

Ruckus

Ellen Siebers' *dream song*

Review

John Brooks

→ parrasch heijnen, Los Angeles

In W.G. Sebald's 2001 novel *Austerlitz*, the character Great-Uncle Alphonso is described as a naturalist who "*spent most of his time out of doors*" painting watercolors. "*When he was thus engaged,*" the depiction continues, "*he generally wore glasses with gray silk tissue instead of lenses in the frames, so that the landscape appeared through a fine veil that muted its colors, and the weight of the world dissolved before your eyes.*" Alphonso came to mind while at parrasch heijnen taking in Ellen Siebers' *dream song*, the Hudson, NY-based artist's first solo exhibition at the Boyle Heights gallery. Just as Alphonso's deliberate veiling provided, paradoxically, a way of seeing and perceiving with greater clarity, Siebers' gauzy perspective—evident in the fourteen paintings that comprise the show—offers a glimpse into a formless, evanescent realm laden with emotion, meaning, and the quiet, romantic wonder of experience.

We live in a loud world, surrounded by the fizzle and clamor of the seemingly endless noises endemic to twenty-first century life. By its nature, the cloistered white space of a gallery—especially in rooms as splendid as those at parrasch heijnen—separates itself from the din beyond its walls, becoming a sanctuary where we might find respite and contemplation when in the presence of the right work. Siebers' sublime paintings more than oblige. Denoted by a blithe, surprising and subtly saturated interplay of color and mark making, the works are small in scale yet occupy more visual space than their dimensions might suggest. Reminiscent of a Whistler nocturne, *Late June* projects deep blues outward, yet its abyssal depths beckon like a portal or a lacuna. Oblong jewel-toned blocks, stacked around *Blue Sleep*'s reclining figure, seem to stretch to infinity in all directions. Skillfully imbued with undeniable feeling, each painting commands attention, reminding us that despite having no physicality, feeling fills us, guides us, destroys us, revives us



Late June, Ellen Siebers

Muddling the boundaries between figuration and abstraction, Siebers renders the what and where of her environs indiscernibly. There is only ambience, only aura. The viewer doesn't suffer from this opacity; in fact, we benefit from it. Her diaphanous color and lyrical brushstrokes evoke—or perhaps conjure—a specific evening, or the complicated dynamics of a love affair, or even what seem like whole lives. The smoldering golden green and umber atmosphere of the Turneresque *Double Red Sun* poignantly records the drifting smoke from this past summer's Canadian wildfires, unavoidably visible from the artist's upstate home. *Streamside's* margins are curtained in mostly rosy washes; the center houses a narrow vignette—a compositional device Siebers commonly uses—in which the vague shape of a small figure stands amidst what we can assume, given the painting's title, is the greenery of a waterside grove. A scumbled mass of white and sky blue dots spills out below the figure; presumably these marks represent dappling light on the water's surface, but because Siebers' paintings lack narrative clarity, we aren't quite certain. This doesn't matter. Marks like these perfectly demonstrate the mysterious alchemy of painting; they are why paintings continue to be made and why we want to look at them.

Often, it seems like everything and everyone is trying very hard to entertain us. Entertainment has its joys, but they're often fleeting. What seems to last, what burrows into the psyche, is that which bewilders, that which enthralls, as Siebers' work does. Gentle and melancholic, the paintings in *dream song* are not just poems, they are haiku: spare, sensile, devastating. They are just whispers, but even whispers can carry across great distances under the right conditions.

parrasch heijnen



Apples in May, Ellen Siebers

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Ellen Siebers: *dream song* runs from August 26 - October 7, 2023 at parrasch heijnen, 1326 South Boyle Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90023

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Double Red Sun, Ellen Siebers

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