NOAH BECKER'S
WHITEHOT MAGAZINE
OF CONTEMPORARY ART

January 2023

In Coversation with Claudia Keep

By Emily Sandstrom

Installation view of Claudia Keep's "Aubade." Image by Cary Whittier.

Claudia Keep's solo exhibition at MARCH features a series of works that exemplify her defning trait as a painter: the ability to take seemingly banal snapshots of daily life and communicate them with a distinct intimacy. Keep's work is consistently laden with emotion, taking us through her days in Brooklyn, where she used to live and in Vermont where she currently resides. Her work features landscape views of long distance drives, the sun rising and setting in her bedroom in Brooklyn, and intricate details of spiderwebs and moths. The paintings serve as an invitation, welcoming us to see such lucidity and emotion in the everyday.
The name of the show Aubade is borrowed from a Philip Larkin poem, which Claudia tells me deeply resonates with her experience as an artist and her navigation of daily life.

ES: You recently moved from Brooklyn up to Burlington Vermont, how has that been so far? Do you think your change in environment has informed your current practice at all?

CK: It's defnitely been a transition. I do miss my friends and being in the city, going to art shows and museums all the time. But here you can sort of like, go outside without confronting humanity all at once, which is nice.

It's funny, when I was living in Maine when I was younger I was in a really natural environment. But I was painting a lot of manmade things and a lot of things that were sort of ugly. And then when I moved to the city, I started tending away from that and started painting more natural things and landscapes, more fowers. It's almost as if being in nature made me more aware of the Manmade, and vice versa. I've been painting a lot of things that have to do with water whilst in Vermont now, like lakes and streams and waterfalls. And of course being in a car more, which is something that I paint a lot. I sort of missed that when living in the city.

Claudia Keep, "Morning Dew on a Spider Web," 2022, 8 x 6 in., watercolor on paper. Image courtesy of MARCH and Cary Whittier.

ES: It feels as though a lot of good art and music can come from being stuck in a car.

CK: Yeah, it's always been really inspiring. I guess I feel really comfortable when I'm just driving around or a passenger just observing. I know it's an overused term but it is a liminal space, but at the same time you can really curate an experience based on what music you're listening to or where you're going.

ES: On that note of liminality, overused or not, one thing I've really remarked on with your work is that it communicates such intimacy from really simple moments of everyday life that would be seen as otherwise mundane. How do you decide which moments to capture and reproduce? What do you think gives them the intimacy and romantic element ?

CK: Thank you. I think honestly a lot of it is subconscious. The formal way I do it is I just take a lot of pictures with my phone and paint from those images that stick with me. I think there's something very contemporary or very real about using the phone because it's always like a certain distance away from you. I never paint something that I haven't taken a picture of. So the images are always sort of the same distance from me. Even though I do occasionally change scale, I think that the repetition of a viewpoint or distance creates intimacy. Also, I'm a pretty emotional person. I can tend to view banal things with some sort of emotional signifcance. But it can take a long time. Sometimes there are pictures that I've just taken that sort of strike me, and I can immediately see that something is there, maybe it's the composition or colors. But sometimes it can take almost a year or two before I actually fgure out how to turn that into a painting or how to approach the subject. Giving myself time to think about the subjects probably lends them a certain signifcance or emotion.

ES: Do you feel as though your inspirations have changed over time?

CK: Yes, my taste has changed so much. In college for instance, I was really interested in painting fgures and was so enthralled by Lucian Freud and Jenny Seville and all these depictions of fesh and skin, and it's just not at all what I'm interested in anymore. I've gone through many different phases of drawing inspiration from different artists, and they still remain with me even though I'm not thinking about them when I'm painting.

And then in terms of the literal subjects that inspire me, that has certainly changed. I'll go through phases where I want to paint the same thing over and over again. In Maine I was painting motorcycles

all the time. I did a series of those. Or like, I was really obsessed with basketball courts for a while. I think before the most recent shift, I was interested in particular types of space. Like spaces between spaces, and a place where some action had occurred but wasn't happening at the time.

For example, a basketball court has so much implied action and implied movement. But I would always paint it pretty much empty, only occasionally with people in it. I still do this to some degree, but I feel as though I've tended towards more direct paintings recently. More like a zoomed in sort of view, more singular.

ES: You mentioned the repetition in your paintings. There certainly is a lot of repetition, yet each feels so unique by the sense of an individual moment that is presented. Do you feel as though you have any relationship with repetition?

CK: I think so. I am sort of a repetitive person, and that's what I like. I remember as a child making my dad read me the same book over and over again every night. I guess that's a comfort thing. I think life is repetitive. I'll become enamored with a certain subject, like water on a spider web, and I kind of just wanna keep painting that until I fnd the next thing that I'm really into. And there's something freeing to me about repeating the same subject. I think there's this almost neurotic impulse as an artist that you have to keep coming up with the next idea that's new and different that nobody's done. And that's like, horrifying.

ES: The name of your show at MARCH is Aubade, taken from a Philip Larkin poem. Can you tell me about your relationship with that poem?

CK: When we were discussing a theme for my show, my gallerist Phllip called me and read me the poem over the phone. It was one of those moments where a piece of art neatly shows you what you've been scrambling to describe or to come to terms with. It felt so apt and felt like just what I was trying to say with my own work, and perhaps even more essentially, it described how it feels every day to wake up. It's so harrowing and stark and yet it leaves some room for beauty and perhaps a little humor, which is what I try to do. The imagery in the poem feels very familiar and resonates, for example the way Larkin describes the morning sky—it's a color I've also tried to describe, but with paint rather than words. WM

Claudia Keep, "7:19 PM, Pine Street in the Rain," 2022, 10 x 8 in., oil on masonite panel. Image courtesy of MARCH and Cary Whittier.