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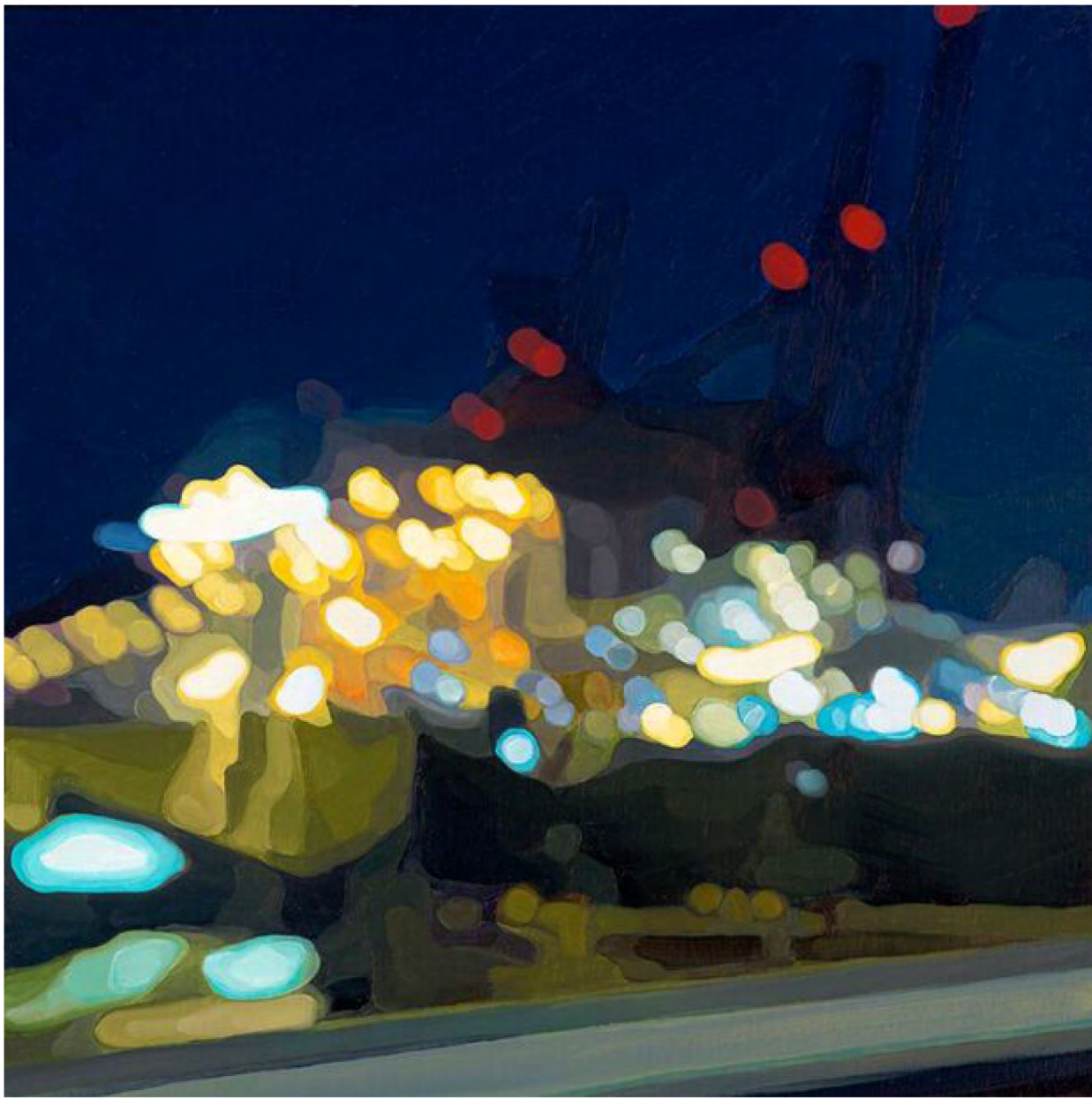
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Bright Lights, Big City: Three Painters Chase the Glow



Seattle gets blown up, blurred out, and reduced to a skeleton by the three painters in “Neighborhoods” at the Seattle Art Museum Gallery. Elizabeth Gahan, Kate Protage and Kellie Talbot hunt down Seattle’s shadows, angles, and icons, and assemble them into a city you thought you knew.



*"Harmony 5" by Kate Protage
Oil on Panel*

"I have a love/hate relationship with the cities in which I've lived," says Kate Protage. "There are two worlds that exist in the same physical space: streets that appear gritty, dirty and depressing by day turn into an environment infused with a strange kind of lush, dark beauty and romance at night." Protage conjures that dark romance with her semi-abstract oil paintings of nighttime streets, viewed as if from behind a rain-spattered windshield. In her hands, tail-lights are a blurred ballet of lights, and familiar roads are suddenly suffused with mystery. The new works in "Neighborhoods" are some of her most abstract yet, expanding her haloing lights until they almost swallow the composition. As a viewer, it's hard to focus on the fuzzy auras, and I imagined it must be even harder for the artist to

create.

“The blurring process is surprisingly easy for me,” she explained. “I’ll paint two different sections, and once they’re blocked in, I’ll revisit the edges where they collide and use a transitional color to “marry” the two.”



*"Better Still" by Kate Protage
Oil on Panel*

It turns out that the hard part is mapping out the drawing underneath the paint—and keeping her palette knives from breaking under her aggressive strokes.

American and European cities appear in Protage’s work—but you might only know it if you’re a native of that particular city. Landmarks, tourist attractions and signs disappear into the night, as Protage focuses instead on striations of twilight and arcs of wet roadway. If she includes recognizable objects, she says, it’s more about sharing her appreciation for something that locals would love.

“What differs from city to city is the light: the palette and mood is markedly different in Rome than it is in Seattle. I make a lot of changes to my source material before I use it, but I always try to stay true

to the quality of light that I see.”

We’re unlikely to see the Space Needle in a Protage painting anytime soon, but that unique sun-on-steel-gray sky after a Seattle storm is all you’ll need to know: you are here.



*“Cowboy’s Horse” by Kellie Talbot
Oil on Canvas*

While Protage erases the recognizable from her paintings, Kellie Talbot revels in specificity. A Seattle resident since 1989, she’s painted every angle of every iconic sign that the city has to offer, in photo-realistic detail. The Pink Elephant Car Wash. Bardahl Oil Company in Ballard. The Seattle Post-Intelligencer’s spinning globe. Focusing on tiny sections of the signs and blowing them up on huge canvases, Talbot reveals every dent and ding, each blister and bulb, relishing in what humans have made and weather and time have wrought.

“I think architecture and signage is very location-specific,” Talbot said recently as she prepped for the

SAM Gallery exhibit. Surrounded by easels in her Ballard studio—a refurbished butcher shop she and her husband saved from demolition—Talbot worked on multiple paintings at once as her glazes dried.

“It’s a language that tells you the stories of towns and cities. You can read the economic upturns and falls by what survives. You can also tell something about the culture by what they value, what remains.”

Remnants intrigue Talbot. Her subjects—whether a pile of oil drums, the busted bulbs of a Vegas billboard, or a nicked hammer—are reminiscent of a time when quality, hand-made objects were the default. Of course, she’s a texture junkie as well, lovingly recreated rust drips, pits and patinas.



*"Small P.I. Star" by Kellie Talbot
Oil on Panel*

Light is one of the most important aspects in Talbot's work; we're talking the depiction of it, and also the tricky work of harnessing it. Working in oil gives her tight control over her color and opacity,

allowing the right amount of light to reach the surface of the canvas and bounce back. But it also means applying glazes in painstaking layers and having the hair-pulling patience to wait for those layers to dry. The effect, however, is worth it: her depictions of lit electric bulbs and glowing neon seem to illuminate a room on their own.

But, it's getting harder to find her prize subjects around the city. As Seattle booms and old buildings are demolished, each removal takes a little bit of the old character away. While many of the signs Talbot paints are for extant businesses, others are headstones. Yet, while she's seeing the changing face of the city first-hand, she's not eager to join the doom-and-gloom parade.

"To be fair, before all the growth there were plenty of boarded-up buildings with no commerce and that wasn't a golden time. I just hope that parts of this city's old character will remain as the new city grows. Seattle doesn't have a long history by comparison, but it has a history that's worth preserving."



*"Garden District" by Elizabeth Gahan
Oil, Wood Burning and Acrylic on Panel*

Beth Gahan's Seattle is a place of prismatic color and wide-open space. Where Protage conjures nighttime mystery and motion, and Talbot zooms in for a macro beauty shot, Gahan channels an architect who's dived headfirst into a crayon box. She renders her city like a blueprint—walls ruler-straight, scale rigorously correct—and boils the view down to the absolute essentials. Then she lets loose with color: auras bloom behind the Smith Tower, and the Great Wheel is ringed with its own aurora borealis.

In some works, she flattens skyscrapers and homes into depth-less squares, merging horizon and foreground. Lush plantlife springs and coils to life around the airless boxes, rococo patterns etch

through the air, and the line between built and natural environment begins blurring. Elsewhere, nature and architecture coexist less happily, as the austere lines of a house are encroached upon by globs of thickly applied, wet-looking paint, crowding out delicate trees and architecture alike.

Gahan has explored the same themes in her public art installations, where geometric forms made from plastic spike from archways and spurt from the ground. They look like sentient fractals busily colonizing and munching on concrete.

In this prismatic world there's such a juxtaposition between the rigid, precise lines of human-made buildings with the seemingly random eruptions of nature and color, that it makes you question the idea that the two could possibly coexist. Yet, there's an effortless airiness, a positivity to all those effervescent hues, that it seems like we'll be able to figure it out somehow. And perhaps something hybrid and brand new will be the result of so much colorful mad science.



Site specific installation by Elizabeth Gahan

"Neighborhoods" runs Sept 10-Oct 22 at the SAM Gallery.

Art featured at top:

"Loading Zone" by Kate Protage

Oil on Panel

"Cowboy's Horse" by Kellie Talbot

Oil on Canvas

"Overgrowth" by Elizabeth Gahan

Watercolor, Oil, Acrylic on Canvas