

brilliant revisionist account, or to redress a historical inequity predicated on the format's modesty and domesticity. Though the genre is often belittled, many scholars have explored the strangeness of the still life's equal and opposite claims for symbolic meaning as well as for a resolutely material representational order. The same contradiction, in fact, underlies the very task of art history, as does a similar attention to minute aspects of surface and of the world that is caught there. Lesley Vance's latest show at David Kordansky, a well-curated hang of a dozen small paintings, elicits such thinking. Vance's works of recent years are essentially abstracted still lifes—stripped of the naturalism and artifice maintained in her earlier reproductions of bivalves and fruit, yet still rooted in close observation and reveling in the illusionistic abilities of the medium. These untitled oil-on-linen panels and watercolors ask what the job of painting might still be apart from mimesis and signification.

Each of Vance's exhibited canvases reveals itself slowly and partakes liberally of passages in which light bends in color, background pushes through, or planes inconceivably warp. Unlike earlier paintings in which Vance hewed closer to sketches or photographs of items—shells, horns, a piece of coral, a ceramic jar retrieved from a studio cache—placed in a specially lit cardboard box, these new paintings stray considerably farther from their referents. The artist now uses models as but a jumping-off point for her painterly elaborations, and the works are sphinxlike in that they reveal neither the implements nor the procedures through which they came to be. Her watercolors are especially prepossessing in this vein, tracing as they do the movements of Vance's hand, without revealing the sequence by which the image appeared. They, like the oils, are nonetheless far from ready-made, with paint deftly manipulated, often wet into wet.

Even if Vance's works remain constructed, she now seems to relish the painting process far more than the setup, ditching the latter once under way with the former, such that even oblique representational capabilities cede to ever more fully attenuated formal play.

This results in further ambiguity, not only about what she has chosen as foundational objects, but regarding what might be their dimensions, contours, properties, textures, or colors—all of which remain subject to the incursion of gestures that make and erase, often in the same stroke. This is to suggest that in pairing observation and formal experimentation, Vance's paintings have become more autonomous, and they are beholden, to a larger degree, to their own internal dynamics. Although emerald greens and deep navy and cobalt blues appear in more than one painting, as do bone whites and some lush peaches and pinks, each palette is far from selfsame, just as each picture takes its own unique shape. The paintings are also decidedly provisional. For Vance's compositions appear caught in one arrangement, when they could be dispensed in so many others. Without rendering the analogy too pat, Vance still trades on the precariousness at the heart of still life's claims for aesthetic permanence in the face of mortality, not as defensive emblem but as liberating conceit.

—Suzanne Hudson



Lesley Vance, *Untitled*, 2013, oil on linen, 21 x 26".

LOS ANGELES

Lesley Vance

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

Still life has long occupied a lowly position relative to more noble pursuits of, above all, painting historical subjects, though even the portrayal of someone's face would do. To depict flowers, foods, and tabletops is to look at the overlooked, as Norman Bryson puts it in his