Kate Shepherd: Surveillance

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May 6, 2020

Installation view, *Kate Shepherd: Surveillance*, Galerie Lelong & Co., New York, 2020. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

On View

Galerie Lelong & Co.
Kate Shepherd: Surveillance
New York

Kate Shepherd's *Surveillance* is the artist's first one-person exhibition at Galerie Lelong in six years. No sooner did the show open on March 12 than the city (and the gallery) close the next day due to health concerns related to COVID-19. It is a huge disappointment for Shepherd's wide community of supporters and the art community as a whole, but Shepherd has taken the situation in stride in her inimitably practical way. She is grateful to the gallery for keeping the show up when it reopens in hopes that people will be able to see it show yet is content and at peace with the fact that the paintings get to hang together alone.

I first visited Shepherd's studio in the mid-late '90s when she was making quirky drawings on prefabricated paint chips. I wrote about her work for a catalogue accompanying a 2007 gallery show in which I was infatuated by the element of drawing in her paintings that was conceptually, psychologically, and programmatically fundamental to her art making. Her unique union of drawing and painting, her adherence to the laws of linear perspective, and the subdued shifts in tone and luminosity that create hypothetical, architectural spaces into which viewers are pulled have been signature ingredients in an oeuvre that never feels prosaic or formulaic.

Kate Shepherd, *Blue Violet Lights Off*, 2019. Enamel on panel, 42 x 41 inches. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

Surveillance marks a vast leap in a new direction. Working on, experimenting with, and percolating this new body of work for years, Shepherd dug deep into her self and her process to figure out how to make paintings that would essentially make themselves instead of her superimposing images on them. Having always considered the crisp lines describing geometric structures and spatial experiences to be what her painting was about, she was compelled to finally address the qualities of her painted surfaces without sacrificing the personal criteria she holds for making a successful painting, in particular the articulation of space and the concomitant viewer experience. A short video walkthrough posted on the gallery website and two recorded conversations conducted, respectively, with William S. Smith, editor of *Art in America* magazine, and Tyler Green, host of the podcast, *The Modern Art Notes,* are generous, intimate, and informative contributions to our understanding of the genesis and essential qualities of the paintings in the show.[1] As a caveat, however, it must be noted that hearing about the new paintings is not the same as experiencing them, and experiencing them all together in real space and time is what I look forward to.

The show's title, *Surveillance*, was apt even before the pandemic in light of our selfie-obsessed, digital world in which boundaries between private and public have been increasingly eroded. It becomes even more eerie and prescient, however, in the current lockdown world where solitary individuals work and socialize through online Zoom meetings and art is viewed as digital thumbnails. The exhibition is comprised of two distinct bodies of work. The oldest works in the show were made three years ago and are installed in the small, side gallery. Works such as *Blue Violet Lights Off* and *Crimson Lights Off* (both 2019) each began as glossy, monochromatic paintings that captured in their surfaces the ambient light and fluorescent ceiling fixtures that Shepherd photographed and then had screen printed onto another surface. Seizing and fixing a specific image at a specific moment in time and place, these printed works are representational paintings that have effectively made themselves.

Kate Shepherd, *Eavesdropper*, 2019. Enamel on panel, 52 x 46 inches. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

The paintings in the main gallery, which Shepherd finally resolved just a few months before the show, relinquish her signature lines and establish as their primary subject matter the heretofore unspoken attributes of the painted surface. Having always built up her paintings with many layers and sanding in between, she never found a reason until now to display the luscious velvety quality of the buried, sanded surface. In *Eavesdropper* (2019), two highly shiny, purple parallelograms holding fugitive images of passersby and nearby objects within their contours cut back sharply into an atmospheric field of tender, non-reflective purple that is modulated by whispers of brushstrokes. A breathtaking, space-defining tour de force, the glossy trapezoids read as "surrogate paintings" against an indeterminate wall rather than the painting itself. In the eponymous painting *Surveillance* (2020), the left half of the painting is glossy like Shepherd's earlier paintings; on this side you see a reflection of the artist taking the picture. The right half, meanwhile, reveals a sensuously matte surface that is impervious to people and things in real space. Despite its impermeability, *Surveillance*, the last painting made for the show, is offered by the artist to viewers as a recipe or instruction manual to gain access into the paintings and her process.

In herconversation with William Smith, Shepherd enumerated the qualities with which she seeks to imbue her paintings: spookiness, loneliness, love, and sweetness. Seemingly contradictory, perhaps, these traits indeed manifest themselves in the new works. One cannot help but also ascribe these characteristics as projections of the artist herself as well as of the particular moment we are living in.

1. *Art in America* "William S. Smith in Conversation with Kate Shepherd.," Instagram Video, April 10, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/tv/B-75sABnlLu/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.; Tyler Green, "Pandemic Bonus Episode: Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Kate Shepherd," *Modern Art Notes Podcast*, April 14, 2020, https://manpodcast.com/portfolio/pandemic-bonus-episode-paul-mpagi-sepuya-kate-shepherd/.