

Micki Meng

Closeness: Spencer Lewis & Caitlin Lonegan

Curated by Michael Ned Holte

Micki Meng New York

November 9 – December 15, 2023

The secret sauce of any group exhibition is the relationship revealed between any two works of art and, by extension, the artists who made them. Which is not to diminish the significance of any individual works, which are of course the explicit subject of an exhibition; by comparison, the space between works is relatively subliminal, but arguably, every bit as important. This is particularly true—even hyperbolically true—with a two-person exhibition.

In proximity, the works work on one another, and by dint of their proximity, intimate relationality. But—also—they assert their difference(s), acting as counterparts, counterpoints. In dialogue, two works will have a lot to say to one another. (Alone together, like the old jazz standard.) Additional works turn the dialogue into a conversation, building exponentially toward complexity. Presumably one aims for harmony or symphony rather than cacophony, though with some care, cacophony can also be a rhetorical position.

The two-person exhibition is as freighted as any other typology, but almost inevitably compare-and-contrast is its default rhetorical frame. Are the artists co-conspirators? Frenemies? Complete strangers, brought together in a curatorial twist of fate?

This particular two-person exhibition features artists who could hardly know each other better. Spencer Lewis and Caitlin Lonegan are a couple in life, though not always in art. By which I mean, they've shown their work together, but not regularly. They met in grad school and once shared a studio but now work independently of one another. Still, it would seem obvious that their work would inevitably be “in dialogue,” given that both are painters who tend toward a visual language of gestural abstraction. But in speaking with Caitlin and Spencer—on separate studio visits—their dialogue about the paintings they make, is rarely direct and more often oblique or circuitous when it happens at all.

So, this exhibition is (among other things) an opportunity to bring the work of these two artists into explicit dialogue, face to face, or side by side, in a domestic context. This setting exacerbates the real-life dynamic of this artist couple, even if it's not *their* apartment, surrounded by their personal effects, but more like an approximation of their lived intimacy.

In visiting their studios, it was not hard to imagine such a dialogue taking place between objects and between artists, by extension, even though Caitlin and Spencer talk about painting quite differently. Caitlin often refers to art history; Spencer more often refers to other objects in the world. On a similar note, I tend to think of Caitlin's objects insistently denoting themselves as paintings, emphatically optically-oriented regardless of support; whereas I tend to think of Spencer's paintings are more haptic, building upon a textural ground like burlap or styrofoam, or even a stuffed support, announcing themselves as objects that occupy a room like furniture.

Both artists are attentive to process, but what process, exactly? In my observation, Spencer is willing to let things get outside his immediate sensibility or subjectivity, with the aid of A.I. or studio assistants, before eventually reeling them in or otherwise rendering them final with a decisive move. Whereas

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Caitlin seems to doggedly stay “inside” a painting as it’s developing, adjusting microtonally according to private metrics. But this analysis is based on conversations with the artists, not from direct observation.

Both Spencer and Caitlin have many works in progress at any given time, and in both cases it’s easy to imagine each artist creating a body of work with some shared compositional tactics, repeatable gestures, or a legible lexicon. What’s fascinating is when that lexicon seems to jump from one studio to the other. Perhaps it’s just my imagination, and this show will be an opportunity to confirm or deny my suspicions. In some cases, I’ve detected Caitlin using a color (say, an acidic green) I might more readily attribute to Spencer, or Spencer covering his painterly tracks in a way I’d expect of Caitlin. I enjoy thinking about the possibility that one might mistake a work by one for the other, placed in proximity in this domestic gallery context.

There is a charge in bringing objects together. While I can anticipate what the show will look like; I can’t anticipate what it might *do* to the works or to a viewer. Including the artists, who are also viewers, and perhaps the most discerning ones. Will nearness reveal new information, bring subtle details to the fore? Let’s hope so. (For the rest of us, if not also for them!) In putting together this relatively concise demonstration of their closeness, I attempted to explore the edges of each artist’s body of work as a way to describe a center, but also as a way to emphasize the ways in which those two bodies might overlap.

– Michael Ned Holte

Spencer Lewis was born in Hartford, Connecticut in 1979. He received his BFA degree from Rhode Island School of Design in 2002 and his MFA degree from University of California, Los Angeles, in 2008. Solo exhibitions have been held at Massimo De Carlo, Hong Kong (2022); Vito Schnabel, New York (2022; 2021); Galerie Nächst St. Stephan, Wien (2022); Sorry We’re Closed, Brussels (2021); Nino Mier, Los Angeles (2016). His work has been included in recent group shows at Metropolitan Museum of Manila, Manila (2023); MAS, Museum aan de Stroom, Antwerp, Belgium (2019); Harper’s Books, East Hampton (2020; 2018); The Pit, Los Angeles (2018); Irvine Fine Arts Center, Irvine, USA (2014). His work is in the permanent collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

Caitlin Lonagan was born in Long Island, New York in 1982. She received her BA from Yale University in Art and Applied Physics in 2005 and her MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2010. Her work has been presented in numerous solo exhibitions at venues such as Various Small Fires in Dallas, Texas (2023); Vito Schnabel Gallery in St Moritz, Switzerland (2022); Vito Schnabel Gallery in New York, NY (2021); Galerie nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder in Vienna, Austria (2022, 2021, 2018); Susanne Vielmetter in Los Angeles, CA (2018); and ACME in Los Angeles, CA (2012; 2010). Lonagan’s work has been featured in group exhibitions such as “Abstract Painting Now! Gerhard Richter, Katharina Grosse, and Sean Scully...” at Kunsthalle Krems in Krems, Austria (2017); “Wake Up Early Fear Death: Caitlin Lonagan, Rebecca Morris, Laura Owens,” a series of three solo exhibitions curated by Philipp Kaiser at Galerie nächst St. Stephan Rosemarie Schwarzwälder in

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Austria, Vienna (2014); and the major survey exhibition “Made in L.A. 2014” at the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Lonegan’s works can be found in many museums and permanent collections, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, CA; Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, CA; Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, WA; Pérez Art Collection in Miami, FL; The Beth Rudin DeWoody collection in Miami, FL; Sammlung Goetz in Munich, Germany; Berezdivin Collection in Puerto Rico, USA; Strauss Collection in Rancho Santa Fe, CA; Benton Museum at Pomona College in Pomona, CA; and the SoArt Collection in Vienna, Austria. She lives and works in Los Angeles.

Michael Ned Holte is a writer, curator, and educator living in Los Angeles. His recent exhibition, “how we are in time and space: Nancy Buchanan, Marcia Hafif, Barbara T. Smith,” at the Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, was named by *Hyperallergic* as one of the top 50 exhibitions of 2022. Previous curatorial projects include “Routine Pleasures” at the MAK Center for Art and Architecture at the Schindler House, Los Angeles; “TL;DR” at Artspace NZ, Auckland; and “Made in L.A. 2014” (with Connie Butler) at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, all with accompanying publications. In 2020, he organized solo exhibitions by Candice Lin and Aram Saroyan. His writing has appeared in periodicals such as *Artforum*, *East of Borneo*, *Poetry*, and *X-Tra*, and he has written monographic essays on artists including Charles Gaines, Shio Kusaka, Roy McMakin, and Steve Roden. He is a recipient of a Creative Capital Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant. Since 2009, Holte has been a member of the faculty at CalArts, where he currently serves as an Associate Dean of the School of Art.

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