of equal parts: past, experience and sensation. That, for me, is often what I am trying to record in paint – the sensation of an experience that is a mixture of specifics and abstraction.

What conversations do you believe "A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends" and John Brooks' show, "I See This Echoing," are engaging in? In your opinion, what similarities or differences are fluid or more jarring between the two?

I think we are both really interested in the humanity and vulnerability of our figurative subjects and approach the intimacy of a nude figure in a similarly sensitive way. I know we are both engaging in some similar discussions of beauty and think of the concept of beauty as intellectual work.

I personally love the experience of walking into his exhibition after being in mine since I feel immersed and embraced by the scale and the larger collections of marks. It feels so buoyant.

During a conversation in the gallery, the idea that certain paintings were hanging in groups of three or four were said to be assimilations of what you are currently doing in your studio. Can you explain this in more detail?

In the studio, I am always thinking about things in small groups. I think the pacing of a group of paintings relates to poetry, and I love how paintings can work as any kind of punctuation. Grouping the work ultimately helps me see each more clearly as an individual. The groupings point out each of the particularities of the work while at the same time creating a larger environment for the viewer to live.

Throughout the show, compositions most commonly portray a cropped figurative foreground, shown caught or captured in the surrounds of landscape, abstracted flora, and sometimes monotonal washes. What considerations do you take to foster the relationship between your painted backgrounds and female characters?

The relationships between the figures and surrounding forms are made from a pretty emotional and intuitive place. It has to do with articulating the feelings that I imagine the figure would feel in the landscape through the language of abstraction – trying to capture what the sunlight might feel like on one's face or what the cool water would feel like on one's feet...things like that.

Both atmospheric color and painterly gesture are bodily experiences as well. And that's what I fell in love with first about painting – the ability to record the nonverbal sensory experiences of beauty.

Your work's titles pay homage to Hilma af Klint, Arthur Bowen Davies and Felix Vallotton. What sources of inspiration do these artists offer you in your creative process?

The particular mysticism present in both Hilma af Klint and Arthur Bowen Davies' work gives me so much energy and excitement. I am not a religious person but feel so much magic and beauty every day that I cannot begin to understand, and surrendering to the raw emotion of that is something I draw out of both of their work in different ways. It is all so full of life. Vallotton, for me, is all about sensuality. His "[Étude de fesses](#)" cannot be beat.

What other, more contemporary practitioners do you gravitate towards or appreciate at the moment? I am personally reminded of Ambera Wellmann and Clare Grill's work when I look at your paintings.

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They are both great painters! I am always inspired by my friend Peter Shear's paintings; they are so joyful to me. There's an abundance of spectacular paintings going on right now. Just to name a few of my favorites working now: Ted Gahl, Ashley Garrett, Aubrey Levinthal, Maja Ruznic, Danielle McKinney, Aaron Michael Skolnick... I could go on forever. And never forget the queen, Lois Dodd.

How does operating out of a studio in Hudson influence your painting practice?

It has a lot of influence which comes down to the abundance of natural beauty and the gift of time. I have so much more time to dedicate to the studio since moving to Hudson, especially with having my studio space on the same property as my home. I love to garden, so having a yard and the ability to spend so much time with that influences me a lot. Observing all of the gentle changes between seasons never gets old.

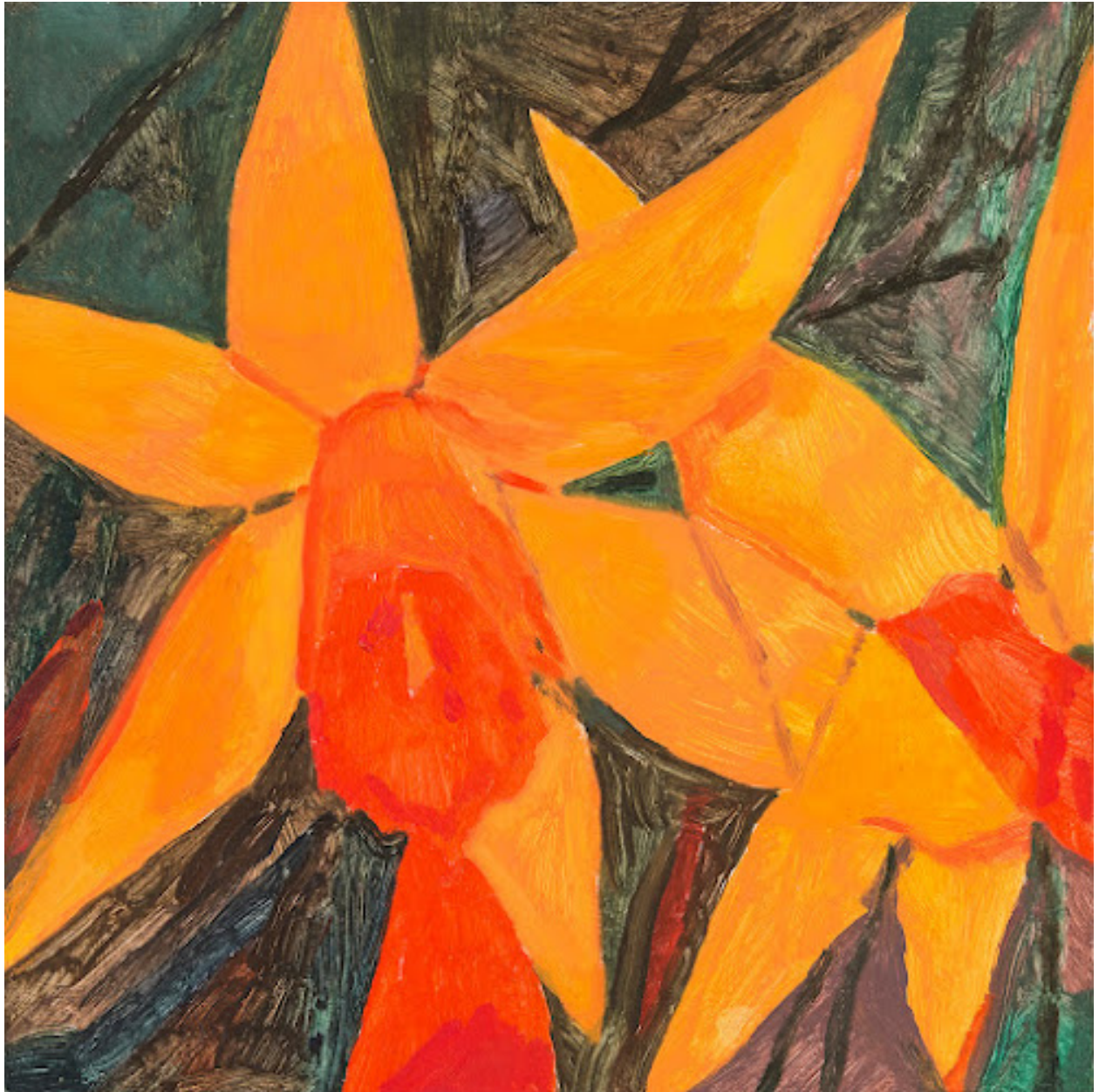
As a person who constantly quotes the surrounding environment, the Hudson Valley just has so much magic to give. It is also home to such a supportive group of fellow artists.



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