



Serena Stevens, *Kylie*, 2019, oil on canvas, 72 × 90".

Serena Stevens

POSTMASTERS

If the various isolative protocols necessitated by the recent lockdown have changed our relationship with the wider world, they have just as surely reshaped the ways we perceive and inhabit our own personal spaces. The altered rhythms of these pandemic days have made us suddenly aware of the heretofore unfamiliar: a pet's midday routines, for instance, or a graceful slant of afternoon light that has always been present in our absence. These attentional shifts can have the effect of making captivating, and even profound, what had previously seemed like inconsequential minutiae. In the work of Iowa City–based painter Serena Stevens, whose "Iowa Dreams" marked her first solo show in New York, an especially keen attentiveness to the particularities of the newly present domestic world is translated into assured and nuanced figurative paintings. Her heightened sensitivity to the play of light on architecture, furniture, and objects suggests the quiet lambency of Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi's sublimely muted interiors crossed with Philip Pearlstein's jazzy spatiality and palette. (In place of the latter's signature nudes, the bodies of lolling cats populate her interiors.) Stevens's careful looking and easygoing skill transform the environs she portrays into sites of atmospheric allure, suggesting that a similar program of conscientious observation might also turn our own by-now-contemptibly-familiar living spaces into sites of modest revelation.

Featuring eleven works made within the past two years, the Postmasters show overlapped with the exhibition of a single painting by the artist—of the ceiling fan that cools the room where it was hung—at the National Exemplar, the reliably smart gallery run by Argentinean artist Eneas Capalbo that decamped late last year from its small TriBeCa space to Iowa City, where Stevens recently completed her MFA at the University of Iowa. Most of the large oils-on-canvas on view seemed to take their subject matter from the artist's own home, and several focused on disheveled beds commandeered by one or more of the aforementioned felines. In *Kylie*, 2019, the eponymous kitten is depicted on its back, raising one meaty pink paw toward the viewer as it sprawls amid a jumble of rumpled clothes and pillows on a duvet decorated with cartoon fish. Meanwhile, *Spare Bed*, 2020, features a pair of the artist's animal cohabitants, the fluffy white one in the foreground partially camouflaged by an acid-pink quilt illustrated with—what else?—even more images of cats.

The unapologetic sentimentality of the cat paintings may not be for everyone, yet these works actually ended up being outliers in Stevens's overall accounting of her habitation. Most of the works were more compositionally sober, if no less lushly rendered. *Light Inside*, 2020, figures a curtain-covered shower as a kind of radiant font, while *Rocking Chair*, 2020, captures the Escheresque interplay of a piece of furniture and the attenuated grisaille shadows it casts on the floor. Meanwhile *Red Door*, 2020—a plain image plainly announced, but thrown intriguingly off-kilter by the striking intensity of its coloration and by the presence of a tiny cutout letter L stuck to the door at the height of a child's hand—hints even more strongly at the kinds of enigmatic scenarios Stevens can conjure through her technical skill. Indeed, her impressive strength as a painter only expands when she takes small steps away from her own home, as in the appealingly enigmatic environment of *Suitcases*, 2019, with its gorgeous jewel-toned stacks of inventoried luggage; *Buckets of Rocks*, 2020, a melancholic, autumnal patio scene; and especially *Intersection*, 2020, in which a penetrating shaft of light turns a street sign into a kind of uncanny crucifix and a quiet nighttime corner into a site of fiery Pentecostal eruption.

—Jeffrey Kastner