

48hills

"Life burbles with inside jokes in Rebecca Ness's jumbo paintings"

By Emily Wilson

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Rebecca Ness, 'Cubbyhole' (detail), 2024, oil on linen. Photo by Lance Brewer, courtesy Jessica Silverman.

Bookstores, bedrooms, U-Hauls, lesbian bars are loci of human comedy (and tragedy) in 'Portraits of Place.'

Rebecca Ness's seven detailed oil paintings in *Portraits of Place* at Jessica Silverman—depicting a bookstore, lesbian bars (like Bernal Heights' Wild Side West), a packed U-Haul truck, and the artist's bedroom—reward close observation. If you look deeply, you might notice that the bike in *U-Haul*, from 2023, is the same one she's riding in *Crossing Manhattan Bridge*, 2023–2024. She wears a backpack in that painting that also makes an appearance in 2023's *My Bedroom*. And in that particular work, there's a Polaroid camera in a drawer that also appears in *U-Haul*.

There's something satisfying about it all, like a callback in comedy.

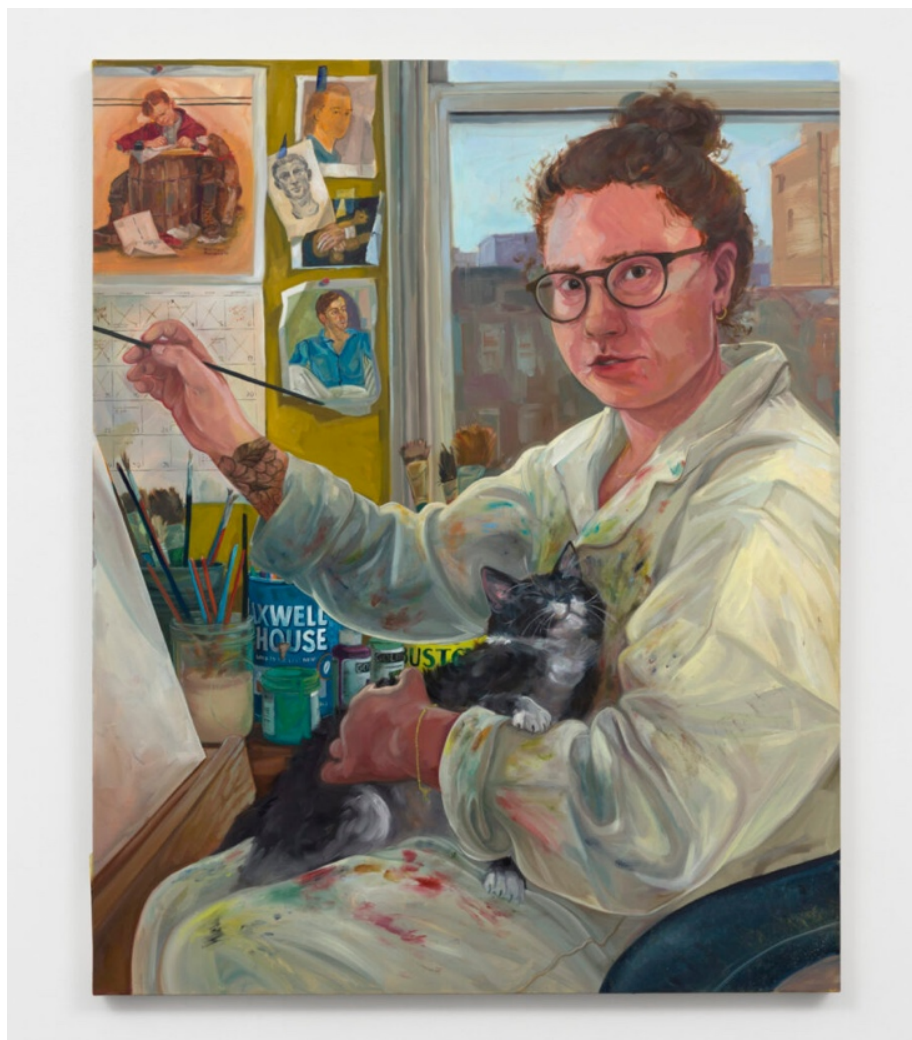
Ness, on a video call from her apartment in Brooklyn, where her two cats sometimes pop in, said she listens to a lot of comedy while working in her studio and, as with painting or writing, it has structures and rules. With good comedy, she thinks, how it's constructed disappears. She likes to think of her shows as a little bit like a comedy set with different acts and characters.

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"There's some sort of structure, but hopefully, when you experience it, it's pretty organic, and it doesn't feel didactic," she said.

Silverman describes Ness as funny, warm, and kind, and she thinks that comes through in her paintings. Ness sees herself as a portraitist, and Silverman points out although they're not the kind of portraits we're used to, they do give us a sense of who the characters are.



Rebecca Ness, 'Self Portrait with a Cat (after Laserstein),' 2024, oil on linen.
Photo by Lance Brewer, courtesy Jessica Silverman.

"When we use that term, I think our brains want to see pictures of people, but we were talking, and she said, 'Well, portrait is also indicative of the space that the body inhabits,'" Silverman said. "I feel like it's that shared space that she brings forth in her work that is really refreshing. So *Portraits of Place* [as a title] is so appropriate because it's her bedroom, it's her on a bike, it's her packing up her things to move. It's the gay bar she inhabits and the bookstore that she loves. She's present in all the paintings."

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Ness does show up in most of the paintings in some form, looking at the viewer while she's sitting at her easel in *Self Portrait with a Cat (after Laserstein)*, from 2024, or if it's just her hands holding a book in 2023's *Browsing the Bookmill*. (Another 2023 painting, *My Bedroom* shows her partner lying on her bed reading *Moby Dick*, surrounded by postcards and photos which may feature Ness.) The artist said she didn't do many self-portraits until she finished undergraduate school, mostly looking at other people and things for her work. Then with the pandemic, she couldn't go paint her friends, so she became a subject. Now she feels that revealing herself is important.



Rebecca Ness, 'Browsing the Bookmill,' 2023, oil and oil pastel on linen. Photo by Lance Brewer, courtesy Jessica Silverman.

"Portraiture and painting people who exist in the real world takes a lot of trust and is also a big responsibility," she said. "I think that if I'm painting people that exist in the world, I also need to insert myself into the stakes. It's kind of like, going back to comedy. You can't make fun of anybody else unless you make fun of yourself. I think inserting myself into the stakes is like showing that I care and that I'm going to treat you with as much respect as I would treat myself."

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Ness, who describes herself as a visual thinker, came by that from childhood. On Saturdays, her architect father would take a big piece of paper, put it on the table, draw a cross section of something, say the *Titanic*, and Ness's family would draw what was inside. "We would have the outside of the story, the plot of the book, so to speak, but we would create little rooms, and the little things happening in each room and people walking the deck and stuff like that," she said. "I think that kind of visual storytelling is how my brain was formed, and it taught me that this is a different and new kind of storytelling."

The after-school oil painting and life drawing program at Acorn Gallery School of Art in Marblehead, Massachusetts also helped make her an artist, Ness thinks, giving her a firm grasp on conventional portraiture. After graduating from her BFA program at Boston University and before starting her MFA at Yale School of Art, Ness took some time to think about what she wanted to do with her art.

"It was like, 'I know the algebra, how do I do the calculus?' How do I get on to the next thing? I was never going to be the best portrait painter, and I was not interested in that," she said.

"What makes me excited to pick up a paintbrush? It was thinking about all these little moments in between conventional art history are the moments that I find give me the most joy, like when I look at how someone painted a fingernail or a reflection or Van Eyck or Van Dyck and those mirrors. Those are the moments that I think I can bring something to that remind me of doing the giant blueprints on my family table and thinking, 'Okay, we see the grand story, but what's happening in the alleyway to the side?'"

Many people find elements in Ness' paintings funny. For example, the U-Haul seems like a reference to the joke of what a lesbian brings on a second date. Life would be boring and sad without humor, Ness said. But she wants something more than just being funny.

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Rebecca Ness, 'U-Haul,' 2023, oil on linen. Photo by Lance Brewer, courtesy Jessica Silverman.

"The world is a very wonderful place, but also a really, really terrible, really hard place . . . the U-Haul painting could be, you know, joking about what two lesbians bring on the second date . . . or it could be about needing to move because your rent got too high, or going through a really hard breakup," she said. "If you have humor but also the dark, it makes it just that much more complicated and meaty."

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