

frieze



The eye, wrote Jacques Lacan in his essay 'The Line and the Light', 'is a sort of bowl' which is wont to overflow with light. 'A whole series of organs, mechanisms, defences' are required to deal with this excess; the shrinking pupil, in bright conditions, 'has to protect what takes place at the bottom of the bowl'.

The compelling idea that seeing always engages senses beyond vision is substantiated by 'The Ocular Bowl', an immaculately arranged exhibition at Kayne Griffin Corcoran. Alex Olson, Agnes Pelton and Linda Stark each belong to a distinct generation with their own sensibility and position, but in the large gallery (not the easiest room for mostly small pictures such as these) they interact as though they have been dancing around each other for years.

Stark's painting *Spectacled Cobra* (2005) is so goofy that it initially seems to share little with the show's other, more sober works. Hung on its own wall between windows, it depicts what looks like a cartoon smiley face on a distended yellow strawberry. Between the seeds, the flesh of the strawberry bulges out in thickly modelled oil paint. If you Google the painting's title, you will see photographs of a snake whose hood is marked with the same smiley face. Stark's painting is an instance of double camouflage – a snake evolved to look like a face, painted to look like a cartoon fruit. In this context, *Spectacled Cobra* is less about deception than the overflowing material from Lacan's 'ocular bowl'. The snake looks at us (and the other works in the show) with eyes in the back of its head; we touch the raised surface of its skin with our gaze and feel the viscosity of its spackled paint. This register continues in the adjacent painting, Olson's large abstract *Circuit* (2016), in which she has precisely rendered curling crests of paint with modelling paste – an elaborate simulation of gesture – and conjured a floating square simply by applying paint in a perpendicular direction.

Two paintings by Pelton raise the stakes of this clever formalist chicanery. Pelton, who died in 1961, was a senior member of the Transcendental Painting Group, whose artists were concerned with looking inwards, not outwards, for their inspiration. Both Pelton's paintings are stylized and – one assumes – derived from an inner vision. The less remarkable of the two is *Passion Flower* (1943), a rather kitschy rendition of an eye-like bloom that regards us from the canvas's centre. In the earlier and stranger *Star Gazer* (1929), a vessel points upwards towards a single star in the night sky, as if hoping to catch a little of its light. For Pelton, the ocular bowl was the body's cosmic access point, as well as the psyche's projective lens.

Returning to the work of Stark and Olson, the interplay of optical illusion and formal substance now seems to address nothing less than questions of faith in painting. What kinds of mystical powers are summoned by Olson's *Focus* (2016) – a grid of crusty blue dots competing with crepuscular, brushy shapes – or Stark's *Ruins* (2008) – in which a New Age-y pendant floats above a mossy Stonehenge? Stark's *Purple Protection Potion* (2007), with nettle, rattlesnake root and seed quartz crystal embedded in ribbons of translucent paint, goes furthest towards establishing an (ironic?) link between a painting's materiality and its metaphysical powers.

What, ultimately, is the difference between sight and vision? Olson asks something similar in her diptych *Mind's Eye (Eyes Open, Eyes Closed)* (2016) in which the right-hand panel is an approximation of the left, painted without looking. The sightless painting is not bad, but not great; if this is vision, then it is hobbled and groping. But maybe that's OK; it would excuse Pelton's occasional missteps, framing them within a personal and artistic quest that was not only sincere but also radical in its scope, reaching beyond the limits of visual perception.

