

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

ARTFORUM

"The Ocular Bowl" at Kayne Griffin Corcoran



Alex Olson, *Mind's Eye (eyes open, eyes closed)*, 2016, diptych, oil and modeling paste on linen, each 24 × 18". From "The Ocular Bowl."

The three-person show "The Ocular Bowl" took its name from "The Line and the Light," a 1964 essay by Jacques Lacan in which the psychoanalyst describes the eye as "a sort of bowl," a faulty container whose propensity to overflow with visual information necessitates "a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defenses" to collectively bring about vision. Featuring two important works by modernist painter Agnes Pelton—best known for her cosmic abstractions and Southwestern landscapes overlain with transcendental themes—and more recent paintings by Alex Olson and Linda Stark, this show was less didactic than broadly associative in its investigations of its theme. The exhibition's press release stated that the show focused on "ideas of vision and how it occurs beyond the eyes." In Olson's work this transpired via both iconography (e.g., representations of receptacles in the homage *Vessel [of the mind's eye, with a look towards Agnes Pelton]*, 2016) and pictorial representations of form generated under conditions of light's occlusion. Thus was the Lacanian reference both an expedient means of generating meditations on the proverbial mind's eye and a misleading reference for works that overwhelmingly evidenced more metaphysical concerns.

Pelton's *Star Gazer*, 1929, and *Passion Flower*, 1943, emanate from within their representational fields and conjure a radiant symbolic register. (It was on these grounds that the late painter was brought together with Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Martin, and Florence Miller Pierce for the 2009 exhibition "Illumination," organized by Karen Moss for the Orange County Museum of Art). Pelton was deeply influenced by theosophy, the spiritual practice in which participants generate graphic "thought forms." She painted *Star Gazer*, with its lone star penetrating a lapis horizon and its bud stalk emerging within a protective jar, while meditating. *Passion Flower*—a flower-as-sun central composition demonstrating a force so potent as to seemingly repel the darker paint from its orbit—further demonstrated Pelton's forays into mysticism; she created it while affiliated with the Transcendental Painting Group in Taos, New Mexico.

Yet the show did not dwell on these historical moorings, nor on Pelton's involvement with astrology, numerology, or auras. It did, however, present several works by Stark and Olson that feature Pelton's signature motifs, such as Stark's *Brand*, 2010, an oddly disconcerting panel with a welt at the midpoint of the so-called "fleshscape" that recalled the senior artist's flower silhouettes. This cavity cradled in a fold implies both a vaginal form and a winking eye, or even a literal navel into which we viewers gazed. She has surrounded it with a hot-pink flower outline, its five petals corresponding to the geometry of a star as well as the endpoints—head, hands, feet—of an upright human figure. Stark's other contributions—*Ruins*, 2008; *Amber Pyramid*, 2005; and *Rose Quartz Pyramid*, 2005—float free of the body, across land and time, with the first offering Stonehenge on the horizon against a bubble-gum sky, while the latter two appeared as aerial views of pyramids, as if painted while hovering far overhead at the point where forms become pure geometry.

In comparison with Stark's mythic abstractions, Olson's paintings presented more modest revelations born of studio experimentation. Her five paintings made for the occasion embody a distinct experience of seeing, such as moving through light or shifting one's focus, but it is in *Mind's Eye (eyes open, eyes closed)*, 2016, that Olson extends Pelton's revelatory waking visions most forcefully. As with the artist's earlier experiments with willful obstruction, she first painted one panel and then attempted another version of the same composition with her eyes shut. Looser and less precise than its original, the second version bristles with an energy given vital and quivering form.

- Suzanne Hudson