

Interiors: hello from the living room

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By Alfred Mac Adam



Lois Dodd, *Chair, Night Window*, 2016. Courtesy the artist and 1969 Gallery (Matthew Carlson).

On View

1969 Gallery

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Those of us with long memories will recall the 2011 show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Rooms with a View: The Open Window in the 19th Century*. We were stunned to see so many German, French, Danish, and Russian artists who never made it into art history courses but whose

work revealed a combination of perspective and painterly psychology. With or without human figures, the usually small-format canvases conveyed contradictory feelings of anguish and awe, despair and joy—as if the views from within rooms opening outward were a species coming into consciousness or awareness.

The 16 artists in *INTERIORS: hello from the living room* move the conceits governing those 19th-century works into our own moment. The COVID epidemic has made us acutely aware of interior spaces and their metamorphosis from living space into working and recreational spaces. But this fascinating show also reminds us that these multi-use spaces are saturated with sin. Looking out or looking in, especially from the artist's solitary point of view, is charged with voyeurism, peeping-Tomism, and Duchampian curiosity: who can forget looking through the hole in the *Étant Donnés* (1946–66) and seeing the dismembered nude within?

The venerable Lois Dodd's wonderful *Chair, Night Window* (2016) summarizes this voyeuristic aesthetic. She places the viewer, whose position would replicate that of the artist, behind a chair. We are concealed as we look through an apartment window toward windows in an adjacent building. The viewer stands in darkness, invisible to others because of the chair and the window frame. The eye is inevitably drawn to the light across the way, making us wonder what might be lurking in that yellow glow. Our will to generate a narrative is stimulated and left unsatisfied. This painting, like so many others included here, turns us into versions of Alfred Hitchcock's nosey photographer in *Rear Window* (1954).



Brandi Twilley, *The Hallway*, 2017. Courtesy the artist and 1969 Gallery (Matthew Carlson).

Brandi Twilley's *The Hallway* (2017) makes us into members of a crime scene investigation team. Her ominous view from a bedroom into a hallway suggests something bad has happened and awaits us just down the hall. The cat on the bed seems calm, but why is the floor littered with a Dr. Pepper can and piles of junk? Has there been a crime? Did we commit it? Amanda Barker's *Living Room (The Vast of Night)* (2020) works in the same way: we look into a room, fully furnished, including a television set someone has left on. Where is everybody? Our imagination quickly supplies a cast of characters, and this irresistible urge on our part explains the psychological trickery of these interior paintings.



Guy Yanai, *Saint-Malo (A Summer Tale)*, 2020. Courtesy the artist and 1969 Gallery (Matthew Carlson).

Darryl Westly, on the other hand, locates us in the light by combining indoors and outdoors in *Exterior-Interior Diana in Repose* (2020). Deploying Fauve colors, Westly creates a double pastoral: we are in nature and we are in the studio, where a reclining male—the artist?—contemplates a snoozing nude. Despite the brightness, we understand that watching someone sleep is perhaps the most intimate voyeurism. The utter passivity of the sleeping subject transforms her into the emanation of the artist's transformation of flesh into art. At the same time, we as onlookers take in the entire scene, doubling the peeping-Tom effect. More overtly erotic, Guy Yanai's stylized lovers about to kiss in *Saint-Malo (A Summer Tale)* (2020) move gently into abstraction. We are not a *terzo incomodo* (third wheel) spying but rather the artist himself translating an embrace into a series of color masses. Summer may pass, the lovers may part, but here they are fixed forever as juxtaposed swaths of paint.



Adrienne Elise Tarver, *Shadows Approached from the Corners* and *She Preferred the Mystery of Shadows Over the Disappointment of an Empty Room* (both 2018). Courtesy the artist and 1969 Gallery (Matthew Carlson).

Quentin James McCaffry's *Sunset* (2020) abandons human drama in order to focus on composition. Using the tiled floor of Dutch interiors, McCaffrey paints a small table with a flower pot set against a bright blue wall on which hang two small landscape paintings. This exquisite Rococo-esque scene is really an exercise in perspective. We have left drama behind and are moving into the chaste harmony of geometry. Adrienne Elise Tarver manages to have it all her own way. Her immensely titled *Shadows Approached from the Corners* and *She Preferred the Mystery of Shadows Over the Disappointment of an Empty Room* (both 2018) incorporate the geometry so important to these interiors with the narrative imperative that permeates so many of them. The painting, in tight focus, verges on the non-representational, at the same time managing to allude to all the magic and suggestiveness of this superb show.

Contributor

Alfred Mac Adam is professor of Latin American literature at Barnard College-Columbia University. He has translated works by Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Carlos Onetti, José Donoso, and Jorge Volpi, among others. He recently published an essay on the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa included in *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*.