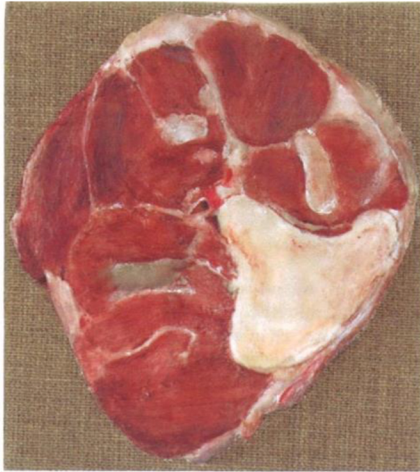


Helene Appel

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Absorbed by the careful rendering of everyday objects and materials, German artist Helene Appel transforms the surfaces of her variously sized canvases into trays or tabletops, across which generally unremarkable things appear to have been scattered or spilled. In this, her US solo debut, Appel presented entries from three new groups of work—devoted to fabric, meat, and plastic, respectively—alongside other, closely related pieces. In each case, the painter's handling is delicate and detailed, but never so rigorously illusionistic that the structure of the support is forgotten. Appel's concern is as much with each painting as a whole object as it is with the imagery therein, and the subjects she chooses allow for an especially fine balance between the figurative and the abstract.

The first room hosted *Untitled (Sweepings)* and *Grey Cleaning Rag*, both 2014. The former depicts, in oil and acrylic against a buff linen ground, a multicolored constellation of tiny bits and bobs—scraps of tape, half a sycamore seed, a thousand specks of more or less unidentifiable stuff. It's as if the canvas had been sprayed with a layer of glue and allowed to gradually accumulate the macroscopic clutter and grime of an unkempt household desk. The latter, smaller work depicts the undistinguished cloth of the title. With the rag laid almost flat, only the thin red stripe that runs down each side of it and the imperfect match between the object's outer edge and that of the panel itself emphasize its natural imperfection. The rag's coarse weave, however, comes very close to matching that of its linen base—allowing for a gentle confusion of actuality and representation.



Helene Appel, *Beinscheibe (Hind Shin Cross Cut)*, 2014, encaustic and oil on linen, 6 3/4 × 6".

Agnes Martin and the more "assisted" fold-paint-and-stretch process of younger painter Tauba Auerbach.

The show also included a painting by Appel depicting a clear plastic sheet, as well as two portraying shallow puddles of water; in these, texture is pared back to virtual nonexistence, occasional highlights and slight tonal variations offering the only confirmation that the subject is even there. This makes for a satisfying juxtaposition with Appel's meat paintings, in which the artist trades such airy near-nothings for the fatty heft of encaustic. It feels, for example, as though one should be able to peel the image of a steak in *Beinschiebe* (Hind Shin Cross Cut), 2014, off its tiny panel and slap it straight onto a grill. Meat is, of course, another traditional go-to for painters, and the directness of its treatment here allows it to stand in for a comprehensive range of associations: From portraiture to landscape, sex to death, these raw slabs seem to contain multitudes. (*Large Water Spill*, 2014, invites us to play associative games, too, though any findings seem, in spite of the design's Rorschach-esque diagnostic potential, somehow less portentous). Refreshingly, Appel's work feels understated, and unapologetic, in its historical rootedness.

—Michael Wilson

Fabric is, of course, one of figurative art's timeless standbys. A great test of technique, it's also a useful tool: Partially draping or veiling figures and objects alike makes them appear that much more convincingly present. In Appel's work, however, fabric stands, or rather lies, alone, covering nothing but the picture plane itself. In the gallery's main space were two much larger examples that further plumb the interaction between cloth as subject and as support. Both also feature stripes, which has the effect of augmenting the works' link with a well-populated sub-history of abstraction: While painted mostly in watercolor so that the burlap surfaces appear more stained than coated, they evoke both the delicate hand-patterning of