

Outside the window, a watcher in the dark

By **Kenneth Baker** Published 4:00 am, Saturday, May 31, 2003

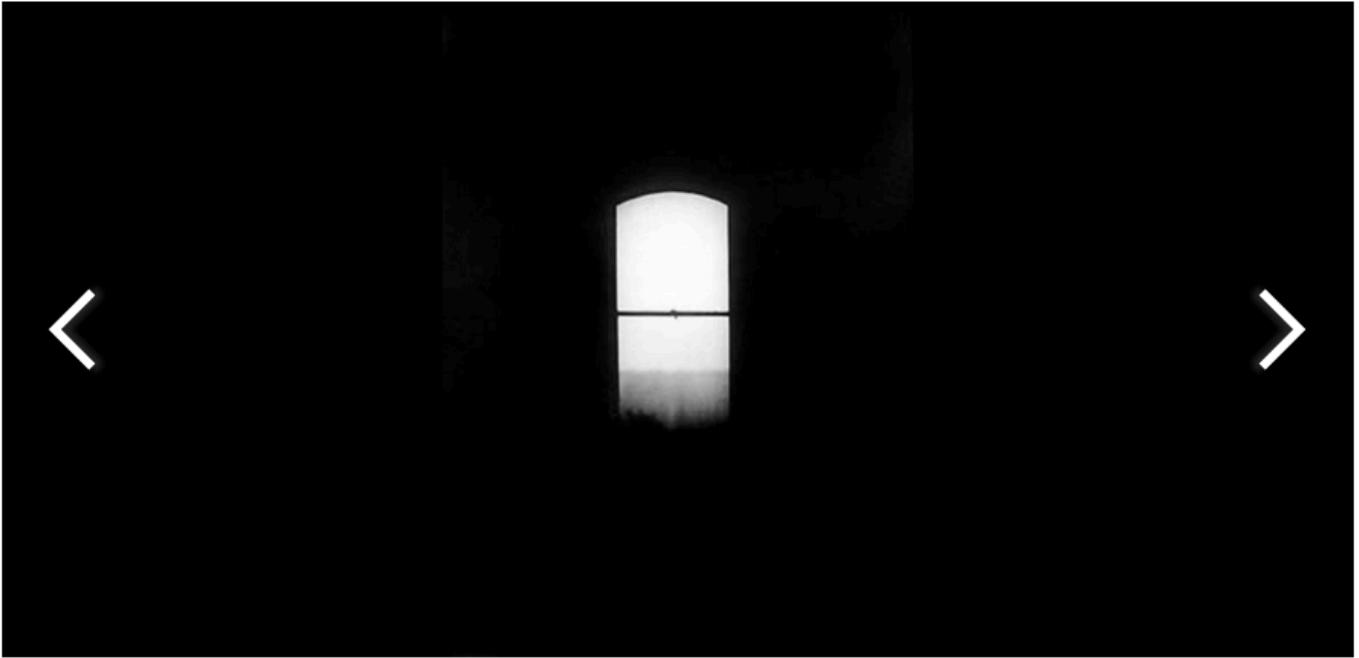


Photo: J. John Priola



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Does all photography have snooping as a subtext?

All kinds of pictures support that idea, from images that capture things too fast, small or distant for the naked eye, to straightforward but stealthy ones such as J. John Priola's series "Dwell" at Gallery Paule Anglim.

Each of Priola's black and whites looks from deep blackness into the lighted window of someone's residence.

His titles identify locations but give no clue whether he collaborated with the people whose dwellings he captured. The faintly invasive feeling the pictures emanate suggests, correctly, that he did not.

The almost abstract formal elegance of Priola's pictures offsets their creepy air of belonging to a stalker's album. Yet their formality also reminds us of the time they involved and Priola's risk of discovery in setting up his 4-by-5 camera.

"Dolores Street, Ground Floor South" (2001) reveals almost nothing of the domestic interior beyond. The nearly opaque curtain flattens the arched window into a tombstone shape. A hazy shadow pattern makes it hard to tell whether the view looks from outer blackness into a lighted window or out from a dark room at muffled light.

Priola's pictures make a fascinating counterpoint to the "Summer Nights" of Robert Adams at the Fraenkel Gallery across the street.

The work of Bay Area painter Laura Dufort, also at Anglim, contrasts instructively with that of Los Angeles abstractionist Sharon Ben-Tal, whose show ends today at Heather Marx.

Dufort covers canvases evenly with silvery interference pigment and fills them with arrays of doughnut shapes, each painted freehand at a single stroke.

The circular shapes translate the enso -- hand-drawn circle -- of Japanese Zen painting into the idiom of modernist abstraction, similarly suggesting spontaneous acts after long deliberation.

Ben-Tal spends inestimable lengths of time preparing lavish surfaces on which she traces looping filaments of paint with a syringe.

Her tracery brings to mind the stone profiles in John Cage's drawings and prints, but Ben-Tal's seem adrift in arbitrariness by comparison. The drama of her show consists in her shifting effort to integrate surface and marks.

Dufort similarly struggles -- except in one diptych -- to make the private discipline of marking radiate an impersonal value, beyond the merely decorative.

Yet both painters work close to the central problem of finding depths for abstract painting that do not entail unnecessary illusion.

-- Carter and Maxim star at Graystone: "Personal Visions" at Graystone marks no milestone

in the annals of gallery group shows, but to anyone who missed the fine work of Bay Area painter Sara Carter here last year it offers a second look.

The show also includes several pieces by David Maxim, an underrecognized San Francisco painter with a distinct take on the construction of art objects and their meaning.

Layering acrylic color from light to dark and from center to periphery of her canvases,

Carter builds up abstractions that gently resist our temptation to see them as views into a vague, bright distance from within dark, curtained interiors.

Apparently, Carter applies clear acrylic varnish between bright and dark hues, so that the uppermost layers of charcoal brown dry thin and improbably translucent.

Carter's paintings employ the modernist grid partly to make us aware of a desire to see through it to something beyond the art object.

We then have to wonder whether this hunger for transcendence has any meaning beyond nostalgia for simpler relations between pictures and world than abstraction permits.

The paintings enact an abstract mime of inwardness threatened by exposure, of subjectivity as shelter, potentially an anti-social disposition. The paintings thus expose a sentimentality implicit in pictorial illusion.

Carter's work now sets her the challenge of going constructively beyond that discovery and beyond relishing their own aesthetics.

Maxim's three paintings, small ones for him, display his habit of using the backside of a stretched canvas as a working surface, as if taking us backstage -- symbolically, behind his eyes -- in the creative process. This sense of inside-out-ness makes them a surprisingly apt complement to Carter's work.

In "Net" (1999), Maxim has strung a gesso-soaked thread net over a stretched canvas turned to the wall. A pattern of horizontal stripes buzzes through the fabric lattice, which an armature of thin sticks holds forward of the surface.

The asperity of the minimalist grid meets the charming cheapness of seafood restaurant fishnet decor. Maxim's expressionist temper admirably denies none of the humor or irony it discovers in the working process.

At another level, Maxim's nets symbolize the artist's hope of catching things in his work: memories, viewers' loyalties, thoughts that expire outside the current of experience that delivered them.