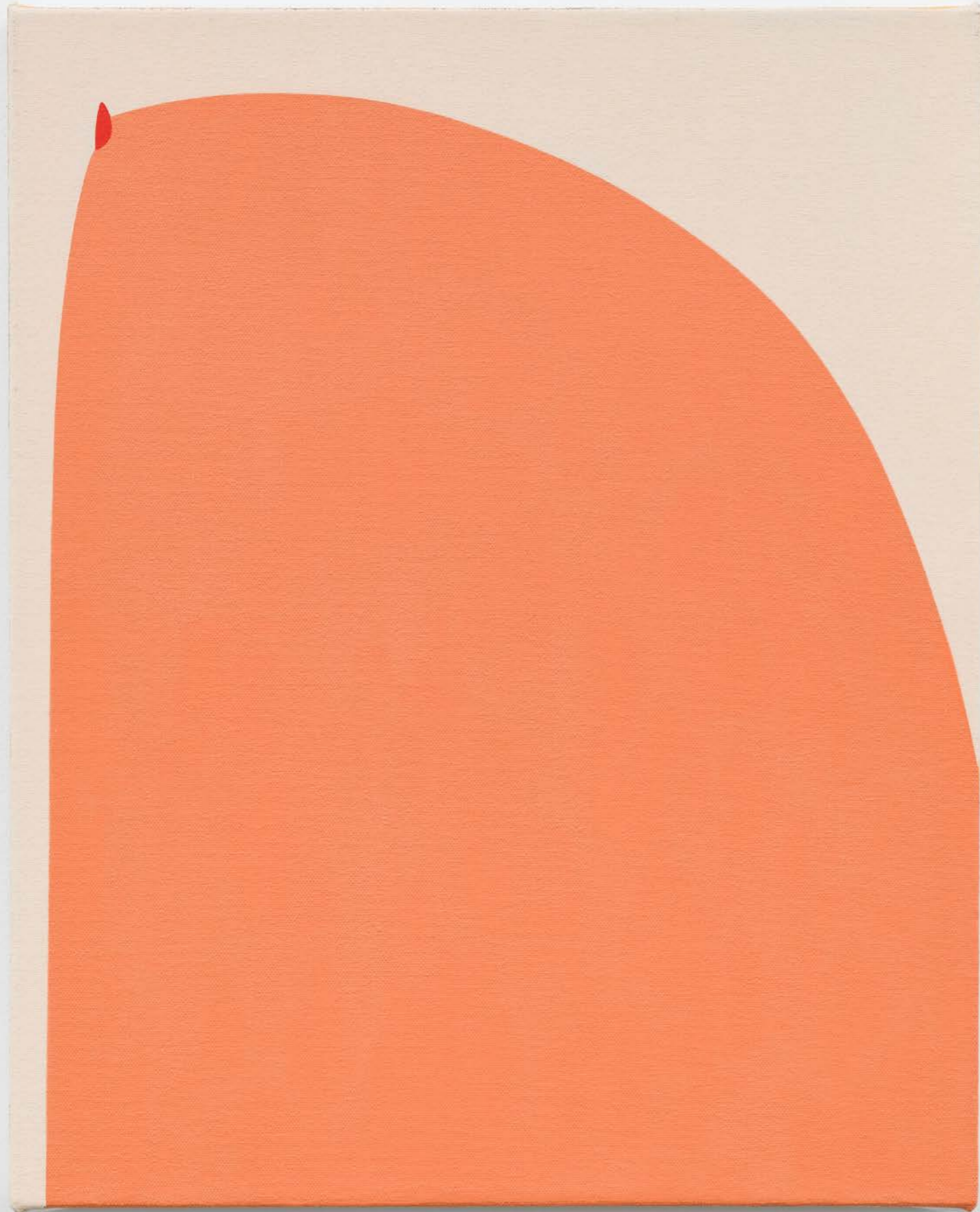


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# “Stripped down and made strange”: Towards an ambiguous visual language in the semiotics of Alice Tippit’s graphic paintings

Chicago-based artist Alice Tippit creates bold paintings that translate familiar forms into a visual language of stark shapes, symbols and colours, their meanings manifold, unstable and often evasive. Alice studied painting and drawing both as an undergraduate and as a graduate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, receiving the school’s George and Ann Siegel Fellowship for her MFA. Her works have been exhibited in both the United States and internationally in Berlin and Malmö.

Previously in her artistic practice, Alice drew on the imagery and tropes of genre painting and familiar historical artworks to produce paintings that toyed with form and meaning to complicate or hinder the interpretation of the viewer. Her earlier work on recasting the symbols and elements in traditional paintings and convoluting their significations still feeds into her current practice. The forms in Alice’s paintings hover somewhere between the familiar and the obscure. Recognisable objects and images—a pair of lips, an apple, an eye, hair, a banana, a moon, various limbs and silhouetted faces seen in profile—are stripped of any discernible context or transparency of meaning. On the starkly coloured ground of Alice’s canvas, these forms become shapes that teeter on the edge of abstraction, interacting with one another to produce relations of meaning that verge on German Surrealist Max Ernst’s definition of the surreal as “a linking of two realities that by all appearances have nothing to link them, in a setting that by all appearances does not fit them”.

Although Alice is influenced by such works as the enigmatic paintings by Belgian Surrealist artist René Magritte, her graphic eye and stark palette make for a form of Surrealism that is wholly her own. For Alice, colour is a device by which to distort relationships between forms and between the different layers that make up the painting. Combined with her use of flat, clear-cut shapes, Alice’s stark hues of light and dark produce a visual system of signification in which every element of the painting works towards, or against, a multitude of possible interpretations. Her tendency towards two-dimensionality is offset in some works by touches of detail—tiny, intricate lines or areas of shading that model the swell of flesh, the curve of a lip—that make unexpected gestures towards depth which contribute to the subtle layering of perspectives present in the paintings.

This incorporation of images and colours as signs, a device shared by graphic design, works towards a visual language that, in Alice’s work, defies a single, clear reading. Her sustained interest in the relationship between text and image merges with her own painterly impulse to reduce and manipulate visual information so that her paintings divert and splinter understanding. Drawing much on the capacity of writing to produce multiple semantic implications by means of poetic devices such as metaphor, Alice ultimately creates images that stand as oblique references rather than as clearly stated, unambiguous definitions.

Alice’s practice today relies on “thinking, researching and making”—sitting with an idea before manifesting it as a work, then sitting with a work before forming linguistic associations to produce titles and supplementary text. She tells us here about the distinctive visual style of her paintings, the affinity she feels with poets and writers who probe and distort systems of language, and her wish for her works to exist in a state of precariousness when it comes to their capacity for communicating meaning.

interview by Rebecca Irvin

Featured image:

Alice Tippit  
*Lick*  
oil on canvas  
16 x 13 inches



**AMM:** Hi Alice, have you always considered yourself a painter?

AT: I've been making paintings—oil on canvas—since 2007. Before that, I was more of a work-on-paper artist: printmaking, drawing, watercolour. Though I make paintings, I've never thought of myself as strictly a painter. To be honest, I don't enjoy it all that much, painting. I like thinking about them and I like finishing them. The making part is just something that I have to do in order for it to be a painting. So I prefer the distance between myself and the painting process that is implied when I say that I make paintings instead of saying I am a painter.

**AMM:** How has the distinctive style of your paintings developed? Did your studies have a big impact on this?

AT: The look of my paintings grew out of an earlier interest in combining text and image. In that work, I began to opt for a clean, bold appearance, counteracted by a corresponding lack of clarity as to a clear meaning. At the same time I was also making paintings that relied heavily on genres of painting and one's knowledge of a particular work. For example, removing all of the signs of greatness in Jacques-Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*: depicting Napoleon from behind and scaled down to miniature, on a flat plain instead of in the mountains. Somewhere between these two projects, I arrived at what I do now in painting. My love of wordplay lives on in titles and works on paper, while the paintings became more graphic in appearance. And while a knowledge of painting genres is helpful, in general they no longer rely on a specific, familiar image from art history. That process though, of breaking apart the signifiers of an image and manipulating them, is one I still use today. I put my own images through that wringer.

**AMM:** Despite the bold nature of your works, your palette appears fairly reserved—the colours are rarely garish or loud but rather stark and subtle. Can you tell us about more about this aesthetic choice?

AT: Aesthetics aren't so much a factor; colour for me is more of a tool for delineating form. In any given painting I choose two to five colours for the image. Before making the painting I will think about potential interpretations for the image and how colour might sway it in one or another direction. If there is a recognisable form, do I want to use the most common colour association, or will the use of a different colour complicate the perception in a more interesting way? I use contrast to unsettle figure-ground relationships, and darks often stand in for deep space in an otherwise flat image. I admit though that I have a personal preference for warmer colours and so I end up reaching for them more often. I've definitely made lurid colour selections in my work, but unless deployed sparingly I find that those images lose something in the clarity of appearance mentioned previously. Sometimes though, this might be a desirable direction for the image, so I try to remain open to it.

**AMM:** In turn, your stark colour palette evokes a certain balance between your subject and the space

around it, subverting the traditional hierarchy of background and foreground in painting. When making a work, how do you think about the relationship between negative and positive space, between background and subject?

AT: I often use the contrast between complementary colours or light and dark colours to produce an unstable figure-ground relationship. This opens up the image and heightens the potential for the image to have multiple interpretations.

**AMM:** Your forms are very clear-cut—how much are you influenced by graphic design?

AT: The appearance and operations of graphic design are of great interest to me. The difference

*“I am definitely taking advantage of pareidolia, which is our tendency—given even a limited amount of information—to see the figure and faces in objects. This tendency is very powerful, so I reduce the referential information, as I do with almost everything really, to allow other interpretations of the forms to coexist. For me, when the body is referenced, I want it to resist simple admiration and instead pose a question, if that makes sense.”*

– Alice Tippet

being that graphic design usually communicates something specific whereas I prefer more ambiguity.

**AMM:** How does your work negotiate between abstraction and representation, and between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality?

AT: Well really it's the viewer who negotiates the space between abstraction and representation, the paintings don't do anything on their own,

right? And I also negotiate that gap when I am developing an image. By using flat shapes without volume, colour to unsettle figure-ground relations, and shifts in scale, I can create an image that shuttles between the two even when there are recognisable forms. Rarely are they one or the other. Sometimes I decide that an image requires more detail for a representational element, or shading to give depth or volume, but this is relatively rare. I do it when it feels right. It's a different thing to do and it can feel more meaningful than it is because I don't do it very often. Usually I only do it when the specificity it adds complicates the reading of the image.

**AMM:** Do you ever work in other mediums than painting, and if not would you like to?

AT: I try to do what feels right for a particular idea, so yes, I'm always open to other mediums. Drawing is really important to my practice, but more as a means of developing ideas. I still work on paper, in a variety of mediums: collage, watercolour, coloured pencil, and I still do printmaking sometimes. I've included found objects and photographs in shows. All very two-dimensional though! I don't think in the third dimension very well, and even when I do it's still very related to drawing or painting.

**AMM:** When it comes to the technical undertaking of making an image, what is your process like? Is it painstaking work to create such stark lines?

AT: Once I'm ready to make a particular painting, I usually finish it in one day. If a form is symmetrical I'll often cut a stencil to get it onto the canvas, or if it is a form I've used multiple times I usually have a stencil made. I start in the morning, get the surface ready, mix my colours, and then I could be at work for only a few hours or all day if the forms are more complicated. I work from the edges outwards, with no masking or tape. I want a unified surface with edges that meet, not layers. It's not easy but my paintings are small, so it's manageable.

**AMM:** The shapes and figures in your work seem to function almost like symbols or signs. Can you expand on the kind of visual language your work seeks to deploy?

AT: Many of my forms reference painting genres such as still life or portraiture, but stripped down and made strange. My interest lies in creating something that has a kind of familiarity and seems legible, so the visual language and bold appearance of graphic design is also something for me to think about when composing an image.

**AMM:** I notice that there is often an anatomical, bodily element to your works, where limbs, faces, mouths, hands, eyes become almost isolated, flattened shapes. Can you tell us more about the presence of the body in your images?

AT: I am definitely taking advantage of pareidolia, which is our tendency—given even a limited amount of information—to see the figure and faces in objects. This tendency is very powerful, so I reduce the referential





Featured image (p.18):

Alice Tippit  
*Vérse*  
 oil on canvas  
 19 x 16 inches

Featured image (p.17):

Alice Tippit  
*Follow*  
 oil on canvas  
 24 x 18 inches

information, as I do with almost everything really, to allow other interpretations of the forms to coexist. For me, when the body is referenced, I want it to resist simple admiration and instead pose a question, if that makes sense. Most of my figures are assumed to be female, perhaps because the female body is overrepresented in painting or because I am a woman, ergo I paint female bodies. But there are many that are not coded in one way or another, and some are most probably male. More than anything, what you are seeing is my interest in the literary blazon, which is a poetic device that catalogues the physical attributes of a subject, typically a female one, using comparisons to natural phenomena or rare and beautiful objects. Metaphor is deeply important to my work.

*AMM: How does the language of your paintings change when viewed in the flesh, in an exhibition for example? Are things like scale and the arrangement of the works important?*

AT: I take as much interest in the layout of an exhibition as I do in creating individual works. I often think of it in relationship to writing. I usually have one work that I think of as central and then I build the story of the exhibition around it. While each work has its own individual set of associations, these can be compounded by its proximity to others. I do this primarily by thinking about difference, so I would never place works together if the associations are too similar. It's better to use a formal kinship, a visual rhyme or echo within the works first, then I assess where it takes me and whether I like the relationship or not. Scale is certainly part of this—my largest works are usually no bigger than 30 x 24 inches; my smallest size is usually 13 x 10 inches. Within this range I have quite a few sizes. The difference in size can seem quite meaningful when arranging works for exhibition, especially so if there is an unexpected use of scale within the image.

*AMM: What dialogue are you aiming to conduct with the viewer? Is there anything in particular that you are seeking to convey, an impression you wish to create, a feeling or atmosphere you hope to induce?*

AT: If there is anything I want to convey it is that the systems we use for communication are less stable than we assume them to be. This to me is exciting—things don't have to be one way—but for others this is a threatening state. I'm not interested in nonsense, which is too easy to create. I will usually try to set a tone in an exhibition, either through writing about it, including text based works, or found objects. This will set folks off, but I'm always surprised as to where they take it.

*AMM: Does your work draw on other disciplines such as literature or are you more closely focused on language as a system, rather than as narrative or meaning?*

AT: A little rule that I have for myself is that nothing in particular should be happening in my images. No story is being told there. That said, I am very interested in poetry and some

writers who are not poets but whose practice I feel a kinship with in terms of their approach to language. I like the system of language but I'm interested in the cracks rather than the structure. And I do think a lot about poetic operations such as rhyme, repetition, and metaphor, particularly when creating an image or putting together an exhibition.

*AMM: As language is such an integral element within your work, how do you go about selecting titles for individual pieces and for shows?*

AT: I keep a list of words that I find interesting in the back of each of my sketchbooks. I like homophones—words that share their sound but not their meaning—and words with connotative meanings. When it comes down to titling it might happen quite easily in that I think of the title as I develop the work, or more deliberately. Most of the time I have to sit with a particular work and think about the associations it brings, then think about words related to those associations, then think about words that rhyme with or have a similar combination of letters to those words, and I'll look at my lists for inspiration. It's a ruminative process. A title should never tell anything in particular about a work, because a work should never be about any one thing, at least in my practice.

*AMM: Is there a particular artist or artwork that has had a great influence on your own work?*

AT: Magritte is a huge influence, a giant among many, many others. His works have a mysterious affect that is well worth analysing. One of my favourite paintings is of a loaf of French bread sitting next to a window, through which the evening sky and landscape is visible. The title is *L'Avenir* (The Future). His titles are really great. They extend the meaning of the work rather than explain. And this work is so funny and pregnant with meaning, though that can also be said about his work in general. The phallic shape of the bread, the opening of the window... what does it mean? Maybe it only goes in one direction but I don't really care to answer that question, I just want to rest with it at that moment.

*AMM: What pursuits do you currently have beyond painting?*

AT: Not much gets between me and my studio time but I've always been a reader, though a lack of time means I don't finish books as quickly as I used to. I take ceramics classes, though I am pretty terrible at it. I've also been teaching myself German for some time, though again, I am terrible at it.

*AMM: What is your studio environment like? Do you like to keep things neat or do you allow it to become more chaotic?*

AT: Somewhere in between I guess. I don't think well in disorderly spaces but neatness is also stifling. I'm a tidy-piles-of-stuff person. My floor is clear but my work table is not. My easel is filthy.

*“If there is anything I want to convey it is that the systems we use for communication are less stable than we assume them to be. This to me is exciting—things don't have to be one way—but for others this is a threatening state. I'm not interested in nonsense, which is too easy to create. I will usually try to set a tone in an exhibition, either through writing about it, including text based works, or found objects. This will set folks off, but I'm always surprised as to where they take it.”*

- Alice Tippit

*AMM: Do you consider yourself part of a wider artistic community, either where you work in Chicago or further afield? Do you ever collaborate on shows or works?*

AT: Yes. Though I am not super social in the Chicago art community I am a part of it, and social media helps me to feel connected to the community beyond my physical one. I've collaborated on works only once that I can think of, with Dawn Cerny, a truly fantastic artist from Seattle with whom I have an unusual synergy. These days I'm more likely to collaborate on shows than works but it has been a little while since one of these has been realised. The last one was with Alex Chitty in 2013 at Roots & Culture here in Chicago.

*AMM: In what ways do you see your work developing?*

AT: I don't think too intensely about how my work might develop, I just continue thinking, researching, and making, and trust that I will be able to see where it needs to go when the time comes.





Alice Tippit  
*ESSENVY*  
Installation view  
Nicelle Beauchene Gallery



Alice Tippit  
*Woman on Yellow Motorcycle in Crystal Lake*  
Installation View  
Kimmerich Galerie



Alice Tippit  
*Mass*  
oil on canvas  
13 x 10 inches



Alice Tippit  
*Short*  
oil on canvas  
20 x 16 inches



Alice Tippit  
*Idle*  
oil on canvas  
18 x 14 inches



Alice Tippit  
*Monitor*  
oil on canvas  
16 x 13 inches

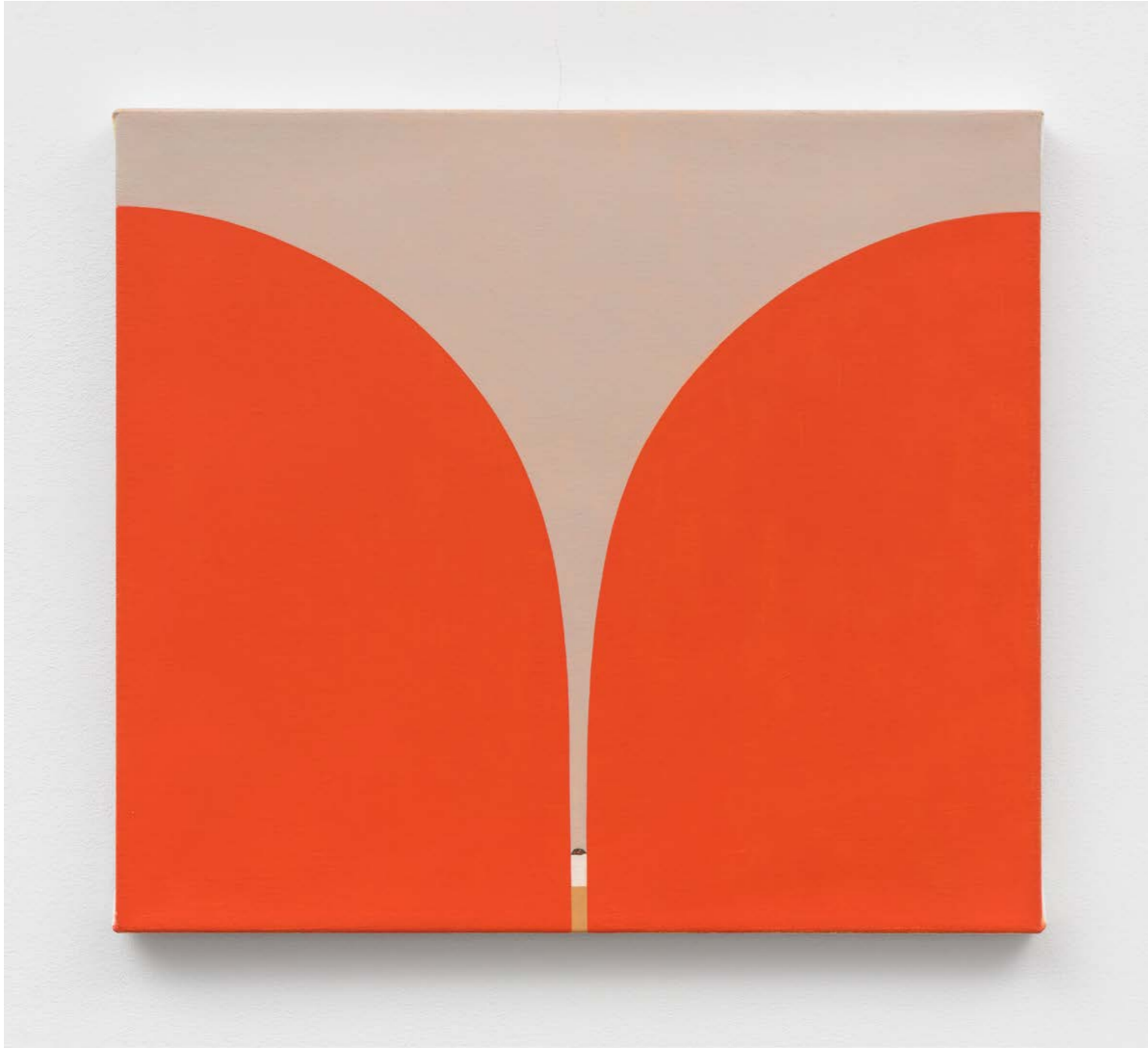


Alice Tippet  
*Skirt*  
oil on canvas  
22 x 18 inches



Alice Tippet  
*Bell*  
oil on canvas  
13 x 10 inches





Alice Tippit  
*Sink*  
oil on canvas  
20 x 18 inches



Alice Tippit  
*Sore*  
oil on canvas  
13 x 10 inches



Alice Tippet  
*Toll*  
oil on canvas  
16 x 13 inches



Alice Tippet  
*Loose*  
oil on canvas  
19 x 16 inches