



Ellen Altfest

3 April - 21 June 2015

MK Gallery presents the first solo exhibition in a UK public gallery of oil paintings by Ellen Altfest (born New York City, 1970).

The exhibition spans 15 years, including early paintings and recent work.

Tuesday-Friday 12pm-8pm
Saturday 11am-8pm
Sunday 11am-5pm

Image: Ellen Altfest: *The Hand* (detail), 2011, Oil on canvas. Photo: Ben Westoby, Courtesy White Cube, © Ellen Altfest / White Cube.

MK Gallery is supported by:



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www.mkgallery.org

Introduction

This first survey exhibition in a UK public gallery by American artist Ellen Altfest presents twenty-two oil paintings produced over the last fifteen years. It charts the evolution of a practice that draws on the realist tradition, from early Renaissance painting to Gustave Courbet and early Lucian Freud. Always painted directly from nature, in natural light and life-size, Altfest's work demonstrates a rare technical ability derived from intense concentration and minute observation. The sheer physical and mental attention invested in these paintings has left many commentators with a feeling of claustrophobia as Altfest's obsessive lines and strokes push realism to the edge of abstraction.

This chronological exhibition demonstrates the stylistic changes made during the course of the artist's career, from large, bold paintings of trees to small and austere, virtually abstract, compositions. Equally, it highlights a number of consistencies such as the tight cropping of organic subjects and an ongoing attempt to create almost monochrome but still representational images, from green in earlier works to brown more recently. At the same time, Altfest introduces wordplay, innuendo and psychological impact into her paintings; as logs and legs, gourds and groins, tumbleweed and tufts of hair abound.

Cube Gallery

The Cube Gallery includes earlier works which focus on natural features such as the intricate surfaces of trees and rocks. Altfest always works in daylight, setting up plein-air encampments or make-shift studios next to her subjects, sometimes working on-site, seven days a week, for a year on a single painting. An exercise in obsessiveness and physical stamina, these large scale images painted in broad brush strokes and bold, vibrant colours, appear to play with the senses - moss and lichen seem tactile and three-dimensional - tipping the real towards the uncanny.

Middle Gallery

While Altfest's earlier works were created outdoors, she later started to bring nature (living and decaying) into her New York studio, setting these objects in front of paint splattered floors or metropolitan vistas. In the words of critic David Humphrey, 'Ellen Altfest asks us to slow down, to crawl, to feel our way across the variegated surfaces of her depicted objects until we experience them as materialised hallucinations. The dense skin of her paintings invites us to travel into nether-spaces of bewildering complexity where we become lost in a thoroughly mapped world right in front of our eyes.'

Long Gallery 1

Altfest is perhaps best known for her small and painstakingly detailed fragments of male body parts. In these works the cut is absolute: there is no background, no suggestion of place, nothing but the minimal if variable minutia of flesh and hair. The application of paint is tighter and sharper as the size and colour range of the paintings are reduced, but, despite appearing smaller than life, they are still painted on a 1:1 scale.

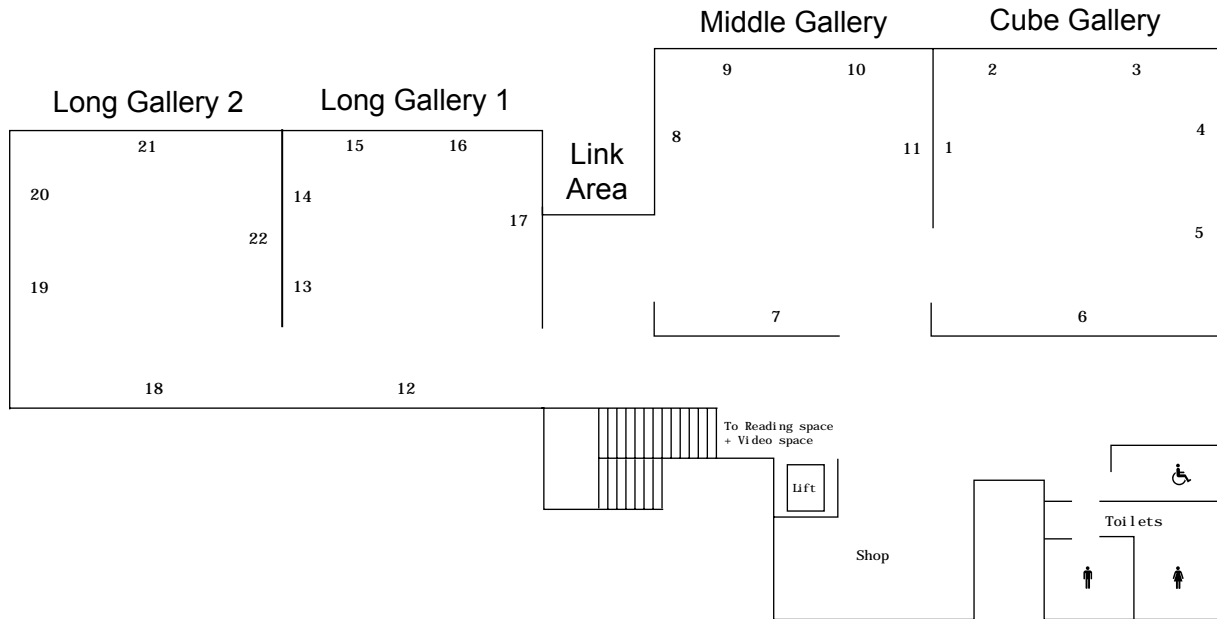
Altfest is fascinated by the male form and has specifically chosen parts of the body that are overtly masculine, including body hair. The first work in this series, *The Penis* (2006), was included in a group show called *Men* that she curated for I-20 Gallery, New York alongside work by eleven female artists including Sylvia Sleight, who became a friend and inspiration. This painting also resonates with works by famous male artists such as Courbet's *Origins of the World* (1866) and Lucian Freud's paintings of Leigh Bowery from the early 1990s.

Altfest has said: 'I learned to be an artist as a still life painter and then applied that language to the figure. Maybe the body is more understandable when it is broken down into knowable pieces. I also like that the parts of the body become their own things, separate from the person they belong to.'

Long Gallery 2

The works in this final gallery represent a further reduction in palette and size and a shift towards abstraction. In these paintings, Altfest has edited out landmarks like belly buttons and nipples, achieving a human quality that is at once specific and undefined. The tight framing of images in the previous gallery has been pushed to the extreme so that in *Composition* (2014-15), for example, the subject overwhelms the canvas. It remains central but is increasingly integrated within an overall composition, where body and textile, foreground and background are given the same attention and prominence. The interplay between different surfaces and textures is the result of an intricate, topographical process using quilting pins as visual markers, metal skewers as measuring tools and the smallest long-handled brushes possible.

Throughout the exhibition, compositions are tightly cropped and framed so that mottled surfaces with bark, moss, skin or hair are intensely scrutinised and rendered in exquisite, almost excessive, detail. Altfest is motivated by the impulse of 'long looking' and has identified time as her most precious resource: 'I want to make a painting that reveals itself over time, a painting that gives something to the person who's looking at it – something to engage with and enter into.' Altfest has spent an immense quantity of time on looking and creating these paintings. As a result, viewing her work demands careful observation, prolonged attention and a heightened sense of perception.



Cube Gallery

1. *Large Rock*, 2002
Oil on canvas
76.2 × 93.98 cm
Richard J. Massey

2. *Log*, 2001
Oil on canvas
61 × 91.4 cm
Private Collection

3. *The Tree*, 2000
Oil on canvas
147.3 × 111.8 cm
Private Collection

4. *Three Limbs*, 2002
Oil on canvas
96.5 × 71 cm
Private Collection

5. *Tree*, 2000–01
Oil on canvas
137.2 × 111.8 cm
Arthur Zeckendorf

6. *The Brook*, 1998
Oil on canvas
91.4 × 111.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Middle Gallery

7. *Green Plant*, 2004
Oil on canvas
33.0 × 35.6 cm
Arthur Zeckendorf

8. *Studio Window at Night*, 2003
Oil on canvas
96.5 × 127 cm
Zabludowicz Collection

9. *Two Logs*, 2005
Oil on canvas
48.3 × 71.1 cm
Private Collection, Norfolk

10. *Tumbleweed*, 2005
Oil on canvas
106.7 × 132.1 cm
Private Collection, Norfolk

11. *Driftwood (windowsill)*, 2003
Oil on canvas
66 × 71.1 cm
Private Collection, London

Long Gallery 1

12. *Gourds*, 2006-07
Oil on canvas
48.3 × 96.5 cm
Private Collection

13. *The Hand*, 2011
Oil on canvas
15.9 × 21.8 cm
Private Collection

14. *Torso*, 2011
Oil on canvas
26 × 35.2 cm
Private Collection

15. *Rock, Foot, Plant*, 2009
Oil on canvas
22.9 × 35.6 cm
ONE2 Collection, USA

16. *The Butt*, 2007
Oil on canvas
33 × 33 cm
Private Collection

17. *The Penis*, 2006
Oil on canvas
27.8 × 30.4 cm
Private Collection

Long Gallery 2

18. *Armpit*, 2011
Oil on canvas
21.2 × 17.8 cm
Private Collection, San Francisco

19. *Three Parts*, 2014-15
Oil on canvas
17.8 × 17.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

20. *Abdomen*, 2014-15
Oil on canvas
24.4 × 27.8 cm
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

21. *Composition*, 2014-15
Oil on canvas
24.1 × 25.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

22. *The Leg*, 2010
Oil on canvas
20.3 × 27.9 cm
Courtesy of the artist

About the Artist

Ellen Altfest (born New York, 1970) gained a BFA in Painting and BA English from Cornell University, Ithaca, New York in 1993, an MFA in Painting from Yale University School of Art, New Haven, Connecticut, and attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine, in 2002. Her solo exhibitions include *Rocks and Trees* (2002) and *Still Lives* (2005), both at Bellwether Gallery New York, *Paintings* (2007) at White Cube, London, *The Leg* (2010), at Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas, and *Head and Plant* (2012), New Museum, New York.. She has been included in numerous group exhibitions, including USA Today: *New American Art from the Saatchi Gallery* (2006), Royal Academy of Arts, London. She received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2012 and exhibited in the 2013 Venice Biennale. Altfest lives and works in New York and is represented by White Cube, London. www.whitecube.com

Events Programme

See website for full listings
www.mkgallery.org/events

Special Exhibition Events

Wednesday 15 April / 10am - 3pm / £25
**Ellen Altfest Drawing Workshop:
Session One - Still Life**

Wednesday 13 May / 10am - 4pm / £25
**Ellen Altfest Drawing Workshop:
Session Two - The Figure**

Access Tour

Monday 27 April / Starts 12 noon
Audio Described Tour
Pre-booking via the Information Desk
A tour of the exhibition for those with a visual impairment.

Family Events

Free but places limited. Online pre-booking required via www.mkgallery.org or at the Information Desk.

Start the Art

Parent and toddler sessions
Suitable for under 5s
Every Tuesday, 11am -12noon

Mini Makers

Artist-led workshops suitable for accompanied children ages 5+
Every Saturday, 1-3pm

Collaborate Holiday Workshops

Suitable for ages 7+ and their families
Join Collaborate 2015 resident artist Anna Sikorska and her chosen guest artist for these free, creative sessions.

Friday 10 April / 10am-12noon or 2pm - 4pm
Friday 29 May / 10am-12noon or 2pm - 4pm

Thursday Scratch Nights

Diverse, free events every week, starting at 7pm and requiring pre-booking.

Thursday 9 April
Contemporary Days: The Designs of Lucienne and Robin Day (2010)
Dir. Murray Grigor (Cert. Exempt / 77min)

Thursday 16 April
Artists' Moving Image Programme: Mathieu K. Abonnenc

Thursday 23 April
!Women Art Revolution (2011)
Dir. Lynn Hershman-Leeson (Cert. Exempt / 83 min)

Thursday 30 April
Spoken Word: Open Mic

Thursday 7 May
Improv Night

Thursday 14 May
Artists' Moving Image Programme: Duncan Campbell

Thursday 21 May
Talk: MK Forum

Thursday 28 May
Talk: Hub to Hub Initiative

Friday Film Nights

Screenings start 7pm. Tickets £5 (concs £3)
Pre-book online at www.mkgallery.org or at the Information Desk.

Friday 10 April
Pride (2014)
Dir. Matthew Warchus (Cert.15 / 119min)

Friday 17 April
The Lunchbox (2014)
Dir. Ritesh Batra (Cert. PG / 104min)
In Hindi with English subtitles

Friday 24 April
Mr. Turner (2014)
Dir. Mike Leigh (Cert. 15 / 150mins)

Friday 1 May
Duke of Burgundy (2014)
Dir. Peter Strickland (Cert.18 /104min)

Friday 8 May
Selma (2014)
Dir. Ava DuVernay (Cert.12A / 128min)

Friday 15 May
Documentary: Maidan (2014)
Dir. Sergei Loznitsa (Cert.12A / 134min)

Friday 22 May
Whiplash (2014)
Dir. Damien Chazelle (Cert.15 / 107min)

Friday 29 May
Living Archive presents:
The Great War Remembered - an evening of live music and film

Saturday Live Music

Doors at 7.30pm. Tickets £5

Saturday 25 April / Free
Film/Music Event: BYOB MK III: A Broken Wave / Pre-booking essential

Saturday 9 May
Arabrot with John Doran, Chrononautz, Cantaloupe and Klaar

Saturday 23 May / Free
Film/Music/Literature Event
Bullet Proof Press presents: Dead men are heavier than broken hearts