

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

As Above, So Below: The Aerial Revelations of Yvonne Jacquette

by [Tim Keane](#) on January 25, 2014



Yvonne Jacquette, “Late Sun Above Madison Sq. Park II” (2012), oil on linen, 45 x 66 in (all images courtesy the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York, unless otherwise noted)

Reflecting on urban spaces, Italo Calvino writes, “Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears [...] the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.”

[*Yvonne Jacquette: The High Life*](#), currently at DC Moore Gallery, epitomizes this enigma. The exhibition highlights the artist’s continued mastery of civic formations hidden in plain sight. Like Calvino’s fictive Marco Polo, she navigates hard-to-reach vantage points on our behalf and paints whatever she sees from up there. Her paintings concentrate on the ongoing expansion and artificiality of cities and communities, and accentuate their dependence upon sunlight, on bodies

of water, and on the underlying earth itself.



Yvonne Jacquette, New York City, 2009 (photo by Sandra Paci)

Jacquette has been painting landscapes from extreme elevations for decades. A native of Pittsburgh raised in Stamford, she settled in New York City in the 1950s. She has been exhibiting in solo shows ever since. Like her late husband, the artist and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt, she is captivated by the variability of the metropolis as well as the vacancies glimpsed even within its crowdedness. She remains dedicated to viewing moments of incompleteness from unusual and wide-ranging angles.

Inspired by what she saw from a plane during a San Diego-bound night flight in the late 1960s, Jacquette began to augment her repertoire with nocturnes, a turn that was reenergized when the artist visited a sick friend in a high-rise hospital on Manhattan's east end in the mid-1970s. There she was fascinated by the contrast between the views of the city's East River contours by day and by night. Jacquette's work has taken on rural landscapes as well and was featured in recent shows at the Museum of the City of New York, the Springfield Art Museum, and the Center for Maine Contemporary Art.

This current exhibition focuses exclusively on works completed within the last five years. Each picture illustrates the past and present strategies she employs, from hovering in helicopters or in chartered planes, to setting up her studio in soaring office spaces, much like a famous earlier series she made during her intermittent residencies in the former Twin Towers.

At first glance across the gallery, the twenty-one new works seem to be the hard labor of a painterly photorealist. Even from a distance, the eye strikes familiar landmarks — Washington Square Park, the American Museum of Natural History, the Bank of America Tower. But the impression of naive realism dissolves once you pause before the pastel rendition of "Whitney Museum Under Construction" (2013).

This introductory piece is displayed in order to illustrate Jacquette's process. She starts with a small-scale pastel sketch, completed on site, the better to render the scene's improvised and

complex harmonics as fluidly as possible. This impressionistic pastel records the vista's grid-like, stationary forms and the curvilinear movements of the highway and river, its varied pitches of light and dark, and its large-scale constructions and smaller components. The combined natural and industrial shades of blue, gray and red in this initial study form the essential palette from which she will create the larger panoramic oil painting.



Yvonne Jacquette, "Whitney Museum Under Construction I" (2013), pastel on paper, 19 x 27 1/2 in (click to enlarge)

The longer the visitor stands before these landscapes, the more it becomes clear that their realistically represented subjects are subordinate to their finely painted detailing and decentered arrangements. Like the painter working from her window in the sky, the viewer, virtually hypnotized by the city's precise hues and resonant tones, becomes lost in the grids of color far below, and steps, as it were, into competing sensations of ascension, suspension, and compression.

As in most of her paintings, the people who inhabit these fortifications are absent. There is a consequent tension, then, between the vertical and horizontal compactness and the unseen populations who presumably create and utilize these infrastructures. Unlike the poeticized space of realists like Edward Hopper or Fairfield Porter, and more recently, the postindustrial visions of painters Rackstraw Downes or Ben Aronson, Jacquette's paintings do not accrue meaning from a visual narrative that develops between human bodies and the natural and civic surroundings. Her works' cohesiveness and significance are the result of complicated, semi-abstract color fields, a concise and meticulous kind of pointillism, and the manner in which each of her paintings dramatizes the predominance of organic forces over the artificial.

Changing light, natural as well as manmade, fascinates her as much as the represented constructions. This provides the exhibition with a solid consistency despite its quite varied topographical subjects.



Yvonne Jacquette, “N.Y. Aerial View from Helicopter (Looking East from Hudson Yards Area) II” (2011–12), oil on linen, 49 x 97 1/2 in

In the gigantic “N.Y. Aerial View from Helicopter (Looking East from Hudson Yards Area) II” (2011-12), the view swoops across the East River from high atop midtown south as dawn breaks over Queens and parts of Brooklyn. The western buildings in the picture’s foreground, in predawn shadow, are rendered in blocks of browns, greens and grays. The sunlight flooding across the river then selectively strikes the spires and towers in the farther-off northeastern slice of Manhattan. The morning light polishes those buildings in gleaming yellow while the other side of the river flattens into a receding patchwork of yellow, orange and gray.

In “Washington Square View with Bobst Library at NYU II” (2010), the red clay facade of NYU’s Bobst Library sits like the dull, bureaucratic monolith that it is. Its narrow black windows are eerily spotted by bright dots and squibs from interior light. The blue, gray, green and brown components of surrounding buildings create an absorbing counterpoint to the monochromatic university construction.

Closer to the viewer, billowy pale greens of the park’s dense treetops swarm the entire bottom half of the painting. The trees seem to touch the buildings on the south side, giving the viewer the illusion of simultaneity, as if he or she were hang-gliding over the park.

Though the subject is apparently urban, Jacquette’s concern is a sort of aesthetic competition between the earth and the city. The impersonal, boxy buildings with their foreclosed dimensions and striated colors are a static contrast to the trees’ varying greens and the freeform shape of their dense foliage.

In her buoyant blue-and-yellow rendering of glassy, electrified towers and imperturbable modern and postmodern architecture, Jacquette paints contemporary New York as both durable and exposed to elements all around it. Forces that are more capacious and more permanent than the city’s ever-changing skyline pervade every painting.



Yvonne Jacquette, "Whitney Museum Under Construction II" (2013), oil on linen, 49 x 71 in

Few painters have made the nighttime itself seem such a commanding force. The beaded lights on bridges, on towering spires, and deep inside office complexes and apartment buildings seem to radiate into the vast duskiness, rendering it an intense, deep blue. Frequently, the random patterning of interior lights within the skyline stirs up a paradoxical sense of absence within presence. Everyone is surely in there — yet no one is here.

In "Whitney Museum Under Construction" (2013), the cantilevered crane and the rising beams of well-engineered gentrification are set against the streaking headlights that curve along the high speed, multicolored lanes of the West Side Highway. The Hudson River, painted in undulating blue, stretches calmly beyond the museum's construction site, out into an expanse lit up only by arbitrarily positioned boats that themselves seem to be painting lines upon the currents as they cut through the water.

Seen from on high, the aesthetic productions of the environment surpass even the most traditional fortifications. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Jacquette's many smaller aerial paintings that gaze into semi-rural landscapes. In "Looking Down from San Giovanni, D'Asso, Italy" (2012), a bucolic green swath seems to be moving, inundating the bordering terrain, extending a bright liquescent green around the telephone poles and the pink and red farmhouses. Here and elsewhere, the earth itself is like a canvas painted by anonymous hands.

Jacquette's "North Fork of St. Vrain River, Lyons, CO (Before Flooding)" (2013) exploits its linen base to replicate the textures of countless trees that run like a dark green wildfire up a steep valley splintered by a bolt of whitewater.

Three of these smaller works, focused on aerial views of Rome, Siena, and San Giovanni, represent an important formal departure for Jacqueline. To produce them, she utilizes photographs — archival pigment prints from her pastel studies — as a material base. The images then form a kaleidoscopic collage featuring contravening perspectives and differing angles that hover over the same cityscape.



Yvonne Jacquette, “York Island, Off Isle Au Haut” (2013), oil on linen, 44 x 56 in (click to enlarge)

In “York Island, Off Isle Au Haut” (2013) the topaz-colored water and irregularly shaped yellow, brown and green islands are nearly effaced by semi-opaque clouds, which are painted with a stunning precision that somehow retains their furtive white beauty. That haze drifting over solid earth and a dynamic sea hints at the naturalness of both manifestation and evaporation. Like all of the paintings in the show, it takes on the perspective of birds who must know far better than we do what our world looks like. Get high on it before this marvelous show ends.

[Yvonne Jacquette: The High Life](#) continues at DC Moore Gallery (535 West 22nd Street, 2nd Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) through February 8.