

An Ordered Absence

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Abstract

In the exhibition *An Ordered Absence*, artist Justine Skahan establishes relationships between various types of imagery. The exhibition consists of paintings and drawings. The subject matter is a combination of architecture, hair, women, elements of the landscape, and domestic animals. The work was developed starting from an interest in the urban and suburban built environment, and is in part an exploration of how gender affects the experience of it.

Installation Images



An Ordered Absence, Installation view, Central Art Garage, Ottawa, 2016



An Ordered Absence, Installation view, Central Art Garage, Ottawa, 2016



An Ordered Absence, Installation view, Central Art Garage, Ottawa, 2016

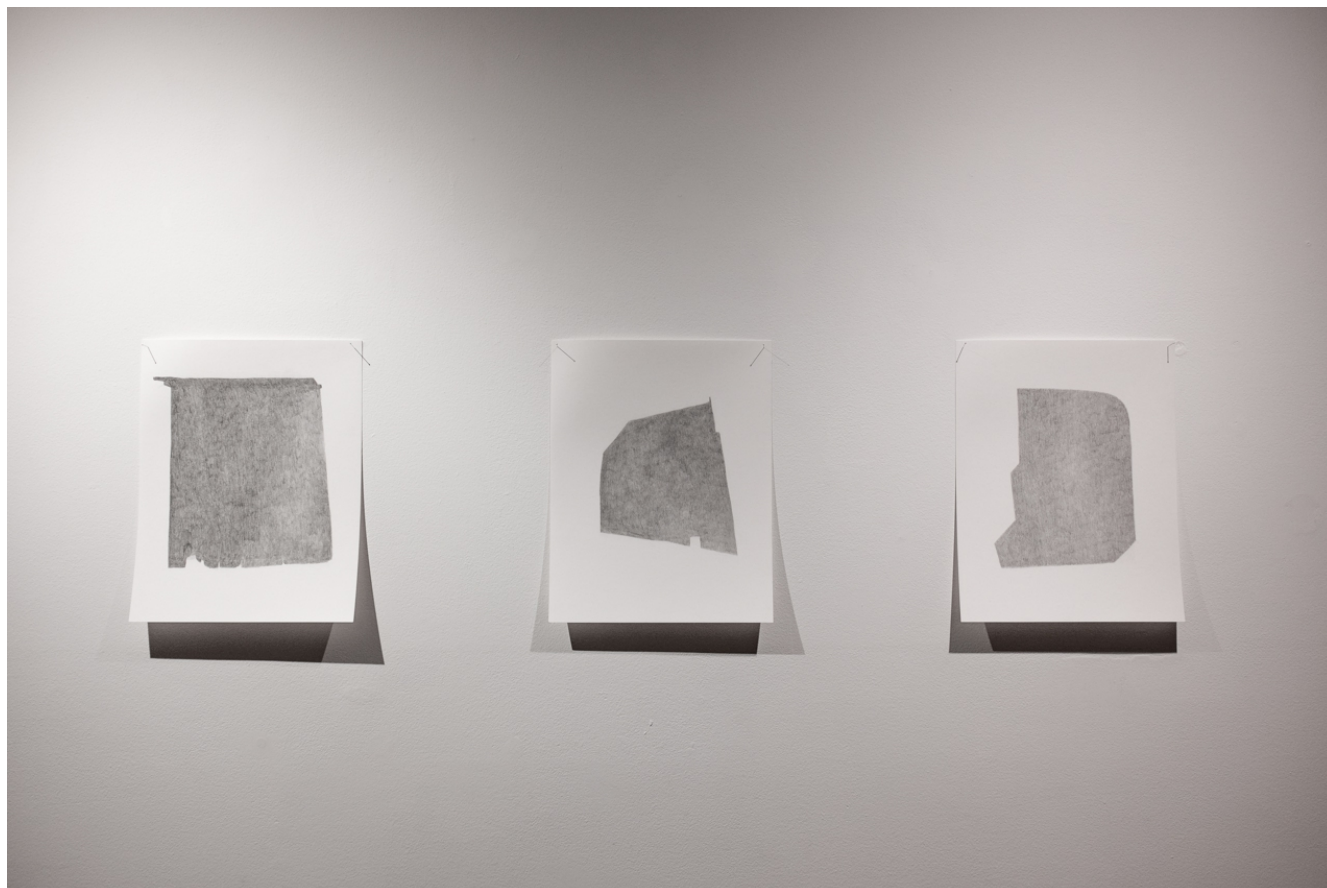


An Ordered Absence, Installation view, Central Art Garage, Ottawa, 2016



An Ordered Absence, Installation view, Central Art Garage, Ottawa, 2016

Individual works



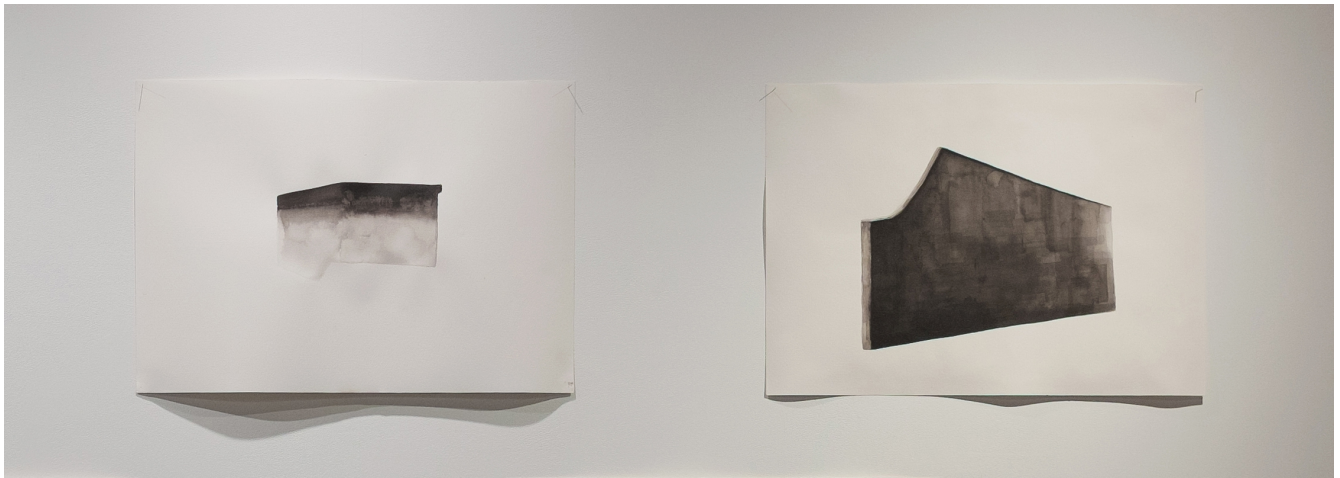
Hiding Spot (series), Graphite on paper, 11 x 14 each, 2016



Ingrid, Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches, 2016



I, Oil on wood, 20 x 24 inches, 2016



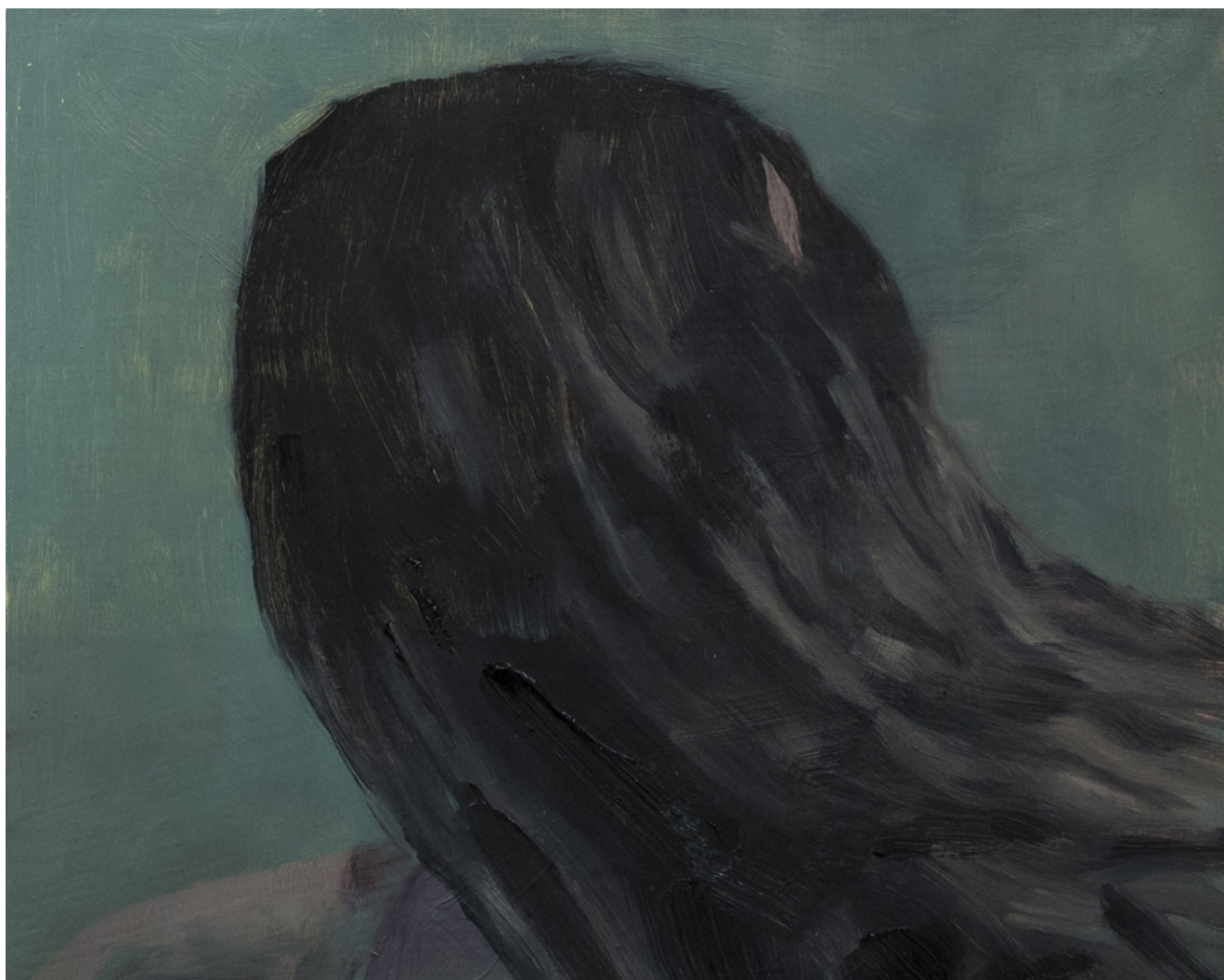
This knowledge, over time, becomes unconscious (No. 2 and 3 from series of 5), Acrylic on watercolour paper, 14.5 x 20 inches



Cat, Oil on wood, 16 x 20 inches, 2016



Olsens, Oil on wood, 9 x 12 inches, 2016



Brenda, Oil on wood, 8 x 10 inches, 2016



Imaginary house, Oil on wood, 11 x 14 inches, 2016



Lawn, Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches, 2015



Landscape painting, Oil on mylar, 24 x 30 inches, 2016

List of Works

1. *An Ordered Absence*, Installation view, Central Art Garage, Ottawa, 2016
2. *An Ordered Absence*, Installation view, Central Art Garage, Ottawa, 2016
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6. *Hiding Spot* (series), Graphite on paper, 11 x 14 each, 2016
7. *Ingrid*, Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches, 2016
8. *I*, Oil on wood, 20 x 24 inches, 2016
9. *This knowledge, over time, becomes unconscious* (No. 2 and 3 from series of 5), Acrylic on watercolour paper, 14.5 x 20 inches
10. *Cat*, Oil on wood, 16 x 20 inches, 2016
11. *Olsens*, Oil on wood, 9 x 12 inches, 2016
12. *Brenda*, Oil on wood, 8 x 10 inches, 2016
13. *Imaginary house*, Oil on wood, 11 x 14 inches, 2016
14. *Lawn*, Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 inches, 2015
15. *Landscape painting*, Oil on mylar, 24 x 30 inches, 2016

Artist Statement

My painting practice consists of a range of reoccurring subjects, most importantly architecture, landscape, domestic animals, and visual representations of gender. My interest in these emerges from a desire to question their construction: their physical making as well as the way we project our own conceptions onto them with varying degrees of accuracy.

My consistent interest in architectural structures extends to details of buildings, vegetation used in surrounding landscaping, raw materials used in construction, decorative elements, and improvised structures. These elements are often the delimitation between two spaces: a lawn, a curtain, a fence, a temporary protective structure, etc. They are markers of the transition between inside and outside, public and private, or finished and unfinished. For example, one of the works on paper included in this exhibition is based on an image of a small addition behind a building near my home. It is the silhouette of the addition, which itself is made from provisional materials such as plywood and sheet plastic. I also frequently return to depictions of domestic animals, which might be closer to human than nature, but are nonetheless somewhere in between. My relationship to the latter component of my painting practice has evolved: I no longer think of the animals as a kind of appendix to my more “serious” work, but rather as having a role in a larger story about my relationship to my daily space.

While paintings are static, I am not motivated to explore subjects with whom I have a neatly, permanently defined relationship. I am more interested in things towards which I feel uneasy or ambivalent, and by using them in my work I position myself in a continuously shifting relationship with them. This uncertainty maintains my engagement with the image and parallels the in-between-ness of much of my subject matter. I am also motivated in large part by the physical making of the work, by painting itself, a part of the process that echoes the desire to see things from a position in between two states.

My interest in architectural space informed part of my academic research during my MFA. Specifically, I looked at the idea of proprioception. Proprioception is a self-referential method of orienting ourselves in space by using previously-acquired knowledge of it, as if it were a muscle memory. This knowledge, over time, becomes unconscious and non-verbal. Proprioception is relevant to my own process in several ways, the first of which is the way I select images on the basis of a line of questioning that resembles intuition more than pre-determined hypotheses. These selections are fragments of my visual field that include my lived landscape, the internet, and print media among other things. Their selection, and subsequent configuration when installed, involves a similar process to

moving through space by employing proprioceptive functions. I am working with representations of individual aspects of my environment and attempting also, at the time of installation, to recreate an impression of how they fit together from my position.

The title of the exhibition, *An Ordered Absence*, is a phrase from a Margaret Atwood poem called “Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer.” The poem is about a pioneer living in an environment with no walls, maps, borders, nor delineations. He feels oppressed and imprisoned by the lack of them. He tries to exert his dominance over the wilderness by setting up fences and building a house but things “keep getting in.” He declares the land upon which he stands to be a complete “absence of order.” The land replies that he is wrong: it silently counters that it is “an ordered absence.” His inability to impose structure upon the chaos that is the wilderness is infinitely frustrating for the pioneer. What he does not understand is the order that does exist. The absence the land wordlessly speaks of is the absence of the form of control he recognizes.

Feminist theory has also been important to my research during my Master's, namely the writing of Luce Irigaray. In her writing on subjecthood, she has likened the socially imposed binary gender norms of “man” and “woman” to infinitely towering structures and the flat land that this tower must by necessity be built upon, respectively. With this she establishes that the “othering” of women is a prerequisite for male subjectivity, and further asserts that language itself, as we commonly know and use it, is inadequate to describe female experience and therefore also inadequate to describe anything but male subjectivity. My interest in working with images of spaces or things that are at the limit of somewhere, or embody some kind of in-between-ness, are in part a rejection of inaccessible “universal” subjectivity described by Irigaray. This is also the disconnect between Atwood's pioneer and the land. He does possess the language, visual or otherwise, to recognize the existing order of the landscape.

I have in recent months been thinking about how our experience of urban space and the landscape is determined to a significant degree by gender. Women and girls know that we must move through the world in a cautious way, as a matter of physical safety. This experience of urban space determines one's knowledge and sense of it. Meanwhile, the necessity to move this way is invisible to many – much like the inability of the pioneer to draw sense from the landscape around him, and for language formed by male-dominated culture to be adequate for describing female experience.

Many of the works included in this exhibition are fragments of architectural structures, mostly based on places near my home, and mostly elements of the backs of buildings in my neighbourhood, seen from the road or from a friend's backyard. Reducing the content of these images was an effort to

further isolate and represent forms in such a way that I felt could echo the sense of the place that I had. Each place is, to me, seductive in form while in reality to a certain extent forbidding.

An Ordered Absence is a body of work whose subjects are intentionally in in-between conditions or places. This is a decision that reflects my direct experience of the landscape and my visual knowledge. It is using the latter as a language in order to represent and reconstruct these in-between conditions and places.