

## DANIEL KOHN PAINTS SPACE DEFINED BY CONVERSATION

By C.L. Reading



DANIEL KOHN:  
Box, 2004, oil  
on canvas, 82 x  
81 inches  
Courtesy of  
Reeves  
Contemporary

Daniel Kohn, a painter who is best known here in New York City for the large panel installation at Grand Central Station in the summer of 2002 memorializing the World Trade Towers, is showing the first new series of work since the broad, sweeping urbanscapes as seen from the city's highest vantage point. Entitled *Interiors-Portraits*, the new works deal with interiors and are very much about relationship and how living spaces create spatial and emotional bonds.

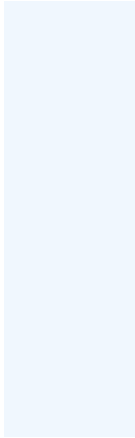
Although figuration is always present in Kohn's work, the backbone of his art is a sense of the architectonic nature of the painted space. Planes of light and color — of paint — define a radical space that challenges us as viewers through our bodies as well as our minds.

Kohn is an excellent draftsman. Elaborate compositions — a dinner table with glasses half filled with wine, people in conversation, empty bowls, shadows cast by the light from an adjacent kitchen — are carefully drawn in to begin the work. As the paintings progress and color fields are identified, objects and people are selectively painted out, leaving an open narrative and a dynamic sense of a space in flux. In one painting, *Red Four*, a quartet of empty chairs vibrates on a field of saturated red, a dance of objects tethered only by the suggested horizon line of a wall. In its partner painting, the rich, red color field again occupies most of the painting, bordered only by a slender line of neutral wall, and open, green shutters at the top right-hand corner. The pitch of the few colors present in both paintings is electric and elegant.

In all of the works, Kohn is handling oil paint more like watercolor, allowing it to glaze an area and wash layer by layer in the thinnest of patinas. Thus, the line between 'painted areas' and 'drawn areas' becomes moot: one's eye moves easily from raw linen and charcoal to light filled areas of orange, or deep blue, as easily as passing from one room into another.

The two large tableaus that dominate the exhibition allow the drawing beneath the painting to be a primary element. In one, "After Dinner in 1997," the center panel of the triptych features a charcoal sketched figure as its focal point, without any overlay of paint. Lightly pitched in a background of bright orange with the chair tilting slightly back away from the dinner table, this central figure is disengaged from the conversation, and begins to recede from the scene. The lack of engagement precludes his becoming more invisible to those surrounding him.

By contrast, the lively tableau of "New Years Eve 2003" depicts seven people at the end of dinner, all completely engaged and warmed by their shared company. The farther one's eye travels from the center of



the table, the sketchier the room becomes, with the back corner of the kitchen seemingly drawn in. Measuring 120 inches across, this is a painting one wishes to literally enter into, because its warmth is so pervasive.

As remembered spaces, the interiors are highly constructed. In contrast, for his portraiture Kohn focuses on the communal moment when the sitter, the painter and the space on the canvas all merge. It is a discussion made visual in which the painting itself compresses time — the time of repeated sessions, the different moods of the sitter, the perception of the painter, and finally the ultimate demands of the evolving canvas. One is reminded of Giacometti's rigorous discipline in rendering a subject. Through this three-part dance, the portrait emerges. These finely wrought paintings reveal much about their subjects — gently — while still staying true to the omnipresent concerns of compositional shapes and tonalities.