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John Haber
in New York City

9.9.20 — DREAMS OF HOME

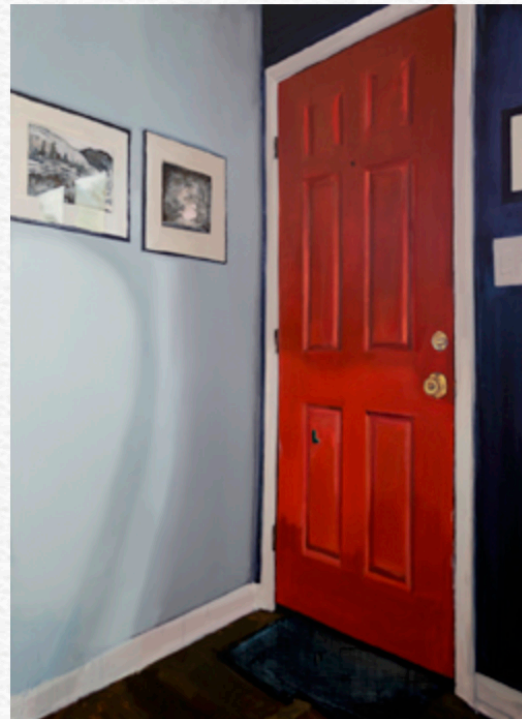
Topics: Postmasters, Serena Stevens

If you are a New Yorker after so many **months without art**, you may wonder if you can ever leave your apartment again. If you are an artist, buffeted by finances, fellowships, and fate, you may wonder instead if you can ever return home.

Thanks in fact to a fellowship, **Serena Stevens** is back where she grew up, in pursuit of her "**Iowa Dream**." Her show of that name has paintings as rich and comforting as they come, at **Postmasters** through September 12. But are these her memories, her observations, or her dreams? She may be wondering herself if she has still to arrive.

They sure look like home, until you ask why. Her cat is still on the bed or, depending on the time frame, already at home, but people are nowhere to be seen. Photos or prints hang just inside the front door, although too blurred to pin down. A backyard table has hardly changed since a long summer evening, but darkness has descended to either side. Besides, it and a second table sit incongruously side by side, of standard-issue glass and wood, and fallen leaves cover both. They are set with a basket of stones.

They all have a striking immediacy, but then so do false memories and bad dreams. You may wish to reach out to touch the backyard table, thanks to her lush paint along the grain of its wood. You may wonder who will step out from behind a shower curtain—at roughly life size, like so much else. You may mistake the cherry red of the front door for the real thing, at least if you prefer the jpg in a "**virtual tour**" online. It looks so vivid that Stevens might well have set it right into the gallery wall, like an installation by **Richard Artschwager** or **Robert Gober**. She can paint more loosely as well, with stripes like ribbons, so that beds tilted close to the picture plane approach **decorative abstraction**.



There are signs, too, of transience and neglect. The door has a black mark that could pass for an accident or an exhibition's fallen dust—until you spot the white border for the illusion of three dimensions. An unmade bed is the spare, for visitors and not for family or cats. Suitcases pile so high and wide that Stevens could not conceivably need them all, not even to leave or to return home. If she has indeed made it, she has not unpacked enough to equip her studio table. A press release duly invokes the idea of "slow art," but time itself is at issue.

Stevens has taken a while to cross America and back, but she was not exactly taking her time. As an artist, she did not have the luxury. She had already crossed the border to

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Illinois as an undergraduate, and she spent the next six years in Southern California, New Mexico, and the northeast. New England craft and austerity may color her treatment of the wood door. She takes the show's title from Arthur Russell, director of the Kitchen, a performance space here in New York. Still, her command of light and shadow gives her Iowa dream a

specificity of time and place. They are her subject quite as much as the furniture and a secret weapon.

Naturally they can be spooky, too, on top of familiar or comforting. The shadows by the door sure look real, but I dare you to say what cast them, and a rocking chair seems caught in a web of shadow from something else again. A brighter light puts the suitcases under scrutiny, as if collecting evidence, while leaving some of them in shadow. A bolt of light pierces a street sign out front like a laser or a magic act, but the sign's shadow looks more like a parking meter. Something lights up the shower from within—perhaps the unseen presence of its bather. At least half the point of revisiting dreams is to look behind the curtain.