

MATTHEW BROWN LOS ANGELES

CAL SIEGEL

Fine As All Outdoors

August 4—August 26, 2020

An art history teacher once told me that late Cubism's impact could not have existed were it not for the proliferation of explosives during World War I. This might be true. Either way, it offered a possible explanation of Cubism's inherent position toward violence and the resulting contextualization taken up by artists like Elizabeth Murray.

*At the age of about nine, some friends and I stumbled upon the constructed set of the film, *The Crucible* on Hog Island in Ipswich, Massachusetts. To take in the externally facing deceit of these structures was powerful. It was at this moment I became aware that this staging was built to obscure the lens of the eye, with the lens of the camera.*

Architectures, which we hold as self-evident, are imbued with inherent notions of power implicit in their motivations and erections. To see the edificial artifice of "public space", or more appropriately, the border zone of outwardly facing private space, allows an awareness of history being constructed and reinforced in real time, without our input.

— Cal Siegel

Cal Siegel's works resonate as sculptural, magical, and sociological studies. Altogether they create a constellation of objects that worldbuild. The works can be described as case studies of interior and exterior spaces—informed by childhood anecdotes, distant memories, and peripheral historical context. Siegel's multidisciplinary practice includes sculpture, paintings, drawings, and photographs.

In conversation with Jongho Lee for *Eye Towards the Doves*:¹

JL: It's interesting to think about certain houses and how they imbue magical qualities like the one you just mentioned. Your pieces simultaneously break down that magic, but also keep it alive by focusing on real elements of these structures that enforce those magical qualities. It's a fine line of "Holy shit, look at this," and "Look away, this is horrible."

CS: At some point, Dan [Herschlein] was talking about how these houses, or spaces in general collect energy like a battery and that's just the nature of it.

The history of America's colonization is implicit in the sociology of its early settlers, and the fabric of their architectures—particularly evident in Massachusetts, where Siegel spent the first half of his life. Once the artist stepped away to attend school in California, his small hometown began to function as a space for critical reflection.

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During this process of reflection, a moment in Siegel's childhood distinctly stood out to him. At the age of nine, Siegel and his friends stumbled upon the film set of *The Crucible*, a historical drama about the 1692 Salem witch trials. It was Hollywood playing New England in New England—the elaborate colonialist set constructed a *feeling*, an *energy* that would forever resonate.

The colonialist architectural and cultural signifiers prompted introspection into the possible effects on actual residents living amongst such structures. Siegel cites this as a critical turn in his practice; the incident subsequently led to a meditation around architecture and the real intention behind construction.

For example, in *teaching history to a goldfish* (2020), wooden shutters enclose a photograph of a goldfish bowl. Dubbed "Indian shutters," the sliding panels imply a history of violence. The shutters were originally designed to deflect the arrows from Native Americans in New England. What is now seen as a quaint addition and feature of colonialist homes, are in fact a testimony to the United States's goldfish memory of violence against the Indigenous people of America and the pillage of their lands.

Although Siegel's standalone structures in the past have focused specifically on the exterior, *Fine As All Outdoors* crosses closer toward the interior. The forms are never overt but implied. Forms such as *IN BED BUT AWAKE!* (2019) faintly resemble curtains obstructing sight into a home through a window. The material is fabric yet mimics the hardened crystallization of marble. The walls of the exterior soften but continue to block visions of the interior.

Likewise, once the walls are crossed, Siegel's abstracted forms of interiors remain purely as silhouettes. The darkened dollhouse shingles encapsulating the sculptures create uncanny relationships in scale and form. One structure loosely casts a silhouette akin to a confessional booth; another, a chimney. In her essay, "Fuck a Map," Sable Elyse Smith notes that the "doll house shingle, on its own—or out of context— suggests a playfulness, an imaginary space or space of fantasy, but this is not the end to which Siegel takes it."² Dollhouse shingles for Siegel act as a skin, a veil, for abstraction.

These visions don't end at the three dimensional. Studies of the exterior are evident in Siegel's grease pencil rubbings of dollhouse shingles. The rubbings reorient and overlap in all directions. The three dimensional quality cannot be mimicked onto paper and instead creates a dead-end perspective, reflecting a kaleidoscopic vision in flux.

Siegel's visionary world pivots once again, this time with focus on the landscape. Studies of the American vernacular architecture extend to monuments situated within the environmental landscape, such as the apple tree. Introduced to North America by colonists in the 17th century, the apple tree is an artifact of colonialism's human gesture. Siegel's four watercolor depictions of apple trees, including a Caville Blanc d'hiver and Cortlands, are rendered directly from images of the Massachusetts landscape. Influenced partly by *The Overstory*, written by Richard Powers, these works reflect on the historical and inextricably linked relationship between humans and nonhumans. Trees have a different understanding of time in the scope of history; it can be described as holistic or cosmological whereas for humans, it is brief and limited. This is perhaps the human tragedy. "If the trees of this earth could speak, what would they tell us? "Listen. There's something you need to hear."³

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1. Lee, Jongho. "Interview with Cal Siegel," *Eyes Towards the Doves*. April 1, 2019.
2. Smith, Sable Elyse. "Fuck the Map," Cue Foundation. January 2019.
3. Powers, Richard. *The Overstory*. First edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

Cal Siegel was born in West Newbury, Massachusetts and currently lives and works in Brooklyn, New York. He received his B.A. in Studio Art and Media Studies from Pitzer College in Claremont, California. In 2015 he attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine.

Solo and two-person exhibitions include *I am the box no roof can cover*, CUE Art Foundation, New York, NY (2019); *The house your road ends on*, Outside Gallery, North Adams, MA (2018); *S.L.A.B.*, Violet's Café, Brooklyn, NY (2015); *wallflower frieze* with Meena Hasan, 6Base, Bronx, NY (2017); and *Smile in The Dark* with Matthew Stone, Left Field Gallery, San Luis Obispo, CA (2016).

He has participated in a number of group exhibitions including *Vernacular Interior*, Hales Gallery, New York, NY (2019); *Double Play*, The Pit Presents Left Field Gallery, Los Angeles, CA (2019); *The landscape changes 30 times*, Anahita Gallery, Tehran, Iran (2015); *Inside/ Outside: Works from the Skowhegan Archives*, CSA Gallery, Waterville, Maine (2015); and *To do as one would*, David Zwirner, New York (2014); among others.

Matthew Brown Los Angeles presents Cal Siegel's first solo exhibition with the gallery, *Fine As All Outdoors*.