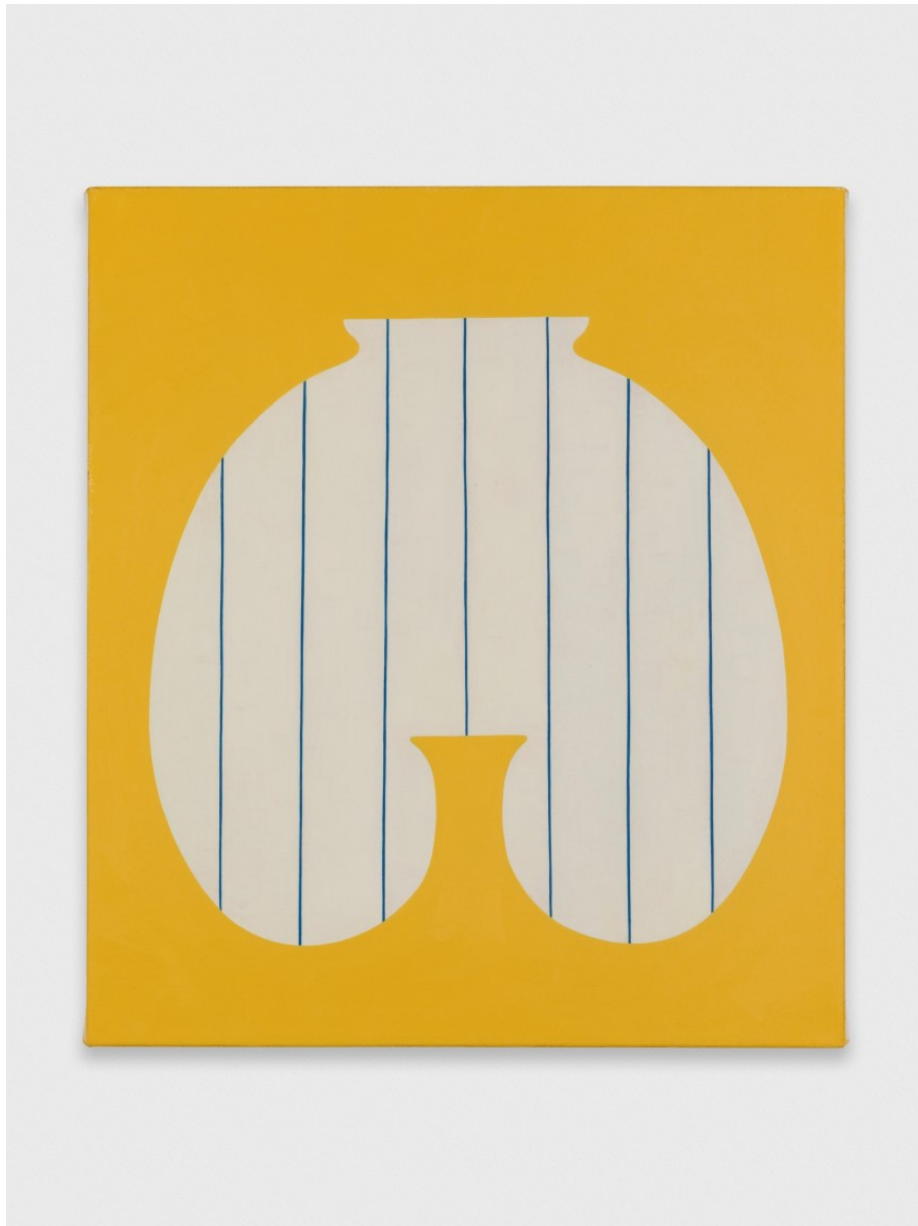


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Inspired by Emily Dickinson, Alice Tippit's paintings play out as visual poetry

DAVID PAGEL | JAN. 3, 2020



"Peer" by Alice Tippit, 2019. Oil on canvas, 16 inches by 14 inches.
(Alice Tippit / Grice Bench)

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Set aside the buzzy new Apple TV+ series on Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) and consider for a moment how her poetry has inspired two terrific art exhibitions in the last four months.

A September group show at Bel Ami gallery titled “The Props Assist the House” captured the magic of Dickinson’s concise lines. Now Alice Tippit’s “Still Life With Volcano” at the L.A. gallery Grice Bench zeros in on the tension — sometimes sexual — that gives Dickinson’s poetry its kick: the physical sense that it traffics in mysteries older than time yet up to the minute.

Pictorially, Tippit’s 17 oils on canvas are no more complex than flashcards — and not much bigger than a tablet screen. Each features a few stylized shapes set against a single-color ground. Many resemble the silhouettes of body parts — legs, breasts, crotches, hands, lips. Others are even more abstract, composed of straight and curved lines that form taut rectangles, elongated triangles and swooping curves, some graceful, others plump, even chubby.

Tippit applies paint sparingly, using just enough to get the job done and not wasting a brushstroke. Nearly all of her canvases are painted with only three colors. White, tan, peach and pink predominate. But other hues provide all sorts of surprises. Making off-white exciting, ordinary gray sensuous and taupe downright sexy, Tippit is a colorist who understands understatement.

Her seven pencil drawings are similarly minimal — and wickedly efficient. Composed around a single letter, a single word or a single phrase, each turns communication inside out. The logic of language gets tied in knots. Meaning mutates. Messages migrate. Interpretations multiply. In short, poetry happens.

The ambiguity of Tippit’s stenciled drawings expands and intensifies in her canvases. In “Follow,” “Mine,” “Sheer” and “Loose,” background and foreground flip-flop. In “Peer,” “Cinch” and “Toll,” the picture-plane seems to wrap around the figurative element, snuggling up yet leaving it free to slip away. “Enter,” “Sold” and “Skirt” are abstract compositions intruded upon by figurative elements. The seemingly flat expanses of “Bell,” “Dress” and “Lune” turn into infinitely deep spaces only to snap back. The ensuing tug of war — between what you think you see and what’s really there — invites double takes, second thoughts, second looks.

Throughout the exhibition, confusion breeds pleasure. Kitty Brophy’s electrifying images of women come to mind, as do John Wesley’s deliciously painted pictures of cartoon-inspired mischief. But Dickinson is the guiding light behind “Still Life With Volcano,” illuminating the silent poetry of Tippit’s slippery imagery.