

Elizabeth Livingston: Night Fell
August 20, 2015



Elizabeth Livingston's photorealist paintings on view at The Lodge Gallery in the artist's first New York solo show, "Night Fell," are seductive and wistful portraits of domestic, suburban life that place the viewer in the role of the voyeur, distant yet alluring. Livingston's artwork seems to engage in the conversation of capturing light and its ephemeral nature while also employing its capability to evoke human emotion as a means of making us hyper-aware of our own personal responses to feeling like the outsider.

Livingston's paintings drape the gallery in an odd sensation of quiet comfort, yet each calls out in the want of closer inspection. There is a mixture between figures—women—sleeping or seemingly tranquil in their activity, portrayed in the safety of an interior space where the artist displays her talent at portraying colorful, ornate patterns in decor or clothing. The only exception is the large piece at the end of the gallery that greets the viewer as they enter: a self-portrait of the artist, arms outstretched, leaning against the edge of a pool, willingly exposed. The rest of the works are home portraits, exterior views of different houses with lush front yards and dark leafy trees amuck—vinyl siding, white porches and pitched roofs complete the all-American middle-class image.

The first home portrait I encountered was "December 26th." The home is neatly decorated; garlands are entwined with white lights that wind up the staircase and around the bannisters of the porch. The two columns framing the front door are reminiscent of candy canes. A Christmas tree twinkles merrily in the window, complemented by the pine trees silhouetted in the foreground. The windows are dark, except for the back room in which we can see a warm red light

emitted from behind the Christmas tree. The porch light is on. The sky is a deep blue behind the house, it's evening, or early morning, and either the house sleeps or its members are gone. It's December 26th—Christmas is over. At first appearing to be the image of warmth and familial comfort, the painting elicits a different response. There is a quiet, lonely emptiness that translates the feeling of a much-anticipated event coming to a close. The bright lights invite us to nothing, yet we cannot help but to feel a strong sense of welcome. The entrance glows, the house beckons.

The next immediate painting, "From the Ridge," portrays another home, the title giving away the voyeuristic location of the viewer. We look through a large window, vision cropped so that we can only make out the dark vinyl siding of a house. In the window, a woman faces what is presumed to be a mirror in a bathroom—all that can be seen is the 1950's baby blue sink in front of her. The pattern of her shirt glints in the light, crumpling near her shoulders as she raises her arms to tie back her hair. The woman is caught in a private moment, unaware of being watched. The composition of the scene is static, the structure sound in its form, juxtaposing the inherent motion of the woman. She is a fleeting part of this scene, but her lively form solidifies the space, keeping it from collapsing upon itself and becoming a flattened geometric abstraction. Through this, the artist has created an aesthetic that is comforting optically, but we know to be unstable. The comfort also extends to our experience of this private, simple and intimate moment—in the safety of her unawareness we find it content to be vulnerable as well.

In the large piece entitled "Night Fell," from which the exhibition received its name, the viewer can fully discern how Livingston infuses her works with this strong sense of comfort and intimacy found in a moment on the brink of transformation. The work reflects the sensation of getting out of a car after a long trip and arriving in a more quiet, peaceful place. I can smell the woods, sense a breeze off in the distance, feel the dampness of eventide—the air is charged, something is in flux. The painting depicts a house at the end of a dirt driveway partially obscured by a large tree, with a lush lawn that spreads before us. The porch lamp has been turned on in anticipation of the darkness, a few windows glow. The garage door has been left open, revealing the car tucked neatly away—everyone's home; the house is prepared for the coming night.

However, we are locked in our cropped perspective of the house and the surrounding lawn, unable to see the sky. We can make out that the grass beyond the house, before the darkened woods, is lit by natural light, as if the sun was still filtering through the trees. The sensation is eerie but calming, as if time was speeding up, night already overcoming the house, day still wandering in grass beyond. Maybe it's the odd sense of welcome we in the place of the voyeur feel that separates Livingston's work from other hyperrealist painters who attempt to

capture the spirit of Vermeer or Hopper. Livingston has the ability to create a sense of ambiguity and also establish the sense of human presence through light. While the lack of physical beings is apparent in both "December 26th" and "Night Fell," these home portraits, in the throws of transition from light to dark, are the emblems of life that makes viewing the works so cathartic.

Livingston's other works, interior scenes with bright wallpaper and intricate detail, balance the ambiguities and unknowns of the exterior portraits with glimpses of the interior. However, some of the actual portraiture seems to fall short of the artist's exterior domestic scenes. While her ability at rendering the individual, texture and pattern is an optical treat, not all of the figures engage the viewer in the same manner as the home portraits. It is clear she has an affinity for exposing vulnerable moments, as she has multiple portraits of women sleeping, including a few that feature Livingston herself. The painting "Last Night" seems unnatural, the sleeping woman's pose coming off as stiff and forced. While the piece "Garden Apartment" evokes a modern day Vermeer, the sensation of intruding upon a private, intimate moment of everyday life that Vermeer so exquisitely arouses is lost. The woman is in a private space, portrayed in a moment where she has stepped away from the main event to retrieve something from the cabinet, a moment of quiet contemplation in the midst of a monotonous motion. However, we do not feel that we have interrupted her quiet moment. The woman's eyes meet ours and there is no surprise, no parting of the lips in shock. She simply stares, her vulnerability is lost and so is our connection to the work. She is expecting us, and the intimacy instilled by the previous works fades. The pleasure of the voyeur recedes.