

ARTFORUM

"Openings: Laeh Glenn"

By Catherine Taft

April, 2016



Laeh Glenn, *Landscaping*, 2015, oil on linen, 62 × 50".

HOW SHOULD A PAINTING BEHAVE? The dreamy yet sober canvases of Laeh Glenn seem predicated on this question. The Los Angeles-based artist asks why a painting should exist at all, what its motivation should be, and how one should relate to it—particularly at a moment when

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

images circulate so quickly and casually, and when painting itself seems to exist somewhere between code and canvas. She extracts the medium's genres—still life, portrait, nude, geometric abstraction—to coolly linger in and wonder at its protocols. Through her distillation of these pictorial archetypes, she reveals new and ever-shiffter boundaries between the image and the world.

Landscaping, 2015, is typical: It is a simple composition in which flat fields of color are molded into sky, hills, foliage, and water. Bold black lines delineate each of the picture's features while fitting poorly to those features' edges. The "look" is nostalgic yet eerily placeless, bringing to mind obsolete hand-inked comic-book illustrations or even Microsoft Office's catalogue of clip art, that enduringly strange standby of late-1990s and early-2000s design.

Moreover, *Landscaping* tells us nothing about the specificities of location or the act of grooming nature, functioning instead as a generic stand-in for the action of a kind of picture making. That is, by painting a landscape, she is landscaping—just as one could be still-living, self-portraiting, or nuding. The work flows from a transposable verb, a test drive of genre.

In most of Glenn's pictures, "subject matter" gets simplified to its most basic graphic components. In *Mums in a Vase (Blue)*, 2012, and *Four for 4 #2*, 2014—which share a still-life composition that recurs in other works—representational elements are devoid of depth: A surface is marked by a simple horizon line; petals are suggested by muted chiaroscuro; shadow is formed by apertures and negative space. Glenn's treatment of shadow brings interesting personality to her work; there is humor in her treatment of spatial illusion, and her shadowy breaches of pictorial space recall Artschwager's *blps* and Baldessari's dots, pixels, and holes. Her simplified images verge on cartooning—which, as artists such as Carroll Dunham, Raymond Pettibon, and Philip Guston have taught us, is a great way to question the authority of painting—while retaining the impressions of digital design, its fills and drop shadows. *Untitled*, 2013, for example, depicts an arrangement of eight cubic objects—think *Tetris*—which hovers against a black ground, while *Flowers*, 2015, displays its titular subject distorted by pixelation. In spite of the velocity and immateriality suggested by these paintings, they are resolutely concrete things, created in a slow, considered manner: Until only recently, Glenn painted on sanded wooden panel, laying down a surface of gesso, then applying up to fifteen layers of oil paint to create a smooth, hermetic surface. As each oil layer took several days to dry, the process of finishing one small painting was long and deliberate, even time-based. Mistakes could easily be wiped away until the final composition was hand-touched to perfection; if an accidental mark remained, it was a well-considered move.

Each of Glenn's disparate paintings attempts to unravel what style might mean—how it might knit together the high and the low, the reified and the real. She demonstrates the world of artistic possibilities that might paradoxically arise from what Benjamin H. D. Buchloh disparaged as style's commodity-like properties: its "universal exchangeability, its free-floating availability." In her first solo exhibition, at Thomas Duncan Gallery in Los Angeles in 2013, Glenn presented three small paintings: a vaguely cubist composition, *Brown Guitar*; an inky black abstraction, *Illustration*;

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

and a geometric panel, *Grey Grid*, all made that year. Each work was roughly sixteen by twelve inches and painted on panel to matte perfection. The show also included the sculpture *Fruit Relief*, 2013, composed of eight geometric wooden forms resting on a wooden table, as if a heavily abstracted still life had been given three dimensions and returned to real life. The four works shared an earthy, bluish palette punctuated by swaths of black, giving visual unity to otherwise formally dissimilar compositions. The wooden sculpture also “matched” the strange wooden frames around the pictures, two of which were customized, with corners and portions of sides missing. This is an ongoing motif in Glenn’s work: In the aforementioned *Tetris*-like painting, for instance, the frame is missing its bottom side, and the painted pieces seem poised to spill out of the picture and onto the floor. Like *Fruit Relief*’s rendering of flat designs in three dimensions, the partial frames in this and other works let illusionism mingle with the real realm of objects, crystalline screen space with obdurate stuff.

Glenn has described her work as furniture, and she often arranges it with an eye toward its surroundings—as a way to engage, enliven, and create an impression of space. It verges on decor. Her recent paintings, for instance, build on one another, relying on careful installation choices that balance or break up a wall. And whereas her older paintings seemed like literal extensions of furniture—especially *Table with a Pitcher*, 2012, displayed freestanding on a walnut table—these more recent works hint at sculptural weight through material and size. Painted on linen and unprimed canvas, they further imbricate the space of real objects, the commodity, and Painting (with a capital *p*).

Eight such canvases were exhibited at nada Miami Beach this past December, installed edge to edge in the booth; the artist knowingly overhung the small cubicle as if to poke fun at the market context. The works, such as the quasi-representational *Stomping Ground*, 2015, show a renewed inventiveness in their juxtaposition of vastly different registers. *Two Blue Fish*, 2015, has a lighter palette and a distinct playfulness, collapsing the impossible matteness of powder-coated steel and oil veneer. Though Glenn remains wary of how pictures interact with the world, she nevertheless wants to get cozy with the medium, with its difficulties and physical facture. Her hopes for painting are dryly optimistic: how freeing it must be to paint now that the aftermath of the aftermath of modernism is supposedly past. And yet our era poses challenges of its own. Glenn’s work expresses the contradictions of painting in our moment: It is a material thing that must reckon with a virtual world.

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508