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# Cathleen Clarke: Whatever Hour You Woke There Was A Door Shutting

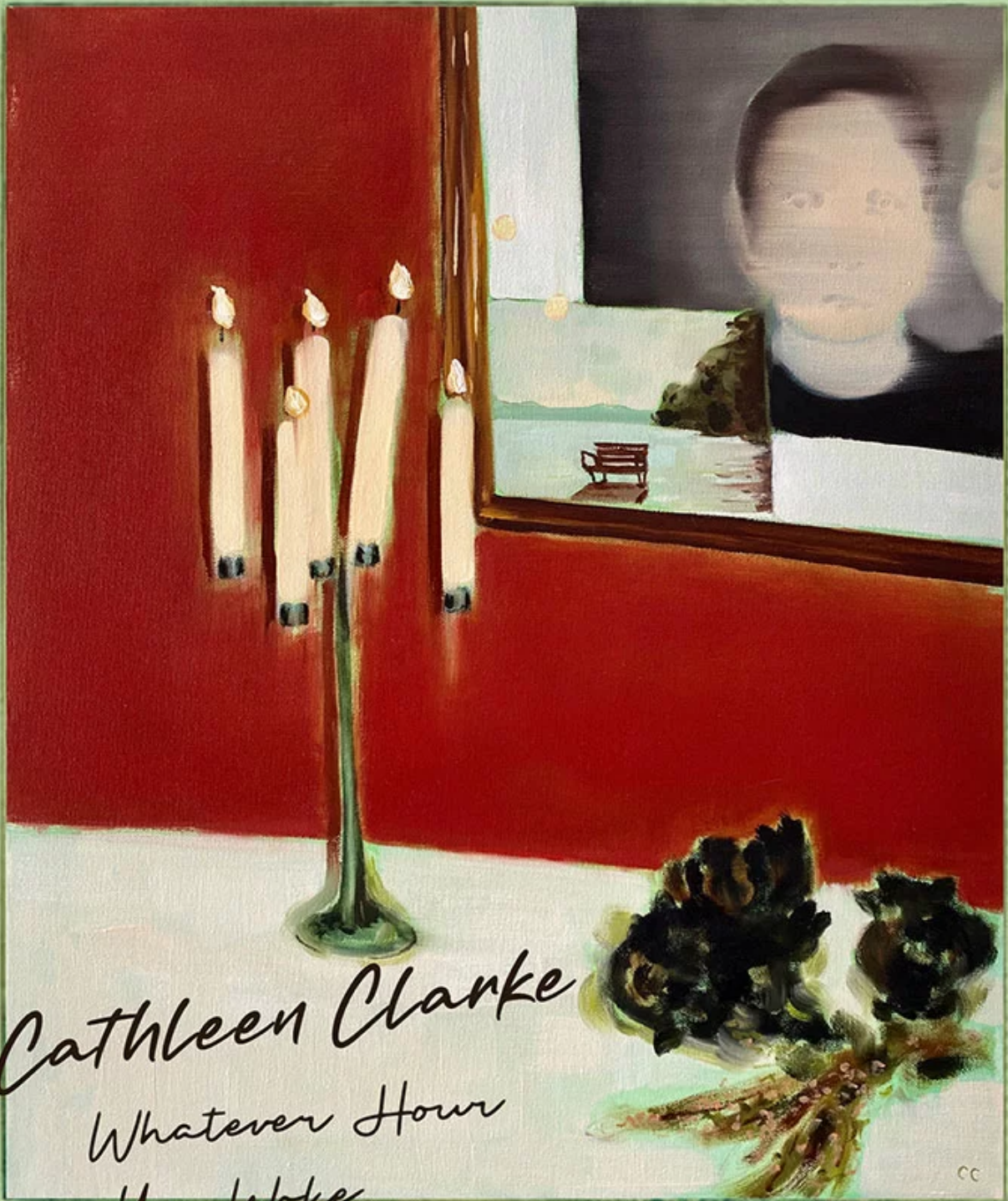
November 24, 2021 by Dominique Musorrafiti

**The new exhibition of the Fou Gallery will be open to the public until 28 November 2021, curated by Lynn Hai, presenting 16 oil paintings of Cathleen Clarke, mostly created in the period of the pandemic between 2020 and 2021. The event takes the title from the opening lines of the short story of Virginia Woolf "A Haunted House". Cathleen Clarke is an American painter born in Chicago who resides in New York. The artist has exhibited her work in numerous collective exhibitions in the United States and internationally. She also held two personal exhibitions in San Francisco, this event at Fou Gallery is her personal debut show in New York.**

Lynn Hai, the curator of the exhibition, introduces the artistic production of Clarke, which is inspired by childhood memories and the mysteries that surrounded her. Interested and passionate about Virginia Woolf and the narrative technique of the "flow of conscience" in her paintings she de-synchronizes the times of the life of her subjects and reproduces a confused dreamlike language, whose visual adaptation joins unconscious reasoning exalted by the effect of evanescence and transition.

The artist explores the themes of memories, mystery, and flow and spends time through subjects that appear distorted. Her oil paintings are related and connected to old family photos, images found, and memories of her childhood. Her work explores and touches on the issues of mortality, spending time, and intrinsic dialogue that is created. Clarke allows her painting to interpret what remembers from a distant experience, but also what can often be not noticed or even forgotten. The reminiscences are therefore expressed and take life again through the sensations of the artist who demarcates them with her lines and brushes, or the choice of the colors.

↑  
FOU  
□



Fou Gallery, 410 Jefferson #1 Brooklyn, NY 11221

Cathleen Clarke  
Whatever Hour  
You Woke  
There Was  
A Door Shutting



Curator: Lynn Hai  
9/25/2021 - 11/28/2021

Opening: 9/25. 4 - 8 PM



Her depictions and images, despite the subjects of her portraits, are part of an absent reality, have such a strong presence that they remain printed in the eyes and the observer could think of witnessing occult or esoteric phenomena. The artist creates portraits whose eyes scan and stare directly into those of the viewers, to the point that those who move may have the feeling that those eyes are pointed at them and that they even follow their movements. The longer audience looks at the image, the longer the mind might recreate it outside the artwork, turning around, the audience might suddenly see one of those people or one of the faces depicted appear, right next to, or around them. This generates a kind of phenomenon that might be reminiscent of the Troxler effect. That is, like when the brain, after viewing an image or object for a prolonged period of time, adapts or becomes accustomed to fixed stimuli and cancels this information, making what is observed fade away. So the faces may disappear from the canvases. But when an image fades or is distorted, the brain is also able to draw on past experiences and expectations to fill in the gaps, recreating the same image elsewhere or something that is closer to the viewer's mind.

The images creep in disturbingly to such a point that they can haunt and ask questions. They can lead one to believe they are facing hallucinations. Are they specters, ghosts, or spirits caught in the moment of doing something? The fact that the artist takes her inspiration from photos makes her canvases almost as if they were snapshots of an emotional instant polaroid, which can also be linked to the idea of fractals, that is, subjects that expand or contract, which maintain unchanged the elements in the form. The artist creates with her works emotional homothety: she dilates or contracts images and emotions.

*CathleenClarke-WhateverHourYouWokeThereWasADoorShutting installation view, photo by Zhaoyin Wang. ©CathleenClarke, courtesy of Fou Gallery and The Honey Pump*

Clarke moves quietly in her exploration of photos and memories, but also in her emotional artistic reworking. She is not intrusive to the past and doesn't impose readings while having her own detailed and precise style in exposing the subjects and experiences. In her narrative approach, she allows multiple possibilities and interpretations ... many doors to open. In fact, the artist gives the idea of painting images that have remained imprinted on her retina, not what her eyeball has perceived at that moment, but almost as if she were in a state of metaphysical and psychic communication as if she had begun her own dialogue with the subjects portrayed. This makes her canvases significantly rich in life, but of a life that is gone, that has passed, but that has spoken to the artist. Often in the stories of the classic narrative, those who are no longer there, are looking for something before finding peace or are the living that evokes them because they feel their absence or are looking for answers ... but what if there were other interpretations? What about if there are infinite interpretations? Her individual point of view is always personal, but it leads each viewer of her works to begin their

own form of unique dialogue with the canvases, with the protagonists, and in a sense with the afterlife.

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These channels of communication that the painter opens offer universal points and connections, but each dialogue undertakes its own rules. These suspended shadows might make people flinch, but there is also the possibility of finding a sense of stillness and peace as if participating in a magical ritual, a prayer, or simply a form of meditation, something that at the same time is different for each person who experiences it while being simultaneously in the same place with others. Just as the artist's relationships with her beloved ones portrayed are unique, so too for each viewer the "ritual" of approaching the artwork has a unique and inimitable aura.

Tuning with Clarke's artwork offers the potential to find something the author wants to communicate, but also to see beyond it. Each layer of paint she depicts underscores a reminiscence that may dissolve or fade away. A mysterious fascination with ghostly traits hovers around her artworks, as the figures in her paintings seem to vanish and disappear into the background, becoming controlled by their surroundings and evoking a constant struggle of clarity and uncertainty, as if they were suspended between life and death. Worlds that existed but also uncertain. Worlds that have been and worlds that are impossible, since there may be mysterious, hidden forgotten data. The artist blurs the contours and focuses on the faces that speak most directly. Looking into the eyes these memories begin to whisper and observing them better they speak and stories begin. Her canvases represent a universe pervaded by sound waves that seem to evoke the voices of the dead in a paranormal phenomenon.



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Chitchats in the silence, indelible voices, indelible glances, the rest fades ... what is the essence of a person? What is identity made of? What are the elements that distinguish this individual from another? The artist opens up dimensions, possibilities, travels among the reminiscences, folds, and gestures, smells, what seemed to have a weight of one kind assumes a much more relevant one, where they mingle and alternate living memories and breathing the moment since moods are exalted.

The decision to find inspiration from analog photos from the past, inevitably leads to consider the relationship with used objects and that have lived, belonged, which despite being objects have their own history and life. It suggests to think about the relationship of people over the years with photos, for example, as in the houses of the past there were photographic altars and walls of memories or in the attics, over the years, accumulated trunks or boxes with heirlooms, photos, and various family mementos. The shift from film to digital, from written letters to email has diminished the physical and tactile inheritance of emotional memories.

Reflecting on these two ways of living and seeing the world, leads one to think about emotionality in relation to materiality, about touch, the different relationships established with photos, and also the fact that analog images age, unlike digital ones. Just as in Clarke's paintings, analog photos begin to fade, colors are no longer detailed, but time after time take they get into mono tone. Photos printed from the film will fade and even film, if not perfectly preserved, will suffer from the signs of time, just as can happen for some people with their own memories. Some of those who enjoy the benefits of digital photography don't print their photos, when they do it they select them. So, how much does the different relationship with photography affect the perception of time, the past, and memories nowadays? Analogic photos also expose people to errors, to real moments that are not always perfect, while in digital what appears unwanted is often immediately erased. Analogic photos often expose temporary moments, ordinary scenes that can happen in anyone's life, but also moments that have been made available by life, captured and precious, that should never be taken for granted. Every moment and day is a gift.

In analog photos, not staged, people often appear distant, they are in the process of actions: they are beginning or about to end something, everyone could see these kinds of shots in many family albums, not only in those from the author. Clarke deliberately doesn't offer many details about the circumstances, perhaps even she doesn't know the full context of the events, or if she does she has decided not to communicate it in order to give everyone a chance to empathize, to find something of their own. In her canvases, there is in fact minimalism and a visual language that can be very familiar to everyone. Her subjects inspired by family photos are therefore immutable, but the choice of blurring the details makes them changeable, creates a sort of paradox, transforming the past and memories into a reality with possible surprises. Since each individual focuses his or her attention on details that he or she finds more appropriate, the artist's paintings can acquire surprising and new meanings. Breaths, sighs, anxiety, tears, laughter, screams, whispered silences, poems of people who have existed, leading one to wonder what is hidden behind those fascinating mysterious faces. Her artistic choices lead the audience to try to understand the influence of the past, its value in its spiritual dimension to grow and metabolize time.

The importance of memory is taken for granted, but often we don't consider how significant and complimentary it's even in its relation to oblivion which is it often neglected ... forgotten ... Memory is an "a posteriori" construction of a complex reality in which thought, however, can lose a part of its reality, since there is interpretation. The eye reflects the things it sees and detaches itself from them.

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Therefore, starting from these considerations, individuals can move inwards, towards something deeper, to embark on a spiritual journey, towards the soul to achieve freedom and themselves. Memory injects itself as the ability to hold and reanimate representations of experience and it can also be seen in terms of the relationships between non-forgetfulness and forgetfulness. A point of the painter's view is also the complementary relationship that marks the sequence of non-forgetfulness and oblivion, on the border between perceptual distortions. An attentive and suspended awareness is reflected, and the supportive role of oblivion and suspended awareness in enhancing memory function.

Oblivion appears as a void to be compensated, and this void is reassuring because every human being knows what details to add to the puzzle, everyone sees something familiar, something unique and personal, there is no doubt that in these images it can be also found something that belongs to the viewers ... but they belong to the artist ... they are the people linked to Clarke ... but they belong also to her audience ... human beings get emotionally

attached very easily to what they see and feel similar and at that moment they no longer notice the differences.

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The doors that she encourages to open, also pose the audience to ask questions about her choice of color tones and shades in the blurs. Curator Lynn Hai underlines how the intensity of the colors and the composition imply impetuous emotions, that her colors palette emphasize fragments that are sometimes explicit and sometimes obscure. The colors are diluted and coated like the outline of the memory, and for this reason, they are never continuous and clearly shaped. All these choices make the compositions lively, distant, and foggy, generating continuous curiosity.



*CathleenClarke-WhateverHourYouWokeThereWasADoorShutting installation view, photo by Zhaoyin Wang. ©CathleenClarke, courtesy of Fou Gallery and The Honey Pump*

Are the colors coordinated and part of the memories of her subjects, or are emotions? Coordinates are often used to understand one's role in space and relate to it, so interpretations can often be limited by one's senses ... Considering that the subjects of the paintings are people who cannot physically tell their truth or their stories, the colors can assume positions that reflect different meanings if related from the viewer's point of view. But at the same time, it also depends on the individual ability to listen, and the desire to understand and the time viewers want to give to think and enjoy the artwork.

The Fou Gallery through Clarke's paintings becomes a sort of telescope used to see the past, a chronovisor or chronoscope able to capture and reproduce images and sounds from a distant time. The curator of the event Lynn Hai exalts the ghostly spectral aspect and the spiritism of the artworks by choosing to cover the gallery's furniture with white sheets, at the same time highlighting the paintings and the subjects depicted in them. The environment acquires and takes a tone that brings a sense of isolation, loneliness, this creates a

dissonance that echoes similarities and thoughts that could bring to mind places like the rooms of "The Shining" or conduct the viewer's attention to Clarke's painting technique that can bring to mind the brushstrokes of expressionism, which emphasize nostalgia and melancholy as in "The Scream" by Edvard Munch. But some of the paintress' chromatic color choices may also bring to mind some of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's work, while the way she strips some of her subjects' emotions and turns them into simple objects brings to mind Pablo Picasso's work, "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)".

*CathleenClarke-WhateverHourYouWokeThereWasADoorShutting installation view, photo by Zhaoyin Wang. ©CathleenClarke, courtesy of Fou Gallery and The Honey Pump*

Visiting Cathleen Clarke's exhibition at Fou Gallery offers a fascinating immersion, a starting point for seeing and hearing, charging perceptions, evoking conversations, and even realizing that we often remember moments and emotions more easily than days.

Photo courtesy of Fou Gallery and The Honey Pump

Art: © Cathleen Clarke

Photos: Zhaoyin Wang

## Dominique Musorrafiti

*CHINA-UNDERGROUND. Ciao! My name is Dominique. I'm Italian and I'm proud to be a mix. My father was an Italian chemical engineer and high school teacher, with Greek and Polish heritage. My mother is Haitian, she was high school language teacher, with Dominican, Spanish, French, Portuguese, African and Native American heritage. Being a mix makes me appreciate to want to understand different cultures and lifestyles. I grew up in Italy, lived few years in Haiti, travel around main European capitals, lived seven years in China, six in Spain and UK. Traveling makes me feel that we can learn something from every situation in every part of the world.*

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