

MATHEW CERLETTY

by David Greenberg



Since the early 2000s, Mathew Cerletty has been earnestly stretching the possibilities of figurative painting while cleverly subverting much of what we have come to expect from both realism and hyperrealism. Transitioning from his early, psychologically compelling portraits to more abstracted takes on household products and text-based images, Cerletty has been probing some amazingly banal subject matter as a challenge to the transcendent promise of traditional painting and to his skills as a draftsman. The seven exquisite works (all oil on linen) in his most recent show, “Susan,” revel in the commonplace minutiae of comfortable living. The furniture, bric-a-brac and architectural particulars depicted in the paintings are treated with a reverence customarily reserved for saints and heroes.

Quiet Grace (2011), at 70 by 62¾ inches, almost dares us to question Cerletty’s sanity. What artist in his right mind would endeavor to painstakingly reproduce such a seemingly trite scene—a corner of a room in the process of being painted in earth tones? Yet we are quickly seduced by the painting’s inner glow and dazzling visual effects. Rendered with skill and subtlety, the domestic panorama induces emotions that one might feel watching a sunset for the first time. Gradual shifts in paint application, from lush to flat, animate the overall tableau. Additionally, the ordinary becomes extraordinary with a little help from clever art historical signifiers. Light pouring in from a window evokes the warmth of a Vermeer; a drop cloth is treated like some Baroque tunic. Even the simple wooden wardrobe has the presence of a Minimalist sculpture, while the tiny color swatch resting on a chair is like a knowing wink to Color Field works.

Toying with the corny compositions that inhabit the neutered world of megastore catalogues, *Ikea* (2009-10, 74 by 37 inches) is simultaneously sublime and comical. The artist varies his style, depicting a cabinet with crystalline sharpness while reserving his most textured chiaroscuro for a simple envelope. The balanced cohabitation of haphazardly leaning golf clubs and a neatly placed purse suggest a whiff of domestic bliss. On further inspection, this apparently straightforward still life becomes psychologically perplexing, and the familiar becomes peculiar. Shadows appear a bit too grandiose; surfaces seem too shiny.

The most remarkable bit of alchemy Cerletty pulls off occurs in the 68¾-by-52½-inch *Wall* (2011), in which the masterly reproduction of a pedestrian cinder-block wall elicits an amazingly profound confrontation with one's own mind. The painting functions as a sort of meditation on seeing. By presenting us with an image so humdrum that it is practically invisible, and elevating it to the status of art with such deftness, Cerletty imbues his wall with a strange sense of humanity. He wears this painterly devotion as a badge of courage—and seems to want not only to provoke in us various emotional responses, but also compel us to notice the overlooked in our world with a fresh set of eyes.

Photo: Mathew Cerletty: Quiet Grace, 2011, oil on linen, 70 by 62¾ inches; at Albus Greenspon.