

Janaki Lennie: Breathing Space

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by Christopher French



Representation is a process of enumeration, a series of descriptions of people and things that seeks to establish a coherent narrative or a sense of place. The centeredness or compositional unity provided by perspective is at the heart of this tradition, and it is this centeredness that Janaki Lennie inverts in her exhibition *Breathing Space*. Her vertically oriented, 5-by-4 proportioned panels fairly shout 'window'; however, they offer all the particular components but none of the structured legibility that we expect when looking at a landscape. Centrifuging the pertinent details of place to the edges, where they cling and accumulate into dense bundles, Lennie offers suggestive portraits of the contemporary sensibility known as ex-urban.

Upending our expectations for detailed depiction supported by generalized background, Lennie's primary subject is always the distant sky, which she does not record in seasonal variation, but at its most unnatural: as the steely ozone alert sky of a summer afternoon; the leaden artifice of a city night-sky, or the bruised purple-brown of thunderstorm anticipation. There are no

horizon lines in Breathing Space to intimate distance or specify locale, so that the details of each painting, described largely in tonal variants of the sky's predominant monochrome, read like grisaille stage props in a theatrical production, anchoring our attention on the otherwise overwhelming nowhere-ness that is at the heart of each painting.



Sometimes Lennie divides different kinds of detail on different sides of a painting, composing like a classifying scientist assaying a sample. The tree branches bordering lower or center left in Breathing Space 206 and 115 are counterbalanced at extreme right by compressed packets of strong verticals composed of light towers, telephone poles, and silhouetted building profiles. In other paintings Lennie piles all of her details to one side, instilling her scenes with the tension of a tenuous truce about to be broken. Severely cropped, tubular, and totally industrial, the forms lurking on the right edge of Breathing Space 114 conjure both fantasy (the externals of a spaceship), and utility (the piping of an oilrig). Breathing Space 113, which piles both natural and mechanical forms into an amalgam that runs top to bottom on the panel's right side, is more naturalistic, enforcing an ant's perspective, with tree branches succeeded by light poles, which are in turn surmounted by the geometry of a broadcast tower. At her most abstract (Breathing Space 210 and 58), Lennie dispenses almost entirely with architectural detail, placing a solitary parallelogram on the upper left side of her composition to balance the tree forms that clump in the lower right.

If the atmospheric grounds of these paintings are relentlessly abstract in their monochrome intensity, the flotsam that props them up is detailed with exquisite neutrality. Lennie's leaves and tree limbs are not observed from nature—they are archetypes of trees, repeatable integers that are made with tightly scripted gestures, like the formulaic strokes of classic Chinese ink painting. Lennie is a careful editor, removing identifying signage or other particulars of place so that her manmade imagery becomes interchangeable and capable of sustaining any number of readings.



On her website Lennie talks about how 'glimpses of the sky seen between the intrusions of the city' can 'offer a path to reconnect with mythic notions of earth and stars.' This romantic ideal is conveyed by paintings that are frankly beautiful in their execution but in conception are full of existential angst about the inhuman qualities of life in an 'edge city' environment. Just as there is no grounding horizontal in any of these paintings to indicate a 'here,' no people muddy the polarities that dominate this series. Equal parts enervating and exhilarating, the spaces Lennie constructs in Breathing Space square the circle between naturalism and abstraction, intimating the possibility of a place where the timelessness of art and the daily artifices of contemporary life can cohabit.