



HYPERALLERGIC

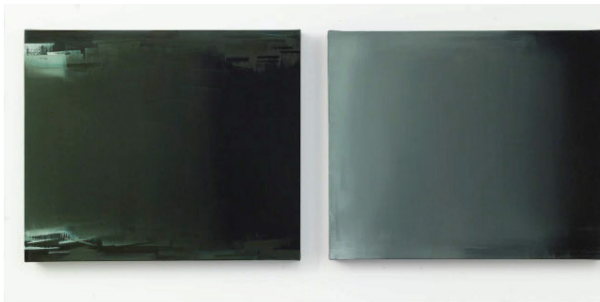
GALLERIES • WEEKEND

Nancy Haynes Invites Us to Look Closely

For those who have followed Haynes' work, her open-ended, experimental approach is not surprising. She is both rigorous and adventuresome without ever claiming these qualities for herself.



John Yau



Nancy Haynes, "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night..." (2016), oil on canvas, diptych, 21.5 x 53 inches (all images courtesy Regina Rex)

Nancy Haynes titled her diptych, "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening we drink it at midday and

morning we drink it at night..." (2016). In total, it measures 21.5 by 53 inches, with a one-inch space between the identically sized paintings. The painting's title is a translation of the first two lines of Paul Celan's famous poem, "Todesfuge" ("Death Fugue," ca.1945), an uncanny evocation of an encounter between a guard and a grave-digging prisoner in a concentration camp.

In 1988, on the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, the poem was read in the German Parliament. Numerous composers have set “Death Fugue” to music, while a line from it — “Death is a master from Germany” — has been incorporated into songs performed by German punk and black metal bands. In 1981, Anselm Kiefer made two paintings, “Dein goldenes Haar Margarete” and “Dein aschenes Haar Sulamith,” which refer to the poem’s final couplet: “your golden hair Margarete / your ashen hair Sulamith.” He has gone on to make many more paintings and sculptures in which he references this poem, down to writing parts of it in his work.



Nancy Haynes, “night reading” (2015), oil on linen, 21.5 x 26 inches

Haynes approaches Celan’s haunting poem more obliquely. There are neither images nor words on the canvas. It is her inexplicitness — her refusal to spell anything out — that has always gotten me to look at her work, most recently in her exhibition, [*Nancy Haynes: this painting oil on linen*](#) at Regina Rex (April 7 – May 14, 2017). The tension between the literal and the metaphorical, between paint as paint or paint as black milk and/or fugitive light is unsettling, because you are thrown back on yourself. You know that you have left the

territory of “what you see is what you see,” but you are not quite sure where you have gone.

In each painting of the diptych, there is a subtle darkening from left to right. In the painting on the left, the brushstrokes ending near the paintings top left edge release a turquoise light, at once material and muffled. This occurs along the bottom left of the painting as well. The field between these glowing streaks gradually darkens as our eyes move to the right, a transition that feels inevitable. For a brief moment one might be reminded of a mist of condensation or a sheet of rain, but, in the end, the painting and painting take over. The movement of the brush and the pressure of application are evident. You cannot be sure if the brushstrokes were slow or fast, perhaps both. By covering the canvas, what is she uncovering? Questions and metaphors rise to the surface.



Nancy Haynes, “the painting undressed”
(2011), diptych, oil on linen, 18 x 40 inches

Something different happens in the painting on the right. Its gray-green milky hue slowly darkens from left to right until it is black along the right-hand side. Again, the association for me was with the sky, a darkening storm cloud. And, as with the painting on the left, the association falls away and I am looking at a subtleness of paint and hue that reaches an exquisite hush. By placing these two related but very different paintings together, Haynes underscores that she is never programmatic, no matter how circumscribed her means: every stroke is discovered and felt. She approaches monochrome but never arrives.

For those who have followed Haynes' work, her open-ended, experimental approach is not surprising. Her works include a series of autobiographical color charts; graphite lines drawn across a field of fluorescent paint activated by ultraviolet light; paintings inspired by Georges Seurat's drawings, which explore the pressure of the hand pressing conte crayon against toothed paper. She is both rigorous and adventuresome without ever claiming these qualities for herself.



Nancy Haynes, "mise en abyme" (2015), oil on linen, 21.5 x 26 inches

You feel that long before Haynes started working on her diptych, "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at evening we drink it at midday and morning we drink it at night...," she took this statement by Paul Cezanne to heart: "Sensations form the foundation of my work, and they are imperishable." The difference — and it is not a small one — is that Haynes seems preoccupied with the perishable, with the passage from day to night, and from revelation to extinction. For her, these two states seem inseparable, darkness gradating into hushed light, and hushed light gradating into darkness. The deliberated tentativeness we feel in many of her paintings arises from her recognition that nothing is permanent within this ever-changing reality. Her refusal to grasp what might be thought of as the concrete in Celan's poems amounts to an

ethical choice as well as an aesthetic one. Her refusal to replace the emptiness at the core of the Holocaust with something graspable results in a very different work from the better-known, more palatable ones by Anselm Kiefer.

“black milk of daybreak,” and, equally important, if she and the viewer could “drink” it in. Haynes knows that paint, that poisonous milk, is what she lives on.



Nancy Haynes, “reaching back” (2016) oil on linen, 21.5 x 26 inches

Although I have never talked to Haynes about this painting, and have no idea what was on her mind when she started it, I think the various points I have touched upon are among the reasons that Celan’s poem spoke to her: she wanted to know if paint could become

Nancy Haynes: this painting oil on linen *continues at Regina Rex (221 Madison Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through May*