

ISOLATION INTERVIEWS

AGLAÉ BASSENS





ISSUE 20

Continuing the Isolation Interviews: a series of weekly artist and curator profiles highlighting current concerns, accompanied by a selection of available works.

We know that these are precarious and uncertain times for everyone and with so many people staying at home, self-isolating or social distancing, we want to be able to continue sharing some of our favourite art and artists with you. The Isolation Interviews are a weekly series of conversations with artists and curators that will explore how these new circumstances are affecting their practices, projects and productivity. We'll hear how they are finding solutions - and even opportunities - and what their plans and hopes are for the future.

Brooke Benington is committed to supporting and creating opportunities for artists. We believe that this is needed now more than ever. Most artists are self-employed, often supplementing their income by working as technicians, fabricators, assistants, teachers and a whole host of other jobs. Now, many have very suddenly lost a vital source of income. With this in mind, we are accompanying each Isolation Interview with a curated selection of work by that artist, available for purchase.

Thank you for your continued support. Stay safe and look after one another.

Lily & George
Directors, Brooke Benington



In the last few years you have moved from London to New York, to Paris and back to New York, in fact, regularly relocating has been a feature of much of your life. Do you believe that a sense of place or perhaps a sense of transience is apparent in your work?

I think the sense of longing and melancholy in my work stems from my uprooted childhood. The viewpoint in my paintings is often of being outside looking in, as though the viewer is invited to look into a scene loaded with narrative but with no clear context. That is a reflection of how I felt as a newcomer in different countries, relying on observation to understand what is going and what is being said in a foreign language. In this sense, my works often have a stage-like or cinematographic quality.

Over time, I came to draw a parallel between the transience of moving repeatedly and the transformative qualities of paint. I love the way inert

paint can embody feeling, thought and image, how it can conjure meaning and transform through the process of painting. Lately, I have tried to consciously use the way I paint (fluid, loose brush strokes carrying thinned down oil paint) to work on still life. I felt that the overlap between that timeless genre and the materiality of the paint could say something about transience, transformation and flux of both time and paint.

Your solo exhibition Sincerely at Hesse Flatow Gallery has recently come to an end. Obviously it hasn't been an ideal year for it, but how did you find the experience of exhibition-making in 2020? Did the pervading atmosphere impact at all on your creative choices and did the restrictions have practical implications for you?

It has been very different from other exhibitions. It was my most comprehensive solo show to date in New York City, which was kind of terrifying but also a lifeline

during the global pandemic. During the first few months of lockdown, I didn't go to my studio as the subway commute was long and initially felt non-essential. Later, I relocated my studio to within a short bike ride from my apartment and was able to start working again. I felt so relieved and privileged to be able to paint every day. I was fortunate to be able to ground myself in my work, and to have a deadline to focus on instead of the news headlines. It helped to hold on to my sense of self and purpose at an uncertain time.

I found it harder to make paintings at first because there were fewer opportunities to meet fellow artists and talk through ideas and show the works in progress. This led to a lot of self-doubts initially, but in hindsight, I think it was a necessary and useful experience. I had to ask myself why I was painting and what I wanted to achieve in order to achieve clarity.

In terms of the pervading lockdown atmosphere, I've certainly been thinking more about time and loss. During the pandemic, time has felt so strange, so slow yet also somehow flying by. My work has always been on the melancholy, lonely side of the spectrum so I guess it was always pandemic-ready in that way.



Something I noticed was more exhibitions of paintings of interiors and still life by other artists. I enjoyed seeing the works of Serena Stevens at Postmasters and Heni Altman at Karma and felt that perhaps the pandemic opened a window for quieter, contemplative paintings in the NYC painting scene.

Your paintings present as still life, or perhaps still frames of life, as if they are quickly captured moments seen in passing. They seem photographic in their approach if not their execution. Is that tension between stillness and a passing moment something you look for when selecting subjects for your paintings?



I often describe my work as still life - and I guess I call it that by default: it's not of figures or portraits, and it's not quite landscape, and not ever fully abstract. My paintings are intended as 'views', with the viewer looking through the lens of my eye. There is something unyielding about that, as I am the one deciding where the boundaries of the rectangular canvas will cut off the scene.

The photographic inspiration for my motifs gives an archival quality to the image presented to the viewer: It was witnessed by me alone, and now through paint, you are invited to witness that image; but also to become a witness of that moment of reflection that occurred when I was moved to record that object or scene. So through that, there is a sense of human presence, and there are different layers of time involved in the process: the photograph taken in passing, a flicker of stillness when I press the shutter, then the process of painting the image, which is fast and immersive, and eventually the stillness and contemplation of the viewer. But that is, in a way, at the heart of still life: this momentary pause allowing us to contemplate nature on its unfeeling course: flowers blooming then wilting,

our loved ones aging, growth and loss, beginnings and endings coexisting in one image. This tension between stillness and movement is definitely something I look for in terms of motif, but also in the handling of the paint itself, always in flux between sheer materiality and representation. The time in painting is somehow not linear, and that is really interesting to me.

Some of your paintings seem to be as much about capturing the light of a certain time of day (often evening or morning) as they are about the objects or subject contained within. Is this a nod to the passing of time or something more emotionally resonant?

I think it might have to do with painting as well as with place. Light sets the scene, it is to the motif what turpentine is to oil paint: it brings the painting together and helps an image feel like a snapshot of a specific, genuine moment that I have experienced rather than an illustration of it. Light will describe a season, a time of day, a hemisphere, a temperature. It defines a mood; it is always changing yet when it's painted, it becomes as tangible or physical



as an object. So it's like the soul of the painting, it sets it in a time and place.

Back to where we began. Have you found that there is a difference in the artistic communities in the different cities you have lived and worked in? And do you feel that in an increasingly connected global art system that these local differences are important?

I think there are definite differences, but I am not sure whether they reside in the specifics of the location I find myself in or in the experience of being new to a place. It is surprising how freeing it can be to arrive as an artist in a new country - I think you allow yourself to break self-imposed rules you were not conscious of following: you get a chance to reinvent yourself, although of course, it's hard to get very far from yourself.

As a newcomer, people will offer you more support and advice than you might get at home, where you are expected to know what you are doing. It feels easier to ask for help and to reach out, something else which can feel harder to do at home (I keep saying 'home' because I don't know what country that is!). So, those things

probably influence my perception of what the artistic community might be like in any given city.

When I left London in 2016, I didn't feel like painting was very popular. I felt at times that I had to justify why I was painting, why it was still relevant. Arriving in NYC, there was painting everywhere I looked, mostly of the figurative kind. And there were many painters, a big supportive community. But this is very cyclical, painting dies and is reborn in all the big art communities every few years.

I do think those local differences are important as they can make a big impact on a developing art practice. I would advise anyone who is thinking of relocating to give some thought to what culture they feel most comfortable in and to seek a place where the medium of their choice is being celebrated - it's very exciting, fuels healthy competition and makes you feel like you are part of something larger than yourself.





AGLAÉ BASSENS

Aglaé Bassens (b. 1986, Belgium) lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Solo exhibitions include *Sincerely*, at Hesse Flatow, New York (2020), *Surface Tension* at Nars Foundation, Brooklyn (2018), *You Can See Better From Here* at CRUSH Curatorial, New York (2018) and *Front Parting*, Cabin Gallery London (2016). Recent group shows include *Fête Galante*, Heaven Gallery, Chicago (2020), *Still Here*, Newington Gallery, London (2019), *Chains*, Central Park Gallery, Los Angeles (2019), *HEADS*, The Java Project, Brooklyn (2017), *Contemporary British Painting Prize*, London (2016), *Biennial Of Painting: The Painter's Touch*, Museum of Deinze, Belgium (2014), *PAPER*, Saatchi Gallery, London (2013) and *Jerwood Drawing Prize*, London (2012). Her work is featured in *New American Paintings No 134 Northeast Issue*, and in *100 Painters of Tomorrow* published by Thames and Hudson (2014). She has a BA in Fine Art from the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, Oxford University (2007) and an MFA in Fine Art Painting from the Slade School of Fine Art, London (2011).

www.aglaebassens.com



Blue R Train, 2017
Oil on canvas
45.7 x 61 cm
18 x 24 in.
Unique



Green Window, 2020
Oil on canvas
45.7 x 33 cm
18 x 13 in.
Unique



Cigarette Break, 2019
Oil on canvas
61 x 46.1 cm
24 x 18 1/4 in.
Unique



Evening Light, 2019
Oil on canvas
33 x 40.6 cm
13 x 16 in.
Unique



Red Window, 2017
Oil on canvas
25.4 x 20.3 cm
10 x 8 in.
Unique



Whitewash, 2020
Oil on panel
40.6 x 30.5 cm
16 x 12 in.
Unique

BROOKE BENINGTON

LONDON

lily@brookebenington.com

+44 (0)7557 036181

FULMER

george@brookebenington.com

+44 (0)7988 941056

brookebenington.com

[@brookebenington](https://www.instagram.com/brookebenington)

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