

Daniel Kohn: Space as the Primal Frontier

By Paula Melton

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Interior scenes by Daniel Kohn testify that everything is a worthy subject of artistic study – including the kitchen sink. Not to mention the kitchen shelves, the refrigerator, the colander and the whisk. Flat but vivid expanses of wall and floor contrast with rashes of homey, familiar clutter. Not the stuff of Better Homes and Gardens perhaps, but certainly the stuff of life.

Kohn describes his current work as “abstracted interiors that explore the viewer's sense of space.” While he has begun working on smaller canvases, many pieces are still invitingly large, up to seven feet high. This size helps place the viewer within the space of the painting, while simultaneously making the surface – with canvas and pencil lines visible through a vibrant wash of ochre or blue – inescapable. While the paintings are not disorienting, they do seek to draw the viewer through the process of orientation.

To this end, the pieces as a group require frequent re-placement of the viewer in space. Variation on a Blue Floor 1 depicts a kitchen, with a view through the doorway to a fireplace with a mirror above the mantel. Variation on a Blue Floor 3 depicts what appears to be the same room, with certain pieces of furniture in their proper places, but this time a featureless wall fills more than half the canvas where the kitchen ought to be, and there is no mirror above the mantel in the adjoining room. Suddenly we are studying not only space, but also the role of the imagination in creating it.

“This all started from a house my mother owns in the country in France,” said Kohn, who is half French and half American, and whose sense of dual identity has always informed his work. “We made a hole in the ceiling and put in a staircase, and suddenly you could see the table from above. You could see people eating from a new angle.” This incident occasioned Kohn's interest in studying variations on the same interior from unusual angles. “Elements of that house are like Lego blocks that I take apart and move around in my mind,” he said.

The thinness of the oil paint and the sketchiness of the drawing help communicate the sense that these paintings are memories – or, as Kohn puts it, “reinventions” – in the process of crystallization on the canvas. Nothing brings this home more clearly than the two- and three-part reinventions, Kohn's diptychs and triptychs. Table Diptych shows a round table, viewed from above and spread across two canvases. The floor in the the left canvas is ochre; the floor in the right, blue. A bowl spans the two canvases, just

barely failing to match up between them.

The addition of elaborately patterned quilts and rugs to these sketchy, translucent interiors is a recent development in Kohn's work that re-grounds this constantly renovated space. While viewing several variations on the same interior may force constant reorientation, Kohn does not pull the rug out from under us. In fact, a boldly patterned rug is often the clearest and most opaque object in the room, off- setting the sketchiness of the painting with its earth-toned patterning.

Still, Kohn's work, though often full of comforting features, does not sit us down in an easy chair and offer tea and cakes. Instead, by lingering at strange angles in unpeopled rooms, the paintings invite us to rethink our sense of where and who we are.