

TWO COATS OF PAINT

Kathryn Lynch: Allusive Places

By Patrick Neal

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Sometimes we see something better when we don't look directly at it. This thought permeated my viewing of Kathryn Lynch's impressive paintings at Turn Gallery on the Upper East Side. Her current exhibition, fittingly titled "Between the Streets," showcases her crowning achievement as a painter: capturing the liminal spaces that define the essence of a given place.

The show consists of city scenes painted simply – innocent, almost childlike renderings of buildings with towers or steeples, a monument, cars on streets, trains on elevated tracks, a boat on the water, a few trees here and there. The compositions are loose and gestural without detail or fuss, but still manage to suggest different seasons, weather, times of day, and places. Undistracted by minutiae, the viewer is free to enjoy terse paint handling that represents scenes while distilling mood, transience, and history onto one plane, like dreams rendering reality as a patchwork. The subjects have just enough specificity to allow familiarity, and the paint delivers emotive power. Many of the paintings resolve around one dominant and evocative color that suffuses the field of the canvas or panel.

Lynch conjures the haze of city lights as seen through gloom or glare, often including bleary reflections on glistening streets. Flourishes of orange or red lights depicting emergency blinkers enliven wan blue and margarine ocher landscapes. Public transportation zips by, seemingly speeding through rain-soaked nights or cool evenings, as though viewed through fogged-up windows. To anonymous environs she imparts a fleeting sense of residents' presence. There is an impressionistic quality to her work, whereby flashes of a subject's character and being, rather than eyeball transcriptions of its features, convey objective reality. I thought of other artists who have evoked New York City's character: painter Loren MacIver, whose haunting atmospherics transform ordinary skylights, fire escapes, and sidewalks into otherworldly specters; novelist James Rechy, whose *City of Night* presents a moody dreamscape in Times Square. All three artists tell a story indirectly, through an allusive lens.

Lynch's oil paint can be thin and washy, as when she depicts a trio of city streets in the evening by way of a Cerulean blue palette, or more heavily scumbled and worked, as with yellows layered over brick red and applied in glazes in the autumnal *Golden Hour*. In that painting, the grill of a train is echoed in the sharp rooftop of a neighborhood building and trees are suggested with a few sweeping stokes. In the vein of Charles Burchfield, *Big Red* is more direct and forceful, depicting the gothic facade of a church or hall. Lynch abbreviates details and forms, so a car, train

or boat becomes a simple glyph. Yet these elemental images can rise to archetypes speaking across civilizations. The paintings *Smoke Stack* and *River*, with hints of a mastaba and fronded tree branches, are rendered in somber sand and turquoise hues, and give off a Mediterranean vibe suggestive of ancient ceramic tiles.

Lynch's small, assured exhibition has a romantic and nostalgic aura, emanating from her naïve style and poetic layering, which involve remembering and repeatedly walking the same paths to revisit a subject or site. Reinforcing this quality, "Between the Streets" is hung in the Turn Gallery's Parlour Room, a 1920s townhouse about forty blocks from the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue that housed the historic Armory Show of 1913 and introduced European painting and sculpture to the United States. Indeed, Lynch's show brings to mind early American abstraction and folk art – the period when American artists were starting to escape their provincial past and become players on the international art scene. Her work has a self-taught innocence and bears a stylistic resemblance to such originals as Horace Pippin, Doris Lee and even the Venezuelan outsider artist Bárbaro Rivas, but with the sophisticated abstract reduction of Milton Avery and Arthur Dove.

Many New Yorkers cherish Manhattan most during holidays, when the crowds have disappeared and they have the city all to themselves. The Covid pandemic has had a comparably surreal impact, emptying streets as residents and tourists alike stay home. Lynch's paintings encapsulate this moment, holding the city still and framing it as a character in its own drama. Here factual details are secondary. The essential experience revolves around sensations, memories, and personal histories: time – and life – as it passes.