



SUSAN  
BEE



CATALOG DESIGN: Rita Lascaro

PHOTOGRAPHY: Ken Pelka

FRONT COVER: Susan Bee, *Eye to Eye* (detail), oil on linen, 18 x 24 inches, 2012.

BACK COVER: Susan Bee, *Pennies From Heaven*, oil on linen, 16 x 20 inches, 2011.

Thanks to Kristen Accola and Katherine Griefen.

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Essay © Raphael Rubinstein, 2013

SUSAN  
BEECRISS  
CROSS NEW  
PAINTINGS

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Essay by Raphael Rubinstein

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SUSAN BEE  
*OUT THE WINDOW*  
OIL AND ENAMEL ON LINEN  
16 X 20 INCHES  
2011

# Capitals of Pain & Love: Susan Bee's Recent Work

by Raphael Rubinstein

AGAIN AND AGAIN in Susan Bee's recent paintings we are shown figures who have been caught, enclosed, imprisoned or hemmed in, men and women apparently with no avenue of escape from the circumstances (visual, narrative, psychological, historical) that surround them. Obviously, this is true of the woman in *Arrested* (2011) who finds herself being led away by two plainclothes detectives. An ongoing series depicting people in cars—this motif made its first appearance in Bee's 2011 exhibition at A.I.R. Gallery—artfully uses automobile window frames to compress drivers and passengers alike into tight spaces, emphasizing their desperation or intimacy, or both. Building windows are also used to convey a sense of restricted freedom. The explicitly titled *No Exit* (2012) portrays a man boxed in by a grid of brown bands and colored panels. In *Out the Window* (2011), a woman holds her hand up to a windowpane, perhaps beseeching our help, perhaps merely testing the limits of her confinement. As in many of Bee's new paintings, the image in *Out the Window* derives from a film noir still, though cinephiles will invariably be reminded of two other iconic woman-in-the-window shots: Maya Deren with her hands pressed against a window in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, and Anna Karina in *Alphaville* when she flattens a copy of Paul Eluard's *Capitale de la Douleur* against a plate-glass window.

The city inhabited by Bee's film noir refugees could well be a Capital of Pain: conflict, fear, menace and violence surround or pursue them. But something else also swirls around these dramatic figures: dense arrays of painterly marks and patterns that flow

into every available space in most of Bee's paintings. The rear window of the car in *Drive She Said* (2011) is activated by a tight weave of violet and blue brushstrokes. In *Trouble Ahead* (2012), where two young women huddle apprehensively in a backseat, Bee fills the car's rear window with an abstract composition of glowing circles, rectangles and irregular shapes. It's the kind of handmade geometry that is found frequently in mid 20th-century abstract painting but is rarely if ever seen in the context of film noir imagery. In other paintings, Bee deploys dripped and poured lines à la André Masson or Jackson Pollock.

One of the many impressive aspects of Bee's new work is the variety she finds within a given format. The patterns, palettes and techniques she turns to for the spaces surrounding her figures are constantly varied as Bee calls upon her painterly skills and historical knowledge to create compositions appropriate for the content and mood of each work. This doesn't mean, however, that Bee seeks only to provide abstract equivalents for the inner states of her protagonists. Although she certainly invites us to connect the figurative and abstract parts of each painting, and ultimately to absorb them as a single experience, it is also true that the non-figurative areas take on a life of their own.

In some cases, the abstract patterns are not restricted to the background but also migrate onto the figures' clothing. Interestingly, this seems to happen most often in the paintings where affection rather than tension is the dominant mood, or when, in film genre terms, film noir is replaced by the romantic comedy or the musical. I'm thinking, here, of paintings such as *Eye to Eye* (2012) and *Fred and Adele* (2012). In the latter, inspired by a photograph of Fred Astaire and his sister Adele, Fred's jacket and bowtie explode with colorful interlocking forms while Adele's dress is an all-over pattern of dots and circles. (It's impossible not to notice a striking resemblance between Fred and the young Picasso.) But as always with Bee, any attempt at strict categorizing quickly collapses: she can also make conflict-driven paintings where the figures' clothes are every bit as vibrant and abstract as in the affectionate scenes. *The Slap* (2012), for instance, where a woman is seen in the act of slapping a man, is noteworthy for the luxuriant formal designs of the battling couple's outfits. Another noteworthy thing about *The Slap* is the intensity of its emotion, a quality foregrounded all the more by the Alex Katzian trope of posing flattened figures



SUSAN BEE  
*TROUBLE AHEAD*  
OIL ON CANVAS  
20 X 24 INCHES  
2012



SUSAN BEE  
*FACE TO FACE*  
OIL AND ENAMEL ON CANVAS  
20 X 24 INCHES  
2013



SUSAN BEE

*FRED AND ADELE*

OIL AND ENAMEL ON CANVAS

24 X 20 INCHES

2012



SUSAN BEE

*THE SLAP*

OIL AND ENAMEL ON CANVAS

24 X 20 INCHES

2012

against a dark background. Whatever her formal influences, Bee is clearly in the line of emotionally engaged American painters: Marsden Hartley, Alice Neel, Philip Guston.

She also is involved with the history of European painting. Caspar David Friedrich has long been central for Bee, who shares with the great German Romantic painter a vision of landscape as a setting for spiritual drama. In his study *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, Joseph L. Koerner argues that Friedrich “fashions his works . . . as altars but must leave out the gods.” There is certainly a devotional aspect to Bee’s work, which, even when encoded with art-historical references, possesses the directness of ex voto paintings. Her work is as far as possible from the ironic strategies of appropriation art. In her most recent reworkings of Friedrich (all 2012) such as *Sunrise* (after Friedrich’s *Woman Before the Setting Sun*, 1818), *Side by Side* (inspired by his *Moonrise over the Sea*, 1822) and *The Chalk Cliffs* (after the German’s *Chalk Cliffs on Rügen*, 1818–19), Bee thoroughly assimilates her sources, reimagining them in her own painterly language so that it is ultimately not necessary to know the original behind her cover version.

If Friedrich represents the allure of the sublime, the dream of finding in nature a new transcendent religious experience, a very different artist and a very different world view guides the paintings in which Bee borrows from Chaim Soutine. As an Eastern European Jew who embodied his anguish in agitated paint handling and distorted forms, Soutine provides Bee with access to a more turbulent vision. Her painting *Alphabet of the Trees* (2012), for instance, is based on one of Soutine’s views of the gnarled trees of Céret in the French Pyrenees. Soutine-like passages of vigorously worked paint even appear in some film-still paintings such as *Pennies from Heaven* (2011).

Perhaps because of her immersion in film imagery, Bee pays much attention to where her figures are looking. Sometimes they stare straight at the viewer, sometimes at each other. On occasion their sideways glances create oblique lines of vision as in *Criss Cross* (2012), a tightly packed picture in which a couple who look like actors in some late 1940s French film (perhaps starring Jean Marais) play out their personal drama in a setting where every surface is filled with passages of gestural abstractions.

(The still is actually derived from a 1949 American film starring Burt Lancaster and Yvonne De Carlo.) In perfect coordination with the 1940s look of the figures, the painted interior explicitly evokes postwar Surrealist automatism. It also recalls, intentionally or not, Pinot Gallizio's *Caverna dell'antimateria* (1959), a legendary installation that involved covering every inch of the walls, ceiling and floor of a Paris gallery with unstretched gestural abstractions. Maybe the *mise en scène* of Bee's painting is more literal than it initially seems. "What would it be like," both she and Gallizio ask, "to live within a house of abstraction?"

While the majority of Bee's recent paintings are interiors, in two important paintings it is exterior architecture that takes center stage. In *Death in Venice* (2011), Venetian palazzi and churches painted in warm yellows, ochres and pinks are silent onlookers onto a strange sight: a winged woman riding atop a magical cloud under which sails a gondola. The waters of the canal traversed by the gondola are a field of multi-colored abbreviated brushstrokes. Based on a vintage photograph of a funeral gondola, the painting seems to memorialize the artist's daughter Emma Bee Bernstein, who died in Venice in 2008 at the age of 23. If one didn't know the tragic background, or didn't think too much about the implications of the title, the rich, bright colors of the painting and its fanciful imagery could lull one into regarding this as yet another romantic depiction of La Serenissima. The strangely anthropomorphic buildings, which don't appear in the source image, seem physically unmovable but emotionally moved. In his 1945 book *Venice: An Aspect of Art*, the English art critic Adrian Stokes observes how "it is one thing to walk past a building, another to glide past, to slip slowly in continuous movement. The hesitancy of water reveals architectural immobility." Bee's dreamlike picture captures perfectly this confrontation of movement and stasis.

Family history also guides *Ahava, Berlin* (2012), a painting that shows a large weathered building distinguished by its arched entryway and paint-spattered facade. Standing to one side of the imposing entry arch is a woman dressed in purple and green clothes and a colorfully patterned scarf. Although the title doesn't tell us so, this is a self-portrait of the artist. Bee presents herself gazing straight at the viewer, not turned away as in one of the Friedrich-inspired *rückenfigur* paintings. The painting was inspired by a trip Bee made in 2012 to Berlin with her husband,



SUSAN BEE

*CRISS CROSS*

OIL, ENAMEL, AND SAND ON CANVAS

24 X 30 INCHES

2012



SUSAN BEE  
*DEATH IN VENICE*  
OIL ON LINEN  
18 X 24 INCHES  
2011

poet Charles Bernstein. By chance, they found themselves staying near the former Ahava Kinderheim, a politically progressive Jewish children's home where Bee's mother, Miriam Laufer (1918–1980) had lived from 1927 to 1934. (Following the Nazi rise to power, the Ahava Kinderheim and its inhabitants, including Bee's mother, providentially relocated to Palestine.) Situated in the former East Berlin, and also in the Mitte, Berlin's old Jewish quarter, the Ahava building was war-scarred, dilapidated and heavily graffitied when Bee came upon it. In her painting she translates those features into automatist paint drips, mostly red and blue. Exuding a violence that is rare in Bee's other abstract motifs (even when they accompany a violent scene), these skeins and drips of paint suggest that the building itself is wounded. Standing stiffly under a plaque that reads "Ahava," the artist is a diminutive figure who looks overwhelmed by the ravaged facade, by the tortured history it represents.

Yet, at the center of the painting something else is happening. Reflected in the mirrored entryway of the ex-Ahava Kinderheim are details of buildings on the other side of the street. Or maybe some details are of the interior courtyard—the painter plays with subtle spatial ambiguity. In contrast to the paint-spattered Ahava facade, these buildings are clean and cared-for; Bee paints them with soft geometric forms and muted yellows and whites. A green-leafed tree is partly visible. Unexpectedly, Bee transforms a snapshot situation (tourist daughter standing in front of orphanage where mother lived as child) into a powerful image of hope and renewal, albeit one that acknowledges the heavy price of history. The ultimate message of this painting is legible on the sign placed just above Bee's head: "Ahava," the Hebrew word for love.

RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN is a New York-based poet and art critic whose books include *Polychrome Profusion: Selected Art Criticism 1990–2002* (Hard Press Editions) and *The Afterglow of Minor Pop Masterpieces* (Make Now Press). He is professor of Critical Studies at the University of Houston. In 2002, the French government presented him with the award of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters. In 2010, his blog *The Silo* won a Creative Capital/Warhol Foundation arts writer grant.





SUSAN BEE  
*AHAVA, BERLIN*  
OIL, ENAMEL, AND SAND  
ON CANVAS  
24 X 36 INCHES  
2012

# Susan Bee

SUSAN BEE IS A PAINTER, BOOK ARTIST, AND EDITOR, who lives in New York. She has had six solo exhibitions of her paintings and works on paper at A.I.R. Gallery in New York, as well as solo shows at the University of Pennsylvania, Kenyon College, Columbia University, William Paterson College, and Virginia Lust Gallery, NY. Her work has also been included in numerous group exhibitions in the United States and abroad.

Bee's work is included in public and private collections including the Getty Museum, the Douglas F. Cooley Memorial Art Gallery at Reed College, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, The British Library, Victoria & Albert Museum, Yale University, Clark Art Institute, New York Public Library, and Harvard University Library.

The artist's work has been reviewed in *Art in America*, *The New York Times*, *ArtPapers*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Forward*, *NY Arts*, and *ArtNews*. She has had fellowships at MacDowell Colony in 2012, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, in 2002 and 1999, and Yaddo in 2001 and 1996. In addition, she has had Publication Grants, from the Visual Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts, from 1992 to 1997, and Publication Grants from the Visual Arts Program, New York State Council on the Arts, from 1989 to 1997.

Bee has published fourteen artist books including collaborations with poets Susan Howe, Johanna Drucker, Charles Bernstein, Jerome Rothenberg, Regis Bonvicino, and Jerome McGann. Her upcoming book project is *Fabulas Feminae* with Johanna Drucker.

Bee is the coeditor, with Mira Schor, of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artist's Writings, Theory, and Criticism*, published by Duke University Press in 2000. She coedited *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: A Journal of Contemporary Art Issues* from 1986-1996 and continues as coeditor of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G Online*.

Susan Bee has a BA from Barnard College and a MA in Art from Hunter College. She teaches at the School of Visual Arts and at the University of Pennsylvania.

SUSAN BEE  
*ALPHABET OF THE TREES*  
(DETAIL)  
OIL ON CANVAS  
20 X 24 INCHES  
2012





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