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## **Abstract**

Alison Rector's painting *Green Kitchen* (2002) depicts a seemingly ordinary domestic interior: a flight of stairs ascends to the right, and a foyer, furnished simply with a wooden table and chairs, leads to a kitchen and, further still, to a broom closet. The old-fashioned wood-burning stove, muted and patterned wallpaper, antiqued furniture, brass sconce, and wide-planked hardwood floor characterize this home as possibly from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, but the lack of figures and personal effects makes the definitive time of occupancy ambiguous. Rector's unoccupied interiors, however, do not appear abandoned. Even in the quietest of her closed spaces, the viewer perceives a presence, perhaps of the non-depicted occupant. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Alison Rector, Domestic Interior, *Green Kitchen*, *Clover Leaf*, *Two Cots*

## **Disciplines**

Art and Design | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology



## Embodiment and Emptiness: Alison Rector's Interior Spaces

Alison Rector's painting *Green Kitchen* (2002) depicts a seemingly ordinary domestic interior: a flight of stairs ascends to the right, and a foyer, furnished simply with a wooden table and chairs, leads to a kitchen and, further still, to a broom closet. The old-fashioned wood-burning stove, muted and patterned wallpaper, antiqued furniture, brass sconce, and wide-planked hardwood floor characterize this home as possibly from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, but the lack of figures and personal effects makes the definitive time of occupancy ambiguous. Rector's unoccupied interiors, however, do not appear abandoned. Even in the quietest of her closed spaces, the viewer perceives a presence, perhaps of the non-depicted occupant.

Rector's eerily vacant rooms raise the question as to who may have inhabited them. The sense of emptiness in each painting is not simply due to the lack of human figures, but also the curious bareness and cleanliness of the rooms. Gone are collections of belongings, the physical traces that mark the everyday happenings of a living, occupied space. No sheets or pillows cover the beds in *Two Cots* (2003); no magazines or newspapers are strewn in the waiting room of *Clover Leaf* (2007), and no house keys or mail rest on the table in *Green Kitchen*.

Despite the absence of people or material things, the sense that the spaces are nonetheless embodied derives from what can be called a "lived perspective." Borrowed from the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the "lived perspective" in art contributes to the sense that the painting is not merely constructed around one's eye, but rather according to how one's body engages with and is made aware of occupying space. In *Green Kitchen* the broom closet (the vanishing point of the composition, which relies on the pictorial device of one-point perspective) leads the viewer's eye directly into the home, but not merely on a straight path. The eye is also directed upward, to the window, the landing, and the amorphous cracks on the ceiling. The visual vectors in the space—inward, upward, outward—contribute to a kind of dynamism, that is, the feeling of being wholly and bodily in the space and aware of all the physical details: a freshly

polished floor, a view from an upper window, and the color of a ceiling. Details in Rector's paintings, such as the floors that seem to slide from underneath one's feet and the attention to the different kinds of lights hanging from the ceiling in *Theater* (2007), demand that viewers move their bodies to catalog all of the particulars. One does not passively see, but cranes one's neck up, walks through, and ambles forward on the stairs. Equal attention to both floors and ceilings in conventional paintings of interiors is not readily or frequently given, yet Rector's work allows her viewer to experience thoroughly what is above and below and *corporeally* enter the scene.

The furniture depicted in the paintings also invites the viewer into Rector's rooms in a bodily manner. In almost all of the works reproduced here, chairs serve as anthropomorphic stand-ins for the absent figure. Seen almost as portraits, the chairs face the viewer or appear in profile; one imagines them to be squeaky or solid, well worn or austere. With legs, arms, a seat, the chairs mimic or are informed by their placement in the larger setting. For example, the curves of the chairs in *Round Window* (2002) echo the prominent arch in the composition. The foreground chair, with sunlight warming the seat, insists that one sit at the table. Once seated, one's perspective of the scene changes; the viewer cannot see what lies outside the right edge of the frame. Similarly, in *Theater*, the viewer is denied access to any happenings on the stage; instead, the seats themselves become the performers, the object of one's viewing. Rather than seeing a small group or pair, as in the other paintings, Rector provides an audience. Looking out at this crowd, the viewer then becomes a kind of performer, an active (embodied) participant in the scene.

When seated in the chairs of *Round Window* or *Clover Leaf*, the viewer no longer has access to the absorbing sight out of the windows. Each window, however, is a crucial and central component of Rector's compositions. The frequency and prominence given to the motif of windows in the works symbolize the construction of painting itself. Like paintings, windows allow one to see a three-dimensional scene through an ostensibly transparent, two-dimensional plane. According to painter and theorist Leon Battista Alberti's fifteenth-century treatise on painting, windows depicted in paintings have been understood as a meditation on the status of painting as a window, or a kind of "meta-picture." In addition, the panes on all of Rector's windows echo and emphasize the other rectilinear shapes and overall organization of the spaces. In the case of *Little Diamond Dinner Hour* (2007), the placemats, framed map on the wall, beamed ceiling, paneled wall, slat-backed chairs, and collection of leaning books all con-

form to the rectilinear structure of the composition and rectangular shape of the picture's frame.

With such an awareness of pictorial construction, Rector reveals a modernist, even cubist, attention to the tension between the illusion of three-dimensional space and the two-dimensional grid of the picture plane. In addition, her paintings often depict seemingly incongruous areas of sheer painterliness, seen, for example, in the framed map in *Little Diamond Dinner Hour*, the visible paint strokes on the ceiling of *Green Kitchen*, and the Mark Rothko-like rectangle of light hovering on the muted wall in *Two Cots*. These areas reveal another source of visual tension in the paintings; passages of brushy, tonal abstraction (the application of paint on surface) both rival and compliment her rigorous attention to realist detail and perspectival order.

The formal concerns for both orthogonal and "lived" perspectives in Rector's paintings foster a pensive mood in the viewer and evoke a curious presence in each of the works, which can be understood in terms of a series of aesthetic and narrative tensions. The rooms are strangely both vacant and occupied; the perspective encompasses the floor and ceiling, as well as a glimpse outdoors and another viewpoint inside. Finally, Rector astonishingly balances intense interest in the two-dimensional shape of the painting with a convincing representation of "real" three-dimensional space. Her rooms, though ostensibly empty, become fully inhabited by embodied viewers.