

Ted Gahl: *Night Painter*

By Bo Joseph

For painter Ted Gahl, the fall of night stills the external and stirs the internal: the outer world bombarded by media, information and imagery powers down as an inner world of memory, intimation and resonance awakens. Night seems to slow time and encourages a level of absorption that, in the artist's words, "converts time into duration." As time seems to suspend so does distraction, disbelief, cynicism and self-consciousness, spurring ever more inventive free-association. Gahl's painting is a medium for authentic autobiographies to unfold in a compulsively irreverent morphing of memory and impulse. Like Philip Guston, another night painter, Gahl seeks to reconcile the stimulus of memory and quotidian sources with an effort to "eliminate, as much as possible, the time span between thinking and doing." Mingled with the relentless stimulus of the day which he stockpiles on impromptu napkin sketches, Gahl's paintings mine the memories and projections of family anecdotes that spur his allusive visual narratives.

The works in this show are tied together in part by a state of mind and in part by a condition of form. They are abstractions made at night about the experience of night. Darkness reigns in a palette of blues, grays and blacks, pierced here and there by slivers of saturated color or exposed canvas. They are paintings about light glimmering at the fringes of shadows, like fissures leaking murmurs of optimism from tenebrous depths. Part of the intrigue of his work is the combination of a lighthearted, pleasant ease with a conflicted or convoluted culling of things darker, unsettled. They display a dark view of the world in collision with the sanguine outlook required to paint into the unknown. A Diebenkorn-esque fractured grid provides structure, offering ways of seeing that are organized in spite of the disorder of life...but never so organized as to risk ringing untrue. They harken to Matisse's moodier compositions in grays and heavy green, that seem to gravitate anxiously near the proverbial "Void." As in deKooning's *Attic* paintings, the viewer will also be lured by implied windows or (trap) doors through which they might find ways into and out of Gahl's compartmentalized realms. Occasionally the viewer will encounter a grounding presence in the form of a silhouetted figure—think Jasper Johns self portrait meets *Swamp Thing*—lurking in these shadows and crevices. This is a kind of Everyman inserted to mirror the artist's presence and to provide a relational vessel into which the viewer might project their own identity and inhabit the work. As with Diebenkorn and Matisse, drawing is at the root of these works, many of which build on Gahl's ongoing daytime sketches and visual notations. But at the moment any Modernist tendrils take hold, they are sheared by Gahl's dedication to something more brutish and timely. These are not the nostalgic indulgences of a nocturnal romantic, but rigorous visual expeditions of the spelunking kind, fraught by fading lamp batteries, noxious ooze, murky depths and disorienting echos.

Gahl's works are as much autobiographical in their representation of his time and his locale as they are in their investigation of familial or artistic histories. Like the night—as well as the time in which he paints—this artist's method can be as restless as it is evocative. In artist Ted Gahl's words, "painting is the persistence of and dedication to the analog, in an increasingly digital world." As antidotes to a conventional search for a "style," his paintings are abstract assertions of an artist's prerogative to champion "the mundane, the beaten down, the everyday." Gahl will as easily paint onto both sides of a used silkscreen as he will paint on stretched canvas; or interrupt an elegant passage with a device out of left field. For Gahl, any esthetic accommodation to style smacks of contrivance. These works reflect a deeply personal nature combined with an observational acceptance of all things—large and small, pleasant and difficult. These rifts (or riffs) serve to shake up the experience, bring it more urgently into the moment and down to earth, and at the same time demonstrate a gritty visual accumen. This is where criticality deigns to enter a practice devoted to multiplicity: the continual measuring of immediacy and authenticity. Gahl is aware of the absurdity of this endeavor and yet he maintains a kind of agnostic faith in its potential. Belief in the face of skepticism simply fuels conviction.

Though time seems to slow at night in Ted Gahl's studio, it does not stop fully. If night provokes new ways of describing form, of mining time, the inevitable arrival of daylight reveals the warped effects of the night. Guston admitted "I'm a night painter, so when I come into the studio the next morning, the delirium is over...and the feeling is one of, 'My God, did I do that?'" a sentiment to which Gahl readily relates. Being surprised and even disturbed by what you make is sometimes difficult to accept, but is also a great reward for an artist determined to expand their worldview by reconciling mundane experience with heightened imagination. Meaning withdraws to shady corners, often huddling with personal demons, that are hard to see against the bright light of day. It takes a night watchman to coax them out and offer an empathetic eye.

Bo Joseph (b.1969), a native of California, received his B.F.A. in Painting from the Rhode Island School of Design. He has lectured at Pace University, New York, NY; The Cambridge School of Weston, Weston, MA; Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI; Parsons of the New School for Design, New York, NY; University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, MA. Joseph has taught at the MFA Program at Vermont College of Union Institute & University and at the Pre-College Program at the Rhode Island School of Design. He was the Associate Director at Allan Stone Gallery. Joseph lives and works in New York City.