

10.10.2023 — Review

Helene Appel: Among Trees, Among Sand Grains

Williamson Art Gallery & Museum, Wirral
by Kyle Nathan Brown

Helene Appel: Among Trees, Among Sand Grains, installation view at Williamson Art Gallery & Museum. Photo by Jonathan Cooper.

For many people, day-to-day life doesn't offer much opportunity for change. Routines are followed, our surroundings become familiar, and we can either be overcome with lethargy or our senses are battered by the tedious repetitions of life. It is in Birkenhead's Williamson Art Gallery and Museum where I find something of a salve for these facts of existence. Away from the hustle and bustle, I'm encouraged to admire not the extravagant or the otherworldly but the allure of the commonplace, in an exhibition that feels like a chapel in which to worship ordinary things.

Among Trees, Among Sand Grains exhibits the paintings of Berlin-based artist Helene Appel, whose practice consists of depicting ordinary objects on a 1:1 scale with pragmatic use of materials. Appel shifts with ease between watercolour, acrylic and oil paints, on cotton, linen and hessian canvases, with the goal of best achieving the object's likeness. What strikes me as special about Appel's work is how it manages to avoid the cold sterility often found in works of Realism, or the sometimes-nauseating effects of Hyperrealism. Instead, it feels as if there is a personal relationship between the object and how it is represented.

Take 'Earth' (2023), which depicts a scene of dirt strewn with stones and other debris. Appel has used watercolour and acrylic, and in a move which

suggests the hands of a perspicacious artist at work, she has cut away small biomorphic shapes from the surface, revealing a second layer of canvas beneath. This more experimental approach to image-making adds a naturality to the piece by stepping away from the two-dimensional aspect of painting, incorporating a new depth of texture and forming real shadows that change as the viewer moves to explore the painting. It feels like a different kind of realism, not a perfect simulation of reality, but a sensorily engaged one.



Helene Appel: *Among Trees, Among Sand Grains*, installation view at Williamson Art Gallery & Museum. Photo by Jonathan Cooper.

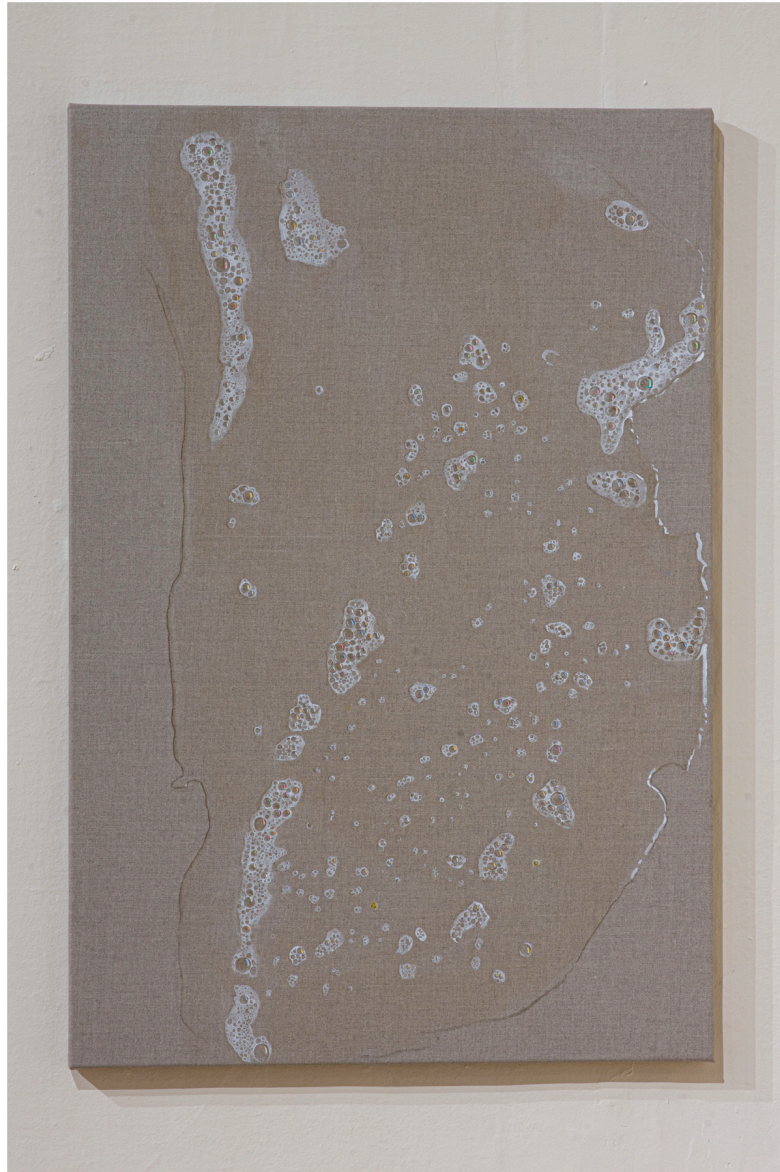
'Oak (Tree)' (2023) utilises a similar subversion of convention, by leaving the canvas unstretched and hung from the wall like a tapestry. The tall length of canvas, fraying at the edges, is cut in the shape of a large tree trunk which, against the stark white of the gallery wall, gives it the effect of having been torn from the place it truly belongs. The detail of the bark is brought to life by a scrawled and scribbled technique of undulating lines in watercolour that from afar form the organic appearance of tree bark, the rough texture of which you can almost feel.

Arguably the exhibition's most ordinary subject is the monolithic 'Pavement' (2021), a large canvas depicting grey, neatly assembled paving stones, which manages to render the light and pliable materials of graphite pencil and cotton canvas as rigidly and substantially as the stones it portrays. With its sharp, pristinely drawn edges, and solid, flat surfaces, 'Pavement' stands out from the rest of the work in the exhibition for its notable shift from free-form to geometric shapes. Because of this, it reminds me of the large and looming works of Abstract Expressionism by Mark Rothko or Ad Reinhardt – 'Untitled (Black on Grey)' (1969-70) and 'Blue Painting' (1951-53) respectively – stripping form right down to the barebones of simple shapes and patterns and concentrating their focus on creating a masterpiece of surface, texture and colour. Here, Appel manages to elevate something most of us experience fleetingly everyday, into an ethereal artwork that stands pensively in the gallery as if asking to be reconsidered in this more peaceful setting. It is this sensitive treatment of her subjects that enables the artist to choose duvet covers, dish cloths, even spaghetti as worthy of adorning the walls of a gallery.

In terms of subject matter, the works in this exhibition can be split into two categories: those that primarily capture an object and those that also capture a moment. Of those already discussed, 'Oak (Tree)' and 'Pavement' fit into the first category, alongside works such as 'Loose Red Fabric' (2023), 'Branch' (2022) and 'Spaghetti' (2018). They are, generally speaking, singular items that can be distinguished as such.

The latter category, which includes the afore-mentioned 'Earth', depict scenes composed of multiple objects and elements, thus depicting a fleeting

moment of time. In 'Seashore' (2016), it is the blue gradient of a wave as the water thins delicately over the sand – an occurrence so fleeting I can only imagine was painted from a photograph. Or the ungovernable composition of bubbles on water in both 'Soap Bubbles' (2023) and 'Dishwater' (2017), which seek to depict not only the illusive nature of water, but also the near-magical properties of light, shown as different flecks of colour reflecting off each individual bubble's surface.



'Dishwater' (2017), Helene Appel. Photo by Jonathan Cooper.

This capturing of moments is perhaps most effective in Appel's 'Sandbox' (2021 and 2023) paintings, of which there are two in this exhibition. Not only are they immaculately painted, using acrylic on linen in such a way that it seems the artist has painted each individual grain of sand, but their main focus is the composition of footprints on the sand's surface. The subject matter here is inherently changeable. These impressions would alter with a change in direction of wind, or if the tide were to come in, or more foot traffic were to unknowingly trample over the composition. But not here. Appel has removed that fraction of time and displayed it, marking it out as important.

I am reminded of James Turrell's 2007 work 'Dividing the Light' – in which the artist highlights the continuous movement of a framed section of sky – for the way it seems to call attention to the remarkable within the transient and commonplace. Appel likewise emphasizes the significance of her subjects by framing them, though unlike Turrell, in freezing this section of sand she makes it her own and gifts it to us, the viewers, as if saying, 'look at

this masterpiece of ordinary life, take this moment to appreciate the treasure of the everyday’.

The painting I found most alluring, so intriguing I found myself returning to it more than a couple of times during my visit, is ‘Blue Net’ (2018). This is a large, landscape linen canvas covered by the titular net, which is depicted as being imperfectly laid out with folds and slight tangling. Its plasticky blue glimmers with carefully brushed ribbons and slivers of light, giving the optical effect of something moving – perhaps the fish it was designed to catch. What Appel has achieved with this painting, which is largely blank, unpainted canvas, is remarkably enticing. It is as if the net is still working in its intended fashion, and we the viewers are caught within it.

There is a peacefulness to *Among Trees*, *Among Sand Grains*. It is quiet, considerate, created and curated with palpable care. If you can, I encourage you to visit this exhibition in the Williamson Art Gallery and Museum in Birkenhead, and let it show you just how special the ordinary can be.

Helene Appel: *Among Trees*, *Among Sand Grains*, 22 September 2023 – 24 February 2024, [Williamson Art Gallery and Museum](#)

Kyle Nathan Brown (he/them) is a writer and artist currently based in Northwest England.

This review is supported by the Williamson Art Gallery and Museum.



Published 10.10.2023 by [Jazmine Linklater](#) in [Reviews](#)
1,210 words