

## Making Things Memorable

For the past five years, Elisheva Biernoff has been intensely—painstakingly—focused on the small stuff. Her meticulously painted small-scale works recreate scenes from found photographs, snapshots that were lost or tossed aside by their original owners. Occasionally, a discarded postcard also makes its way into the mix. The precision of Biernoff's painting is astonishing. Each stroke is laid down so exactly that viewers often need a second take to confirm her images' status as paintings. Early on, to help with this verification process, magnifying lenses accompanied a few of her miniscule compositions. Even the versos of Biernoff's works are painted to mimic the photo-lab imprints stamped on the back of her source materials. This degree of attention to detail comes at a price: In the artist's estimation, each work requires at least three months to finish.

Flaws stemming from the processes of analog photography also make their way into the paintings. Light leaks, exposure errors, incorrect focus, and off-kilter framing, among other technical problems, are faithfully reproduced in acrylic paint. In the process, they are turned into mysterious anomalies that beg the question, "What happened there?" Unraveling the mysteries of a Biernoff painting, however, is more than an issue of visual analysis—it's also an emotional journey. Exploring one of these entrancing images prompts a meditation on time: on the time required to make it, but also on the moments that have been captured, instances that have slipped into the realm of foggy memory. It's easy to get lost in a haze of happy nostalgia when considering one of Biernoff's recent works. They elicit empathy for the regular folks that are pictured. They recall the excitement of developing analog film or getting hand-addressed pictures in the mail. Their physicality evokes a longing for the simple but now-rare pleasure of holding a photograph in one's hand.

These works trace a rich and diverse lineage. In the 1970s, photorealist painters like Richard Estes and Chuck Close also reproduced photographs with remarkable fidelity, although the magnified scale of their works, and their focus on the peculiarities of lens-aided vision, stand apart from Biernoff's approach. Her embrace of photographic errors aligns Biernoff with a range of modern and contemporary pioneers, from Man Ray to Zoe Leonard, who similarly exploited the formal possibilities of mistakes. The intimacy of Biernoff's works, combined with their singularity as paintings, might even conjure comparisons to daguerreotypes, a 19th-century technology that has experienced a revival recently, as contemporary artists have plumbed photography's earliest history. Among the many artists in the late 20th and early 21st centuries who have played the formal traits of painting and photography off one another, finding fertile ground at their intersection, Biernoff holds her own.

Yet it's an emotional charge—that sense of longing for people, places, and things missing or far away, of wanting to remember a fleeting moment perfectly—that seems to animate Biernoff most powerfully. In artist statements she describes herself as a storyteller focused on "unlocking individual histories" in images that together create "a brief and subjective history of how we picture the world." The stories Biernoff tells, even when about ostensibly heroic characters, focus on the most relatable, and poignantly mundane, aspects of those figures' interior lives.

This guiding impulse has proved productive. After earning her BA at Yale, Biernoff headed west to complete an MFA at San Francisco's California College of the Arts. She caught the attention of Bay Area critics with a 2010 solo show at Triple Base Gallery, a two-story

multimedia installation that in part mimicked common architectural forms in a state of disrepair. Most commentary on the show lingered on the details, such as the handcrafted, uncannily accurate reproductions of fallen leaves, tissues, gum wrappers, and other flotsam that Biernoff had scattered on the floor. Here too, fascination with the work's trompe l'oeil verisimilitude soon gave way to moving recollections of neglected objects and ill-maintained spaces. On Artforum.com, critic Glen Helfand likened the installation to an "immersive elegy," a "seductive setting within which to ponder the visual splendor of collapse." A year later, Biernoff's contributions to a group exhibition at Eli Ridgway Gallery included an enclosure in which eighty slides of majestic landscapes were projected onto fog from a humidifier. Cogent and legible for only a moment, the experience offered a jolt of excitement at the moment of identification, along with a reminder of how we take such sites for granted, even as we lament their increasingly imperiled state.

Blurring the distinction between emotions stirred by the natural world and those associated with people seems to come instinctively to Biernoff. Her Last Postcard series (2009–2011), completed after intense research, seamlessly blends two competing sensations associated with travel: the awe and curiosity inspired by far-flung sites and the desire to be close to those left behind. Adopting the voice of real-life explorers, Biernoff composes the final handwritten notes sent home before their disappearance or death. The lives of the people Biernoff invokes in the series are at once tragic and inspiring, but it's the ostensive recipients of the postcards—those left to grieve with only thin paper documentation of the writer's last days—that are the heart of the matter.

The topics Biernoff tackles in her work are big: global exploration, climactic crises, failures of urban upkeep, the faultiness of memory, the deficiency of reproductive media like photography to capture the richness of our day-to-day. Her strategy for accessing these big ideas is to call attention to that which is usually overlooked and undervalued. In Biernoff's view, ephemera—discarded pictures and images, detritus strewn in corners, short notes written to friends and family—is what really tells the story of our lives. In focusing on the minute and the humble, Biernoff aligns herself with a dominant ethic of modern and contemporary art since dada. But unlike the many artists before her who found new ways to bring the stuff of the everyday into the space of the gallery, she recreates it with an uncanny degree of care. With a keen eye and ample artistic dexterity, Biernoff has found her own mode for making the mundane memorable.