

KATIE BELL • *Abstract Cabinet* • January 10 to February 28, 2020



KATIE BELL is an artist originally from Rockford, Illinois (b. 1985). She received her BA from Knox College (Galesburg, IL) in 2008 where she studied fine art and race and gender studies. She graduated in 2011 from the Rhode Island School of Design (Providence, RI) with an MFA in Painting. Bell has shown her work at a variety of venues, Smack Mellon (Brooklyn, NY), Locust Projects (Miami, FL), Okay Mountain Gallery (Austin), and the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum (Lincoln, MA). Her work has been written about in BOMB Magazine, Whitewall, Hyperallergic, Artnet, The Chicago Tribune, and Paper Magazine. In 2011 she was an artist in residence at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation's Space Program based in Brooklyn, NY. She was awarded a fellowship in painting by the New York Foundation for the Arts and in 2016 the Saint-Gaudens Memorial Fellowship. Bell lives and works in New York, NY.



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341 DELAWARE AVENUE BUFFALO NY 14202 716.854.1694 WWW.HALLWALLS.ORG

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**ABSTRACT  
CABINET**

Behind a dividing wall, acting as the opening curtain for a “one-act drama,” a set of characters wait patiently for an unwitting actor, the viewer, to arrive. Holding its collective breath, Katie Bell’s *Abstract Cabinet* activates upon the moment of a gaze sweeping across the space it occupies. The scene unfolds as a back-and-forth dance of meticulous stage blocking. Micro dramas unfurl along a klutzy path, channeled by discreet tableaus that materialize along the route. The exhibition’s titular *Cabinet* is less concrete than the image it initially conjures. While furniture-like objects within the installation serve as sets containing smaller scenes, the gallery itself is employed as container, both for Bell’s display of oddities, and for those visitors who cross its threshold.

Upon entering the exhibition, the *Cabinet*’s space feels deceptively airy, while physical navigation through it proves to be more complicated, hampered by an array of obstacles and barriers. A dawning realization is triggered almost immediately—that a vision of the static display, and the experience of moving within it, are at odds with one another.

Peppered throughout the installation are islands of vacant floor space, that allow for the admiration of abstract vistas. Comprised of riotous forms crowding over multi-planar terrains, their anxious positions cast them as characters, frozen at the peak of some ambiguous spectacle. The wider the view, the more tempting the impulse for closer investigation. The spatial allure in all directions is generated by Bell’s attentive compositional arrangements at every interval of scale.

In carved out recesses, atop flat surfaces, and standing with their backs against the wall, enigmatic objects mimic the predictable positions that domestic doodads always seem to occupy. Approaching a more intimate distance to one form or another has a quieting effect on the wider installation’s nervous energy. Bell talks about her fascination with materials and forms that are, “nameable and nameless, functional and functionless.”—a beguiling promise that their mysterious qualities can be identified and categorized, if one can only get a closer look. And although these forms are full of a comfortable familiarity, Bell’s objects remain silent, refusing to justify their purpose. Their familiar flavor is akin to every rest stop along a stretch of highway, contrived to feel as though you’ve been there before. Instead of the answer to some untold story, Bell’s objects have a silent conversation with the viewer, one whose rhythm is measured by a physical call and response.

Bell’s selection of banal building materials carries that baggage of being nameable, having specific purpose built into their character. On the other hand—separated from the spaces and situations that makes their purpose functional and literally appearing as fractured segments—identification becomes uncertain, allowing the materials’ formal characteris-

tics to imbue them with mystique. Despite their apparent banality, they share the special quality of having been hand-picked—treasures uncovered by Bell’s compulsive and practiced looking, not for anything specific, but for a moment, when amongst a stack or a pile, something alluring is stumbled upon.

Material fragments belong to the familiar generic universe of interiors while at the same time, being of a specific place, with scavenged materials sourced locally, and from old haunts that the artist has built relationships with over years. The external sense of place paints a surface of rationality on their placement within the *Cabinet*. The fracas of successive tableaus quickly settles on the viewer’s palate, even as forms riot against rational means of support. Within the *Cabinet*’s walls, materials and forms feel strangely anchored to the spot they belong, as if a force of gravity insists on them settling in place.

Part of their settled character comes from the placid and rich colors of the materials. They are intrinsic to their intended function, albeit a nonchalant nod to an aesthetic need for building materials to blend into the architecture that surrounds them. As a painting rendered spatially, tenuous arrangements rely on the support their organizing parts. Placed in proximity, the combinations of color and texture are soothing in the most mundane way—harmonious in their unfulfilled functionality.

The forms of Bell’s *Abstract Cabinet* read as a spatial painting, consisting of a myriad of lines and planes. Shallow furrows that trail and jump over surfaces of exaggerated pedestals are lines drawn with a router, seemingly unconcerned with the precision that normally frames its work. Elsewhere, coils, dowels, and manufactured strips reply with the sharpness of their manufactured edges. The gallery walls are planes integral to the composition, mirrored by rectilinear plinths and swaths of flat colored material. They do additional work, acting simultaneously as a boundary for the volume contained within their perimeter, as dividers that segment interior space or as an armature supporting objects that are propped against them, draped over, or covering their surface.

Just like the multifunctional elements contained within it, the *Abstract Cabinet* is an unreliable narrator, switching between disciplines and blasé about its fluid purpose or classification.

Rebecca Wing  
Curatorial Assistant

