

ArtSeen

Jule Korneffel: *Here comes the night*

By Andrew L. Shea



Jule Korneffel, *The Unicorn in its Garden (at Night)*, 2022. Photo: Daniel Greer. Courtesy Spencer Brownstone Gallery.

Today people speak of a “golden hour,” when the sun is low on the horizon and emits a soft, warm light, as the best time to snap a selfie. For his part, Pierre Bonnard preferred “l’heure bleue” occurring immediately after sunset. In this transient moment of paradoxical stillness, ambient light reflects off the sky and bathes the world in cool, hushed tones, causing nature to appear almost as if illuminated from within. One can guess why this appealed to Bonnard, whose paintings emit not the depicted effects of some external light source, but rather their own more mysterious and internal glow.

With *Here comes the night*, an exhibition of eight acrylic paintings now at Spencer Brownstone, Jule Korneffel declares a similar infatuation with twilight atmosphere. The gallery’s press release states that in making these new works Korneffel painted “primarily but not exclusively” in the darkening hours, and that she used direct observation of the waning light in the studio to inform her selection of tones and colors. These abstract, minimalist canvases are muted, matte, and closely toned. Their hues skew cool as a rule.

Cold and forbidding, however, the paintings are not. Quivering fields and fleeting suggestions of geometric forms are inscribed with a sensitive hand. Thin films of translucent paint accumulate into generous, almost milky surfaces. Occasional flecks of texture, likely bits of dried paint picked up off the palette, are left on but painted over, giving the skins pretty pimples that you want to touch but not pop.



Jule Korneffel, *Another Tragic Moment in History (Detail of a Flower Still Life)*, 2021. Photo: Daniel Greer. Courtesy Spencer Brownstone Gallery.

The paintings vary substantially in size. A predominantly blue painting the size of a paperback book hangs next to a blacker one that’s nine feet tall. The phenomenological effects of these differences are striking, and with time one gets lost in the larger work, *Another Tragic Moment in History (Detail of a Flower Still Life)* (2021), its scotopic atmosphere concealing and revealing forms that drift in and out of periphery as the eye meanders at will.

As one continues to look, straining to make sense of the work's barely evoked structures, it's impossible not to think of Ad Reinhardt and his black paintings of the late 1950s and '60s. Yet with Korneffel one finds little of Reinhardt's stentorian demand for purist negation. Here comes the night, but day lingers yet, and we can be pretty sure that the sun will rise again, so long as we give it the chance. Indeed, these subtle paintings seem more closely aligned with Guston, who in 1960, while still painting abstractions, dismissed the "ridiculous and miserly" myth "that painting is autonomous, pure and for itself," arguing instead that "painting is 'impure.' It is the adjustment of 'impurities,'" he wrote, "which forces its continuity."

That Korneffel, like Guston, aspires to both impurity and continuity is apparent in her titles, which allude to a handful of influential painters from Western art history, folding a personal canon in with the contingent experiences and situations of the present: *Chagall without Goat, From Vuillard with Love (Rome 1996)*, *Sky, Sun, and Moon in a Giotto Fresco (Looking Southern on 2nd Ave)*, *Ppl Leaving (Fantin-Latour Blues)* (all 2021). The press release notes other influences such as Botticelli, Bellini, Monet, and Rothko. The smallest painting in the exhibition, *The Unicorn in its Garden (at Night)* (2022), stands erect on a plinth so that we can see its verso, where Korneffel has tucked into the stretcher bars a postcard of the Met Cloisters' enigmatic late fifteenth-century French tapestry, *The Unicorn Rests in a Garden* (1495-1505), depicting a delicate unicorn held captive in a field of resplendent flowers.

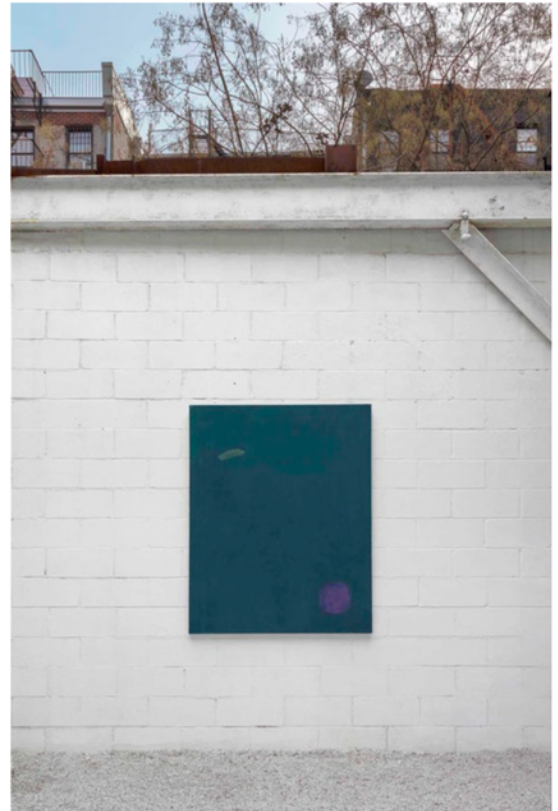
On the cloudless afternoon that I visited, the verso of *The Unicorn in its Garden (at Night)* faced the gallery's pebble-strewn courtyard space. Hanging on a cinderblock wall outside was the large *Sky, Sun and Moon in a Giotto Fresco (Looking Southern on 2nd Ave)* (2021). Against a predominantly dark-turquoise field, a ball of light-purple marks glows in the bottom right corner, and dash of pale yellow hangs in the top left. Shaded from direct sun by city buildings, the painting found light that was soft and even, yet remained perceptibly alive to the passage of natural time.

Jack Tworkov, whose nuanced late paintings also pit inscriptive, painterly gestures against self-imposed formal limitations, once wrote that "subtlety is to profundity what prettiness is to beauty." The meditative quietude of work like this can easily become anodyne or placid. But at her best, Korneffel finds real music within the austerity of her self-imposed parameters. On these lower frequencies, Korneffel has the precision of a great swing band playing pianissimo, its muted horns speaking at the level of an emphatic whisper.

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Installation view, Jule Korneffel, *Here comes the night*, Spencer Brownstone Gallery, New York, 2022. Photo: Daniel Greer. Courtesy Spencer Brownstone Gallery.