4

Jane Dickson

James Fuentes Press

Jane Dickson

4

Jane Dickson

James Fuentes Press

Editor
Laura Brown

Design
Other Means

Publisher
James Fuentes Press

Printer
Gruppo Industriale FG s.r.l.

Typefaces
Magister (Omnitype), Totally Gothic (Emigre)

Artwork Photography
Paul Hodara, Jason Mandella

The James Fuentes team would like to thank Jane Dickson, contributors Chris Kraus, Odili Donald Odita, and Shellyne Rodriguez, and Other Means for their continued collaboration. Jane Dickson would like to thank the writers, Laura Brown, Charlie Ahearn, Jessica Rubin, Maya Shah, Paul Hodara, Kristina Boden, and David Dickson.

ISBN 978-1-7365415-4-8

Cover: *Traffic Cop Port Authority*, 2020.
Oil stick on linen. 34 × 20 inches.

Contents

Odili Donald Odita and Jane Dickson in conversation

Odili Donald Odita

I was looking at the painting by Grant Wood, *American Gothic* [1930]. He was painting it to be very serious and earnest about the people he painted. He saw them as heroic. But the painting was also an ironic portrayal of these American people and the American landscape. I was interested in that double reading of the space, and I think with your work, I see an exploration of America—a specific type of America. Do you think about the ironic as much as the heroic? What is your idea of the American landscape—physical and social?

Jane Dickson

The question of the American social landscape is central to my whole practice. I'm more inspired by George Innes, the transcendentalist painter. I'm not particularly a fan of Grant Wood. I was very influenced by '30s painters when I was young, but not particularly him. It is iconic and I am interested in the iconic. On that level, I think he's interesting, but [Edward] Hopper was much more of an influence than Grant Wood. Grant Wood is a little bit cartoony and formulaic for me. He was a great inspiration to Walt Disney.

Odili Donald Odita

When I look at American allegorical painting, I see a great sense of irony, melancholy, and sadness in the depiction of persons and space. Do you ascribe to this in your paintings?

Jane Dickson

I am interested in the way that architectural environments shape the psychological range of experience that one can have within them. At the worn out end of the 20th century, much of our degraded American environments project the sadness of lost glory or the sadness of careless design, anything for a buck.

Odili Donald Odita

What differentiates the Los Angeles work from the New York work, and the space in between? For instance, the images of highways, of traveling, of light and action, versus the other work that you're known for from your time in Times Square.

Jane Dickson

My paintings explore urban and suburban streetscapes. The urban is where I have settled, but the suburban is where I come from. It's not an

accident that Times Square surrounds the Port Authority Bus Terminal. The majority of the people going through Times Square every day, and being serviced by Times Square, are really suburbanites from New Jersey who come into the city to do things that they can't or wouldn't do at home. I'm interested in this dichotomy of let's make a "a perfect, antiseptic place" in the suburbs where we can escape all urban problems and be very homogenized and boring, and then we'll go into the city to get wild.

Odili Donald Odita

I was struck that you only spent maybe six months or less than a year in Los Angeles. Could you talk a little bit about that? There's the idea of getting from one place to the other.

Jane Dickson

I went to LA to paint highways, parking lots and strip malls, suburbia with palm trees. I'm from Chicago. It was a flip of the coin whether I went east or west first. My best friend went out to art school in California and I went east to Harvard. I imagined that I'd find out what it would be like to be in art school there from her, but she died our freshman year, so I didn't really get to learn that from her.

Odili Donald Odita

I am sorry.

Jane Dickson

Well, I'll step back and say, I went to the École des Beaux-Arts for a year right out of high school. My mother lived in Paris. My father was British and my grandparents lived in London so I had spent a lot of time in Europe growing up. I felt like an outsider on both continents. I very consciously decided, when I came back to America to go to college, that I wanted to figure out what it was to be American. After spending a year at the Beaux-Arts, I thought, hmm, this art thing requires incredible self motivation. And as a 19 year old, I had no idea what I was doing. So I decided to study to be an anthropologist. That seemed more practical. So I did start out studying anthropology. I used that lens in my painting to pick my subjects and to think about my subjects in terms of social anthropology. After two years I dropped out and went to the Boston Museum School because I thought, this place is amazing, but not for art.

Odili Donald Odita

When I think of your work, I think of you within a range of other American authors and artists as

diverse as Eugene O'Neil, Henry Miller, Tennessee Williams, Georgia O'Keefe, Dorothea Lang, Agnes Martin, and Nicole Eisenman. Would you think of this as a good placement for your explorations of American phenomena, but in your own way?

Jane Dickson

I would throw into that list: Diane Arbus, Weegee [Arthur Fellig], Ed Ruscha, and [Utagawa] Hiroshige, documenter of the amusements of the floating world in fantastic perspectives. These are all people that I did consciously think about when I was in Times Square. I'm interested in being part of the dialogue of my time, as they were in theirs.

Odili Donald Odita

What does the nocturnal mean in your paintings and how would you describe the light of the nocturnal?

Jane Dickson

Well, for anyone, the urban night is potentially dangerous. And as a young woman, the urban night is definitely dangerous.

Odili Donald Odita

Is it a male space or a female space? Is it gendered at all for you?

Jane Dickson

It's totally a male space. When I first came to New York in the '70s, there was this feminist movement called Take Back the Night. Women were marching to take back night, but that's never really happened.

Even in college when I got jobs, I always picked to work the night shift. For a while I worked as a night watchman in the Fogg Museum at Harvard. It was kind of hilarious because I would sit there with the old guy who was the full-time night watchman. There had been a robbery about a year before and in that robbery, they rang the doorbell and he answered the door and they put a gun in his face. They tied him up and went and stole all of these Greek coins that had not yet been inventoried. I don't know if they ever found out who did that. But anyway, he'd go, "What if they land a helicopter on the roof this time?" He was completely traumatized.

Odili Donald Odita

Wow.

Jane Dickson

When I came to New York and got a job at the Spectacolor Sign in Times Square I said, I want to work the night shift. Because I thought I needed my daytime to work in my studio. That was a clearly pivotal choice for my artwork, working night shifts in Times Square.

Odili Donald Odita

It sounds like a space where your imagination could come to life. I'm very interested in the idea of night or darkness having color, or the literal fact that in darkness, you still have light. People equate or create a moral and negative connotation to darkness, when in fact, darkness is just another range of the light spectrum. Are there colors that you see when you're dealing with night spaces or nightscapes? Is it diametrically opposed to the light of the day or the color of the day?

Jane Dickson

Well, the first key for me in finding my voice visually was working on a digital light board. I was working literally with lights on a black board. And I thought this was going to have no effect on my real work, my artwork. But I found myself hypnotized by the potential of color against

black, as opposed to color against white, the color of most paper or gesso.

I'm interested in the whole spectrum. There are so many colors of black, warm and cool. I usually mix my own from blues and browns. The other thing is that I studied more than painting. I was completely entranced with the range of velvety blackness that you could get in print making. I feel like I came out of chiaroscuro, really, just black and white. I remember reading something Georgia O'Keefe said—when she finished art school, she got an award and went and burned all her work. She decided to just work in monochrome, in black and white, until she really needed a color and then only use the color that she really needed. I feel like many artists, especially students, just pile on every damn color, pure as they can. There's no dialogue between the colors.

Odili Donald Odita

Right.

Jane Dickson

I set a color key by working on a color ground. If you start on blue, then all the colors react to that blue. When you paint orange, the blue is coming through, vibrating.

It's just like in music, you pick a key. If you're going to be in the key of, you know, B flat major, it's going to have a certain feeling. I would say my work is almost all in the minor key, but if it's on blue, that gives it a certain tone. Everything has to relate to that blue. On black, I combine the colors with oil sticks. Originally, they were Markal brand. They're meant for marking on lumber and they're very cheap. They only came in six or seven colors, one green, blue, red, orange, yellow, black, and white. To get any other color, you had to mix them. I do that by scumbling very light layers, harmonizing the colors through optical color mixing—then they're growing in dialogue with each other. Often an orange that's got a little green in it and a little purple in it is much more powerful and delicious, vibrating with a yellow that's got a little purple in it, than pure colors.

Odili Donald Odita

Well, you're using the intelligence of color theory in understanding color contrast and color complements. You're able to create accents with other neutral colors. It makes sense that you're amping up the situations by using color contrast and complement versus a Dayglo fluorescent orange. Would you call yourself a maximalist or minimalist? I ask this because on one hand, you're employing so many different materials, but on

another hand, you have these almost minimalist scapes, where you reduce the information to get at the content in a much stronger manner.

Jane Dickson

I'm honing down the composition and the imagery to get to some essence, to get to the iconic. I found that working on night scenes really helped me, because you can make the light focus on what you want to show people and everything else just disappears in the dark. Whereas if it's the daytime, there's all sorts of other stuff. I take a lot of photos, and then I look for what I remember from this scene, which is not that there was an overflowing wastebasket. I remember something particular that made me take that photo. That's why I really only use my own photos to paint from.

Odili Donald Odita

Right.

Jane Dickson

I had to have been there. Even if my photo turns out to be crappy, I remember that there was something in the corner here that was really important. In my drawings, and then my paintings, I'm going to pull that out. It's also part of why I approach

painting sort of like a Japanese potter—they throw a million pots and toss a bunch of them out. If something doesn't work, it usually means it wasn't fully conceptualized beforehand. Sometimes I can spend six, eight months trying to fix something that didn't work. I may be able to save it, but I could have made seven other versions in that time that would all be better than the one that I fixed. And the way I'm painting, I want to have some of the ground revealed. Otherwise, why bother to use that ground? Once you start moving things around, you're painting it all out. It's better to just get on a new piece of felt or AstroTurf or sandpaper or garbage bag or linen and start again.

Odili Donald Odita

I am really interested in this idea you had about minor key versus major key. One could think, with color, of the major key being similar to primary colors. And then minor key might be secondary, tertiary colors. But in fact, I think it's how you mentioned the dark or the black being like velvet. It seems as if you're using value as a foundation for the minor and major key aspect of the work.

Jane Dickson

I don't use velvet and I never have, because it has

such strong kitsch connotations. I do like to rub the high and low up against each other, but I'm not interested in kitsch per se. I am interested in materials for their references, but that's not a reference that I particularly wanted to go with. So those black paintings are actually on canvas and linen.

Odili Donald Odita

That's great.

Jane Dickson

When I was starting out, I avoided canvas and linen because of its burden of art history. Once you pick up oil and face a canvas, you're entering the ring with Titan and Van Gogh and everybody else that you've ever admired. I was like, ah, I'm going to paint on trashy materials so you can't compare me to those people. When I did start to do the paintings I'm known for of Times Square, which are oil stick on canvas, I was like, okay, I'm going to tiptoe into this arena, but I'm not going to use oil paint or a brush, I'm going to use oil stick so it's more like drawing and it's really my own. Hardly anybody was using oil stick at that time. Jean-Michel [Basquiat] was, but he was using it in a really different way.

Odili Donald Odita

What other materials have you painted on?

Jane Dickson

Black garbage bags were early favorites. I would come home from working on the sign and I wanted to continue working on a black surface and there were garbage bags in front of me. I've also done a lot on sandpaper. Sandpaper comes in many colors. For a while, whenever I traveled I'd buy local sandpaper, because it's different in different countries.

Some of my earliest work was on gray textured vinyl wall covering. I did an installation called *City Maze*, which has a wonderful video that I did at Fashion Moda in 1980 with Crash, Noc, Daze, and Freddie Braithwaite AKA Fab 5 Freddy. And I went to Materials For The Arts to get materials for it.

Odili Donald Odita

That's a great place.

Jane Dickson

I picked up these rolls of gray textured vinyl wall

covering. As soon as I tried painting on it, I fell in love with how it fragmented brush strokes. I did some of my earliest paintings of Times Square on this textured vinyl. The painting *Fab 5 Freddy* [1982] that's up at the National Portrait Gallery is on gray textured vinyl. And my painting of Eighth Avenue that the Whitney owns now [*Dobbs Hats*, 1981] is also on gray vinyl. My first show at Fun Gallery was mostly on this textured vinyl. I have one or two pieces of it left that I've been sort of hoarding. When I wanted to work larger, I started painting canvas black. At that point, I had to mix my own black pigment in matte medium. They didn't make black gesso yet.

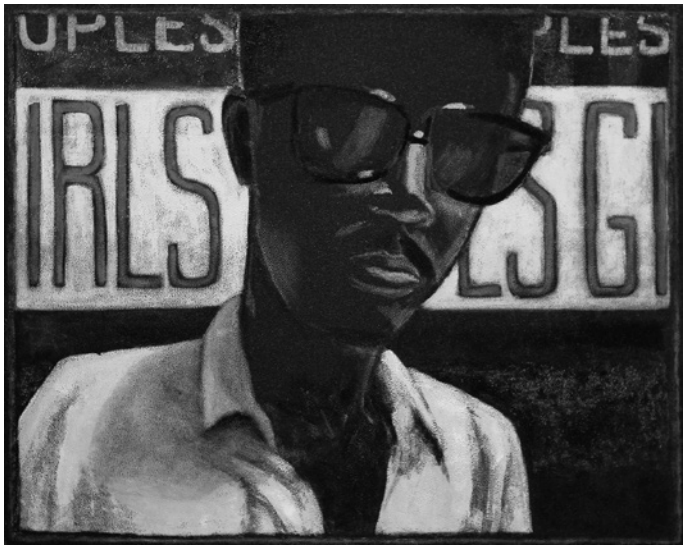
Odili Donald Odita

Were you using only oil stick on this? Do you paint with brushes as well?

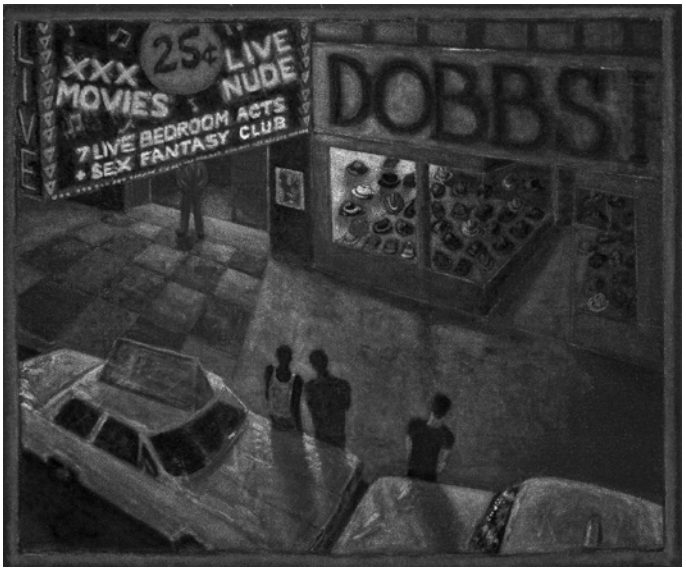
Jane Dickson

I used brushes and acrylic on textured vinyl, on AstroTurf, and also on felt. I do lots of little studies with oil and brush on canvas before I figure out what surface will resonate with a particular subject. But I'm going to say that in general, I feel like when I use a brush, it looks like lots of other people's work. It's just such a well-trodden territory.

1 Jane Dickson
Fab 5 Freddy, 1982
Oil on canvas-backed vinyl
40 1/8 × 50 1/8 × 3/4 inches
Collection of the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC



2 Jane Dickson
Dobbs Hats, 1981
Acrylic on vinyl
48 × 58 1/8 inches
Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



I'd painted dozens of little highways with oil on canvas when a friend came over and said, "It looks like you don't care about those trees," which I had scribbled in between the highway and the sky. I thought, she's right, I don't care about those trees. Then at Home Depot I saw huge rolls of AstroTurf and thought, ah ha! I won't paint the trees. I'll use this symbol of nature, just generalized greenery for the trees and only paint the part I am interested in—highway and sky. These are my transcendentalist works, the sublime in traffic.

Odili Donald Odita

It seems like you work in themes and in series. Do you decide upon a series before you start making the work, or do you actually just make work one after the other and then start placing them in the series that they belong?

Jane Dickson

That's a great question. I aspire to focus on one thing, but as a person of many enthusiasms I usually have a main theme that I'm focusing on and several side themes in development, overlapping.

Odili Donald Odita

Right.

Jane Dickson

These days I seem to have two or three subjects going at once because it takes the pressure off of being too serious about each. At this point in my life, my trajectory is not linear anymore, it's a spiral. I can come back to Vegas from a decade ago, or AstroTurf from two decades ago, or oil stick on black linen that's three or four decades ago. I can go back into those and go, now I have something more to say about that. I can bop around. A new material I'm really liking lately is Tyvek. Tyvek is beautiful to paint on.

Odili Donald Odita

I want to ask you about the use of one point perspective in your work. It seems central to the LA work, or the paintings of the highway and houses. What effect does that have for you psychologically, conceptually, emotionally when you're making your work?

Jane Dickson

Almost all of my city work is two point perspective. It's on a diagonal. It wasn't conscious to start with, but because of the closeness of urban buildings, one rarely gets to have a centered, frontal view. One is looking at an angle. Especially in Times

Square, where I was trying to be an unobtrusive observer. If somebody's mugging someone, I'm not going to go, "Can you please hold still while I take a picture?" No. So I'm at an angle and maybe I'm holding the camera at my hip, so no one will notice. I was very interested and influenced early on by Ukiyo-e Japanese prints and their strange diagonals. But when I went to the highways and the houses, I chose very consciously to make those in one point perspective. You are centered looking head on. In my newer work, it's half and half. I'm doing close ups of signs and those are straight on.

Odili Donald Odita

What things do you think the centering amplifies? Besides making it the subject matter of the work, let's say. Would it amplify other things outside of that for you?

Jane Dickson

Well, I think that perspective literally means where you're looking from. I'm not giving you a universal truth; this is what this corner of contemporary reality looks like to me from my spot, right now. I started doing the highways partly because I came from Chicago and I love cars, but also because I was commuting to teach, first at SUNY Purchase and then up at Pace in Westchester. Commuting

three, four days a week up to Westchester I thought, well, I'm in my car. I've got to use what I've got and what I've got right now is the highway. The highway is a key to the American psyche. And the view from the windshield is centered. I'm not painting it from the shoulder, it's when you're in motion. I did use to drive on the West Side Highway holding my camera, which was probably really dangerous.

Odili Donald Odita

I was reading about that and I was wondering, are you the passenger in the car taking pictures, or are you driving and taking pictures?

Jane Dickson

Usually I was the driver. I have not done the Cross Bronx. I keep thinking, I've got to get someone to drive me back and forth on the Cross Bronx, because it's too dangerous to be photographing while you're in traffic.

Odili Donald Odita

Your recent paintings have a sense of nostalgia to them—a nostalgia of an urban past. The quality of the light, the oil sticks, the broken color and the black paper showing through gives a sense of an

image breaking and ready to fade. Could you talk a little bit about this? Is there a nostalgic quality in looking back at a space that does not exist as that any longer?

Jane Dickson

This work of Times Square of the last two years that's from '80s photos is really the first time I am looking back on something that's gone. Up until now, my subject has been that I'm often looking at things that are anachronistic. They are of another time, but they're still here. When I was in Times Square in the '80s, it reminded me of Hopper. The buildings, my neighborhood, including the building I lived in, were slated to be torn down. Nobody was updating anything. They were all buildings from the '20s and '30s that had seen better days, but they were still functioning. They looked like Art Deco. In this current work, I have a painting called *Save Time* that's from a laundromat in Binghamton. It's recent, but it looks like it's been there for a long time. And yes, it's a neon sign, and neon I love, but neon is being replaced by LED. LED light is harsh, blinding.

I want to note that my next show at James Fuentes is called *99¢ Dreams*, and I'm noticing that keyboards don't have a cent sign anymore. I guess youngsters are like, "Pennies? Who gives a shit

about pennies?" I'm trying to type it and I'm like, where's the cent symbol? Gone. You can't have dreams that cheap.

Odili Donald Odita

Even in accounting, on bank forms and things of that nature, they're wanting you to use whole numbers and not add the cents.

Jane Dickson

Yeah. It's just obsolete. Oh my God, here's another point where I'm reaching for the obsolete.

Odili Donald Odita

There's something fascinating in that. Why are you seemingly looking back at something that is on the fringes of existence and of memory? What does it mean for you to look back at those spaces? Spaces that are relegated to small towns seen on the drive to a bigger city. They're not in the center anymore. It seems like you're really evoking imagery that speaks to a transition and change in our reality. What does this distance in time represent for you?

Jane Dickson

I think it's partly that it's very hard to see the present. When I started in Times Square, I was just painting the present. I was painting what was around me, but even then, I was mostly selecting things that were already old and worn. There were other buildings that were modern and I wasn't so interested in them. I've done newer, more utilitarian buildings like Port Authority and strip-malls, but those seem to be more about the absence of presence on a really visceral level. I don't think that I, or maybe anyone, gets to choose what we have to express.

Odili Donald Odita

Or even what we experience.

Jane Dickson

I have a bottomless well of melancholy, of the blues, I think. I was raised in suburban Chicago in the '50s and '60s during the post-war boom when everything was supposed to be so great. And we had the accoutrements of things being great. But in fact, things were scary and dark and difficult. So much of my earliest work—my childhood and student work—was about this dissonance between the ideal facade and what really is going

on inside. Which is something I came back to with the houses on carpet, another material I've used a lot. Those houses are all on carpet samples. I took millions of photos of houses and I'd think, this house belongs on this brown shag and this one belongs on the plush blue carpet with dots on it.

Odili Donald Odita

I want to talk more about the color in your newest work, and the way in which you're dealing with that imagery. Are you being exact to the imagery you use, or is the memory of those spaces being affected now that you're working on them in the present?

Jane Dickson

I'm never interested in mirroring photography. If that's what I end up with, and sometimes I do, it's a failure. It didn't transcend the literal. I'm choosing something because it resonates beyond itself. I'm not interested in going, oh, look, isn't that a quaint old sign. I'm interested in the idea that we are fascinated by a sign that says Fascination, that broadcasts what our desires are, and our hopes. It's not just the literal sign, it's what the sign is evoking.

Odili Donald Odita

Your spaces are very stage-like, as if everything is on display in your paintings. There's one point perspective and there's two point perspective, as you said. The one point perspective paintings read much differently, not in mood, but in activation and action. It relates to something you said earlier about perspective being from where you are standing. I am thinking about where you are standing, but also what you're looking at from where you are standing. Does perspective start from the object that is seen, or does perspective start from the person who's looking at the object and deciphering what that object might be?

Jane Dickson

Early on, people often talked about it in terms of voyeurism. I was going to say to you, oh, all the work with figures is in two point perspective, and the ones with one point perspective don't have people. But I just remembered that I did a whole series called *Witnesses*, which were of looking up at other people's windows, or looking across the street into other people's windows. So I was exploring the concept of voyeurism very literally. But then the subjects are looking back at us, at the viewer.

You're looking at somebody straight on

3 Jane Dickson
Witness II, 1991–97
Oil and rolotex on canvas
48 × 30 inches

and they're looking at you, but it's through two windows and across a street. I was thinking about how everyone in a city is somewhat of a voyeur and somewhat of a subject of being watched. This state when you can feel someone watching you goes back to our predator, prey, pre-human beginnings. It's the same as when you look across the street and you go, oh, that guy's scratching his ass across the way. And later you look up and you realize, oh, somebody's watching me. It's a very uncanny and uncomfortable feeling to realize one is unsuspectingly being watched.

Odili Donald Odita

As an exchange or a re-distribution of power.

Jane Dickson

Yeah. And with the paintings of strippers, that's also about power and display—who's watching and who's being watched. I identify with the stripper. I'm not ogling her and going, "That's a nice ass." I did the stripper series at a similar time that I did a series of circus paintings. I painted elephants that were on these tiny little stools. I thought, I relate to those elephants because they're so ungainly, they're trying to pose on these tiny stands that make them look ridiculous. It's not that different with women stripping, because

nobody's got a perfect body. Particularly back in the day before plastic surgery was ubiquitous, women could have any kind of body, as long as they were willing to strip, men were happy to pay to see them. You'd have women with all kinds of bodies and they're not necessarily comfortable showing you. They don't look like Barbie dolls.

Odili Donald Odita

So how are you ultimately engaging gender in your work? I'm thinking of the painting *Lolita* from 2020. In that painting there is a power relation going on with the title and with what's being depicted. Is there variety in the way that you're wanting to depict gender and power? Or let's say, is there a specific nuance in the series of paintings where you're depicting voyeurism within these landscapes? In addition to that, are they white spaces or are they ethnic spaces? Who occupies and controls those spaces, and who are the inhabitants of those spaces?

Jane Dickson

I definitely bring a woman's viewpoint. I did a very early version of the *Lolita* painting on textured vinyl in the '70s. It was about the cops waiting while they're bringing in a stretcher and passersby are watching them. I painted cops a lot. They're always

a form of menace. I'm afraid of them. They're not generally helpful. And they're male power personified. When I scanned these negatives, I found the negative for *Lolita*, and I was like, holy shit, the film that was playing was Lolita. I didn't have that in the earlier version.

There was another marquee that I painted that was a double bill. The films were called *School Girls* and *That's My Daughter*. I thought, these are so creepy. But the fact that it was a marquee on 42nd street, implying incest and pedophilia was not considered out of bounds in the '80s—it could be advertised—is remarkable now.

Odili Donald Odita

I'm thinking about a lot of filmmakers, too. For instance, Woody Allen, consuming his movies as a fan in the '80s and '90s and now there are the sexual abuse allegations against him within his family that complicate the viewing of his films. There is also the new film *Licorice Pizza* by Paul Thomas Anderson. There is a sense of nostalgia that permeates this film, a glorious kind of nostalgia, but there's also the issue of the relationship between the two main characters, their age difference and the power dynamic that's depicted in this story. This is really interesting to me because it speaks to something that I think is necessary in art, a certain kind of dilemma that

4 Jane Dickson
Peep 7, 1992–96
Oil and pumice on canvas
57 × 40 inches

goes beyond morality in a way in which you have to start to think and consider how you might choose to experience what you're looking at. I think that it's quite important to have these considerations where you begin to question power. Not in a way where it's either good or bad, but to be in this place where as a viewer you are forced to work and think through your own relationship and idea of what you're seeing.

Jane Dickson

If my paintings work, they put you in that spot. I don't tell you, this is good, this is bad. I choose things that are complicated and problematic so that you can tease out your own stance on it. Whether it's gambling, stripping, or driving. For example, with my house paintings people responded very emotionally to the suburbs and to the garages.

Odili Donald Odita

Would you say that your work is inhabited by you or are you outside of the space as a viewer? You have called yourself a witness. How does this identify and change your position from one state to the next, or from one work to the next, or from one idea of investigation to the next?

Jane Dickson

I'm looking for reflections of my own experiences in the world around me. I'm looking for common shared experiences that can give insights into the choices we all have to make. So I'm both inside and outside. If I'm having a fight with my significant other, I can't go, "Oh, let me step back and photograph this unhappy dynamic." But if I see some couple having a fight, I know what that feels like and I can observe and capture that exchange. I wasn't a stripper, but I had friends who were strippers. And I certainly feel like as a woman I've been on display and been judged by men my whole life.

Before I did the stripper paintings I thought, oh, stripping is just demeaning. But through my friends who were working as strippers, I realized it's actually more complicated. Sexual display is a power that most girls are trained to not use. But it is a power that young women have, it's the main power that young women have. And some women choose to use it to make a living and there's logic to their choice.

Odili Donald Odita

It's very complex because we're also describing a world that's run by men. We might also be describing a world that's run by white men. How

do you move through that understanding? How do you differentiate yourself within that understanding? And then, as you said, "take back the night," and realize that this has not happened. What is it for you to speak about a world of power within your perspective? How do you empower yourself within the ideas that you're engaging within the work?

Jane Dickson

I paint things that frighten me. I take control of them in paint. I have really chosen to explore mostly male arenas, like Times Square or demolition derbies.

Odili Donald Odita

I remember seeing some of those paintings.

Jane Dickson

Hopefully those will get seen again in the next couple of years. I've been working on a series of women being judged by men, like my wig shop storefronts, of all these women's heads with different wigs. They make me think of Donald Trump. Women as interchangeable commodities. Like, "Oh, I think I'll take a red head tonight. No, maybe I'll take a brunette just for variety."

Odili Donald Odita

Even his hair is like a wig. It's artifice.

Jane Dickson

Yeah. I'm looking at one of these paintings now. It's all the same mannequin heads with Caucasian features in different skin tones. There's the very white one, there's the caramel colored Latin one, and then there's the light skinned brown one. So it's like pick your flavor, whatever you want, you can just order one up or take three or whatever. They're weird because I can't paint the mannequins to all look exactly alike, so mine end up being a little more lifelike than they really would be. I don't know, they're uncanny.

Odili Donald Odita

Do you think that they take on the anthropomorphism of a human figure or a representation of human experience in the paintings?

Jane Dickson

You empathize with them, even though you know that they're mannequins. They all look like, "I'm trying to look attractive; do you like me like this? If you don't, I'll put on that one." I feel like that's

a very universal woman's experience. Men are like, "I'm just how I am. Take it or leave it." And women are like, "Oh, don't worry about me I won't take up very much space, and if you don't like curls, I'll straighten it and I'll dye it."

Odili Donald Odita

I see a great economic dynamic at play as well in your work. It's a reality that shifts from Blockbuster to Netflix. Can you talk about this a little bit more?

Jane Dickson

The '80s had the AIDS pandemic. I did these artworks during of the COVID pandemic. Yes, they're very different, but there are parallels—the intrusion of death into the daily order. I was young then. I'm not young anymore, which is somewhat mind-boggling to me. More and more as I walk around the city I'm going, oh, I remember when that was Dave's Corner, I remember when that was the Waverly Theater. My present becomes overlaid with all these previous incarnations.

I'm not saying that one incarnation was better but that incarnation led through various ones that led up to today and I don't think that we can understand today in isolation, or with amnesia. I don't believe that everything old is better. I'm not into

that kind of nostalgia. I am very interested in how the fuck did we get here. This reality we're in is so insane now and is there a straight line from Times Square to Trump? Not exactly, but it's part of the ethos where men could do whatever they wanted, and women had to just grin and bear it. That was the male/female dynamic but, yes, also, it's a racial dynamic and the whiter you are, the more you can do whatever you want. Whatever other color you are, you have less and less power. It does hark back to a time of, "Well, white boys will be boys," and that's just how it is. Times Square is not the only place where that is. It's kind of universal in all times and places.

I'm grappling, like everyone else, with what the fuck is going on. When I did my Las Vegas paintings, they were a way for me to think about the internet, because, oh my God, I'm flicking through Instagram all the time. It's like a slot machine. It's infinite and it's addictive, intentionally so. I was thinking about the architecture of distraction, which also encompasses Times Square, Coney Island, strip-malls, and demolition derbies. Entertainments that are sold to us to distract us from what's really going on and the hardships that we're really experiencing.

Odili Donald Odita

That's so interesting.

Jane Dickson

We all need some distraction. We can't grapple with problems 24/7 but often we don't grapple with them at all. We just go, oh, I don't want to see that, so I'll just... You know? Do some more gambling or shopping or whatever our distraction of choice is.

Odili Donald Odita

In your newest series, you have these four drawings from 2020. They seem to be especially present. Store For Rent, which is just a storefront with this rent sign, and Taxi!, with its voyeurism going on, but in a different kind of landscape. Cuffed, which reminds me of the current situation of police brutality, and of people of color being detained. Then Looking Up, which to me is a really positive painting, because she is looking up. I think that is a shift of the power dynamic. The woman could be a person of color and she's looking up and looking away from the space around her. Maybe to something else, a dream maybe.

Jane Dickson

I'm not exactly sure which one Taxi! is.

Odili Donald Odita

It's two men on the street. They're looking at a woman who is hailing a taxi.

Jane Dickson

That one is based on an '80s photo. I approach things from a feeling and then as I'm painting, I think about its resonances to larger cultural issues and if it has enough resonance to continue to explore. That image is one where somehow I found it important emotionally.

Odili Donald Odita

In a way, the woman in Looking Up is leaving the space. The woman with the taxi, she's leaving that space too and maybe she is going to work, or going to do something that's better.

Jane Dickson

It's true. She's stepping off. The guys are ogling her and she's ignoring them. That first pandemic summer, I just sat there grounding myself by making small black drawings from scans of old photos and new photos on my phone. I make sketches and leave them up. Some of them will lead to paintings. I really got into another group of photos of those tourist

5 Jane Dickson
Taxi!, 2020
Oil stick on paper
13 ½ × 19 ¾ inches

places near Port Authority with racks of shoes out in front that seem like African shoes, or Caribbean shoes. They're stylish men of color's shoes, not white men shoes. They're pointy, they're snakeskin. There's something more to do with these. Along with the wigs, identity shopping.

Odili Donald Odita

You said you're painting from photographs. Do you also work from observation? Do you work from photographs of other people? Do you work from drawings you make? Is it only your own photography?

Jane Dickson

I work from my own photos. My initial photography might be serendipitous, like catching a guy jumping over a puddle in the rain. But if I decide that there's more to consider in people jumping over puddles, then I will go out and look for that when it rains and take lots of research photos.

I don't paint from other people's photos. If it's on the cover of the *Times*, it's a fantastic image that someone worked really hard to get. They already did it. I wasn't there so I don't know what went on, really. Once in a while, I'll take a perfect photo of my own and then I can't make a painting of it. It's already complete. I tend to work best from

my poorer photos where I have to remember the parts I can't see in the photo.

Phones now have the plus that we always carry them and can take infinite photos. The minus is that, because I'm not going to ever run out of film, I tend to be way more casual in shooting than I used to be. I used to compose things more carefully, as film was precious. Now I click, click, click. I have to be more careful to really pay attention to what I'm shooting.

Odili Donald Odita

Working from photography is interesting. I worked with teachers who said, "Don't ever work from photographs," because it might limit the person's scope of color. But in your case, it seems like it becomes a springboard for you to imagine psychologically and conceptually what the color can be. As you said, you avoid certain things in the pictures maybe to better grab onto other things.

Jane Dickson

My first study from the photo will be fairly literal. I draw the details that I'm interested in and I probably stick to the literal colors. Then the next version, I might look at it and go, yeah, but that red shirt is jumping out and messing up the painting, so he's going to be wearing a green shirt

now or I take figures out. I'm trying to get to some emotional truths that's not about anecdotal detail. A lot of people who paint from photos get caught up in reproducing every damn detail. They forget to edit. But who cares about most of those details.

Odili Donald Odita

They forget to use their imagination too. For yourself, though, when you're working with the color and the spaces that you're depicting, do you think of color and light as forces of technological representation? For example, the way in which I can see you right now on my computer screen versus the way in which I might have seen you on a TV set from the '80s.

Jane Dickson

I think a lot about how Photoshop is changing my color. Let's say I have a photo that's underexposed, especially from these negatives long ago, the ones I didn't paint from originally were drastically underexposed, so I couldn't really see anything in them. But with Photoshop, I can keep lightening it up until I can see what was in the shadows. Or damp it down if it's overexposed, so that I see, oh my God, that bleached out sign says Lolita. Some of the colors of my old film are fading because it's more than 40 years old and

maybe it wasn't perfectly fixed at the time. If it's Ektachrome, it's kind of bluish, if it's Kodachrome, it's kind of reddish.

Digital cameras and Photoshop prioritize the reds, warm tones. I prioritize blue greens, cool tones, so every time I photograph my work I have to go in and damp down the red, bring up the blue. I think it's like they decided to sort of go Kodachrome. I guess everybody likes their photos warmer. It's more cheerful. If it's bluer, it's more depressing.

Odili Donald Odita

That's important.

Jane Dickson

Also, I can increase the saturation in the source photos, making them more bright and more intense.

Odili Donald Odita

Does geography also enhance the way in which you use color? For example, the idea of making LA work versus New York work versus suburban work. I want to throw in one more thing: is there a consideration of the virtual in your work? That you're working from observation is one way of saying, this is reality, but the transformation of your observation and the way in which you're

actually engaging these multiple time spaces—does this complicate the way your work can become a virtual space versus an actual space?

Jane Dickson

I ponder virtual space a lot. I was painting Coney Island and Las Vegas as precursors of virtual space, which is designed to disorient you. In the name of entertainment you get to part with as much money as possible, which is totally true in virtual space now.

We are all more comfortable with multiple realities than we were in the '80s, when it was unfathomable. I'm somewhat of a dinosaur but even I'm pretty comfortable with Zoom. This is the second time you and I have Zoomed. I feel like I know you but, in fact, we've never been in each other's actual presence. We're okay now with Zoom as presence. Now when I go out on the street, I find myself checking my phone more than looking around. Like everyone else, I am occupying more and more of my time with the virtual and trying to think about what that means.

Odili Donald Odita

I think it's fascinating that you're making drawings and paintings today from the Times Square photos you made yesterday. The merging of those

two different moments, this moment with that moment, and the experiences you had then versus the experiences you have now.

Jane Dickson

People are extremely interested in the '80s and in Times Square. I get interviewed about this period frequently by somebody who is writing a book or doing their doctoral thesis. I also did a fair amount of reference imagery for that TV show, The Deuce. I chose consciously, early on, that I was not going to use art to focus on my own personal travails, as many artists do, unless they reflected broader cultural issues. I wanted to document my cultural moment as the subject of my work. For a long time I was focusing on other places—LA, Vegas, the suburbs—I was sick of Times Square, it was a long time ago... Then, during the pandemic, I had time to reconsider my history. I dug up all my '80s negatives and scanned them. These are my photos and my life and I want to think about them from today's vantage point, to see how different they are from the vantage point of 40 years ago. I'm a different person and the world is a different place and this neighborhood, as it stood, no longer exists.

America doesn't really want to look at its own underside but other parts of the world do. Same with graffiti. When we were starting to make

Wild Style, we applied for funding from PBS and they said, "This graffiti hip hop thing, it's too local to New York. It will not be of interest to anyone outside of New York City, so we're not going to fund it." As soon as PBS said no, the Japanese, the Germans, and the English all said, "Here's money. We're really interested in this." PBS hoped that hip hop wouldn't affect the rest of the country but, in fact, it's affected the whole world.

Odili Donald Odita

My last question to you really deals a little bit with: how does your work represent a vision of the great American landscape and American infrastructure? I'm wondering how we might look at your view of America?

Jane Dickson

I wonder if my interest in infrastructure came from the fact that my father was a water and sewage engineer working on big water treatment systems at a time when "better living through science" was the motto. I'm more concerned with the dystopian than the utopian, because that's where change needs to happen, where things need to be reconsidered. Even in the '60s and '70s and '80s, when it still seemed like rah rah, everything is getting better, it was clear to me that there

were major cracks in the system and that things weren't getting better, or they were only getting better for certain people. There was no recognition that if all the wealthy people siloed themselves off into some little fake town suburb and leave all of the poorer people behind, that the city is going to suffer.

I don't feel like the American landscape is a monolith and I feel like there are parts of it that are wonderful but I chose to focus on manifestations of issues that need to be dealt with, and that I am trying to deal with and conceptualize myself. It's not just my personal issue. It's an issue that everybody or many people share and are trying to grapple with.

Odili Donald Odita

Does artifice and the artificial help to make things real for you?

Jane Dickson

I think we all need escapes from reality. Reality is hard and challenging. We need to focus on it, but we also need to take a break and turn to the artifice that is sold to us as entertainment. I get lost in those distractions because I, too, am a moth to the flame. I like those flickering lights. Everyone does. They're attractive. Some of it is harmless, some

of it's fun, and too much of it is a nightmare.

I am reflecting back: here are things that we're attracted to and let's think about that. The carnival paintings are very much that, and they also fit into what you were talking about earlier about the proscenium, you know, each booth is like its own little stage and that also is something that I chose consciously to engage with.

Figuration was so out when I started doing it. It's astonishing to me that right now it's so in vogue. I welcome it but I'm more used to being in the opposition. I'm not afraid to delve into the past to find things, to find structures that seem useful still today.

Odili Donald Odita

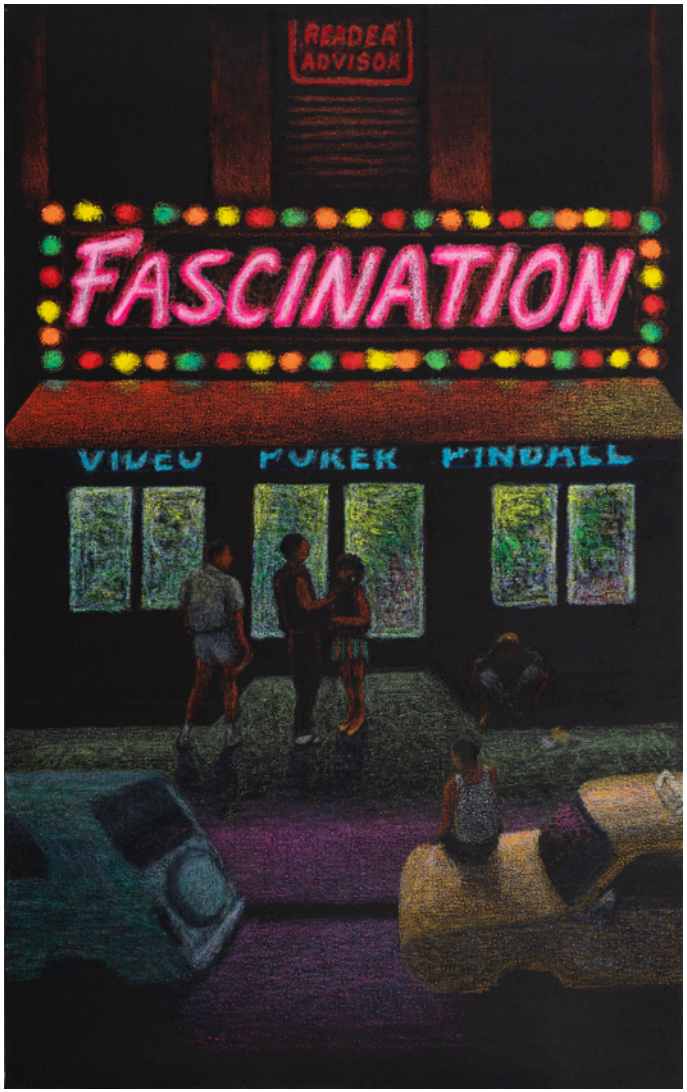
And to find structures that are present like AstroTurf and plastic and garbage bags, these kinds of surfaces that you put images onto in a way to conflate everything, to bring everything together, as much as to show the different layers that make up our reality. I think that's fascinating, AstroTurf as a means of artifice to push the image forward.

Jane Dickson

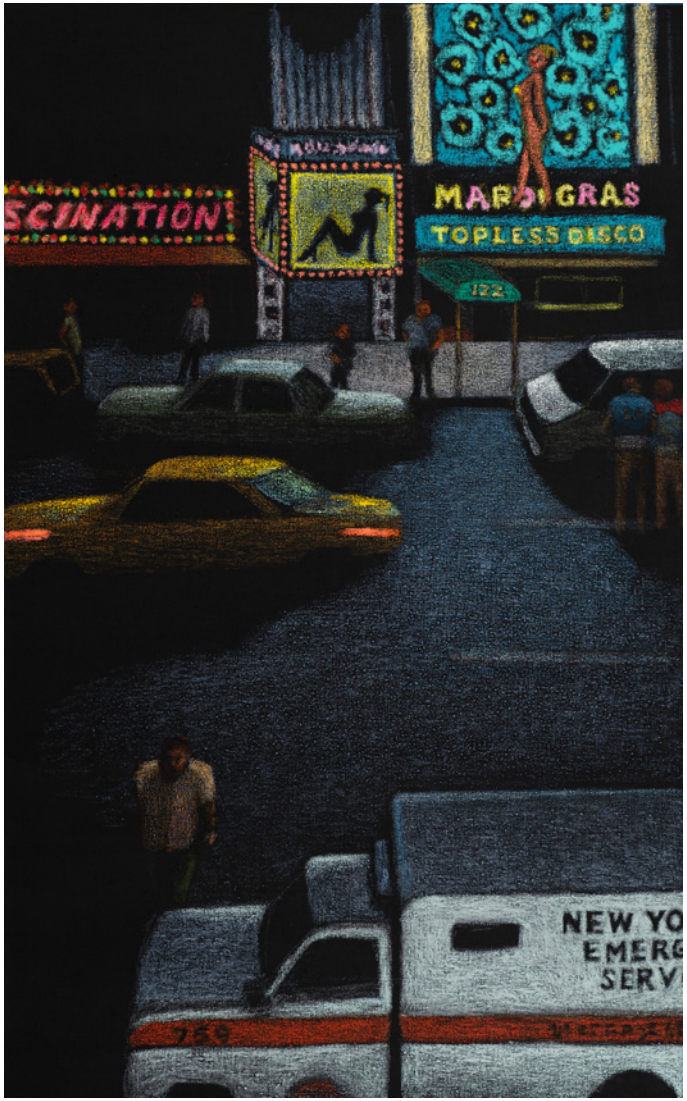
I like '90s AstroTurf and now they make it with really long grass pile, not the Brillo-like loop, which

is great to paint on. The long grass is just hopeless to paint on. I think I've found a place in Bushwick that still has vintage AstroTurf. I'm sure that there's new materials that I just haven't tried yet that will be wonderful keys to the present and beyond.

Plates

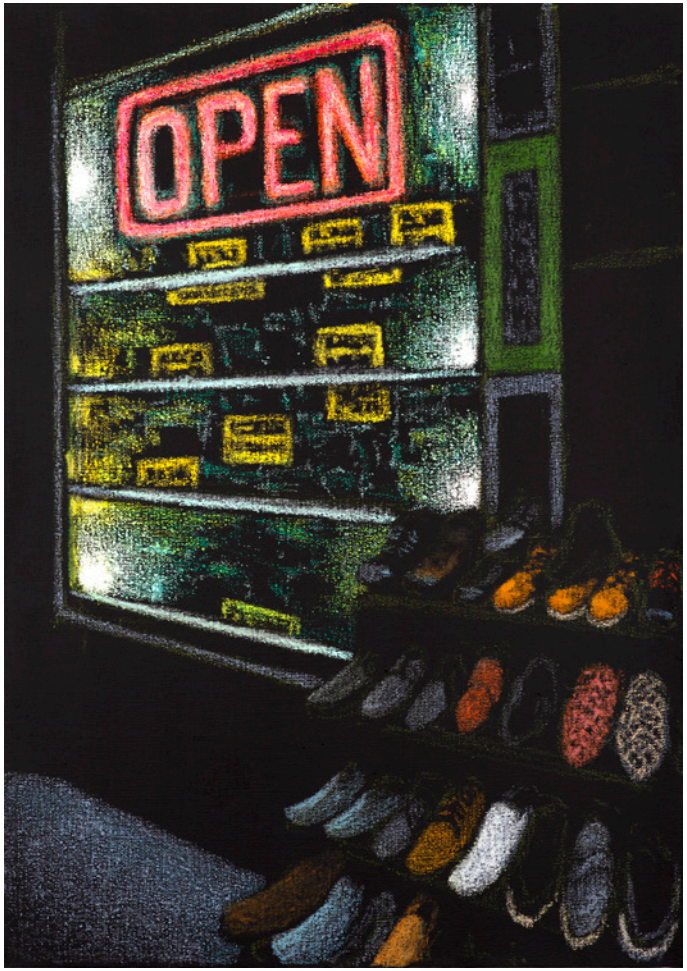

READER
ADVISOR
FASCINATION
VIDEO POKER PINBALL

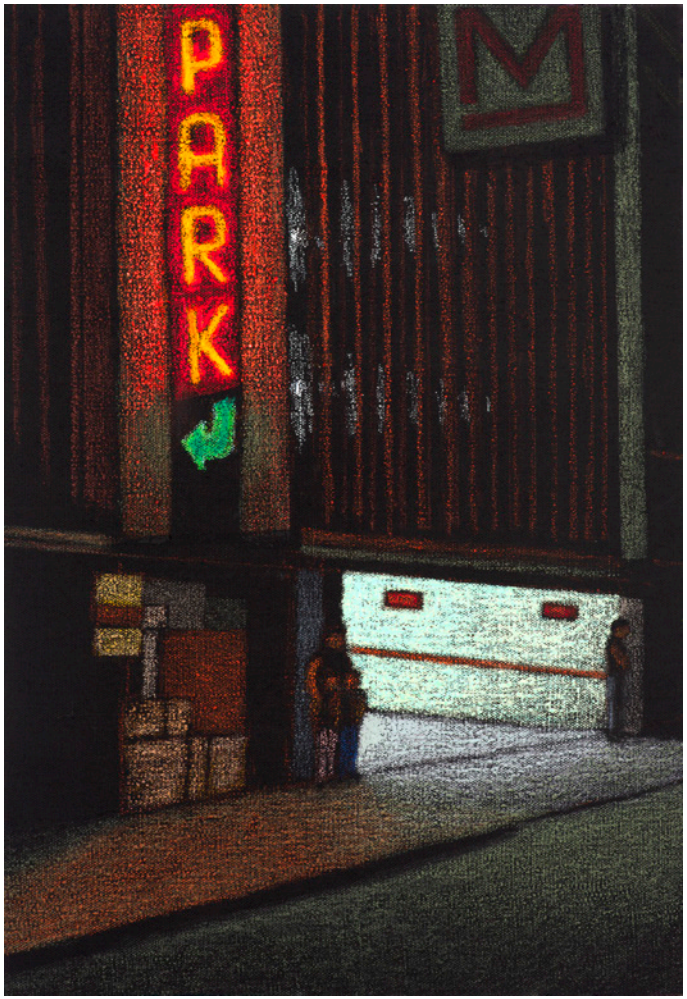

The New York Times
The New York Times
The New York Times

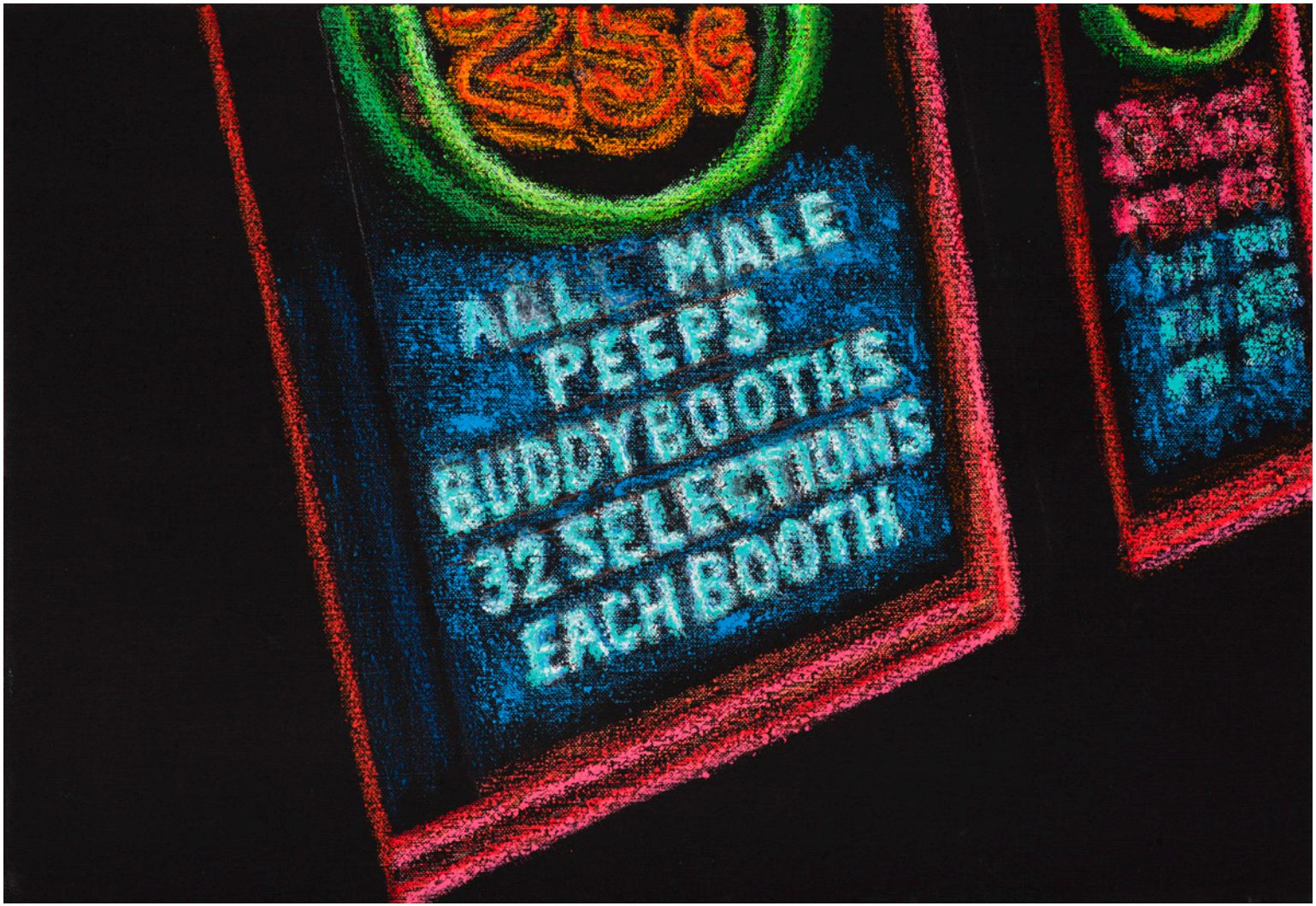

SCINATION
MARDI GRAS
TOPLESS DISCO
122
NEW YO
EMERG
SERV


EEP
LAN
FILM
PRIZES
GAME
BOOTHS
LIVE ON


DEVIL BELOW
POLICE

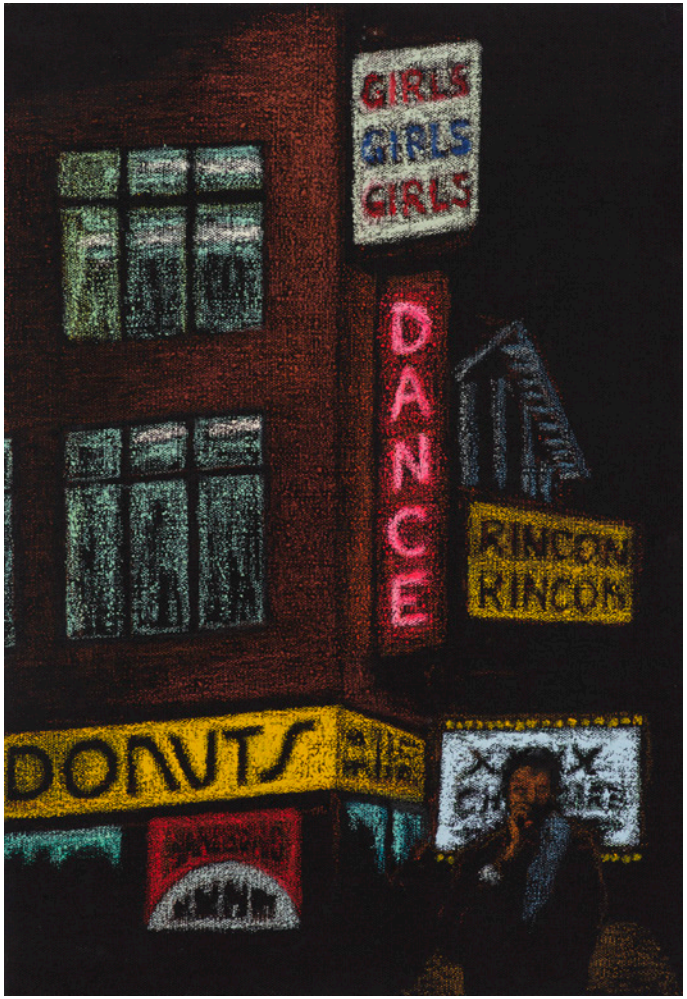

OPEN

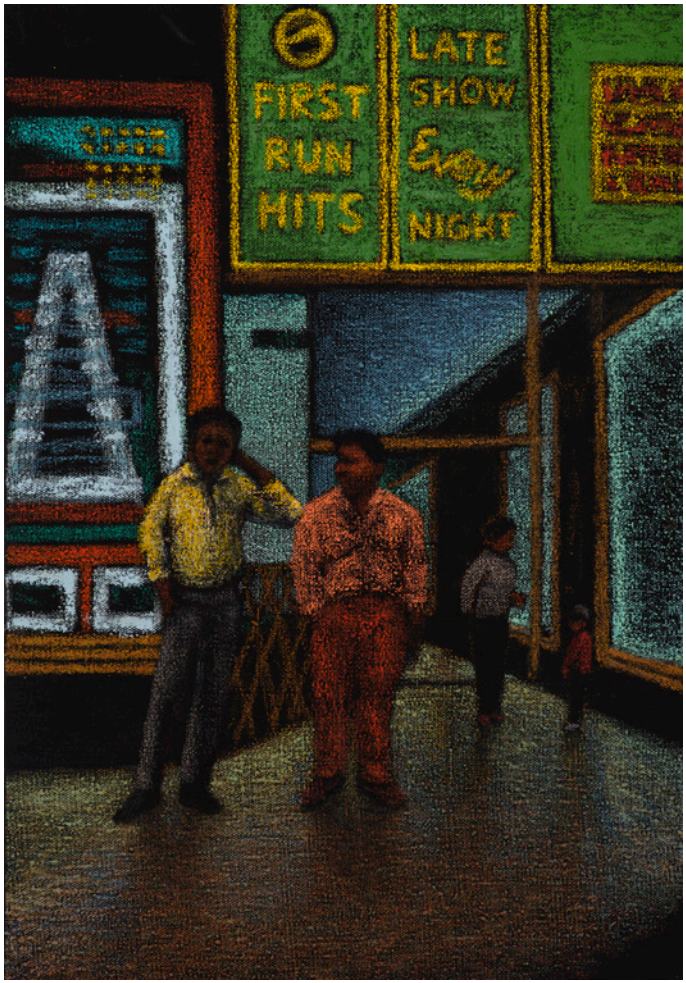

PARK
M

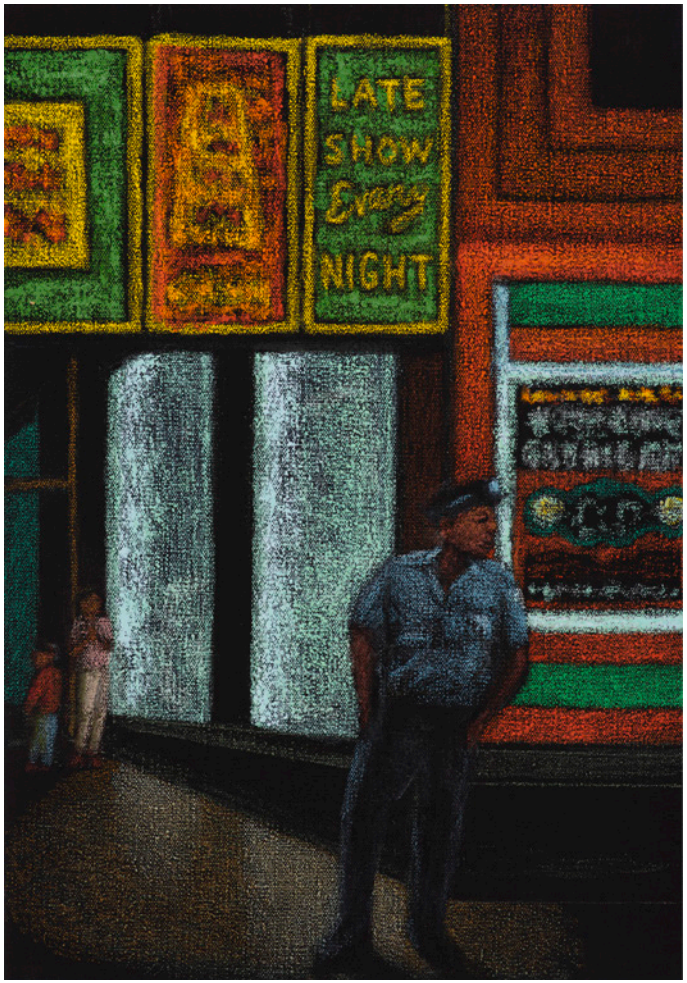

ALL MALE
PEEPS
BUDDY BOOTHS
32 SELECTIONS
EACH BOOTH

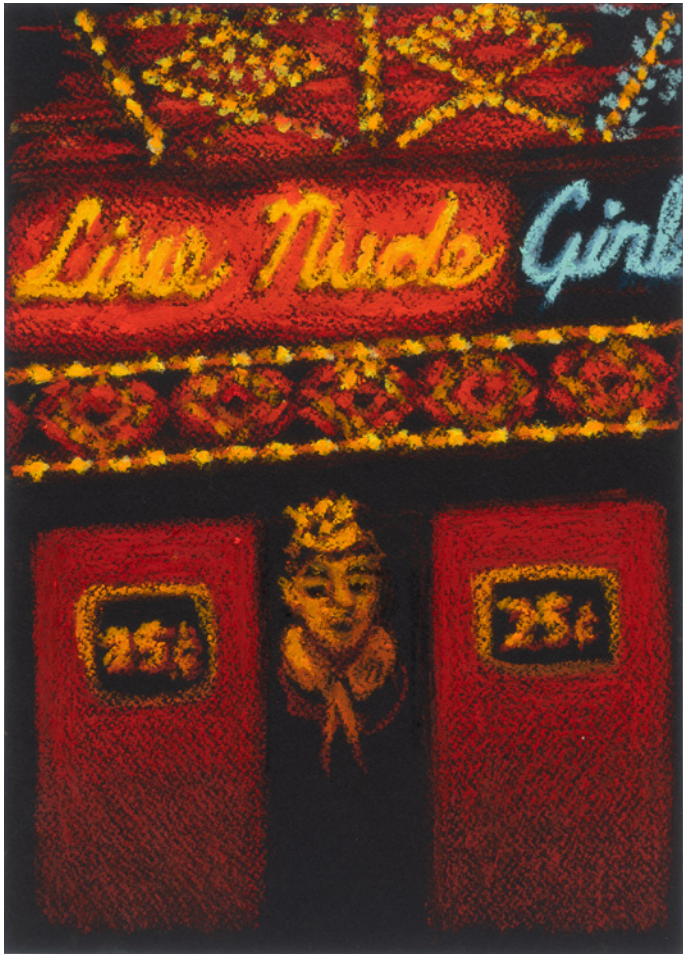

233

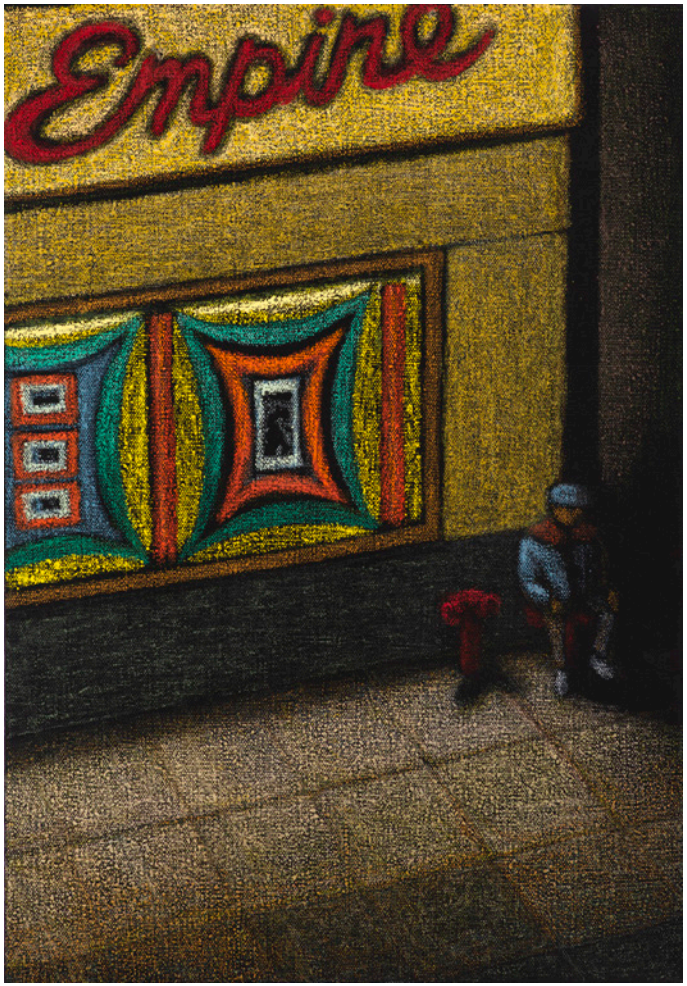

Empire
ALWAYS
3 GREAT
KUNG FU
HITS

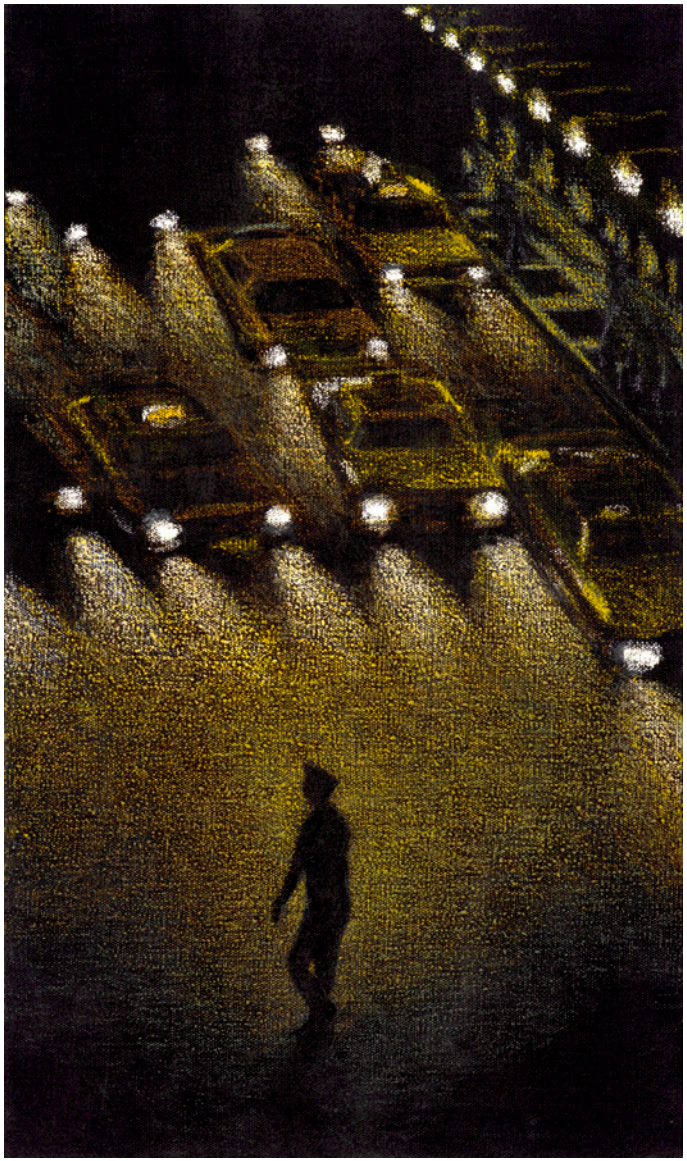

GIRLS
GIRLS
GIRLS
DANCE
RINGON
RINGON
DONUTS

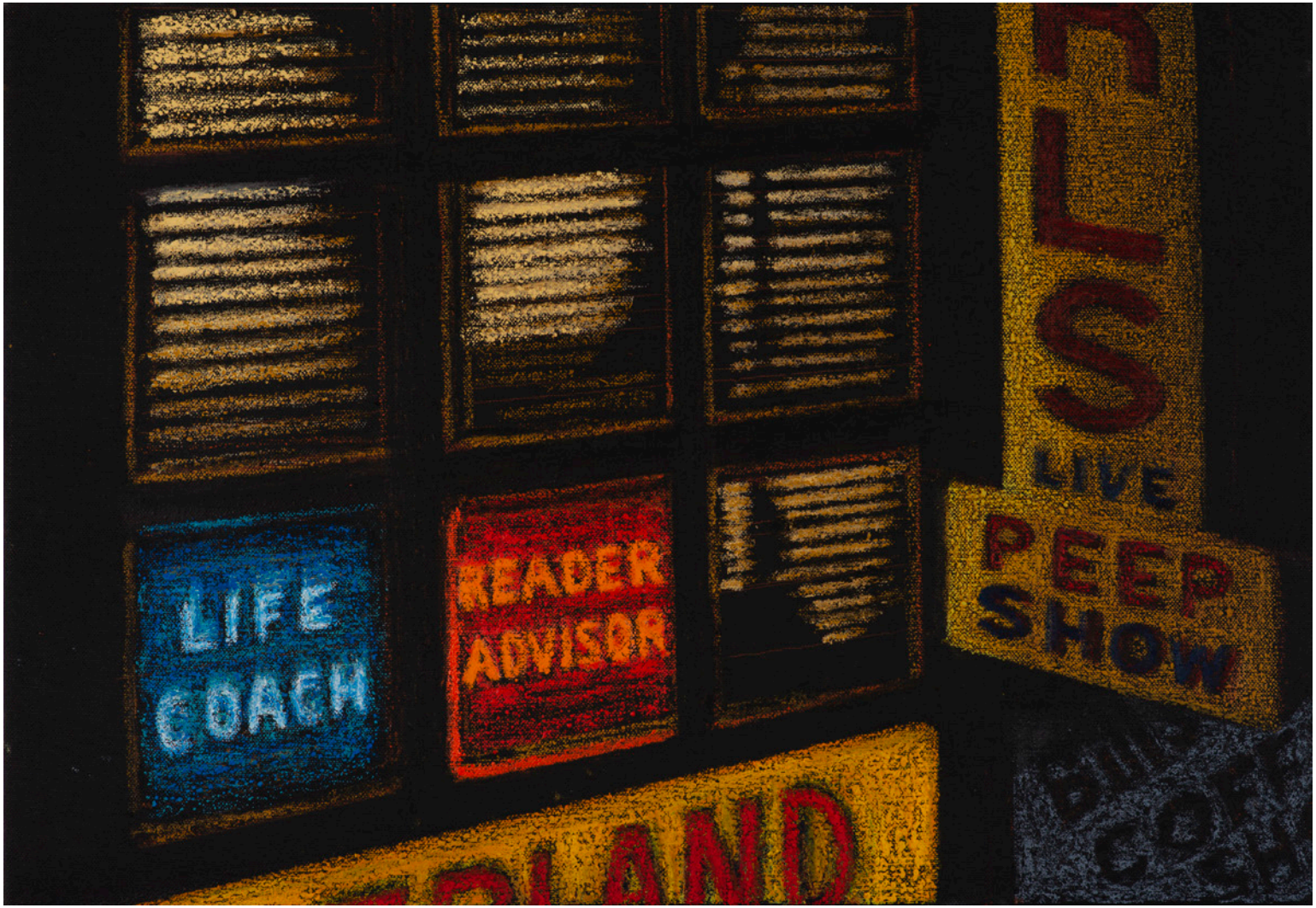

FIRST
RUN
HITS
LATE
SHOW
Every
NIGHT


LATE
SHOW
Every
NIGHT

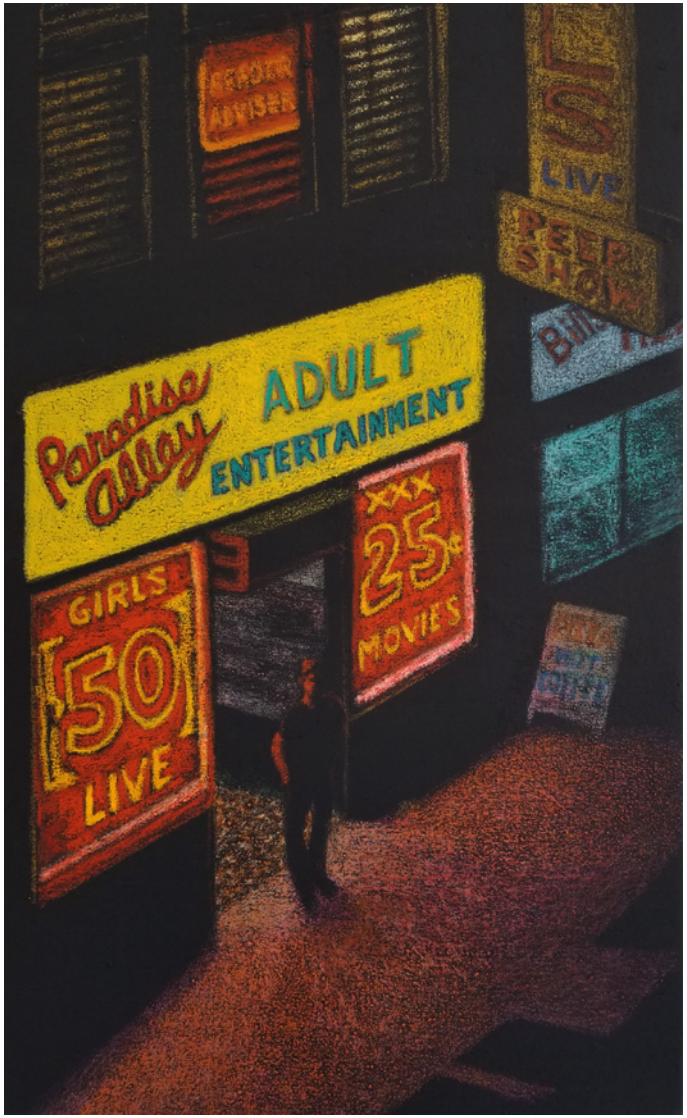

Live Nude Girl
25¢
25¢

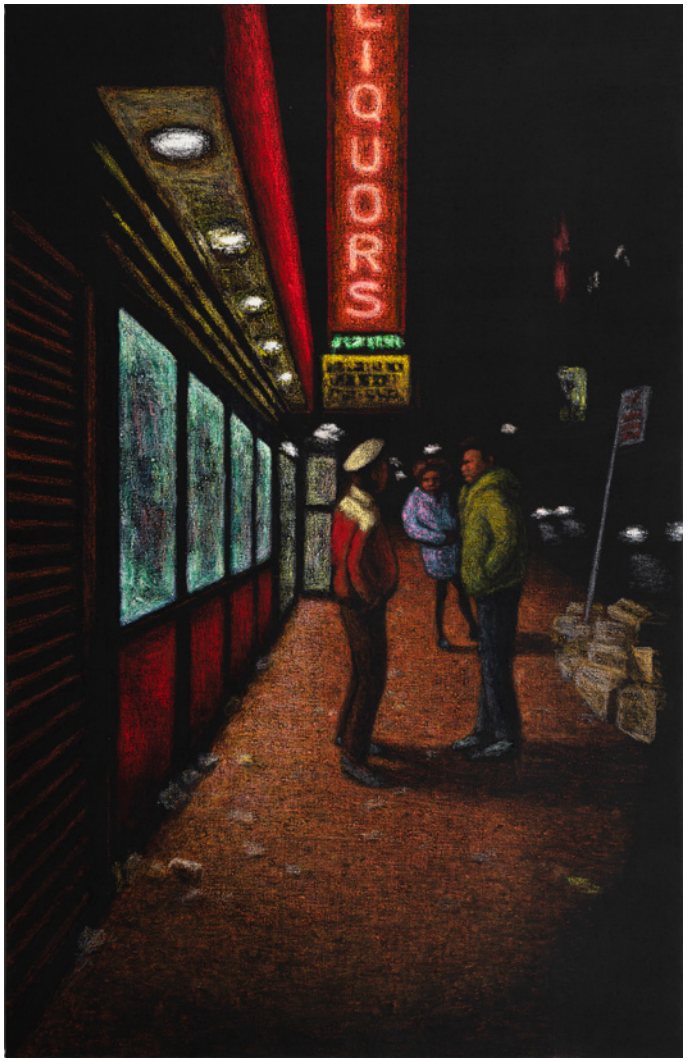

Empire

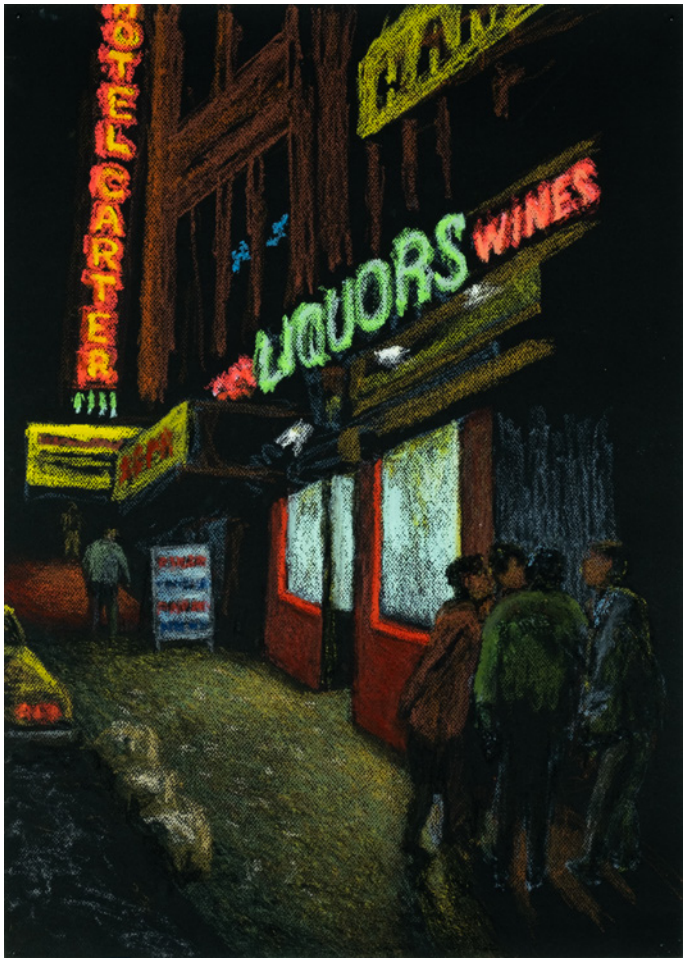



LIFE
COACH
READER
ADVISOR
LIVE
PEEP
SHOW

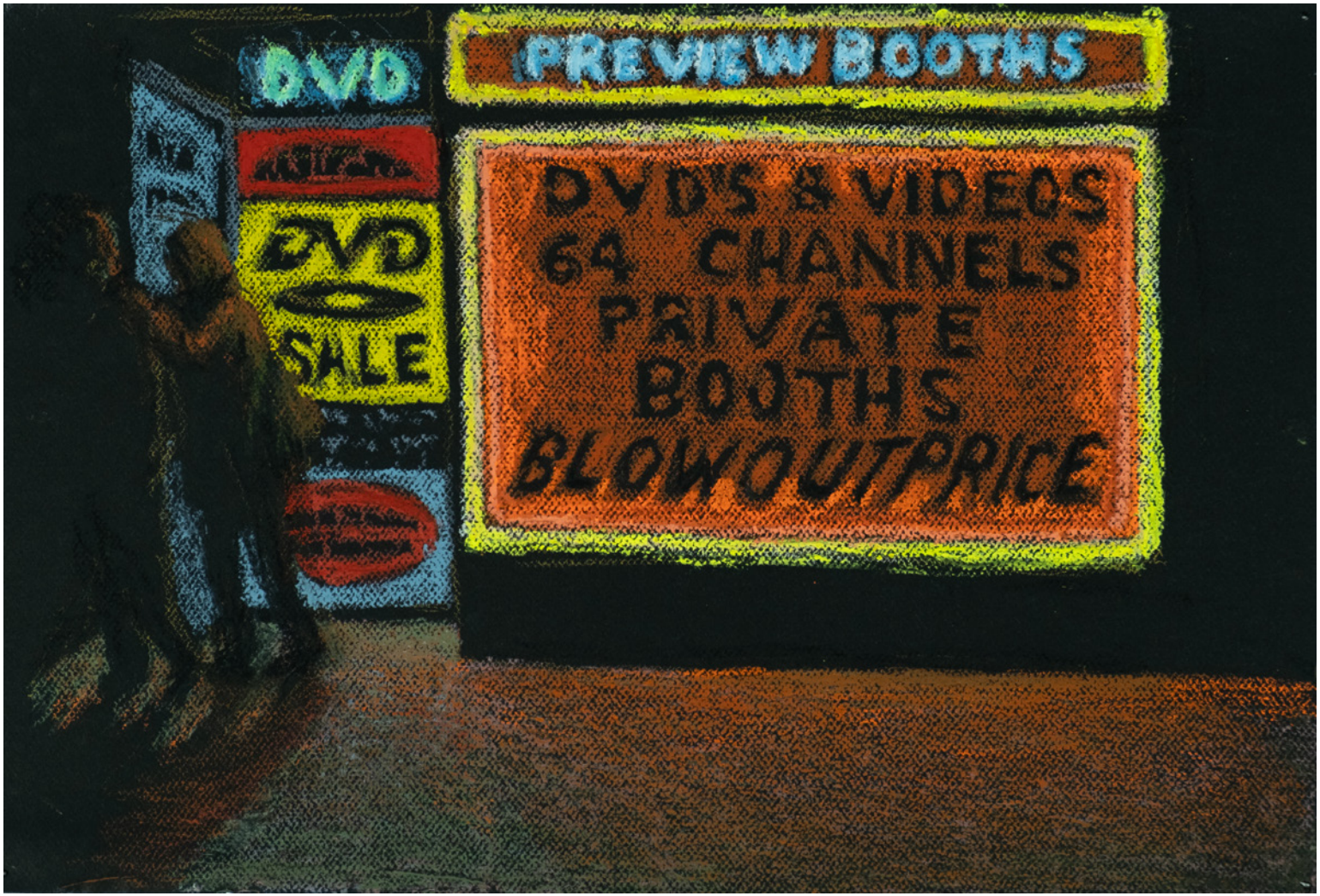

The
New Yor
Time

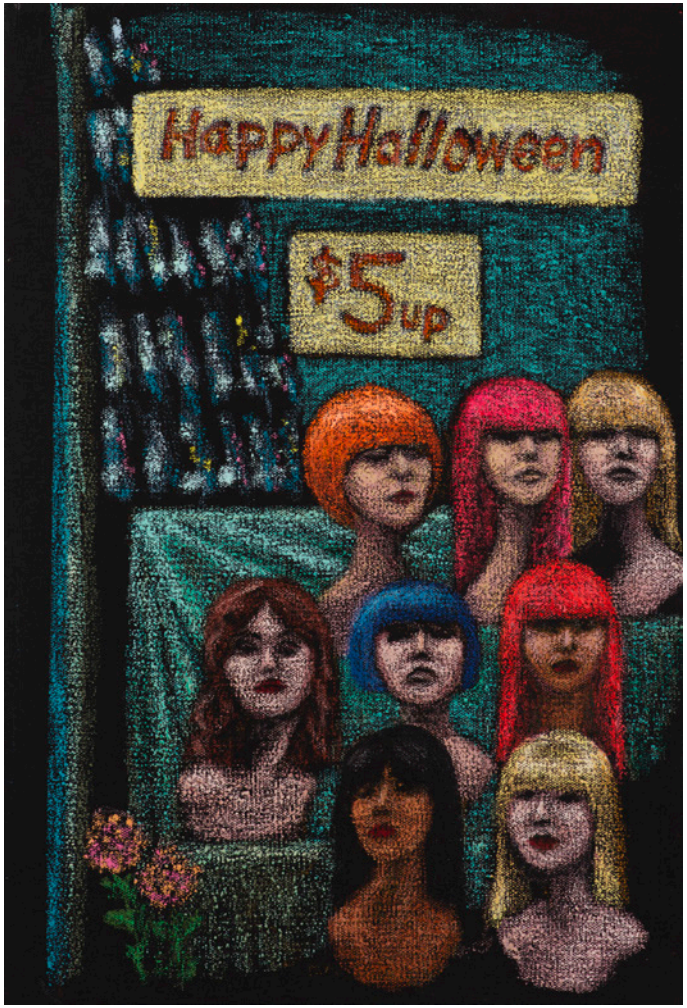

Paradise Alley
ADULT
ENTERTAINMENT
GIRLS
50
LIVE
XXX
25¢
MOVIES
LIVE


LIQUORS

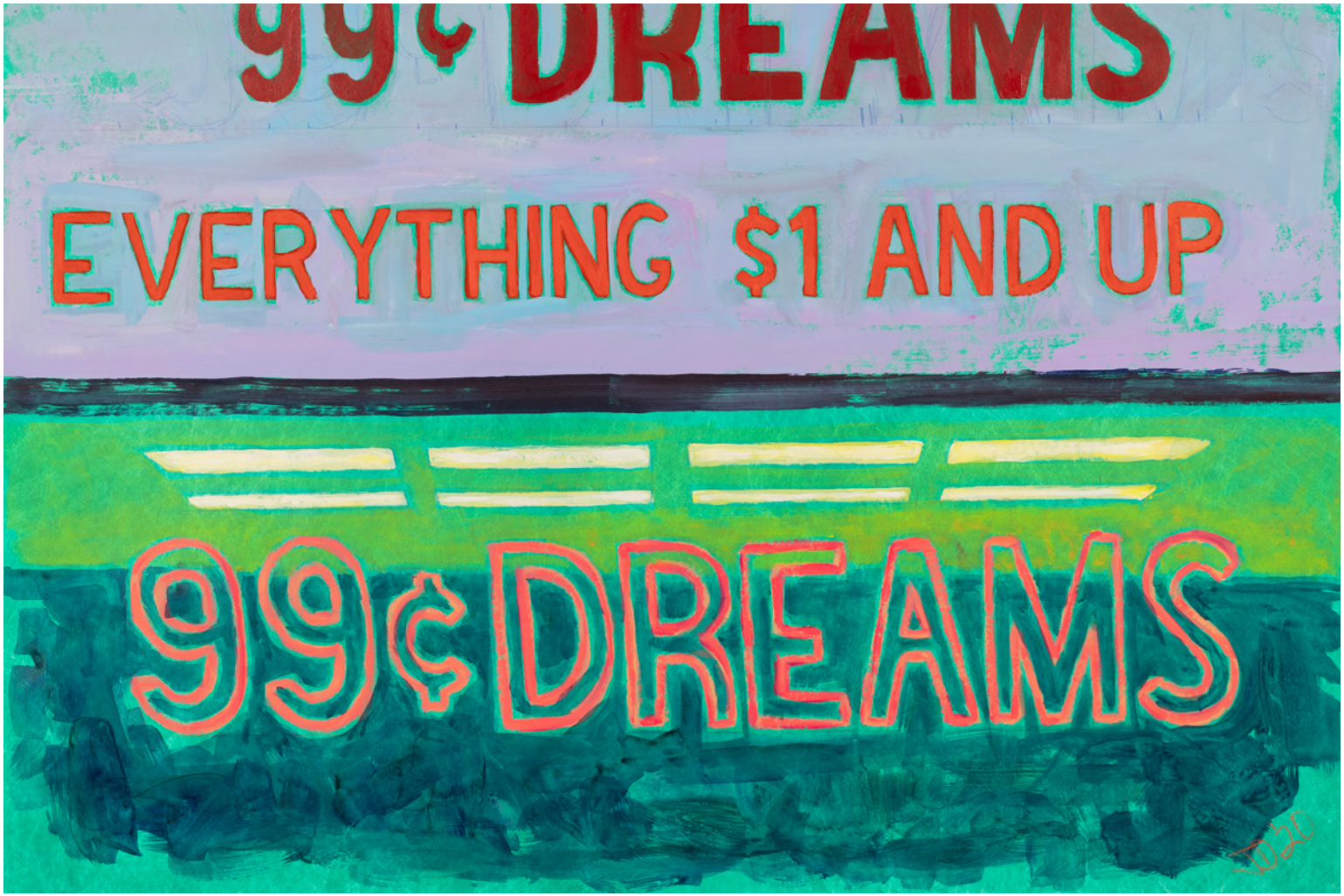

LIQUORS
WINES


UNIVERSAL UNISEX
Anakis
UNISEX


DVD
PREVIEW BOOTHS
DVD'S & VIDEOS
64 CHANNELS
PRIVATE
BOOTHS
BLOWOUTPRICE
DVD
SALE


Happy Halloween
$5 up


99¢ DREAMS
EVERYTHING $1 & UP
99¢ DREAMS


99¢ DREAMS
EVERYTHING $1 AND UP
99¢ DREAMS


AUTOTITLE
LOANS
PAY DAY
LOANS


GAIN


DO NOT
OBSTRUCT
TIP


AVAI

Shellyne Rodriguez

Jane Dickson Paints the New York That Raised Me

I remember the first time I went into a peep show in Times Square. I was 17 with an obvious fake ID purchased a few doors down. My friends and I had wandered out of the Playland arcade to smoke a blunt, and decided that our remaining pooled coins would be better spent looking at some titties. So off we went, into a corridor, behind a curtain to a series of booths. We piled into the cubby and popped the coins into the slot. A white door slid up, revealing a window to a stage where a brown skin woman with bouncy girls and mahogany-colored nipples swayed her hips at us. We were all speechless, goofy, completely high off that nickel bag of weed we scrounged for, barely a grade better than oregano. She completed what was a split second of a shimmy before she jutted her hand towards us.

"Five dollars," she said. We were dumbfounded and speechless, enamored by this sexy woman who all of a sudden was confronting us for tips. Fumbling over each other, already knowing we didn't collectively have five dollars, we somehow managed to convey this fact. She wasted no time hitting the button, disappearing again behind the white door.

I have often thought about this moment and many others like it. How these underbelly encounters in New York City shaped me. A New York that was perhaps more honest, and less contrived, before it was sanitized by Giuliani. A New York that is not locked away in some nostalgic past, but still present and embedded in the crevices of the sidewalks, the alleys, beneath the scaffoldings hovering above us. Present in the bodies of those who lived it, from both sides of that peep show window. Present in the work of Jane Dickson. This image of the peep show window functions as an entry point into the experiences of those who traversed it. This is true for me, as a life-long New Yorker, and as an artist.

Generationally, I follow behind Jane by three decades, who arrived to New York in or around the year my mother gave birth to me in the South Bronx. Jane was painting the New York my mother was living. The New York that raised me. A New York shaken by deindustrialization and the decline of the manufacturing jobs that provoked the migration of my grandmother from Puerto

1 Jane Dickson photographed by Charlie Ahearn

Rico, much like our Southern Black counterparts escaping Jim Crow. A New York crushed by the Rockefeller-induced bankruptcy of the city, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's racist "planned shrinkage" policy, and smothered by the smoke from the rash of arsons set by greedy landlords looking to collect insurance money. It was a New York still reeling from the clap-back against the Black Power and Anti-war movements, the return of our young men from Vietnam, and the traumas and opioid addictions they brought with them. A New York in the midst of becoming a neoliberal petri-dish for the elites, while at the same time having to hold the coming plagues of Crack and HIV/AIDS.[1]

Within these fractures and among these wounds, poor Black and Puerto Rican kids uptown in the Bronx launched a cultural revolution. Hip Hop culture was born and alongside it, Salsa music. Downtown, in the village, the punk scene was creating a riot. Together, all these endeavors bubbled up and festered in the thick ruins. Jane was among the vanguard who straddled this creation and destruction before it became consumed, institutional, and sterile. She belonged to the cadre of artists who Sarah Schulman calls "the freaky, faggy, outrageous, community based"

1 Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis Was Sold to the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

folks who "took illegal drugs, hustled literally and figuratively for money," who lived in poverty, who were "real innovators, real drag queens, real street dykes, real nuyoricans, really inappropriate risk taking, sexually free nihilistic utopians."[2]

Located on the outskirts of Times Square, a sort of watering hole for all of New York's creatures, Jane lived the best and worst of this city and raised her children in it. When I look at her body of work, I can sense the fresh innovations she was cooking up with her peers at the Times Square show or in Fashion Moda up in the Bronx, but I can also feel the hard times and precariousness of her subjects, what the people were living as they loitered outside her window after dark.

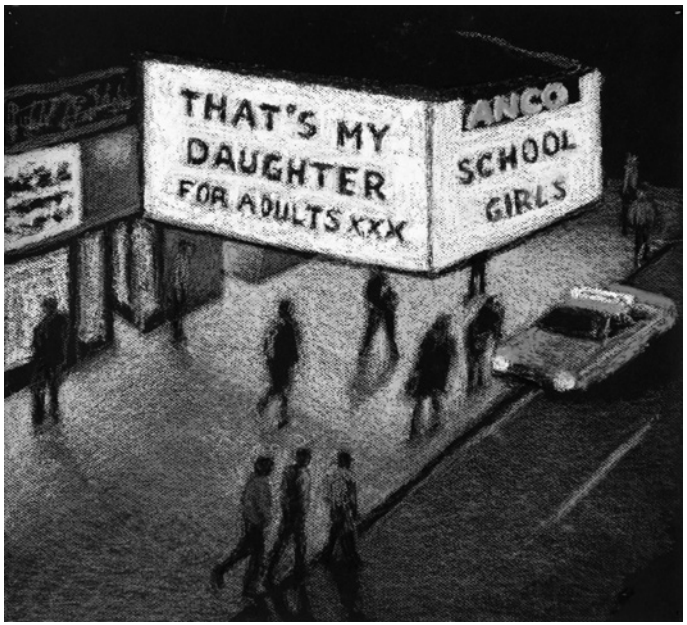
Through Jane's work, I am able to peer into the young life of my mother and aunties, who were perhaps passing through Times Square smoking a joint coming from a Kung Fu movie. Or my uncle, boombox in hand, picking a fight or picking up girls under those neon lights that Jane captures so well. Emanating from the surfaces of her canvases, I can still hear the soundtrack that shaped the people who made me.

As an artist, I stand on her shoulders and together we stand on the shoulders of many artists

2 Sarah Schulman, *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

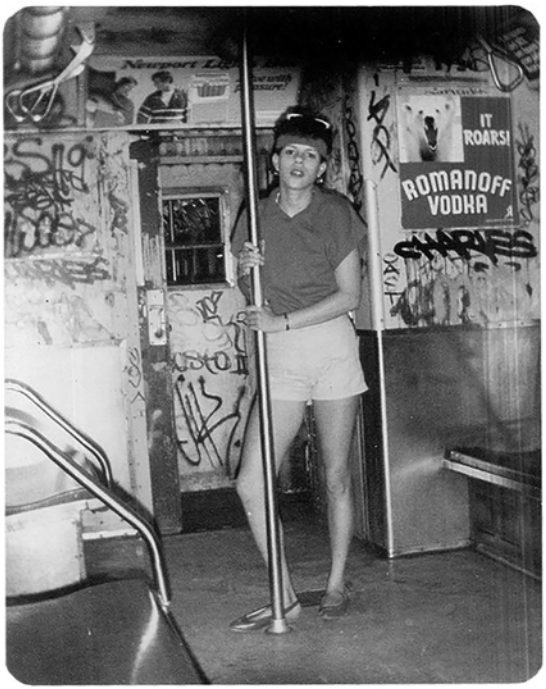
2 **Jane Dickson**
***Kung Fu Hits*, 2019**
Oil stick on paper
20 × 28 inches

3 **Jane Dickson**
***Anco*, 2020**
Oil stick on paper
20 × 22 inches



who have observed the crevices of this metropolis. Jane is a descendant of the Ashcan painters and those who came after them. Artists like Reginald Marsh, who painted the Bowery and crowded Coney Island beaches, and Edward Hopper, who captured the alienation of the city. More than any other artist, however, Jane's work reminds me of the printmaker Martin Lewis, whose etchings peer down at the quiet drudging of New Yorkers. The storefronts and lamp posts of the city bring his images to life in the same way that the neons in Jane's work illuminate the streets below. I imagine a young Jane peering from her window overlooking Times Square, like the flapper girl in Lewis's *The Glow of the City* who bears witness to the rise of the newly-built Chanin Building, still standing today on the corner of 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue, from her fire escape. Almost four decades later, Jane would preside over the decline of the industrial city and the rise of its neoliberal turn.

While Jane might describe herself as a *flaneur*, I would argue against the description. There is a cold distance between that kind of observation and what's visible in Jane's work, as well as her trajectory as an artist, evidenced in her long-lasting friendships and collaborations with graffiti artists who continue to be marginalized in the art world. She has grown into an elder beside some of those revered founders of hip hop culture, depicting the worlds they were living alongside her as they were



busy creating this new avant-garde art form that would shake the world. For Jane, this is her cohort, many whom were lost to the plagues of those times. Wong, Wojnorowicz, Haring, Dondi, and many others. No one in this city was spared. This is where the peep show window as metaphor collapses. When dancer and voyeur are one and the same. Where the line between the artist that observes the city while dwelling in its pits is blurred. There is no line. We are all in this together.

America the Transient

Early last summer at World House Gallery's temporary exhibition space in Chelsea, Jane Dickson exhibited several of her gorgeous, bleary pictures of parking-lot sunsets and the less-than-great American highway. Unlike the landscape photographs of Andreas Gursky, which often document that moment when the balance shifts and "nature" is transformed into the "natural surroundings" against which commercial-recreational plants have been constructed, in Dickson's paintings the entire world has long ago been paved. Painted in oil on many different grades and shades of AstroTurf and industrial carpet—unusual mediums Dickson

A version of this text was originally published in Art in America, October 2001.

perfected during the '90s in hundreds of pictures showing single-family suburban homes-the paintings have a dreamy quality. In Dickson's universe it's always dawn or dusk, times of day that are often most problematic for the mentally disturbed. Once, when I was to interview a political refugee from Romania, he requested that we change our 6 P.M. appointment because, he said, "I am not so good with the transition between day and night." I was startled by his sensitivity, but later it made perfect sense. "It is difficult to remember," he told me. "It is also difficult to forget."

Dickson's highways seem to occupy a zone between memory and forgetting. It's an ordinary place, full of small and sometimes realizable hope. In *Out of Here, North* (1999), a 6-by-11-foot painting on AstroTurf, the red taillights of three cars are headed towards a hazy opening in the cloudline at the horizon. (Something persuades me that these must be family cars—perhaps the fact that the surroundings are precisely the kind of suburban landscape that many Americans have now grown up with.) The colors of the road itself are as blurred and dappled as the sky. A few nameless shrubs, oil derricks and transmission towers line the far edges of the highway. Because the plastic blades of AstroTurf grab the paint so well, the support used in this painting is barely recognizable as what we see on patios and miniature golf courses. Instead, the painted surface takes on a pixelated

quality, creating a pattern of bleeding, edgeless dots that evoke not only Pointillism but also early TV transmissions. Details are softened in passage, rather than willfully obscured.

Out of Here, North was installed with three other "Out of Here" paintings (each named for one of the cardinal points of the compass) in the project room at the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art last summer. (The paintings were first shown at Galapagos in Brooklyn in October 1999.) For this installation, Dickson commissioned a soundtrack by Derrek Brown and Chris Morgan of the band Deep Fat. A 17-minute groove that incorporates the sounds of passing traffic, the recording perfectly evokes the endless monotony of daily life. In fact, the slow dreamy atmosphere in the "Out of Here" paintings highlights one of the paradoxes of our wired-up globe: that ultra-high-speed, nanosecond technology still means inertia for most of us. Information travels between satellite receivers at dazzling speed, but we remain trapped in the present. The motion captured in this painting is by no means ecstatic. Rather, it evokes the vague nausea of carsickness, as eternal as the 35th refrain of "99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall."

In Blue Highway (1999), an empty eight-lane road stretches out before us with its guardrails, lamps and signage until it meets the clouded sky. Dickson's vision of the American road is as far from the heroic nomadism of the Beats as it

1 Jane Dickson
Blue Highway–Dan Ryan, 2000
Oil on astroturf
57 × 71 inches

is from the labyrinthine mystery of David Lynch's film *Lost Highway*. In *Long Beach Lot* (1999), the traffic missing from *Blue Highway* slumbers in the smoggy sunset, guarded by a ring of shadeless palms. The cars are conspicuously modest, late-model Mazdas and Toyotas, presumably bought on payment, washed, insured and anxiously maintained. Dickson is the most clear-eyed, factual of painters, but what is subtly radical about her work is her ability to render the ugly uniformity of exurban construction in a manner which is not at all dystopian.

"I want to see where the edge in bland is," Dickson told an interviewer for *Bomb* magazine several years ago. The Chicago-born artist trained as a figurative painter at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and at Harvard University. While her work is effectively conceptual, she is always using one part of her brain to deal with traditional formal questions of perspective, light and shadow. She "knows how" to make a painting. In the early 1990s, she moved from a Times Square loft with her husband, the filmmaker Charlie Ahearn, and their children, to a more conventional wall-to-wall carpeted dwelling in a less gritty part of Manhattan. It was the novelty of being surrounded by gray carpet that led Dickson to consider the linkages between carpeting and the desire projected by most people onto the idea of home. Freed of the hell of living in a barely plumbed industrial space

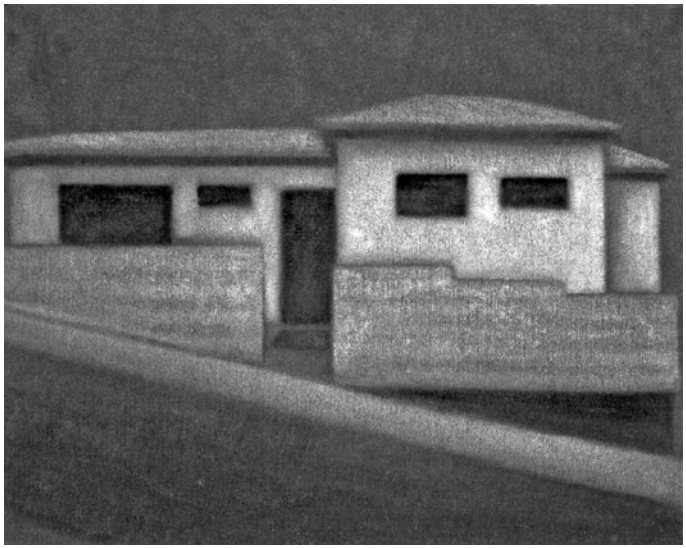
above Eighth Avenue, Dickson became fascinated by the American ideal of the single-family house. Her curiosity led her to undertake her portraits of suburban homes on carpet and AstroTurf.

Based on snapshots of houses taken by the artist everywhere from Rockland County and Binghamton, N.Y., to the barrio environment of Los Angeles's Highland Park, the paintings in this ongoing series always keep their architectural subjects in the center of the frame. Through the process of painting, Dickson simplifies and amplifies the image in the photograph, trying to recapture the original feeling of the scene, the qualities that did not translate to film.

In Los Angeles, where Dickson lived for six months in 1999, it's no longer possible to research a house's history of ownership in the public records; residential properties change hands so often that old deed information isn't kept on file. Stripped of the signifying referents of history, things are what they are and there is very little left to really long for. Desire drains. Appropriately, in the "Houses" series there is hardly any anoetic difference between *Home 21–Spanish Adobe* (1998), *Home 27–Tudor Garage* (1998), *Pink House* (1998) or the two-storied brick and clapboard model with the gambrel roof in *Home 22–Matthews St.* (1998). Similarly, there is hardly any difference between what looks to be a half-million-dollar property, *Home 19–Hillside Contempo* (1998), and a, let's say,

2 Jane Dickson
Home 6–Pink Peaks, 1997
Oil on acrylic carpet
24 × 27 ¼ inches

3 Jane Dickson
Home 19—Hillside Contempo, 1998
Oil on carpet
24 × 30 inches



$80,000 bungalow near Figueroa Street depicted in another painting. As seen by Dickson, all these buildings are primarily receptacles of domestic life, places where people eat, sleep and watch television (another of Dickson's favorite subjects) in the sacred privacy of home.

Darkness hides itself within the trees outside Dickson's houses, the way it does in Ed Ruscha's paintings of foliage and buildings silhouetted against nighttime Los Angeles skies, which are never absolutely dark. In Ruscha's canvases, the desolation of the scene is offset by an iconic quality: by isolating these shards of California emptiness, Ruscha reformats them more cheerfully as Pop. In Dickson's more "realistic" landscapes, however, emptiness is all there is. Yet, this emptiness does not inspire pathos. Dickson's houses remind me of the lyrics of art-rock poet Susie Timmon's paean to her suburban roots, "Finding Someone to Take Care of You":

> Come off the eat, take a right
> Take another right when you get to the light
> Take the first left and another right
> Turn off your lights, head up the hill
> Coast into the driveway and it's very still...

When Dickson made her artistic debut in the 1980s, as a part of the Colab Group, with figurative paintings of Times Square life, her work was

often misread. Her depictions of strippers, grasping couples on the sidewalk and crime suspects getting frisked against police cars were emphatically night scenes, drawn with oilstick on blackened linen in a manner reminiscent of black velvet paintings. She also created similar effects with oilstick on paper, as in *Jai Alai* (1985) in which the silhouetted figures of three men and a policeman, all bathed in artificial yellow light, hover against a bus station wall. Seen as if through the Vaseline-smeared lens of soft-core pornography, these urban scenes were often taken to be a kind of romantic neo-social realism, a cultural anthropology steeped in liberal compassion. In fact, what interested Jane Dickson most about these subjects was the existential street phenomenon of waiting. She was single, in her 20s, and she was waiting for her life to begin. Dickson saw herself then as a participant-observer. "I was a witness," she comments in the *Bomb* interview, "but I wasn't only documenting what was happening to them. It was my experience too."

A show earlier this year at Scolar Fine Art in London presented some of these early Times Square paintings alongside examples of Dickson's subsequent work—a series of New Year's Eve revelers, the highways and the houses, amusement parks and demolition derbies. In "Reconfigured," a recent exhibition of American painting at the Yan Huang Museum in Beijing, examples of

her older paintings were accompanied by newer works featuring scenes of strip-mall industries: *Green Laundromat* (2000) and *Taco Fiesta* (2000). Exhibitions such as these help to illuminate the logic and intentions of Dickson's early paintings, and make it apparent how very not romantic they are. It also becomes clear, as you look at the new and old work together, how impossible it is to separate the paintings from the circumstances of Dickson's life.

We love and hate the Beats because they were outsiders looking in; they saw their loneliness refracted in the highways and the diners, the tenements, the oilskin tablecloths and cheap curtains glimpsed while driving past the roadside shacks of America's desperate poor. Dickson, on the other hand, has always been fully implicated in her subjects. The little girl sprawled out in the darkness, her back facing the viewer as she watches television in *Eve on the Carpet* (1996) is her own daughter. The shadowy figure in *Two Palms Motorcycle* (1999) walking the concrete path into a small bungalow, where a blurred TV screen glimpsed through the window seems to be warming the front room, is most probably her neighbor. Dickson's approach to painting is frequently compared to Edward Hopper's. Despite the distance in time, Dickson's parking lots and taco stands are not so unlike Hopper's famous late-night diner, but what really unites both painters is how they use an

elusive realism to capture the strange sadness just under the surface of everyday life. The interstitial images of exurban America typical of Dickson's subject matter are often found in the work of contemporary photographers, most notably Catherine Opie and James Welling. But in contrast to such work, which tends to achieve its emotional power through effects of distance and impersonality, the psychological nuances in Dickson's paintings are very direct. In even her most depopulated scenes, Dickson conveys a sense of recent habitation, of transient human life ghosting the highways and houses. Her eye is never very far removed from the tenuously middle-class state of echt-America where most people live two paychecks away from disaster. Dickson gives an inner life to subjects which might otherwise be seen as kitsch. All the fleeting hopes and disappointments that she captures are integrally a part of how this country lives, and they're also unmistakably her own.

Contributors

Chris Kraus

Chris Kraus is a writer and critic who lives in Los Angeles. Her eight books include the novels *I Love Dick* and *Summer of Hate*, and the essay collections *Where Art Belongs* and *Social Practices*. Kraus teaches writing at ArtCenter College of Design and works as a co-editor of the independent press Semiotext(e) alongside Hedi El Kholti. She's been a Jane Dickson fan since the mid 1980s.

Odili Donald Odita

Odili Donald Odita is an abstract painter whose work explores color both in the figurative historical context and in the sociopolitical sense. He is best known for his large-scale canvases with kaleidoscopic patterns and vibrant hues, which he uses to reflect the human condition. For Odita, color is at once a distinct phenomenon and a vehicle for mirroring the complexity of the world. He has presented solo exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (2021–22); Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond (2020–21); Laumeier Sculpture Park, Outdoor Galleries, Northern Grove, St. Louis (2020); the Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami (2019–21); the Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham (2015–17); Savannah College of Art and Design (2012–13); and the New Orleans Museum of Art (2011), among other institutions.

Odita is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery, New York and the Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town.

Shellyne Rodriguez

Shellyne Rodriguez is an artist, educator, writer, and community organizer based in the Bronx. Her practice utilizes text, drawing, painting, collage, and sculpture to depict spaces and subjects engaged in strategies of survival against erasure and subjugation.

List of Plates

1 *Fascination Vertical*, 2020
Oil stick on linen
48 × 30 inches

2 *Liquors Sally's Hideaway*, 2021
Acrylic on linen
47 × 100 inches

3 *Topless Disco*, 2020
Oil stick on linen
48 × 30 inches

4 *Big Peep Eye*, 2021
Oil stick on linen
62 × 76 inches

5 *Devil Below*, 2020
Oil stick on paper
13½ × 20 inches

6 *Open*, 2021
Oil stick on linen
34 × 24 inches

7 *Park*, 2020
Oil stick on linen
32 × 22 inches

8 *All Male Peeps*, 2021
Oil stick on linen
22 × 32 inches

9 *233*, 2020
Oil stick on paper
15 × 20 inches

10 *Kung Fu Hits*, 2022
Oil stick on linen
65 × 77 inches

11 *Dance*, 2020
Oil stick on linen
32 × 22 inches

12 *Late Show 2 Guys*, 2020
Oil stick on linen
32 × 22 inches

13 *Late Show Cop*, 2020
Oil stick on linen
32 × 22 inches

14 *Live Nude Girl*, 2021
Oil stick on paper
14 × 10 inches

15 *Empire Taking a Load Off*, 2020
Oil stick on linen
32 × 22 inches

16 *Traffic Cop Port Authority*, 2020
Oil stick on linen
34 × 20 inches

17 *Reader Advisor*, 2021
Oil stick on linen
22 × 32 inches

18 *Study for Liquors Sally's Hideaway*, 2021
Oil stick on linen
18 × 38 inches

19 *Paradise Alley 3*, 2020
Oil stick on canvas
46 × 28 inches

20 *Liquors Conversation*, 2020
Oil stick on linen
56 × 36 inches

21 *Liquors No Dice*, 2020
Oil stick on paper
28 × 20 inches

22 *Universal Unisex*, 2021
Oil stick on linen
38 × 50 inches

23 *DVD Sale*, 2020
Oil stick on paper
13 ½ × 20 inches

24 *Halloween Wigs*, 2021
Oil stick on linen
32 × 22 inches

25 *ggc Dreams Felt*, 2022
Acrylic on felt
62 × 84 inches

26 *ggc Dreams 1*, 2020
Acrylic on tyvek
24 × 36 inches

27 *LV 43 Autoloan*, 2010
Oil on canvas
36 × 24 inches

28 *Gain 3*, 2000
Oil on canvas
35 ½ × 53 ½ inches

29 *Do Not Obstruct*, 2021
Acrylic on felt
63 × 74 inches

30 *Long Beach Lot Sunset*, 1999
Oil on astroturf
42 × 74 inches

31 *Jai Alai*, 2000
Oil stick on linen
50 × 36 inches

32 *Out of Here East*, 2011
Oil on astroturf
on canvas
73 × 114 inches

978-1-7365415-4-8 90000 >
9 781736 541548