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TWO COATS OF PAINT

Award-winning blogazine, primarily about painting

Ellen Siebers: The visceral pull of her brush

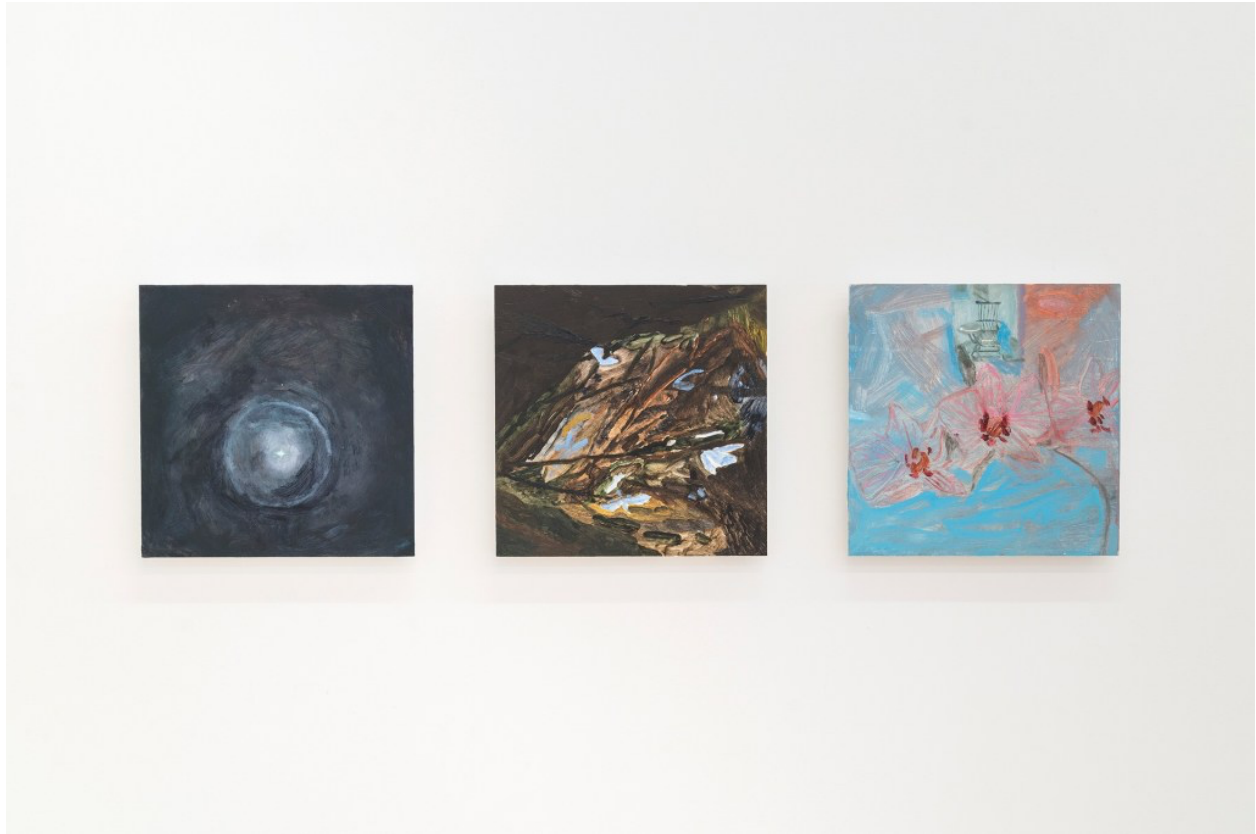
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Ellen Siebers, Stargazers, 2021, oil on beveled birch panel, 12×12 inches

Contributed by Patrick Neal / For her solo show, currently on view at March Gallery in the East Village, [Ellen Siebers](#) has created small paintings in oil on beveled birch panel that are poetic in their open-endedness and straightforward in their embrace of beauty. Many incorporate the innovation of

overlapping frames. Tight rectangles containing figural scenes are placed on top of naturalistic motifs evoked in loose, washy strokes. The combination of images depicting people and domestic items with those capturing the natural world surrounding them sets up relationships within and among the paintings that have intriguing associative power. Enhancing this effect, which induces a pastoral state of reverie in the viewer, is Siebers' expressive brushwork.



Ellen Siebers, "A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends," installation view (Photo by Cary Whittier)

Many of the works are grounded in images of flowers, including daffodils and orchids, that encompass the field of the panel, their petals and stems rendered schematically like crystals and tessellations. The background strokes that comprise the outer areas of the paintings are unabashedly gestural. Siebers has an assured hand when delineating motifs like the spokes of flowers or the gaseous cloud formations of murky evenings. The smaller scenes framed within, like snapshots or map insets, are tighter and more detailed. Many depict nude women reclining, bathing or posing, paying homage to past artists. These scenes are limned with shadows or borders reminiscent of Polaroids in scrapbooks or clippings pinned to bulletin boards. In some cases, they seem like intimate scenes viewed through peepholes or windows. In a painting like *Vuillard's Chair*, Siebers zeroes in on details from these smaller vignettes while amplifying areas of sensual painterliness in the larger areas. We languish in the visceral pull of her brush, whether the oily, viscous strokes of *Daydream* or the dry, scratchy resistance of paint laid over wood in *The Sunshine*.



Ellen Siebers, Vuillard's Chair, 2021, oil on beveled birch panel, 10 x 10 inches

The exhibition's title, "A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends," comes from a line spoken by Hamlet, suggesting that spiritual intervention is formative to an individual's fate. Indeed, an effusive wonderment emanates from Siebers' work – the awesomeness of staring up at the cosmos or observing the strange forms that comprise nature. Themes emerge such as the months of the year, twins or mirrored doubles, bathing and water, sleeping and dreaming, the stars and sky, animals and insects, and windows and slats. References to other artists, particularly [Félix Vallotton](#) and [les Nabis](#), abound. Several paintings of the night sky are dotted with stars, clouds, moons and insects. Siebers' paint handling is unfussy and the color combinations are subtle and evocative: mint greens, sky blues, margarines, tangerines, and charred reds and greys. The beveled sides of the birch-board panels recede inward behind the front picture plane, effecting a sense of floating.

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Ellen Siebers, Daydream, 2021, oil on beveled birch panel, 10 x 10 inches



Ellen Siebers, The Sunshine, 2022, oil on beveled birch panel, 8 x 8 inches

For painters and writers, circling around a subject and sketching out thoughts and images helps generate an array of meaningful impressions that can be crafted into definitive statements. Siebers' works remind us that, if the scope of an artist's interests is wide, divergent themes will present themselves and re-emerge in succeeding bodies of work, much like a poem layered with tangents of seemingly disjointed material. There is great ease and flow in her work, and the show is hung to reinforce her visual and mental associations. Small clusters of same-size works hang together and speak to each other as if part of a bigger story, prompting viewers to look for narratives. The paintings *Love Letters 1* and *Love Letters 2* are pleasingly spare in mood and tone. Brushed in peach and umber colors, they suggest the light and shadows of the outside world dancing on the walls of an inner chamber. Other titles, like *I want to night swim in May* and *Orchid's Chair*, have an oblique quality that elicits a reflective state of mind more than any contemplation of the image actually pictured.

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Ellen Siebers, Love Letter I, 2021, oil on beveled birch panel, 15 x 15 inches



Ellen Siebers, *Love Letter II*, 2021, oil on beveled birch panel, 15 x 15 inches

The press release for the show discusses a reclamation of the virtues of beauty, wresting it from the didactic grip of “patriarchal powers.” I would add that previous assessments of formalism – a key component of beauty – as insufficient, exclusionary, and regressive don’t hold water anymore, as beauty has re-asserted itself in our metamodern era, in which revisiting well-charted territories is igniting new possibilities and hope is replacing cynicism. Siebers’ work manifests beauty through the inextricable inseparability of things both “cerebral and physical” – the bond unifying all things. This is not unlike the concept sometimes called [Nondualism](#), which puts a premium on the sensorial here-and-now of a limitless present. Painters like [Jordan Wolfson](#) in his book *Painting and Consciousness*, and [Nigel Wentworth](#) in his book *Infusion*, have explored non-duality in relation to their own painting, searching for answers to existential as well as aesthetic questions.

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Ellen Siebers, Orchid's Chair, 2021, Oil on beveled birch panel, 10 x 10 inches

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Ellen Siebers, "A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends," installation view (Photo by Cary Whittier)



Ellen Siebers, December Daydream, 2022, oil on beveled birch panel, 10 x 10 inches

The gaps between groupings of Siebers' paintings might metaphorically reflect her art practice, suggesting the way an artist can benefit between the completion of an artwork and the beginning of the next piece by looking at other people's art as well as reading books, blogs and journals to generate new

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ideas, unlock memories and gain inspiration. Siebers' compositions possess unique details and abstract thickets that can also be found in paintings by [Mark Milroy](#) and [Claire Stankus](#), and she shares their penchant and talent for transforming everyday encounters into a kind of worldly magic. A painterly mark carries the body of the artist who created it, ensuring an entry point for future viewers to empathize with her vision. In this way, artworks resonate through time, alive in an eternal moment.



Ellen Siebers, "A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends," installation view (Photo by Cary Whittier)

"[Ellen Siebers: A Divinity That Shapes Our Ends](#)," March Gallery, 62-64 Avenue A, East Village, New York, NY. Through May 28, 2022.

About the author: [Patrick Neal](#), a regular contributor to *Two Coats of Paint*, is a painter, freelance art writer, and longtime resident of Long Island City. His current solo exhibition, *Atmosphere: Patrick Neal New Work*, is on view at Joyce Goldstein Gallery in Chatham, NY through May 7. He will be exhibiting new photographic prints at The Local NYC, Long Island City, NY, from November 1 through December 31, 2022.

Tags: [Divinity](#), [Ellen Siebers](#), [March Gallery](#), [Patrick Neal](#), [Shapes](#)