

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Other World Within This One: On Jane Freilicher



Jane Freilicher in her studio (1984) (Photo by Nancy Crampton. All images Courtesy Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York)

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Jane Freilicher's still-life paintings have a large-scale, panoramic quality associated with landscapes. Conversely, her landscapes focus on nature's compactness and textures so that they convey the intimate solidities of still-life. The eleven stellar selections on display in *Jane Freilicher: Prints and Works on Paper* at Tibor de Nagy, cast their spells from some impossible threshold between outdoors and indoors merging the two genres in riveting and memorable ways.

Following last year's much larger retrospective in the same space, which focused on Freilicher's long and important friendships with New York poets like John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler, this current, smaller show of work across four decades helpfully turns a spotlight back on her under-appreciated distinctiveness. Though her work shares the unassuming frankness and heady optimism found in the work of the leading First Generation New York School poets, her art parts company with those poets' sensibilities in that it never traffics in surrealism, pop culture, fragmentation or collage. Freilicher's foundational valuation of transformational solitude is a further departure from the high-octane, expressionistic New York School poetry, as well as

from the work of many of its leading painters. Her pictures seem to be oblique self-portraits of the painter blissfully alone in a room of her own. They enact meaningful quietness and sustained focus in contrast to the flux of images, feelings and thoughts of a Frank O'Hara poem. Her paintings seem to have developed through a repeated gazing upon the ordinary that then opens out to a sort of incremental, aesthetic transubstantiation akin to the prodigious aftereffects of perception documented by a much earlier literary kindred spirit, the French novelist Marcel Proust.

While sunlight is Freilicher's chief muse in this project, its absence seems to inspire visitations as well. Her pairing of the color lithograph "At Night" (2011) with the older oil on paper painting "At Night II" (1997) exemplifies her disarming simplicity with brushwork and subject, and the magnitude gained from an unfussy approach. Flanked by two empty vases — one thin and green and one curvaceous and blue — a thick-leaved cattleya plant in a red pot atop a slab sits on a yellow tabletop near a window overlooking



Jane Freilicher, "At Night II" (1997), oil on paper, 12 x 12 inches

a late New York evening. In its oil painting iteration, the heavy brushwork and earthen tones harmonize the interior foreground of plant and vases with the gray swaths and pink-and-red speckles of the cityscape, effortlessly interior and exterior into an alternative dimension.

The more recent lithographic version yields gleaming, distinct surfaces and vertiginous contrasts around those very same objects and spaces. Here the yellow tabletop cuts a well-defined horizon, where the darkened window pane gives way to a precipitous, monochromatic skyline and the ever-deeper recesses of night-sky. The night's aggressive conspicuousness and the city's anomie, both intensified by the lithograph's severe grays and blacks, lures the eye, defensively, so to speak, back down to the comforting, artificially lit interior with its potted plant, vases, and shimmery tabletop. Yet these mute objects with their cool surfaces and blunt shadows convey an engrossing

melancholia, one just as intensely evoked by these indoor elements as by the vast, silent cityscape and surrounding sky.



Jane Freilicher, "At Night" (2011), color lithograph, 26 ½ x 26 inches. Edition of 54

In the small watercolor "Casement Windows" (1974), the interplay between inside and outside is jazzy and even subliminally philosophical, dramatizing the paradox of inhabiting the thick of the city while remaining aloof from its encroachments. The hanging plant's green foliage and clay pot dominates the left corner, but a grid of thick black lines denoting the window's casement and the vertical black lines of a terrace railing both conceal and reveal the far-off pink, white, yellow and red building facades, rooftops, and the lush blue and white sky. The longer one looks at the painting, the more that obtrusive grid operates as a metaphor for the city as a hub of attention and distraction, visibility and invisibility, the natural and the constructed. But the overall impression is one of a sustained wholeness.

Freilicher's poetic absorption in the surface of objects counters her inconspicuous realism. For instance, the "Bouquet" pairing — an oil painting on paper dated c. 1982 and an etching with aquatint from 1992 — reads as an apparently pure American still-life. The nearly matching image presented by these two works is of a bouquet of red roses fitted into a relatively narrow glass cylinder, which rests on a gray dish beside a smaller aquamarine vase holding a sprig of white blossoms. But the close-up view of these ordinary objects, unlike the window paintings, thwarts any grasp of its setting. It could be a random alcove, a ship's cabin, a hotel lobby, a dining room table, a funeral parlor mantle, or even a shelf in an upscale restroom. That alluring opacity about the setting, combined with the nearly blank field of background color and the chromatic contrasts among the objects, imbues the painting with a Symbolist, dream-like aura. The cordovan-colored wall palpitates so forcefully that it seems to absorb the bouquet's palette into its vibrations. In turn, that wall contains what appears to be a porthole-

shaped mirror, or round window, which looms with a moon-like strangeness as it reflects the faint outlines of the rose bouquet. Seashells and petals lie deliberately placed on the yellow tabletop rather than scattered naturalistically, so that they seem to be tokens of seashore and garden within a prevailing insularity. Such lyrical over-magnifications of the commonplace kept recalling for me a proverb, most often attributed to French poet Paul Éluard, about the secret, aesthetic layering of reality, which declares, “There is another world, but it is within this one.”

These days Freilicher’s world-within-this-world tends to be the one found underneath the cadences of sunlight on Long Island’s eastern shore. Her long association with that community was honored this past summer at the annual Art Hamptons festival, where she was given a 2014 Lifetime Achievement award. The rustic landscapes in this De Nagy show testify to her ongoing immersion in that colorful environment around Mecox Bay.



Jane Freilicher, "Bouquet" (c.1982),
oil on paper, 24 x 19 ½ inches

In “Roses and Chrysanthemums” (2014), intense greens and watery blues within a partial, verdant bay-view are integrated into a foregrounded centerpiece of arranged flowers, simple vases and gossamer curtains. This unassuming scene sets the stage for Freilicher’s sublime orchestration of pinks, purples, and blue-and-pink-tinged white. Even in her understated presentation, the shimmering tonalities and luxurious undertones evoke the exotic sun-drenched palettes in certain Mediterranean paintings by Paul Signac and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

The landscapes “Goldenrod” (2012) and “Early Fall” (2013) are also standouts. Both focus on Long Island fields, depicting the subtle seasonal alterations of color — summertime gold and autumnal greens, respectively. The smoky brushwork, especially in “Early Fall,” is a departure from Freilicher’s characteristically lithe delineations. In both landscapes she gives full play to the seasonal saturation and chromatic resonances that stir within and rise from these fields. Their resplendence turns an airy outdoor scene into a kind of palpable thing; the landscapes are as intimate and accessible as the smallest still-life.



Jane Freilicher, “Roses and Chrysanthemums”
(2014), color lithograph, 27 ½ x 34 3/8 inches.
Edition of 54

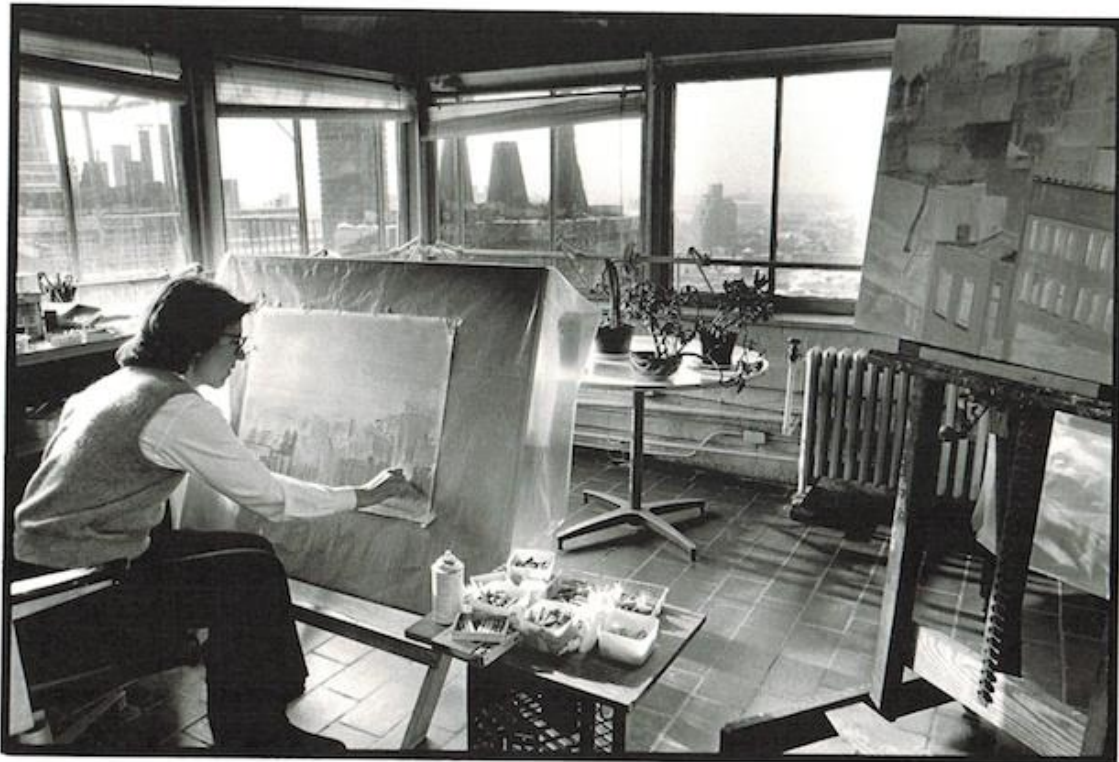
Like Proust’s prose, Freilicher’s paintings achieve a transfiguring the everyday — without ever altering its integrity or intrinsic reality — through representations of reality that painstakingly re-enact the processes of perception. Natural and manmade objects seem to unfold themselves through an internal artistic agency all their own. Freilicher’s patient work turns that apparent illusion of nature’s animism and the organic quintessence of the artificial into convincing truths about the physical world. Her

art is an ongoing lesson in shutting out the hustle and bustle, standing still, and being hyper-attentive. It reminds me of early passages in Proust’s novel *In Search of Lost Time*, in which privileged objects and elements — windows, water, trees, orchids, fish, plates, vases, sunlight — make such unlimited impressions on the narrator’s memory and consciousness that they become, in and of themselves, *artists*, as in this famous passage, in which Proust’s narrator, like Freilicher at work, contemplates the simple fact of hawthorn flowers in a countryside church:

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The hawthorn was not merely in the church [...] but, arranged upon the altar itself, inseparable from the mysteries in whose celebration it was playing a part, it thrust in among the tapers and the sacred vessels its rows of branches, tied to one another horizontally in a stiff, festal scheme of decoration; and they were made more lovely still by the scalloped outline of the dark leaves, over which were scattered in profusion, as over a bridal train, little clusters of buds of a dazzling whiteness. [...] I could feel that the formal scheme was composed of living things, and that it was Nature herself who, by trimming the shape of the foliage, and by adding the crowning ornament of those snowy buds, had made the decorations worthy of what was at once a public rejoicing and a solemn mystery.



Jane Freilicher in her studio (1984) (Photo by Nancy Crampton)

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