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Bright Lights on Quiet Streets: Tom Keough's Nocturnes

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Abstract

The well-kept city streets lined with trees and old brownstones may seem familiar in the paintings of Brooklyn-based artist Tom Keough, but the neighborhood is disquietingly empty. Keough situates the sidewalk in the immediate foreground of his paintings and compels the viewer to enter into an eerily vacant scene. With few exceptions, Keough leaves the always still and sometimes snowy New York setting largely unoccupied. Nonetheless, Keough conveys human presence in his paintings with the soft glow of lamplight from windows, footprints in the snow, and cars parked along the side. The theme of urban alienation—a paradoxical sense of loneliness felt in the midst of dense population and bustling activity—has been examined by Keough's art-historical predecessors, such as Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, and perhaps most consistently by Edward Hopper. Whereas these painters frequently employed various urban types (shop girls, entertainers, once clerks) lost in thought to evoke a sense of estrangement and inward reflection, Keough remarkably conveys similarly absorptive emotional states without such figural intervention. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Tom Keough, New York setting, urban alienation, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Edward Hopper

Disciplines

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

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Although the cityscapes appear abandoned, the viewer expects and possibly desires to find someone turning a corner or standing in a window. The footprints in *January Night* (2003) lead the viewer to such a figure. Small and almost ghostly, a little girl stands quietly next to a tree in the far background of the painting. The light cast by the streetlamp is impossibly intense and sets the girl in silhouette. The bright warmth of this artificial glow contrasts with the cold snow and midnight blue of the sky above. One envisions walking toward the girl in a calm that is antithetical to the usual cacophony of the city. Keough depicts the few hours after a recent snowfall, when neighbors stay warm indoors, before the roads have been plowed and the sidewalks shoveled, and nature momentarily overcomes the hurried hum of the city. The steady drone of the streetlamp and the crunching of snow implied by the footprints are the only interruptions to the sublime stillness in the painting.

Keough's painting *Sycamore Tree* (2005) again examines a markedly absent

street, and one continues anxiously to search along stoops and behind trees for other inhabitants. Following the diagonal lines of the sidewalk and the fence in *Sycamore Tree*, the viewer's eye finally arrives at another shadowy figure standing in a glowing doorway. Here, too, Keough interrupts the darkness of night with the harsh, artificial illumination of the streetlamp. Although Keough places the lamppost directly in the center of his composition, the source of light in *Sycamore Tree* comes dramatically from outside the painting. A city's glut of artificial light prevents the night from becoming dark, and Keough takes care to distinguish the subtle lamplight from within from the brazen fluorescence of the outside. The navy sky, however, seeps stubbornly through the top edges of the buildings and branches. The gnarled tree trunk in the foreground of the painting, lit harshly by this neighboring streetlamp, leans ominously to the right and casts a shadow that interrupts the viewer's stroll along the sidewalk.

The presence of long shadows at night is not the only unnatural element, as the streetlamp in *Sycamore Tree*, enveloped by leaves from the neighboring trees, also appears to be a stylized and pseudo-organic tree trunk. Keough's paintings do not necessarily evoke a disconcerting tension between natural and man-made landscapes; rather they assert a precariously symbiotic relationship among natural and architectural elements in older urban neighborhoods. Keough draws formal parallels between vertical trees and lampposts, but the calligraphic branches also resist the order of the geometric facades of buildings in paintings such as *11th Street, 29* (2001) and *Webster Place Tree* (1998). And, in *Sycamore Tree* the placement of the tree in the foreground functions as a kind of liminal space between the natural and man-made, as flowers mediate the rectilinear grid of the sidewalk and the irregular, gnarled bark of the trunk.

Keough's paintings most noticeably recall Hopper's in their evocation of a pensive urban narrative as well as in their careful study of the effects of artificial light along almost abandoned streets. Keough's paintings are not simply cityscapes, but are careful meditations on unlikely and infrequent moments of solitariness and quiet in otherwise crowded neighborhoods. Hopper similarly captured this preternatural calm of an urban street in *Early Sunday Morning* (1930). Where Hopper offered a careful study of morning sunlight raking across the building facades, Keough attends to a more complicated study of the effects of light—both natural and artificial, as well as from interior and exterior sources—in his paintings. Ultimately, Keough paradoxically and successfully paints seemingly uncanny nocturnes of a quotidian neighborhood that is at once familiar and strange, inhabited and isolated.