Art Reviews

Rapt by Strangely Lit and Shadowed Paintings

Jordan Kasey's painted figures, lit with mysterious, colored light, have the monumentality of Picasso's Neo-classical period and are as ponderous as whales gliding through the ocean.

Dennis Kardon March 6, 2017

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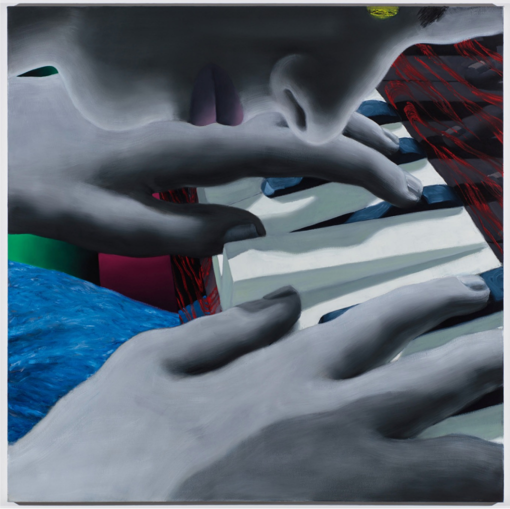
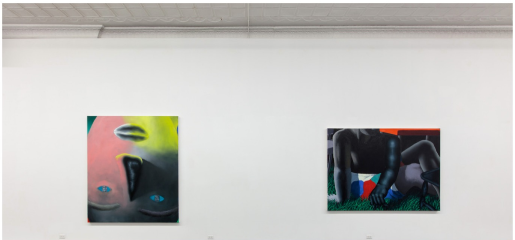


Jordan Kasey, "Practicing Piano" (2017), oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches (all images courtesy Nicelle Beauchene gallery and the artist unless otherwise noted)

The celestial body of Jordan Kasey's exhibition, *Exoplanet*, refers to a planet that exists outside our solar system. Kasey's compellingly odd paintings at Nicelle Beauchene gallery obviously originate from a realm outside the familiar body of artworks currently orbiting among the downtown galleries.

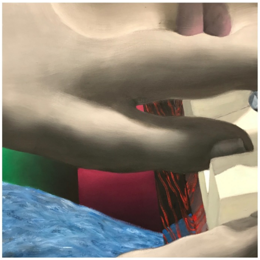
Kasey is a paradoxical painter. The five large canvases commanding the gallery space are simultaneously overwhelming and confidential, representational but formally abstract. Though lacking juicy expressionistic brushwork, the works vibrate with quietly restrained emotion. Her thick figures, lit with mysterious, colored light, have the monumentality of Picasso's Neo-classical period, without the earth tones, and are as ponderous as whales gliding through the ocean.



Installation view of Jordan Kasey: Exoplanet at Nicelle Beauchene

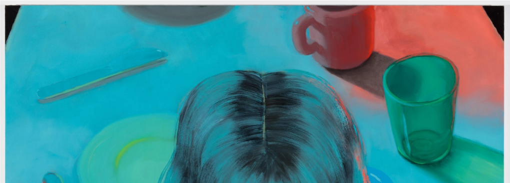
The force that drives the engine of Kasey's work is her eschewal of the flat-earth ideology (collaged, cartoony or photo-derived, super-flat figuration) of many of her contemporaries. Although sharing formal explorations with older painters like Dana Schutz and Nicole Eisenman, Kasey has developed an idea of space and light that owes its complexity to traditional shading, shadow, and tonal control, but is nevertheless obviously artificial in its eccentric color, cinematic scale, and close-up framing. The result is an ambiguity and intimacy that feels totally contemporary.

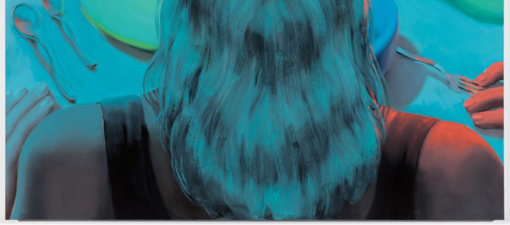
Her experimentation has resulted in explosive yet compressed compositions, as in "Practicing Piano," with its fractured shards of gray fingers, mauve lips, piano keys, shadows, a blue patch of clothing, and glossily reflective mahogany, all topped by an absurd yellow jewel of an eye like the star atop a Christmas tree. But then there is also the weirdly luminous and dreamy face with Ms. Potatohead features in "Upside-down Head." Meanwhile, the ominous "At The Table" displays a glowing blue and red array of empty dishware that surrounds the turned away head, while three strange disembodied fingers creep in on the right to caress the tines of a fork.



Jordan Kasey, "Practicing Piano" (2017) (detail) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

In the 6½ by 9 foot "Poolside," Kasey orchestrates the shadows and limbs of the four fragmented bathers to create a sonata of themes and variations on volumetric forms and flat negative spaces. She is most endearing when she spatters her composition with little slivers of light that are the result of intersecting shadows and forms, and arise particularly through her wonderful inventions of fingers. There is both innocence to the casually crowded, orange and pink array of exposed arms and legs on a hot summer day, and unease in the way our eyes are forced to move through these contained pillars of sunburnt flesh. Framed by two monumental seated figures on the right and left as well as a horizontal arm at the top, "Poolside" allows viewers into its constrained space through the sunlit patch of gray tiles at the bottom. But then Kasey takes our attention for a little whirl with a rapid succession of fingers and shadows and toes.

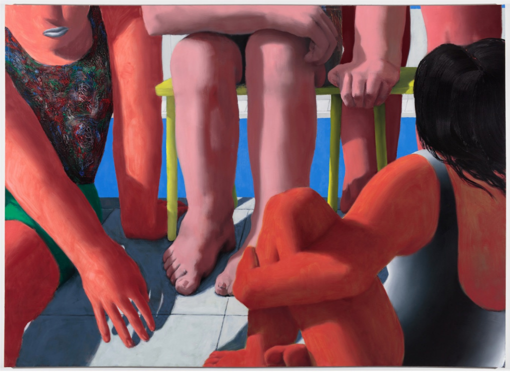




Jordan Kasey, “At the Table” (2017), oil on canvas, 57 x 71 inches

Each painting, described by a deadpan title, enacts a deceptively simple tableau, which Kasey then subverts through the complex ways her forms break up light and color. Rather than go for more nuanced color, she is unafraid to use simple black for objects, shaded flesh, and shadows,and her strange color is either local, such as the bright cobalt of pool water and lime green of deck chair, or a projected colored light illuminating a tablecloth or head.

But the quality that really elevates this work is the unplanned nature of Kasey’s approach. Because she understands the way viewing distance changes the perspective and forms of a large painting, the scale she achieves cannot be simply enlarged from sketches. Her surfaces are thick from adjustments. The psychological effect of these paintings hinges on the complex physical relation of viewer to imaginary space and painted form, a relationship that can only be achieved through Kasey’s spontaneous interplay of body to paint, and touch to canvas.



Jordan Kasey, “Poolside” (2017”), oil on canvas, 77½ x 108 inches

Constantly testing the limits of both her abilities and imagination, she manages to create paintings that are simultaneously contemplative and riveting and yet avoid becoming formulaic. All five paintings here were completed this year, revealing an ambition to stake out a varied range while still finding coherence. While there is a maturity to the pictorial complexity of her vision, Kasey exhibits a sense of invention and play that incites curiosity and excited anticipation of what she may paint next.

Jordan Kasey: Exoplanet *continues at Nicelle Beauchene (327 Broome St, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through March 12.*

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Dennis Kardon

Dennis Kardon is a painter and writer living and working in New York. A show of his recent paintings, Reflections on the Surface, can be seen at Valentine Gallery. Work and writing can be seen at denniskardon.com. More by Dennis Kardon

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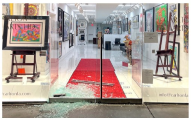

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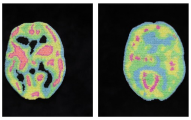

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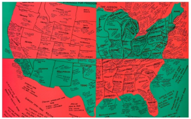

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Rhea Nayyar

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In quiet yet scrupulous detail, *Designing Experience* asks how the US National Park Service shapes the narratives it tells about this country and the lands it claims.

Alexis Clements

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