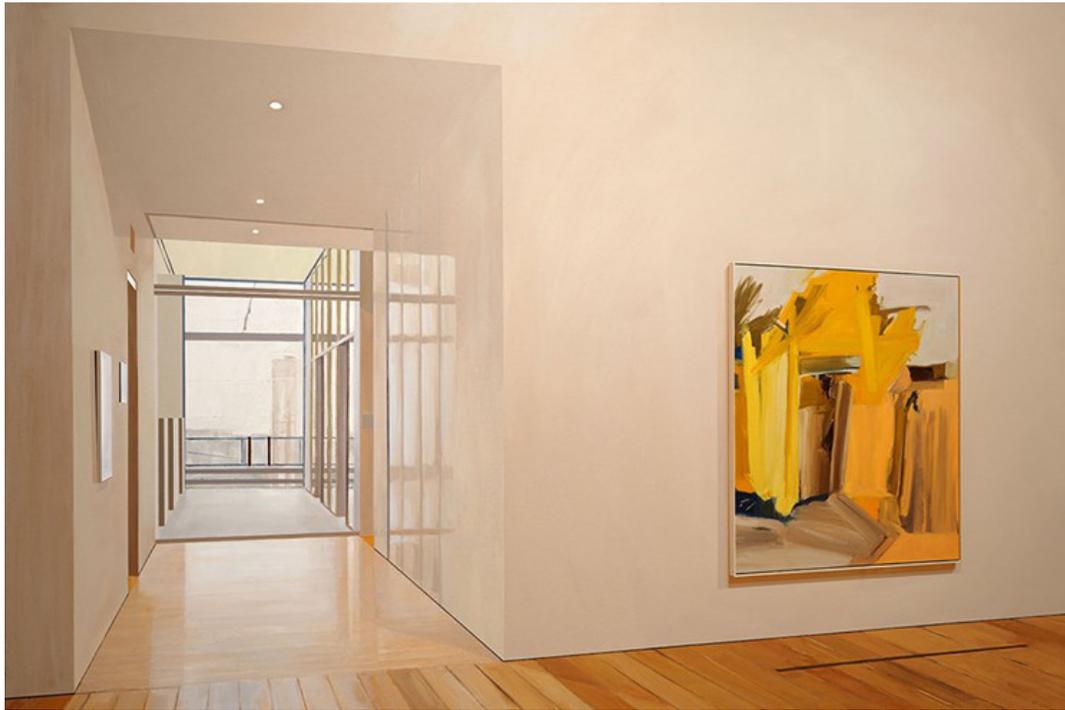


“Review: White Walls Is an Art Show About Art Shows”

Michael Paglia / October 6, 2016



Sarah McKenzie, “Door to the River,” oil and acrylic on canvas.

Boulder-based painter Sarah McKenzie has a handsome solo at David B. Smith Gallery called *White Walls*. The show’s title refers to the traditional exhibition space in a gallery or museum — typically a set of white walls on which art is hung — and in this show, McKenzie depicts these spaces in her signature representational style.

McKenzie began this series two years ago; it was partly sparked by a trip she made in 2013 — thanks to a grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation — to Frieze London, a famous art fair. Struck by the appearance of the tents that populated the fair, she photographed them; she began to paint them the following year. Though there’s one of these tent paintings in the show, titled “Barrier,” it represents more of a prelude to the series than a part of it. That’s because it’s an exterior view, and with the rest of the paintings in the show, McKenzie is examining the interiors.

In digital reproductions of her paintings, they appear to be photorealist or hyperrealist in style. But in person, they don’t have that crisp, super-realistic look at all; that’s because they are so painterly in places. This led me to consider them as part of the contemporary-realist category, but McKenzie does not see herself as a realist — even if her subjects are representational.



Sarah McKenzie, "Slant," oil and acrylic on canvas.

When I walked through the show with her the other day, she pointed out the abstract qualities that she puts in her work, most notably her use of different painting methods in different parts of the depictions. For instance, in "Door to the River," an oil and acrylic on canvas, smooth coats of flat color define the walls, while heavily modulated tones applied with visible brushstrokes express the wooden floor. To carry out the facsimile of the Willem de Kooning on the wall, she takes yet another approach to painting, aping the original's expressiveness.

Another element that introduces abstraction into McKenzie's otherwise representational work is the pronounced constructivism of her compositions, which are essentially defined by straight lines arranged in elaborate relationships so that they communicate the perspective view of the rendered spaces. McKenzie determines the precise place to put each line through mathematical calculations that allow her to scale up the images from the small original photographs to the large completed paintings.

An interest in representing recognizable subjects has been persistent in art since the age of cave paintings. For artists today, though, the challenge is putting a new twist on the old warhorse. But that's just what McKenzie does, by introducing conceptual content while creating paintings about the exhibition of other paintings.