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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

UNDERCOVER
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Ena Swansea

ALBERTZ BENDA GALLERY

A visitor once asked me how long it takes a new arrival to become a New Yorker. My considered response: You are a New Yorker when you start to miss the "real" New York, the one you knew when the city was still fresh to you and hadn't yet been replaced by . . . whatever it is that the next wave of arrivals brought with them. By that standard, I might have to call myself an inhabitant of the city that Ena Swansea evokes in her most recent paintings. It's recognizably New York, but not as I see it when I walk its streets these days. Swansea's New York is wrapped up in a decayed Romanticism that's hardly been felt in these parts since the 1980s, and this despite the fact that her imagery discreetly incorporates contemporary details, for instance the signage for a fast-food chain that didn't exist back then (*shake shack in the summer*, 2015). More often, her paintings focus on decontextualized nature—details that don't relate to any specific time period: a distant vista from the waterfront (*view from the sex pier*, 2016) or trees with some brownstones peeking through in the background (*snow on 16th street*, 2015).

Strangely, though, the New York that is the main setting for most of the works in Swansea's recent show doesn't look that different from her North Carolina hometown in *snow in charlotte*, 2016, the one painting

Ena Swansea, *Tiny Plastic Hands*, 2016, oil on graphite on linen, 20 x 30".



\$15.00



Schwabsky, Barry. "Ena Swansea," *ARTFORUM*, February 2017.

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whose title explicitly references another place—and not only because we don't think of a southern city under snow. The sense of familiarity ought to have been reassuring, but instead it created a disquieting sense of déjà vu. It was as if Swansea had transmuted Southern Gothic into a personal brand of Northeastern Gothic. The eeriness of the paintings had much more to do with the way they evoked temporal and spatial displacements than with the play between abstraction and figuration that's highlighted in the gallery press release. Swansea has developed an unusual technique of painting on a graphite-infused ground, which seems to situate everything in a darkly glimmering, indistinct twilight space; you might even call the resulting light effects Caravaggesque. On this ground, where brush marks often seem to float discretely, the paintings' imagery may appear to be in a state of dissolution—but it never comes close to being unrecognizable.

The resulting effect of uneasiness was particularly pronounced in Swansea's paintings of the urban landscape. In representing the city's inhabitants, she produced results that were more mixed. A couple of portrait-like works (*zachariah* and *girl in a club*, both 2015) seemed constrained in their attempt to delineate the specificity of a face or figure by way of a technique perhaps better suited to liquefying individual identity. Maybe that's why I found her crowd scenes—*40 People in a Club* and *cardboard legs*, both 2016, or the large-scale work on paper *the box*, 2014—more convincing: They succeeded in capturing the partial and temporary submerging of individuality into an audience. But perhaps the strangest and most haunting of the paintings in this show was neither a landscape nor a figure painting: *Tiny Plastic Hands*, 2016, which was one of the smallest pieces on view, depicts what at first seemed to be a single glove floating before a nondescript graphite-gray ground and casting a shadow. But why do both glove and shadow have fingernails? The title only begins to explain what the stark image shows. It looks simple at first but takes time to register, gaining force as its ambiguity heightens.

—Barry Schwabsky

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