

Join the New Social Environment — our daily conversation with artists, filmmakers, writers, and poets. Join us.»

« SEPT 2022 Issue



Donate

ArtSeen

Katy Crowe: *A Wrinkle in the Macula*

SEPT 2022

By Mary Jones



Katy Crowe, *Erebus*, 2022. Oil on Linen, 52 x 40 inches. Courtesy as-is.la.

On View

as-is.la

A Wrinkle in the Macula

July 30–September 10, 2022

Los Angeles

Katy Crowe's work has long been regarded with tremendous esteem among artists who appreciate her improvisational, richly layered abstractions, complex color sense, and impressive mastery of materials. She's a painter's painter, but like the careers of Suzan Frecon, Harriet Korman, and Stanley Whitney, visibility for a painter's painter is often long in coming. Crowe's show, titled *A Wrinkle in the Macula*, is a brilliant reset.

Her concise installation includes five paintings, four uniformly sized, 52 by 40 inches (all 2022), plus the smaller *Beyond* (2019), all oil on linen. They exude a presumed effortlessness. Edges are important, imperfect, and emphatically hand-drawn, revealing previous solutions of color and placement, with surfaces that blossom as if they were just finished. Like Suzan Frecon, Crowe generates her own formulas, delivering a facture that epitomizes the history and potency of oil paint as a medium. For Crowe, the notion of

depth is both literal and metaphorical. Glazes and luminous color create a transparent surface, a shallow stage-like space in which a succession of flat geometric shapes explore formations of momentary tableaux. Like breaking through the fourth wall in theater, Crowe's wobbly geometry doubles as an allegory for a rational structure but also its unmooring. Adrift and animated, circles float through planes of space, often connecting like a chain. Wherever the circles intersect, an askew lenticular shape occurs, creating an almost cartoon "eyeball" form. And as her title, *A Wrinkle in the Macula* suggests, these orbs might also be eyes. The ability to infuse subjective experience into abstract form is one of the marvels of Crowe's oeuvre whether, as in previous work, it's the hourglass shapes from the black widow spiders nesting in the back of the studio ("those gals" as the artist called them), the light in Cairo, or, currently, feelings of despair over recent political and global events.

The ghost of the grid keeps Crowe's brushwork on point, echoing the linen with lightly crisscrossed vertical and horizontal strokes. This consistency grounds her bold range of viscosities, from wet, just congealed passages to rough, dry brushed flurries. In *Tartarus* (2022) a translucent, solvent bitten vertical swath hangs like a curtain in front of a dry brushed net of rust over purple. The same draping motif occurs in *Elysium* (2022) but as a copse of blurred black lines, staking off a rising violet sphere. Crowe coaxes delight and innuendoes from her sophisticated improvisation, the illusion that everything happens in one take, without revisions.



Katy Crowe, *Asphodel*, 2022. Oil on linen, 52 x 40 inches. Courtesy as-is.la.

In *Asphodel* (2022), three circles join, eclipse, and mirror each other. The top circle drifts upwards and forwards, revealing traces of an original red oxide washed with Egyptian violet blue. Crowe expertly utilizes weight in color, and this circle is heavy and laden with deep pigments, implying a sense of gravity. Below, a slate gray circle dematerializes into a possible shadow or reflection. In *Erebus* (2022), the circles don't touch or link, but encounter each other with an almost comic intensity. Crowe resists fixed interpretations with a casual expansiveness.

Crowe's visual wit invites the viewer to follow her clues. Four paintings have titles taken from the Greek mythology of the afterlife: *Asphodel*, *Elysium*, *Erebus*, and *Tartarus*, respectively. This, plus her exhibition title, *A Wrinkle in the Macula*, took me to Anthony Synnott's essay "The Eye and I: A Sociology of Sight" (1992). Synnott traces the roots of our ocularcentric culture back to the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, which posited sight as the primary, most objective sense. However, he also relates the inverse relationships between sight and knowledge—seeing may be believing, but knowledge is cultural, incremental, and only comes with time. When a wrinkle in the macula happens, vision is distorted, blurred, the sharp details are lost. Crowe's paintings suggest the instability of our assumptions and the impotency of vision as a barometer of reality.

Like Guston's late work *Head and Bottle* (1975), the eye shapes take on a Beckett-like sense of the absurd, and dismantle purity as a tenet of abstraction. Although Crowe's paintings remain resolutely abstract, an evocation of instantaneous lucidity and speculative wonder happen within her process, a lightness of being she has honed for more than four decades.

Contributor

Mary Jones

Mary Jones is an artist in New York, a Senior Critic at RISD, and an Instructor at SVA.