

# The New Criterion

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## Susan Lichtman at Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects

by *Andrew L. Shea*

The title of Susan Lichtman's first solo show in New York City, *In My House*, tells you, simply, what her paintings are about. For the last thirty years, Lichtman has used her southern Massachusetts home as the subject of her paintings. Although Lichtman primarily paints interiors, this show includes a number of porch paintings, as well as multiple interior/exterior window views. Most of the work shown was painted during her tenure as this year's Frances Niederer Artist-in-Residence at Hollins University, in Roanoke, Virginia.

Painting domestic interiors can be a symbolically charged endeavor. Notwithstanding the historical ramifications of genre painting, the subject is imbued with latent sentimentality and nostalgia that can easily deaden the seriousness of a work and sever its relationship to the realities of ordinary life. As such, to paint this subject with integrity requires extreme attention to the formal intricacies of the craft.



*Susan Lichtman, Cookout, 2016, oil on linen, Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects*

Lichtman's mature understanding of space, color, and surface elevates her paintings above this trap of sentimentality. One word to describe her depiction of space and forms might be "efficient," and, in this way, the no-nonsense directness of the exhibition's title perfectly matches the spirit of her work. Maintaining a critical and analytical distance from her subject matter, Lichtman will render a form in astonishingly few marks so that, ultimately, paint reigns supreme in these works, despite their precise illusionism.

To keep up this efficiency requires a wit and inventiveness that is evident in the pictures, in the shifts and turns that these patches of color take. For example, the cat perched atop the family piano that Lichtman has chosen, not even to paint, but rather to suggest through its negative outline on the background wall. Or the vacuum cleaner and window frame behind it that, when bathed in the same

soft, green light, momentarily merge into one single form before they are understood as separate objects.

In a [2016 interview](#) with Larry Groff on Painting Perceptions, a well-known blog devoted to modern observational painting, Lichtman says that her first move in composing a picture is to observe or imagine a small and specific object that might find itself in her home, and place it somewhere on the canvas. Then, Lichtman says, she expands outwards, building the work imaginatively from that original source. Painters are typically taught to paint general to specific—outline the overall composition and then build up detail gradually. But for Lichtman, it seems that working in this backwards, specific-to-general manner provides an avenue for discovery: for creating innovative, unplanned compositions. Further, I think that the process allows Lichtman to recreate the experience of looking more faithfully than a more typical approach to composition would allow. Guiding the eye around and through her imagined interior world, the paintings only gradually reveal important but perhaps flattened or shadowed forms and figures. To look at these paintings is really to be reminded of the experience of walking into a new room for the first time.



*Susan Lichtman, Coffee Outside, 2016, oil on linen, Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects*

Of course, most painters avoid working this way because it is extremely difficult. Drawing is more laborious without an overall structure as reference and it can be almost impossible to predict how the final image will turn out. This is not to say that the paintings are in any way “lucky,” but rather that the process is experiential and improvisatory. Indeed, the paintings bear traces of the extensive process

of revision that Lichtman likely works through. Some areas, with thick buildups of paint, betray numerous re-workings, whereas other sections have been left bare to the original toned canvas. This dynamic variety of surface contributes to the overall momentum of each work.

Finally, a review of this exhibition would not be complete without some discussion of the extremely careful color that Lichtman employs in her paintings. Lichtman's color is versatile—one work will have a drastically different color schema from the next—as well as nuanced and sensitive—slight shifts in temperature and hue carve forms on the smallest scale. To my mind, Lichtman is at her best when painting within a very narrow range of value and hue. Variations on grays and pale greens run through many of the paintings, allowing Lichtman to carefully build complex harmonies in areas that a less-skilled colorist would muddle or deaden. In these moments, Lichtman's relationship with some of the great French observational colorists—Vuillard, Bonnard, Cézanne—is most evident.

Susan Lichtman: *In My House* will remain on view until July 15 at Steven Harvey Fine Arts Projects. The gallery is hosting an evening talk with the artist on Wednesday, July 12 at 5:30 p.m.

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Andrew L. Shea is the Hilton Kramer Fellow in Criticism at *The New Criterion*.