

## One Way Mirror

### On the Paintings of Megan Rye

By Marc Handelman

Ultimately—or at the limit—in order to see a photograph well, it is best to look away or close your eyes. “The necessary condition for an image is sight,” Janouch told Kafka; and Kafka smiled and replied: “We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds.

My stories are a way of shutting my eyes.

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Forms both foreign and familiar bleed into view. A white plastic lawn chair, a red and white shoebox, a darkened two-liter bottle, dishware and deep shadows emerge from a dense sea of objects. The scene slowly unfolds, receding toward a brilliant spectral illumination. Similar to the effects from the cadence of a fluorescent light, surfaces flatten, colors homogenize and edges fade. Forms closest to the penetrating light dissolve toward it in soft eradication. We seem to be in a small room which resembles a store. Debris litters the shelving and floor and a haunting stillness governs the topography. We are poised in a liminal space of waiting, hovering before and after an event, anxiously scanning the surfaces to locate some sense of place and time. Such is the scene from *Iraqi Store, RRN1*, one of Megan Rye’s meticulously constructed and beautifully enigmatic paintings that have moved toward an interiority at once uncanny and haunted.

Since 2005, Megan Rye has been making paintings based on photographs taken by her younger brother Ryan, a U.S. Marine who supervised the Regional Detention Facility in Fallujah and ran convoy operations within the Sunni Triangle from August 2004 to March 2005. While the original photographs function as traditional documentary photography, Rye’s paintings are by contrast reflections on the photographic medium. They attempt not to picture the war or literally transcribe the photographic image in paint, but seek to materialize a connection to the presence and sight of the photographer. The growing proliferation of photographs taken by soldiers in Iraq is clearly evidenced by the overwhelming results of any Internet search engine, externalizing the picturing of the war. But the poignancy and locus

of her project emerges fundamentally as an inquiry and exploration of the interior spaces that fortify our connections to one another, animating our strongest hopes and latent fears. Rye’s project, aptly titled *I Will Follow You Into the Dark*, charts this chasm between our lives and the distant experiences of those closest to us, reanimating frozen moments of vision that lead us toward a connective space of intimacy and proximity.

Culled from an archive of over 2000 photographs, the pictures Rye selects for the source of each painting are informed by a number of aesthetic, formal, and psychological considerations. Within the process of painting, the parameters of legibility, alteration and abstraction are constantly negotiated toward an estrangement of the image, dislocating it from the optical constraints of the photograph. Forms dissolve into each other, light is re-dramatized, hues shift into spectral harmonies, and the physical body of the painting itself is materialized in elegant and controlled buttery planes of color. The act of painting thus mediates these subtle interventions of representation, decoding and reordering information, fictionalizing narratives, warping space and adjusting the myriad surfaces of a subject. If these are scenes we only partially feel we have known or recognize, Rye’s paintings draw us deeper toward a world that feels closer to memory. Shadows engulf forms, objects soften, details retract, and the nocturnal infuses everything, even under the phosphorescent blaze of the sun.

There is an almost filmic quality to these beautiful and sometimes distant paintings, a particular softness of light that seems to be in a perpetual state of departure. The distilled temporal dimension of painting for Rye suggests a process of *mourning-in-advance*, extending a fraction of a second in her brother’s photograph into a space of weeks or months, capturing the trailing essence perhaps already-abandoned from a moment of sight or life. The German painter Gerhard Richter, responding to a question about his relationship to his photographic sources once said: “It is so important that I paint it. I am fascinated by the human, temporal, real, logical side of an occurrence which is simultaneously so unreal, so incomprehensible and so atemporal. And I would like to represent it in such a way that this contradiction is preserved.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the unreality of Rye’s project is related to the condition in which those of us “back



Left: **Mosul, Iraq 12.21.04**, 2005, oil on canvas, 32 x 90 inches

Right: **Dawn**, 2007, oil on canvas, 78 x 103 inches

**I Will Follow You Into the Dark**, 2006, oil on canvas, 42 x 58 inches

**Judgment**, 2007 oil on canvas, 61 x 81 inches

**What We Found**, 2007, oil on canvas, 63 x 73 inches

home” attempt to bridge the distances and representations of those away in this war. These temporal poetics between the photograph and the painting are everywhere present, illuminated in particular by the desire for the distillation of an endless instant.

*Mosul, Iraq 12.21.04*, the first painting in Rye’s project, began when her brother was still in Iraq. It remains the singular painting whose sole photographic source was taken by a photojournalist. It appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* and depicted a mess hall in the tragic aftermath of a bombing that killed twenty-two people, including U.S. soldiers. In *Mosul*, Rye doubles the image of the mess hall. Mirroring out from its center like an elongated Rorschach blot, its large-scale horizontal format recalls the epic American landscapes of the mid-19th century. The growing destabilization of forms in the foreground draws us into the enveloping proximity of a billowing geometric abstract field, a threshold at once monolithic and ethereal. Light pours through this space of containment, filling the hall as in a ruin of a giant cathedral. The mirroring structure recalls, among other things, the sublime geometry and hallucinogenic space of Sharon Ellis’s landscape paintings. But unlike the euphoric and electric color of Ellis, Rye’s palette grows ever dark with a steely range of grays, greens, cool-pinks, half-tones and rich blacks. If Rye’s painting performs a kind of hallucination for the viewer, however mesmerizing, it is a palpably ominous one.

A similar uncanny stillness pervades many of Rye’s paintings that have followed. In *The Alamo, RRN3* the dark block-like shapes of an armored vehicle refract and are engulfed by the receding geometry of homes and distant buildings. The atmosphere is bathed in a soft pink glow in the frozen hours of dawn or dusk. A gun turret breaks the planar and rectilinear structure of the grid, delicately touching the faint trail of a distant electrical wire. Illuminating this hushed scene, the sky stretches and bows horizontally in three concentric bands across the canvas. Similarly, in *Dawn* a massive and radiant sun ascends above a shadowy cityscape, animating its surfaces with the orange reflections of its inferno. At once apocalyptic and encroaching, a familiar “central silence” orchestrates the atmosphere of this ambiguously violent, yet ordinary solar cycle. The scene recalls the incredible stillness of a Luminist painting, whose frequent maritime skies such as Francis

Silva’s *Schooner Passing Castle Island, Boston Harbor* (1874) are caught in the moments just before or after the passing of a great storm, when the water is flat, and there isn’t a cloud in the sky. “Luminist silence,” writes art historian Barbara Novak, “implies presence through the sense of *thereness* rather than through activity. Inaudibility is a correlative of immobilized time and objects. . . . Yet luminist silence, in the repose of inaction, represents not a void but a palpable space, in which everything happens while nothing does.”<sup>3</sup>

In the harsh green iridescence of *I Will Follow You Into the Dark*, a crouching Marine digging a hole in the middle of the night turns his head to face the photographer. Through the lens of night vision goggles, invisibility is processed into sight and a poetic equivalence is suggested between the mediating technologies of what the military calls “Enhanced Spectral Range Vision” and that of painting. Both attempt to bring into existence that which is tangible but outside of empirical sight, and both mark a lapse or void in representation: the transcription of the scene would remain locked in the memory card of her brother’s camera, and only be re-visualized later by Rye. Here, she “sees” what her brother most likely did not. The glance backwards of the Marine reminds us of a gaze that is our own, and in a creeping mental transference, we become the photographer through the eyes of the painter.

From the back seat of an armored vehicle, the beautifully elegiac *Fallujah to Abu Ghraib, RRN2* situates our gaze past the shoulder of a helmeted soldier who drives us toward an impenetrable white light radiating from the other side of the windshield. Here the title of Rye’s project is reflexively inverted as we enter into the darkness of a blinding void. *One Way Mirror*, situated again in the confines of a vehicle, is fragmented into an irregular grid. Reflections of a face veer in and out of focus through the smudges and dusty veneer of a rearview mirror. In the lower left corner we see a hand holding a camera and realize we are looking at a self-portrait of Rye’s brother. Slicing through the painting’s bottom edge is the familiar warning: OBJECTS IN THE MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR. This hauntingly intimate portrait soberly reminds us of the potential for painting to bring us closer to someone, but also of the inherent illusions not only of vision, but of desire.



Rye’s most recent painting, *Judgment*, evokes the fluctuating fields of an abstracted montage implying the re-coding and obfuscation of information. An intricately patterned, blood-red Persian carpet extends vertiginously into space, as if the picture plane were being tipped back through the wall, pulling the viewer along with it. The viewer is stabilized momentarily by the calligraphic traces of what appear to be hunched figures that weave in and out of the field. A man praying and a looming figure in watery reflection hover within the picture collapsing and disjoining a sense of scale. Rye has indicated that here, for the first time in her paintings, she has incorporated external photographic sources in combination with those of her brother’s. This intervention signals very different inquiries and deployments of documentary photography as well as that of “the archive.” As questions of authorship are layered and information is radically de-contextualized, Rye’s abstraction further fractures our gaze of empirical sight toward a process of painting rooted in subjective vision. As Richter has said of vision and the desire to paint, “We can’t rely on the picture of reality that we see, because we see it mediated through the lens apparatus of the eye, and corrected in accordance with past experience. And because that is not enough for us—because we want to know whether it can all be different,—we paint.”<sup>4</sup>

If, as Kafka has suggested, photographing something is “a way to drive the image out of our minds,” then for Rye, the paintings are a re-inscription of vision, a way of burning those spaces and forms into one’s memory, a process that fills an individual and cultural void. Yet curiously, while painting may work against the lacuna of memory caused by trauma, the images Rye has chosen do not necessarily suggest a need for repression. These pictures are not horrific or gruesome. They do not participate in what has been called the “aestheticization of suffering,” or its more recent critique. Rye’s scenes are the prosaic routines of military life. Such is the unsettling and haunting banality of *What We Found*, in which a U.S. soldier gazes down at a letter in the small vacated kitchen of an abandoned home. But within this sublimated space of death, Kafka’s observation echoes throughout the documentation of Ryan’s life in Iraq. And if depictions of direct violence have not been selected as photographic sources, were never shot, or in fact have been painted out, tension

remains marshaled between the potential for horror before, after, or just outside of the frame.

But if Ryan’s photography suggests a way of shutting one’s eyes, it also seems to suggest a concurrent desire to capture what is there, and a desire to speak. Indeed for Barthes, what often unlocks the personal meaning of a photograph is located in the emotional-afterimage. After quoting Kafka, he goes on to write: “The photograph must be silent. . . . (Shutting your eyes is to make the image speak in silence).”<sup>5</sup> The significance of a photograph then, on one level, is located not within the visual coherence of its field, but within the interiority of its viewer. The strange and radiant silence of Rye’s vast, enigmatic canvases attempts to explore and distill this condition. It is a silence at once palpable and sonic. At a time when we are “bringing the war home,” the immobilization of a different kind of silence for those returning, and their families, can be stronger than pictures or words. Indeed it is often easier to look away or try and forget that which may haunt us. But within the intimacies of the hours Rye has spent seeking to embody her brother’s gaze, in these distillations of an endless instant, her paintings slowly unlock these pictures, transforming them into speech. Here in the intricate spaces between the photographer, the painter and the viewer, Megan Rye’s powerful, complicated and elegiac paintings remind us of the beauty that exists and sustains us in darkness.

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1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 53.

2. Gerhard Richter, “An Interview with Dieter Hulsmanns and Fridolin Reske, 1966,” in *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews, 1962–1993* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), p. 58.

3. Barbara Novak, “On Defining Luminism,” in *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850–1875; Paintings, Drawings, Photographs* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1980), pp. 27–28.

4. Richter, “An Interview with Peter Sager, 1972,” in *Daily Practice of Painting*, p. 68.

5. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 53–55.

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Front: Fallujah to Abu Ghraib, RRN2, 2006, oil on canvas, 20 x 30 inches  
Inside flap: Iraqi Store, RRN1, 2006, oil on canvas, 36 x 45 inches

## I Will Follow You Into the Dark

Paintings by Megan Rye

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