Ena Swansea: Fugitive Scenes

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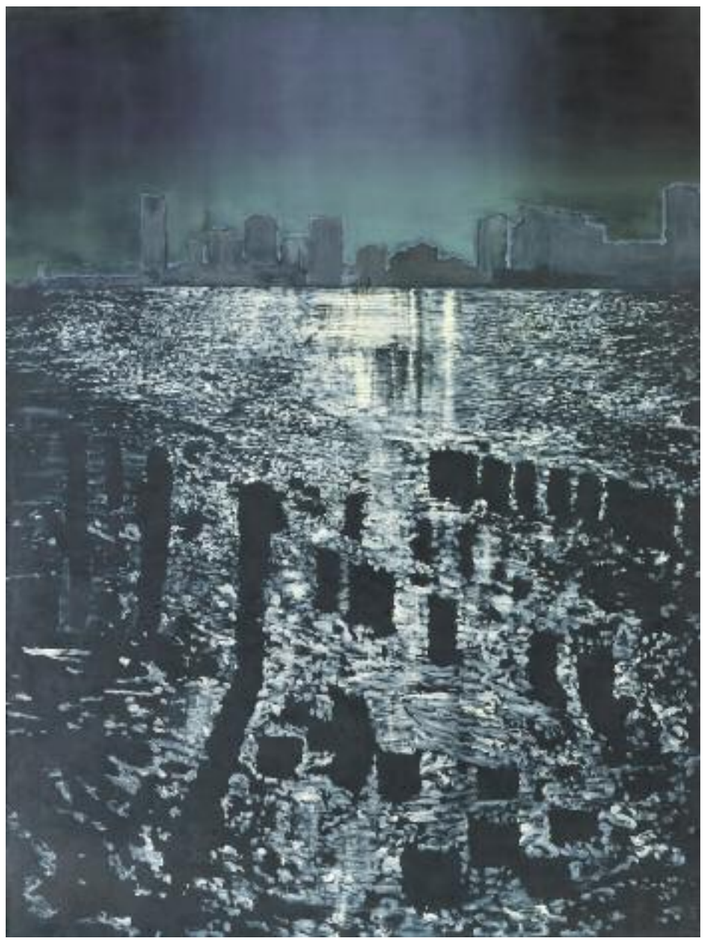
In contrast to many figurative and representational painters these days who often utilize images found on the internet, Ena Swansea's paintings arise from her direct, keyed up encounters with the physical world. At the core of Swansea's approach is her personal absorption with seemingly mundane and unremarkable moments and scenes, the kind of readily familiar things you might glimpse as a matter of course but not really register, or perhaps only glimpse from the corner of your eye: a statue in a park in particular light, teenagers lounging around, snowfall in Central Park, a baby in its mother's arms on the street, a young woman being offered a strawberry, and, importantly for this exhibition, upright wooden piles in the Hudson River, among many others. These commonplace things uncommonly resonate for Swansea, perhaps even instantaneously, because of how they appear, but also because of their oblique, evocative secrets. There is something important to discover in them; something urgent, yet mysterious and elusive; "a steady storm of correspondences," as the great American Modernist poet Theodore Roethke once put it, in his poem *In a Dark Time,* connecting them to Swansea's psyche and, through her paintings, to our psyches as well. Swansea notices and photographs these things, stays with them, deeply considers them and then, working from photographs, transforms them into quietly powerful paintings that are at once enchanting and unnerving, humorous and brooding, intimate and haunted by immensities. Swansea never attempts to faithfully replicate the

1 **1501 Broadway,** 2009
oil on graphite on linen, 60 x 72 inches (152.4 x 182.9 cm)

original image in her paintings. Instead, the original image is a point of departure, and the finished paintings—at times arrived at over months, and employing a host of idiosyncratic techniques—are a combination of fact and fiction, close observation and pure invention. While painstakingly made, Swansea's paintings conjure fleeting moments of wonderment and revelation when one's consciousness is abruptly altered, challenged, and intensified.

Consider *view from the Roth Bar* (fig. 2, pp. 26–27), one of five paintings here dealing with wooden piles in the Hudson River, in this case seen through the window of a neighboring building. In Swansea's painting, you see these lingering ruins in the foreground, these visible traces of the past, and while you perceive them as piles, they also suggest Manhattan skyscrapers, unearthed archeological relics, monuments, minimalist sculptures, and ceremonial figures, even some sort of ancient shrine. You see a white band in the back, which is fog rolling in on the river, and it seems at once lovely and ominous, a luminous but also threatening and obscuring force. Further away you make out stout buildings in New Jersey, but they are almost apparitional, silhouettes half-fading into the dark. It takes a while to realize that white splotches atop the piles, which correspond in color to the billowing fog, are Swansea's loose versions of roosting seagulls. While these pile fields might look to the casual eye like forlorn eyesores, they are actually preserved landmarks, and an integral part of the recovering estuary. Seabirds roost on them, young striped bass frequent them, and they are a habitat for barnacles, sea grapes, and shipworms, meaning that these ruins contribute to resurgent, fresh life. While largely gray, the river is also flecked with blue, red, yellow, and green: piecemeal refulgence scattered across the surface of the water. This liminal place where river and land, nature and city, history and modernity all converge looks desolate and severe in the painting, with all those rough-hewn piles jutting out of the water, but also entrancing and sublime.

2 **view from the Roth Bar** (detail), 2013



3 **14th St pile field,** 2010
oil on graphite on linen, 84 x 60 inches (213.4 x 152.4 cm)

Swansea's austere, in some ways minimal painting, with its mostly subdued colors including various grays, blues, whites, and blacks, doesn't wallop you; it's not eye candy; it's not animated by razzle-dazzle effects. Instead, to borrow a phrase from Emily Dickinson, who knew a thing or two about how evocative and poetic local things can be, it "stuns you by degrees." As you give yourself over to a painting that has everything to do with the somber allure of wooden piles, seabirds, river, fog, sky, distant buildings and sheer light in a protean hour, either early morning or dusk, you realize how expansive this painting really is, how it embraces vast, world-shaping forces, cycles of regeneration and decay, order and entropy, creation and destruction. Also—and this is really important for Swansea's work—this scene doesn't seem timeless and preserved, but instead ephemeral, soluble in time: a fleeting moment, as I mentioned, of wonderment and revelation. Swansea is an excellent painter, but not only that, a visual poet of fugitive scenes at the cusp between presence and absence.

Ena Swansea's background is in film, and four smaller paintings (pp. 21–24) of the same pile fields essentially function as a film camera panning in, moving from far off to close up. As you follow the progression, small (at 18 x 24 inches), dark, and quiescent river paintings—of the wood piles in the river at a distance, with a ship passing by; closer views of the piles in water, with iridescent green seaweed gleaming on the wet wood—are also imbued with ragged and fractious energies. Short, horizontal brushstrokes (a characteristic of Swansea's paintings) introduce an implicit element of motion and speed, and abut vertical brush strokes used for the piers; each painting's surface is, quite literally, being pushed and pulled in divergent directions. Gradations of paint thickness make for images that seem at once ultra present and withdrawing. While Swansea's painterly touch can be meticulous and exquisite, and while she is an expert colorist, she also allows for willfully awkward moments: smears; abrupt dabs of paint; objects delineated by rapid, almost cartoonish outlines; objects that

slightly tilt and seem precarious, even whole buildings, which make her paintings at once graceful and unruly. The most close up view of all focuses on the undulating water lapping at the piles, on its surface colors and contours, but also on hidden depths, both in the water and us, on subterranean regions where the mysteries are. This painting also deals in complexities and ambiguities: water as a nutritive substance that can also be frightening, as a supple substance that can wear away rock and shape continents, as a changeable thing that can easily move from placidity to ferocity.

The remarkable thing is how Swansea locates such inspiration in humble, otherwise forgettable scenes, and I'm betting that many Chelsea joggers and people strolling on the High Line pay scant, if any, attention, to the nearby pile fields in the river. There is also nothing especially noteworthy about snowfall in Central Park, or paintings of such snow, which are almost guaranteed to be total clichés. If you run a Google search, say, on "Central Park snow paintings" you will find dozens of such paintings, almost all of them awful and trite. Swansea's *snow at night* (p. 29), however, is another matter altogether. Jagged, white snow piles, mottled with gray smudges and blue streaks, appear as rugged geologic structures beneath a dark sky, akin to lava formations either on this planet or another, or rocky ridges in the wilderness. A tiny person scrambling along the ridge recalls a 19th-century wanderer far out in awe-inspiring nature, but also an astronaut during a lunar landing, or perhaps a science fiction astronaut in the remote future investigating an alien planet. Parts of the snow piles are dark and impacted, while other parts are bright white and incandescent, and seem to emanate light from within. This, weird, interior light, emitting from truncated nature in an urban park, is both vibrant and scary. While Swansea's palette is once again minimal, largely black and white mixed with blue touches, two small traffic lights and a traffic sign introduce a welcome bit of bright color, but they are also overwhelmed by the snow and the night. There

is something exaggerated, hilarious, goofy, and absurd about this painting of a snowstorm apocalypse, that temporarily turned Central Park into a remote Arctic wilderness navigated only by a solitary, and quite vulnerable, explorer. There is something sublime as well, both in a contemporary sense as a lofty experience charged with grandeur, and in Edmund Burke's understanding, articulated in his influential 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* as experiences in nature that involve astonishment, fear, danger, reverence, and a sense of the infinite.

4 **snow on 16th st,** 2011
mixed media on metallized fabric, 93.6 x 144 inches (237.7 x 365.8 cm)

It may be the case that Swansea, especially with her most recent body of work, connects with, and recasts for her own purposes, a nature-based sublime dating back in this country to the 19th century Hudson River School romantics and painters of the American West, but even more pertinently to the American Luminists of the same era, such as Fitz Henry Lane and Martin Johnson Heade (all of whom, by the way, were enormously influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Transcendentalism, the Emerson who advocated cathartic experiences in nature that could be expansive, liberating, and mind-bending, and an art based on those experiences). What Swansea shares with these artists, and especially the Luminists, who, like her, favored humble, local scenes and were deeply involved with rendering light, is an aptitude for psychologically charged encounters with nature, experiences of radically heightened consciousness outdoors. However, in her case this is not with "pure" nature, but instead nature mediated by culture and history: not wilderness mountains but Central Park snow piles, not a pristine river but a river marked by industry and history, not the Catskills or splendid Yosemite but an urban New York City park ringed by tall buildings and prominently featuring a famous restaurant, such as occurs in Swansea's *oranges* (p. 33).

Designed by SITE (Sculpture in the Environment), Danny Meyer's famous Shake Shack gourmet burger emporium in New York's Madison Square Park is meant to harmonize with its environment; it's a partly transparent, glass and metal, one-story kiosk that responds to the surrounding greenery and trees, while its triangular roof, echoing the triangular shape of the nearby Flatiron Building, doubles as a shade trellis for English ivy. Swansea exaggerates this harmonization, to the point where the building is almost invisible, a restaurant merging with, or subsumed by, the environment. Mostly what you see is its sign, in white, quavering letters, "SHAKE SHACK," and underneath it "SHAKES BURGERS HOT DOGS FRIES SUNDAES SODA." Hovering just above, inexplicable, aerial oranges are enchanting and

downright magical. Otherwise, looming, slightly askew buildings tower on the right, while intricate tree and branches reach up on the left, toward the white sky, which is both wondrous and eerie. The trees, architecture, and sky exude a powerful force, and almost envelop the flimsy Shake Shack (always, by the way, on "best burgers" lists), which suddenly seems very fragile and provisional. There is frank magic in these trees and buildings, and this peculiar sky, making for a surprisingly wild and marvelous urban park that also has an air of menace and alarm.

One of Swansea's favored techniques is to coat the surface of the canvas with dark graphite powder, almost like a tough mineral deposit, meaning that she often paints on black, not white, surfaces, and also that her paintings of nature scenes (or rather hybrid, nature/culture scenes) occur, quite literally, on nature, since graphite is an allotrope of carbon. What results are paintings that don't saturate the canvas, but instead cling to, seemingly float on, or even seem projected on their prepared surfaces, while they are also in dialogue with the blackness behind. Swansea frequently accentuates this effect by leaving thin, black bands (evidence of the graphite ground) as an irregular frame around the picture plane. Because of all these techniques, Swansea's paintings of ephemeral moments also seem ephemeral, like one frame of a film, or an instant of a television show. With *oranges* this arresting visual effect is compounded by how the painting seems slightly blurry, as if you were seeing it through mist or the thinnest of translucent scrims. This substantial painting seems downright ethereal, liable to disperse in the next instant. It also seems to be simultaneously cohering and pulling apart. Step back and the whole scene is vivid and intact. Move up closer and it breaks apart into almost abstract, and surprisingly scruffy, marks and shapes going every which way.

Another important characteristic of Swansea's oil paintings is how they absorb

5 **21st century haystack 2,** 2008
oil on graphite on linen, 54 x 72 inches (137.2 x 182.9 cm)

6 **21st century haystack 3,** 2008
oil on graphite on linen, 54 x 72 inches (137.2 x 182.9 cm)

non-painterly forms of representation, like movies, photographs, videos, and the cinema, even x-ray images. What this means is that her already mediated nature scenes get further mediated and transformed by her combinatory aesthetic. There is something photographic about *oranges,* which alludes to old time black and white photographs, such as 19th century daguerreotypes or collodion process pictures. There is something cinematic about Swansea's several paintings of pile fields and light in her paintings is often closer to artificial light projected during a movie shoot than anything occurring naturally. This is certainly the case with Swansea's two recent paintings of hay bundles in France, which also have 19th century connections, namely to Claude Monet's impressionist *Haystacks,* from 1890 and 1891. Swansea's *haystacks in Mancey* (p. 42), a diagonal row of large bundles, is, in her terms, "cinematic black and white," and recalls old movies, for instance by Jean Renoir from the late 1930s. Here the hay bundles are austere, but suffused with a crackling, bristling intensity, and they also seem dangerous, like tightly coiled barbed wire. *haystacks by La Ferte* (p. 43), featuring several bundles at a distance dispersed across a field, has a totally opposite mood. Each bundle is gleaming and looks festive. Together, they are like a troupe of hay bundles on their own jaunty, rolling parade.

What Swansea's paintings definitely communicate are heightened psychological (and emotional) states involving an admixture of agitation and repose, amazement and foreboding, beatific bliss and outright fear. This is a major reason why her paintings are not only very good, but also deeply meaningful. Even when they don't involve human figures, they are still suffused with a complex and conflicted humanity. Exhilaration and trepidation, our connection to and frequent alienation from the world, our search for comprehension and our frequent experience of bewilderment and unease abound in Swansea's paintings and make them so very human, so very close to the bone.

7 **haystacks lying on a beach,** 2012
oil on graphite on linen, 48 x 60 inches (121.9 x 152.4 cm)

When they do involve figures, this complex humanity is apparent in droves; it is a palpable force at the heart of Swansea's paintings altogether. You could stare at the pensive young woman being offered a strawberry in *strawberry* (pp. 36–37), for hours, and still not sum up the thoughts and emotions playing over her countenance: pride, vulnerability, skepticism, curiosity, delight, wariness, loneliness, and desire, among many others. *teenagers*

8 **the green line,** 2012
oil on graphite on linen, 60 x 48 inches (152.4 x 121.9 cm)

(p. 39), is a view from above of three young women reclining together while looking straight up; once again their expressions are nuanced, layered, and unfathomable, and while they are right before you, returning your gaze, each remains distant, a mystery. The rock musician wearing a fur hat and sunglasses, allegedly composing lyrics to a song while skiing, in *he wrote the lyrics while skiing* (p. 41), also seems vulnerable in a vertiginous world and buffeted by snowy forces beyond his control. Even the black and white statue in *Flatiron Building* (p. 31), partially enveloped by park foliage while eyeing the Flatiron Building, seems oddly touching and tender, a solitary figure in private, perhaps troubled, contemplation.

It is pointless to attempt to decipher a story in any of Swansea's paintings, since they categorically resist narratives. It is equally pointless to speculate about autobiographical concerns (while these may exist, they are always successfully concealed), or to try to discern exactly what message is being delivered. Nevertheless, Swansea's altered experiences, her combinations of fiction and fact, are richly communicative, and have an air of truthfulness, of deep human inquiry. There is a wonderful moment in Emily Dickinson's small (at only 41 words), yet large-minded poem *1129,* that addresses her own artistic inclinations, but also, perhaps, her particular way of being in and with the world. The poem begins:

> *Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—*
> *Success in Circuit lies*

This perfectly fits with Swansea's straightforward, yet mysterious and elliptical, paintings. It seems to me that there is a great deal of "slant truth" in these paintings, which approach tough matters indirectly, from an angle, or from multiple angles, and urgent matters through suggestions and hints.

Swansea's New York studio, 2013