

# NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021 [nightgallery.ca](http://nightgallery.ca)

Ashton Cooper, "Critic's Pick: Cynthia Daignault, *Elegy* at Night Gallery," *Artforum*, November 2019 issue.

## ARTFORUM



Cynthia Daignault, *Elegy (House on Fire)*, 2019, oil on linen, 64 × 96".

### Cynthia Daignault

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In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1945 essay "Cézanne's Doubt," the philosopher used the painter's work to propose that an individual's process of applying paint to canvas could serve as an index of the artist's phenomenological experience of the world. "His painting was paradoxical," Merleau-Ponty wrote. "He was pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous

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surface, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature.” While Cézanne repetitively painted Mont Sainte-Victoire from life, Cynthia Daignault has, for the past five years, devoted herself to picturing the American landscape—actual scenes observed from nature as well as from film stills, documentary photographs, and other images taken from our cultural history. These landscape paintings aren’t simple records of an object or a place but testimonies to Daignault’s “immediate impressions”: her embodied experience, her observations, her browsing history, her fears, her research, her memories.

For her first solo show in Los Angeles, “Elegy,” Daignault built on her recent large-scale project *Light Atlas*, 2014–17, for which she drove across the country and stopped every twenty-five miles to paint what she saw. “Elegy,” however, presented a darker vision of the United States. Gone were the brightly hued beachscapes and perky Southwest cacti of the earlier canvases. These paintings were drained of sanguinity. Rendered exclusively in shades of gray, they meditated on the “abject horror” of “environmental collapse,” as the artist wrote for the exhibition text. Their scale was equally formidable (as big as 86 by 129 inches, compared to roughly eight by ten inches for the paintings in *Light Atlas*), recalling Mark Rothko’s seemingly counterintuitive comment, “I paint very large pictures . . . precisely because I want to be very intimate and human.” In *Elegy (House on Fire)*, 2019, the painting’s size allows for a more immersive interaction with Daignault’s supple and sculptural handling of paint. Did the impression that we can see Daignault’s process—conceivably her phenomenological experience of the world—heighten our own bodily response to the canvas in front of us? At the very least, the larger size invited the viewer to move around in front of the work. Seen from a distance, the burning house was relatively naturalistic, but from the perspective of a few inches away one could forget that the painting is representational at all. What once appeared to be leaping flames liquesced into dozens of twitching brushstrokes.

One alluring aspect of this show was how the images proposed different conceptions of “landscape.” While some of Daignault’s choices verged on the didactic (a ticking clock, a mountain vista, a portrait of John Muir), others were more capacious: a rearing horse on a dusty patch of land (comprising a scene that turned out to be a still from *The Misfits* [1961])

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and Al and Tipper Gore's infamously long kiss at the Democratic National Convention in 2000. One of my favorite pieces depicted Ernst Haas's 1969 photo of Helen Frankenthaler kneeling over a canvas in her studio. An assortment of terse little black brushstrokes abbreviate the bristles of the brush in her hand. The gesture of including Frankenthaler felt cryptic until I remembered that she often talked about her works as landscapes ("If I am forced to associate, I think of my pictures as explosive landscapes, worlds, and distances held on a flat surface," she said in 1957). Like Frankenthaler, Daignault sees landscape not as some circumscribed entity but as an expanse, a perspective.

Daignault's meditation on landscape, her elegy for it, foreclosed the possibility of a resolved idea or disinterested evaluation of the world. Instead, the artist invited viewers into the process, leaving them to navigate her web of imagery themselves. Her painted universe, set in mercurial strokes, shifts dramatically depending on your proximity to it—much like memory itself. In his analysis of Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty wrote, "Cézanne discovered [that] . . . the lived perspective . . . is not a geometric or photographic one." Daignault's dirge for the environment did not aspire to verisimilitude, but attempted to render the artist's own anxieties about the end of the world. The works paid homage to things that no longer exist, and to things that very well may not exist in the near future.

—*Ashton Cooper*