

Derosia

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ARTFORUM



OPENINGS

WHITNEY CLAFLIN

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Opposite page: View of "Whitney Clafin: ADD SHOT," 2020–21. Bodega, New York. Wall: LOVE (!!!), 2020. Floor: Mime in a Merry-Go-Round, 2020.

Below: Whitney Clafin, C.F., 2013, oil on linen, 36 x 24".



WHITNEY CLAFLIN'S EARLY PAINTINGS were all ground, patterned found fabrics and weltering marks encrusted with street garbage and drugstore staples—a compact disc, a necklace, a club-entry wristband, eye shadow, psoriasis cream. Her 2014 exhibition “Crows” at Real Fine Arts in Brooklyn appeared to showcase a departure: Clafin filled the gallery with a suite of wide-open works featuring diaphanous clouds, drips, spatters, and clusters of spiky strokes arrayed on white backgrounds. From paintings that were all ground, she had moved to paintings that were all gesture, and in so doing she created a miniature drama around the painter’s supposed fingerprint. The stark contrast with what had come before actually represented less a shift in a practice than pseudo-parable about shifting within one’s practice, a self-conscious and slightly tongue-in-cheek tale of self-discovery.

The other half of the show consisted of a pseudo-museological vitrine containing two sketches, one of a burning candle and one of a young woman masturbating, and myriad pages composed on an honest-to-God typewriter. The verse they contained, as I recall, was a flustering mixture of teen angst, fragmentary incident, and language poetry. The manuscript has gone missing, but sampling other verse of the period gives its flavor, advertent typos and all:

Other girls in drug bondage
 enflamed by the prospect
 very fresh, unwittingly fold to me
 while I watch yourhair tail down the side

 My narrative of being, to avoid

 The default display of amusement

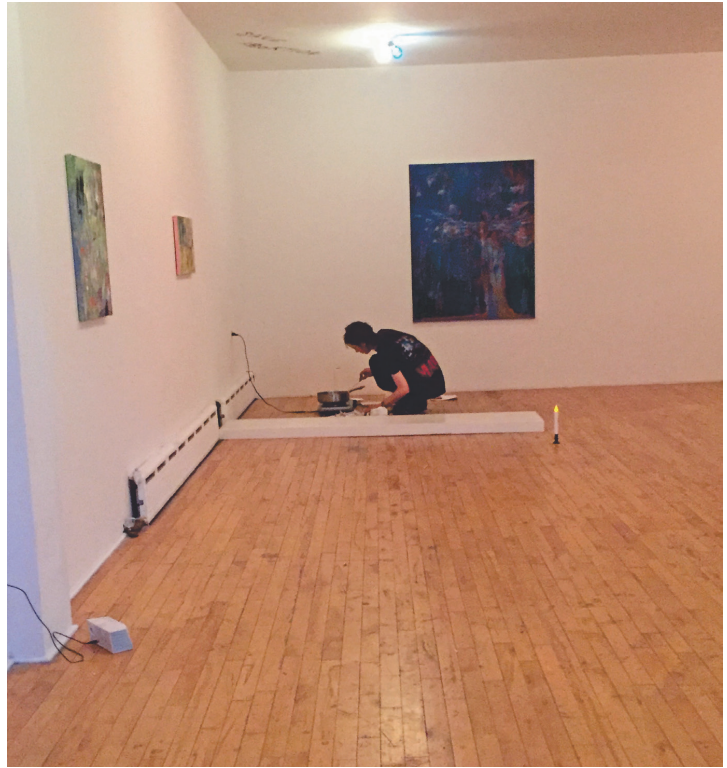
As with the paintings and their drama of the mark, so with the vitrine: two different dramas of identity, that of the artist finding a voice and that of the adolescent’s internal theater of self-definition. With these disparate halves, “Crows” conveyed a disorienting sensation of two plays being performed simultaneously (and impossibly) by the same actors in different costumes.

Clafin’s exhibitions are rarely explicit in their agendas, but at this crucial juncture, she produced a clear statement of a core feature of her multifarious art: its sublimation of identity from a solid state into a cloud. Clafin works in language, altered readymades, sound, scent, performance, and other mediums. There’s even a parlor game called *IMPULSE*. For our purposes, it’s safe to call her a painter, since paintings are typically the focal point of her shows. These days, her exhibitions tend to roughly balance canvases in various modes with miscellaneous but hardly random items,



Above: Whitney Clafin, *Forget Marriage*, 2017, soot on ceiling, 4 × 62".

Right: Whitney Clafin, *Raised in a Jail*, 2017. Performance view, Real Fine Arts, New York, March 6, 2017. Whitney Clafin. Photo: Annie Ochmanek.



e.g., a miniature disco ball and wine bottles used as candleholders, dorm-room style. In conversation, she has self-deprecatingly drawn a parallel between her approach to exhibition making and event planning; *mise-en-scène* is anything but an afterthought, sometimes skeletal but always based.

Clafin's 2017 exhibition "Just Disco," also at Real Fine Arts, featured an elaborate scenography that captured her sensibility with particular vividness. Every Sunday, Clafin conducted a performance in which she made grilled cheese sandwiches on a hot plate, accompanied by the creaky dance-noise beat of a ten-minute song she had composed and recorded titled "Raised in a Jail." On a small shelf resided plastic shot glasses and an open bottle of Cointreau left over from a recent session of making margaritas, while on a nearby plinth rested a pair of headphones, whence emanated an altered-and-looped snippet of Built to Spill's "Temporarily Blind." The lighting conditions mimicked those in the artist's studio at the time: She blacked out the windows and lit the space with blue and red bulbs. A stuffed dog greeted you at the door, and there were two lighter-burn text pieces on the ceiling, one saying FORGET MARRIAGE and the other SAVE ABORTION. Also overhead, letting a bit of faux sky into the dim space, was a painted oculus showing a few fluffy clouds.

The ambience felt hermetic, heightened, a tad psychedelic—an impression amplified by the paintings on view, an ambitious ensemble that looked strangely like early-twentieth-century modernism. One predominantly light-blue canvas featured a grid faintly warping in the background and robust yellow slivers amid patchwork and overpatterning in robin's egg and cerulean, all a bit like Mondrian on the verge of a crucial breakthrough. Another canvas, bloody red, gathered glyph-like forms struggling to distinguish themselves, reminiscent of Matta but with curves instead of hard lines, and with the letters TV aggressing in one corner. These accomplished, process-based abstractions seemed a world away from a lukewarm liqueur and a scorched ceiling, but in Clafin's hands, a failure to cohere becomes not only puzzling but also entrancing. A liminal but invigorating sense of otherworldliness pervades her shows, as if within them reality's choke collar slackens ever so slightly.

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One way to read Clafin's convivially disruptive impulses, and especially her refusal to let an image of herself as authorial figure resolve into crisp HD, is to situate them in relation to the Cologne School, whose preoccupation with artistic identity as ironized performance was so influential. Clafin certainly possesses the insouciant catholicism of the cohort that includes Martin Kippenberger and Michael Krebber, the latter of whom loomed especially large among painters when Clafin was coming of age as an artist. She also shares their critical (in both senses) attention to what happens beyond the borders of the canvas, a concern extended by Jutta Koether into what David Joselit famously dubbed "network painting." Looming in the mists of the Rhine is Sigmar Polke, a protean character who liked a nice piece of found fabric himself. But, crucially, Clafin dumps the Krebberite dandyism in favor of the DIY and purges self-thwarting of its paradoxically grandiose quality—no more jockeying for canonical position, no more agon with the historical avant-garde. In Clafin's very contemporary perspective,



Above: Whitney Claffin, *Sigh Co.*, 2020, magazine clipping on knife, $\frac{3}{4} \times 8 \times \frac{1}{2}$ ".

Below: Whitney Claffin, *Life ('s like this)*, 2020, Nat Sherman cigarettes, ash, alcohol ink, enamel on found fabric, 20 x 30".

Bottom: Whitney Claffin, *Spaces*, 2020, oil and ink on linen, 12 x 16".



there's nothing so special about tearing down the self and building it back up; in a dividualized world, it happens every day, all the time.

In 2017, in *Topical Cream* magazine, Claffin ascribed both her humor and her use of quotation or homage to a kind of compulsive mimicry:

I can't resist impersonation when I'm working. I'm always talking to myself and making jokes in my head, so when I am painting, I try to only partially articulate that stuff. This way I can affect the look of the work quickly and staunchly. I need to have these kinds of divisions and dead-ends in order to protect myself. So, sometimes the paintings will super intensely or low key conjure other paintings, but only for a moment, like just as an escalator in a parking garage.

Claffin's fleeting imitative tics contribute to the way her work erodes identity, keeping her position slightly adrift both within an individual canvas and across them. Her elusiveness untethers the work from the bedrock of milieu, making it impossible to pin her art to a social or intellectual scene that crystallizes and propagates artistic mannerisms. Her practice can't be fully plotted along the Cologne-to-New York axis or any other. Rather, it relies on, for lack of a better term, *vibe*. It's a *vibe* you may catch or may not, but the work tries to make you feel welcome, eschewing hieratic modes of appreciation.

In 2020, Claffin put together a show at New York's Bodega gallery that flaunted her fondness for thoroughly unchic cultures of crafting, Americana, and indie-rock and lo-fi aesthetics, as well as the vague but undeniable presence of the spiritual in her work—or, if not the spiritual, then the ineffable, the thing that's always out of your reach and will forever remain so. There was a \$5 photocopy multiple of a Claffin drawing depicting a frame from Hitchcock's identity-swap thriller *Strangers on a Train* and a ready-made in the form of a pink-handled steak knife dubbed *Sigh Co.*, 2020, to which that artist had affixed the words *A CATCHPHRASE*. The paintings, including several made via a technique of overpainting and sanding down, showed a fresh variety. On the surface of *Life ('s like this)*, 2020, Nat Sherman cigarettes spelled out the word *STILL*, with the *i* dotted in ash. A few fabric pieces bore minimal intervention, like a sewn-on hippie-dippie sunflower patch saying *LOVE*. The more process-based works included *Spaces*, 2020, a little landscape in vaguely Impressionist mode and one of the more overtly lovely paintings Claffin has ever produced, despite a slight hedging in the form of a painted-in black-and-pink frame that matched the scene's sunset clouds. The ongoing plague scotched the chance of any performances, so Claffin created a kind of stand-in for herself, a mannequin in jaunty togs carrying a shopping bag: a perfectly cipherish self-portrait. Instead of offering the visitor headphones through which to avail themselves of the soundtrack, she placed the headphones on the dummy, a strange but not at all surprising gesture of generosity toward the inanimate. It looked like she, the mannequin, was having fun, unlike the rest of us.

It's worth noting that thwarting an authorial identity, even if it's a doomed enterprise, is an attempt to thwart branding as well. It's worth noting, too, that Claffin's work is capillaried with references to, if not quite poverty, then precarity. Grilled cheese on a hot plate, patching your clothes, inventing your own amusements. Even Claffin's process of overpainting began out of necessity as a way to recycle canvases. The painted-in frame in *Spaces* conjures the bygone decor preferences of a mostly disappeared social class. It also reminds us that the work is there to be sold and taken home as a matter of the artist's survival. But what a lovely thing and a lovely connection you get in return, if you can afford it. The memory of visiting with it is fortunately available to all of us. □

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