

ARTSEEN

Elise Ansel: Time Present

By Alfred Mac Adam

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For her title, Elise Ansel snatches a fragment from the first lines of T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton," (1936) the first of his *Four Quartets*: "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future. / And time future contained in time past." This melding of time is the essence of Ansel's modus operandi: she dissects monuments in the history of painting and transforms their disiecta membra into her own painterly idiom. She embodies Eliot's poem, which takes on a form of irony when applied to her method: "What might have been is an abstraction /



Elise Ansel, *Damascus*, 2017, oil on linen, 75 x 60 in.
Photo: Luc Demers/Courtesy Danese/Corey, New York

Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation." The verse encapsulates Ansel's analytic gaze into the work of the past not as fixity, but as possibility ("what might have been"); not the meaning a given painting may have had, but an ineffable something she metamorphoses into "an abstraction," which will always be "a perpetual possibility" because it cannot be pinned down.

So Ansel begins by reading the past, finding elements that interest her, and recombining them. Her eye and her camera wander over paintings in real, virtual, and recalled museums until something tells her to stop. Then her creative imagination takes over, effecting a visual *sparagmos*, after which her subjective gaze translates its findings into a painterly artifact.

This requires courage, not to say bravado, and Ansel's powerful swaths of paint, reminiscent of those of Howard Hodgkin, constitute a vigorous strain of resurgent abstract expressionism. An Ansel painting is

instantly recognizable: she has created her own painterly idiom, one that expresses itself here

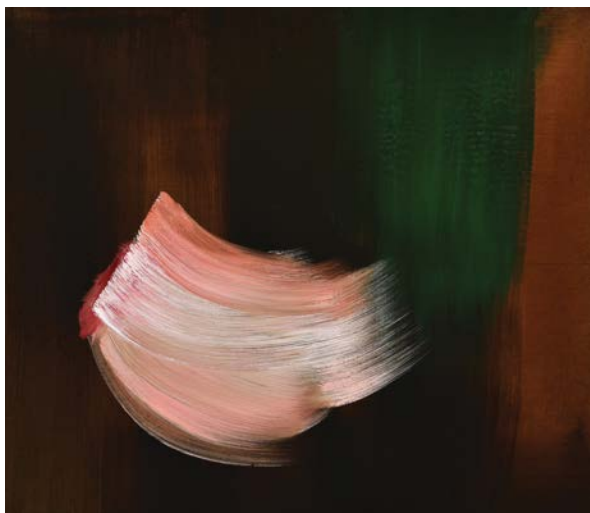
in two keys. Some paintings retain images from Old Master works she has dissected, while others are pure abstractions whose relationship to any source is invisible.

To reconstruct Caravaggio's *Conversion on the Road to Damascus* (1601) is an audacious act, because the original is one of the most startling paintings of all time. What Ansel captures here, while retaining the overall gestalt of the original, is rhythm. The conversion of Paul is geometric: he must fall and then rise as Saint Paul. Ansel focuses on the syncopation implicit in falling and rising, and in that way creates a unified image in which light and dark not only contrast but also complement each other.



Elise Ansel, *Table*, 2018
oil on linen, 45 x 60 in.
Photo: Luc Demers/Courtesy Danese/Corey, New York

Her deconstruction of Rembrandt's *Judas Repentant Returning the Pieces of Silver* (1629) is another matter. Here the original provides a clue: Rembrandt diffuses the light to such an extent that he renders all his figures blurred. Ansel plays on that in two canvases, *Rembrandt's Book* (2018) and *Medium Study for Rembrandt's Book* (2018), to create illusionary depths and masses that echo the mystery of the original. The same will to abstraction governs her astonishing *Medium Study for Donne (Distilled)* (2018), which derives from Memling's *Donne Triptych*. This small, 21 by 24 inch canvas is a complete redefinition of chiaroscuro. The darkness splits, and a blaze of rose tinted whiteness blasts through, like a message of hope.



Elise Ansel, *Medium study for Donne (Distilled)*, 2018
oil on linen, 21 x 24 inches
Photo: Luc Demers/Courtesy Danese/Corey, New York

Ansel's fifteen canvases, which vary in size from 60 x 123 inches to 21 x 24 inches, are the work of an artist at the top of her form. To what new heights will she ascend from here?

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