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OWEN WESTBERG

Lake

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“He spent much of his life obsessively turning time into space,” writes Susan Sontag of the Swiss writer Robert Walser’s famous long walks. Walking isn’t the only thing Owen has in common with Walser, who wrote short morsels of prose and a few longer novels. Both favor a small, unassuming format, a cheerful sort of melancholy, an unpretentious style, and something sparkling—“How it glitters and glows with blue and bell tones over the whole Sunday sunbathed little town”—that’s Walser from Kleist in Thun.

For over a decade, Owen has been painting discreet scenes in oil on smoothed birch panels or aluminum flashings that fit smartly into a purse or piece of hand luggage: late afternoon landscapes, round, glowy fruits, a fictional painter or pair of sneakers, tinted windows on a corporate building, and often, patterned fabrics. He paints these low-stakes subjects with wet, slightly oversized brushes that approximate rather than articulate. His marks are straightforward yet sensitive. Never sentimental. Tender but not sweet, and a bit unhinged—as if in a rush to get it all down. His color—always exact—pulls clarity from a hand that favors a wobbly line over a straight one. Simple shifts from cool grey to warm champagne cast a rippled cloth into full relief. The palette is limited but nuanced— soft ochre, medieval blues, kiwi, terracotta and buttercream, and the regular colors: yellow, orange, navy.

Another thing about Owen’s paintings, maybe even the main thing, is their mystery. They seem to refer to something that isn’t there. It’s as if the “true” subject were out of frame, and we have just turned away from it. Still, it seeps into the paintings like a fog, an interference. This is what makes them different from other small observational-type paintings that I see—there’s an impetus behind the work, lurking in its idiosyncrasies, that is not easily explained away. These paintings open up possibilities, they make room for novel thoughts—but what sort of thoughts? There’s a moment in Kleist in Thun, when Kleist climbs to the top of a castle to enjoy the view, but it isn’t what he hoped: “The nearest thing lies as in a faraway veil-like dreaming distance. Everything is sheathed in a hot cloud. Summer, but what sort of a summer?”

– Anna Glantz, June 2023

Owen Westberg (b. 1986, Pittsburgh) received an MFA from Columbia University and a BFA from Rhode Island School of Design. His work has been included in recent exhibitions at Chris Sharp Gallery, Los Angeles; and Dunes, Portland, ME. *Lake* is his first solo exhibition. Westberg lives and works in Pittsburgh.

Please contact the gallery, office@laurelgitlen.com for additional information or images.