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Aubrey Levinthal: 'Tourist'
Both Voyeur and Participant
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by Jody Zellen



In her first exhibition at M+B in 2021, Philadelphia-based painter Aubrey Levinthal looked inward, making works about the isolation of the pandemic and the guarded interactions that followed. In her current exhibition *Tourist*, her paintings begin to look outward, depicting figures on the go, traveling and socializing, in addition to experiencing quiet moments alone. Levinthal works with a soft, muted palette rendering her scenes tenderly and somewhat abstractly, as often the figures merge with, or are bisected by the backgrounds. While based on observation, Levinthal also extrapolates and allows her imagination to infiltrate the scenes.

For example, *Windowbox (13th St.)* (all works 2023), is a painting of a woman passing by a windowbox filled with flowers on the exterior of a nondescript building. Levinthal presents a tight crop of the location so the dark, olive-green windowbox, sparsely populated with red and purple flowers fills most of the composition. A woman passes by. Her shirt is rendered in translucent whites which allow the shadow at the base of the box to merge with her body while the skin tones of her head and neck take on the colors of the front of the container. In profile, she stares straight ahead with wide open eyes as if lost in thought and unaware of her surroundings.

A similar sentiment pervades *Waiting for the E*, where Levinthal portrays a lone woman wearing a light blue dress and coat, carrying a darker blue handbag, as well as a backpack filled with flowers. She casually leans against a support column as she gazes down at her cell phone. While the woman occupies most of the left side of the composition, depicted behind her and on the right side of the image is the architecture of the empty train station painted in washy tans and grays. A second figure sits on a bench in the distance partially obscured by a dark vertical beam. While the woman's expression is complacent, there is an aura of loneliness that emanates from the scene.

It is not hard to imagine the artist among the woman seated in *Three Women (Amsterdam)* sharing a moment and a drink together as city life goes on around them, or even enjoying a moment of solitude and contemplation in *Sauna Lady*, a painting of a woman seated on a wooden bench with legs extended, surrounded by paneled walls and steam from the hot rocks in the sauna. Draped in only an opaque white-toned towel, the figure subtly fuses with her surroundings.

A narrative is inferred through the trajectory of the paintings that illustrates a range of human emotions and experiences: from vulnerability and melancholy to self-reflection and even joy. The narrative moves from leisure time, like *Morning Aerobics*, a painting of a man and a woman relaxing in a pool, to travel, as in *Terminal A* and moments of intimacy like *Studio Nintendo* that

depicts a small boy sitting across the lap of a young woman seated on a huge pink arm chair. Both figures appear to be zoning out with their eyes closed, ignoring what might be on the computer screen.

Levinthal has an uncanny ability to express a lot with minimal depiction. Her painting style is light but expressive, a wonderful combination of lines and fills, transparencies and opacities. Figures dissolve into architecture as if to reinforce the impermanence of human life while simultaneously asserting their presence. Levinthal is both voyeur and participant, chronicling that which unfolds around her: wary, but also delighted to celebrate what it means to be alive.

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