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'Intimisms' at James Cohan

BY TAYLOR DAFOE | JULY 11, 2016



Installation view of John McAllister's "blazing oceans murmur of a cloud" (2015) and Hope Gangloff's "Stahl at Kennedy" (2016) (Courtesy of James Cohan, New York)

Summer has come, and with it the annual influx of group shows in New York. Although considered secondary offerings from the city's galleries, many of these prove every bit as strong as the more-high-profile solo exhibitions mounted in the same spaces during the rest of the year. The best even use their summer show status to their advantage. One such example is "Intimisms," a beautiful group show on view now at James Cohan.

Strictly speaking, Intimism was hardly a movement; it was really more a theme predominating in the work of French Postimpressionist painters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who refocused their expressive strokes on friends and loved ones in quiet, domestic interiors. But the style has never really gone out of fashion. And "Intimisms" does an impressive job of capturing its pervasiveness in the history of painting, as well as the variations on this theme introduced by different practitioners.

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Curated by Aliza Nisenbaum, a Mexico City-born, New York-based artist who contributed a handful of her own paintings, the exhibition contains works by 25 other painters as well, ranging in age and era from Louis Eilshemius, born in 1864, to a handful of 30-somethings. The majority of the paintings are as small as the name of the show would suggest. To appreciate many of them, you have to get close — sometimes really close. Brushstrokes are dramatic, colors as warm as the rising temperatures outside the gallery doors. Emotions evoked run the gamut from despondent to confident to confused, and everything in between. The pictures' subjects are engaged in quotidian activities — reading, kissing, sleeping. Many of them have just been, or are about to be, intimate in a less aesthetic sense, lying naked, talking. In the case of Ridley Howard's paintings, they are in the middle of the act itself.

The two names most closely associated with Intimism are the Nabis artists Édouard Vuillard and [Pierre Bonnard](#). And their DNA is everywhere in evidence, especially in the warmth of hue and tone displayed by the majority of the works. But the exhibition brings to mind other figures as well, perhaps even more so, touchstones for successive generations of painters. Alex Katz, for instance, looms large, especially in the work of Howard, Anna Glantz, and Ga Hee Park. Alice Neel, represented in the show by two paintings, is another luminary whose influence can be felt, especially in the pictures by Hope Gangloff, Henry Taylor, and Patricia Treib. Other highlights include a rough-hewn portrait by Nicole Eisenmann, who continues her 2016 tear after recent solo shows at the New Museum and Anton Kern; a contemplative nude study by [Lucian Freud](#) from 1983-84 titled, "Small Figure"; and Nisenbaum's gorgeous portrait of a group of women from the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, titled "MOIA's NYC Womens Cabinet, 2016."

This list, far from complete, hints at one of the most pleasant surprises presented by "Intimisms": Under the guise of looking backward, offering an homage to an almost-movement of the past, it presents a surprisingly thorough mini-survey of current trends in figurative painting. Best of all, installed as they are in a quiet gallery setting, low-trafficked in the slow summer months, the works can be viewed in the manner they were intended to be: quietly and patiently.

"Intimisms" runs from June 23 through July 29 at James Cohan, in New York.