



ARTS & CULTURE

Art Review: On Jefferson Avenue, These Paintings Haunt

A new timely art show in Bed Stuy showcases the spooky works of Cathleen Clarke.

ANDREW KARPAN, OCTOBER 4, 2021



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On view on the second floor of a quiet brownstone on Jefferson Avenue, a certain ghostly charm hangs around the work of Cathleen Clarke. It's a presence that is somehow both literal and figurative.

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Directly, her paintings adaptations of images Clarke collected of family members and related found objects. These are projected forward representationally into oil and onto canvases, where her striking, muted palette of colors morphs them into unspecific and formless memories that are themselves, in turn, both uncanny and mysterious.

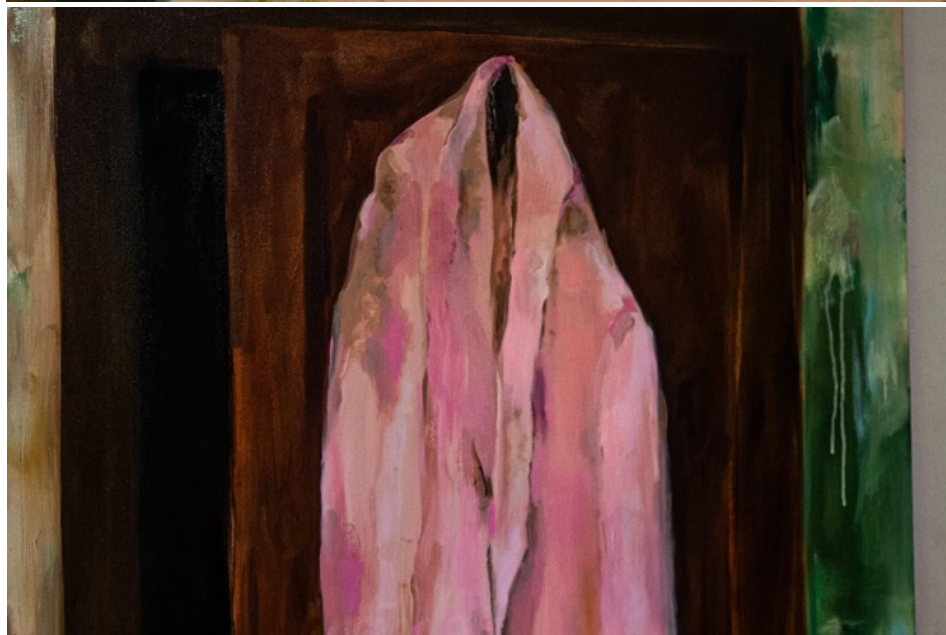
But it's Clarke's choice, or perhaps that of time, to blur out the faces which speaks most directly to the spookiness that floats so purposefully in the air during the tenth month of every year. They look like ghosts, caught suddenly in the act of being really ghostly.

The effect is deliberate. "[Whatever Hour You Woke There Was a Door Shutting](#)," Clarke's solo show at the Fou Gallery, lifts its title directly from the opening lines of [the short but sprightly](#) Virginia Woolf story "A Haunted House," the opening salvo in the writer's 1921 short story collection "Monday or Tuesday."

Woolf's observational modernism in this story had anticipated her more accomplished later works, and its influence can be read similarly on Clarke's own, which touts itself as glossing the humdrum into moments of contemplation. ("Each layer of paint interprets a moment in time that would have otherwise been overlooked or forgotten, evoking a reminiscence that is fading away," [according to](#) the website of her art dealer.)



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From top: "The Glove" and "Strange Weather"; a detail from "Summer Nights, Walking" and "There Was A Door Shutting."

But Clarke's work is more visually accomplished than this kind of stylized praise might suggest. The everyday objects she collects here have a kind of barren studiousness that reinvents the ordinary with a spooky glow. The Brooklyn painter's latest show, for instance, smartly pairs a small illustration of a yellow glove ("The Glove," a recent piece) with her take on a remarkably austere cup of coffee, the latter given the far more illustrious title "Strange Weather." The yellows on both reflect each other as if both were lit by the same jack o' lantern. The glove's fingers drip from their empty wrists, and the effect makes them look like shadows hanging from a tree.

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The washed approach to representational art might bring to mind the current vogue for art that stirs quietly. Clarke's bleak emotional landscapes, centered largely on the cloistered lives of women from the past century, made me think of Shannon Cartier Lucy's anxious tableaux, [currently on display](#) to wide acclaim at the Lubov in Manhattan. The realist styles of the pair differ, but their emphasis on the minimal and the homespun is shared. Both painters are searching keenly through a domestic visual language to find what creeps, what haunts and what remains unearthed. Their work, correspondingly, feels fragmentary, parts of a whole that remains just beyond expression.



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From Top: “Passing Time (Without You)” ; details from “All The People From Your Past” and “Behind, From Where We Come.”

It's the portraits that typify the effect in “Whatever Hour You Woke...” Where Lucy's women look away, Clarke's interest in repurposing stilted and staged photography creates portraits whose eyes peer right back into yours. In one, which sits toward the end of the show and right above the quiet street, Clarke's grandmother stares blankly ahead in a nightgown, her hand right below her mouth in what feels either like a gasp or a yawn. In another, a pale child stares forward, his face reduced to pockmarked stabs of bright red paint. In a number of crowd scenes collected here, grim faces group around the dinner table, and the reasons for gathering feel remote and unknowable.

The reality of the subject matter – at all times we are constantly met with the feeling that these are people who existed and who departed without knowing the future of their blurred out faces – gives the small gallery the feeling of a tidy mausoleum tucked away from the world. Old furniture fills the room in a wooden part of a brownstone that dates to the early years of the 20th century, remade [relatively recently into](#) “an alternative to the commercial model of mainstream galleries.” But the more interesting question is what lurks in such a quiet space. “Whatever Hour You Woke There Was a Door Shutting” will be on view at the Fou Gallery at 410 Jefferson Avenue until Nov. 28. The gallery is open on Saturdays and also by appointment. [Check it out here.](#)

All photos: Andrew Karpan

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