



Ellen Altfest

FOREVER

STILLED LIFE

In painting slowly and with utmost care, Ellen Altfest turns inward, away from the noise, distractions, and inattentiveness of the contemporary world. While her paintings are small and their compositions can be seen at one glance, she often takes months or more than a year to make one work. The attention she pays to every square millimeter of the canvas encourages our own close looking.

Altfest depicts traditional subjects—inanimate objects as well as portions of landscape and parts of the human body. Spending at least eight hours a day working in the studio or outdoors, she paints directly from observation—no photographic sources or references—transferring tiny amounts of paint from the palette to the canvas with a fine brush, taking her eyes off the subject only long enough to apply the pigment. The things she depicts are typically arranged within a shallow field, minimizing foreground and background in favor of flattened and abutted forms. Often, she replicates a natural texture or patterned fabric, filling the canvas edge-to-edge in a way that evokes the allover compositions of abstract expressionist or color field paintings.

With their stunning clarity, surprising juxtapositions, and unorthodox cropping, Altfest's works comprise a poetry of the everyday. The exhibition's title is inspired by Emily Dickinson's line "Forever – is composed of Nows," an encouragement to live fully aware in the eternal present. Altfest's work is likewise a call to mindfulness directed at both the viewer and herself. The things she depicts might seem of little consequence in a world of high drama, and in truth their identity is often difficult to immediately discern—we might lose interest in a subject if it is instantly recognizable. But her transformation of the ordinary into something that warrants attention—hers and ours—might encourage us to see value in the parts of our lives we often navigate with eyes half closed and minds elsewhere.

Encompassing still life, figure painting, and landscape, Altfest's works are perhaps usefully described as "stilled life," an active concentration of essences. This stilling of life seems most unexpected in her paintings of the nude male body. She notes the human connectedness that comes from months of proximity to another person: "the model is part of the work, which

is an intimate relationship, and a real bond can develop between us.”¹ Yet her nudes only show parts of the whole subject. However close-up the view, these parts are presented from an emotionally detached perspective. As we see in *Torso* (fig. 1), she usually crops out faces, ensuring that there is no psychological hierarchy between the body and other objects—shriveled gourds, a tumbleweed, or a patch of moss. “I learned to be an artist as a still life painter and then applied that language to the figure,” Altfest says. “Maybe the body is more understandable when it is broken down into knowable pieces. I also like that the parts of the body become their own things, separate from the person they belong to.”²

Altfest only paints what is in front of her, whether in the studio or in nature. When painting a still life or a human model, she controls the situation. Changes in the objects or sitter may occur, but only slowly—the accumulated marks don’t have to be constantly reconsidered. But when painting outside, fluctuations in the weather, qualities of light, seasons, the comfort or discomfort of the artist, all reinforce what we know: nothing is absolutely fixed in time and space. Altfest has to allow for this. “The weather drives me crazy too,” she notes. “When it rains it gets dark or wet and can disrupt my whole workday or work week. There’s a certain insanity that painters who work from direct observation have, that other people don’t know about or don’t have.”³ When leaves fall from a tree, she may have to focus her attention elsewhere, turning to more unchanging parts of the scene—tree trunks or rocks—until other leaves grow back in the spring. When a tree branch holding a pine cone starts to sag, she ties it back up with a string. So, while appearing to give the same immutable information as photographs, which instantaneously capture a subject, Altfest’s scenes average the many thousands of decisions that over time have led to the final image.

I met with Altfest on a ridge in the mountains of North Georgia, where she had been working on *Borrowed View* for months (fig. 2). From among plenty of interesting angles and great vistas, she selected one that is not breathtaking but has certain characteristics she seems to favor, starting with a tightly knit arrangement of large expanses or masses, each marked by different textures, colors, and placements in space. The most prominent feature in scale and sheer physicality is the close-up of a tree trunk. Over her career, Altfest has often painted patches of moss, lichen on a rock, or sections of bark, filling her pictures with natural patterns. Her cropping isolates these densely textured areas from what we might imagine outside the frame; the bark in the foreground of *Borrowed View* doesn’t



Figure 1: Ellen Altfest. *Torso*, 2011. Oil on canvas; 10 1/4 x 13 7/8 in. Courtesy of Modern Collections. © Ellen Altfest. Photo: Todd-White Art Photography

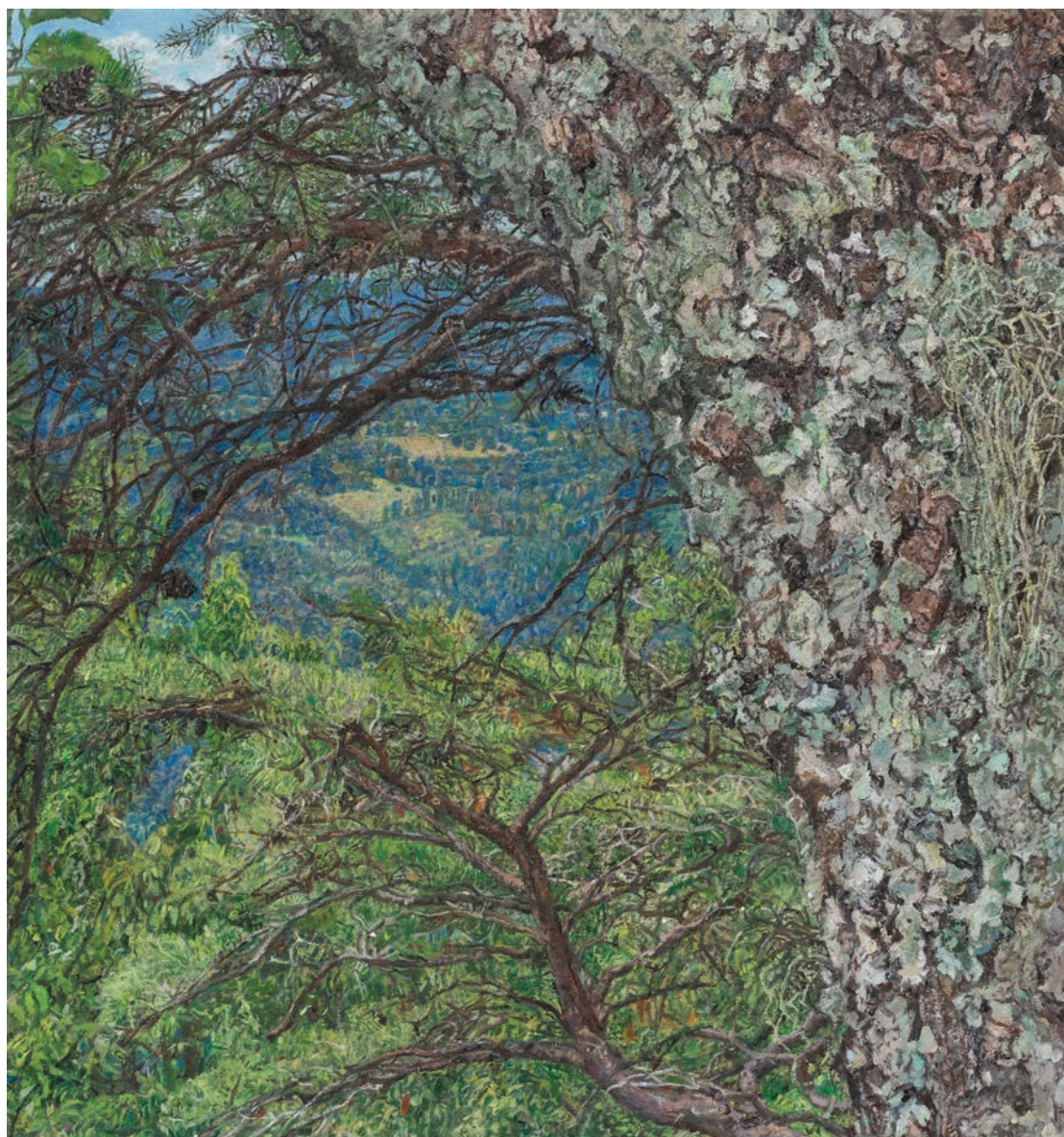


Figure 2: Ellen Altfest. *Borrowed View*, 2022–23. Oil on canvas; 10 x 9 1/4 in. Courtesy White Cube, London.
© Ellen Altfest. Photo: White Cube

tell us about the circumference or height of the tree or its place in the forest. Instead, it is an abstract-seeming plane of gray cracks, ridges, and jagged shapes covering nearly half the canvas and seething with ancient energy, coarse and convoluted. Foliage fills the lower and top registers to the left of the tree, animated by the tangled density of linear branches and trees in the mid-distance that could have been taken from a Jackson Pollock painting. These branches open at center to form a visual gap, exposing the blue, green, and golden patchwork of a faraway valley. Unusually for the artist, the touch of a more intense sky blue at top lightens the scene's near-claustrophobic density with a breath of open space.

The contrast between Altfest's studio pictures and plein air landscapes seems to reflect the duality of being and becoming. In philosophy, *being* is a concept ascribing essential, unchanging properties to a thing or idea. A concrete subject like that of *Torso* seems to exist outside of time—it is airless, enduring, and monumental. *Becoming* refers to the truth that everything constantly changes, transforming from one state to another. *Borrowed View* grew through a long process of engagement with fluctuating nature—it became a summary of its variations, which could have taken any turn. In all her works, Altfest has to decide what to keep and what to change along the way; in the more transitory landscape, these decisions are influenced by external conditions. Despite this, being and becoming are not in opposition. The contents of each painting include labor; our ability to imagine Altfest's extended bodily, optical, and mental commitment makes the process inseparable from the final image. While everything indeed does change, we are only looking at a stopping point along the way, a point of stilled consciousness where the image is as complete as the artist can make it.

Mark Scala
Chief Curator

Notes

1. Ellen Altfest, "Nudes in Venice," interview by Ridley Howard, *HuffPost Contributor*, June 14, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nudes-in-venice-interview_b_3437912.

2. Altfest, "Nudes in Venice."

3. Ellen Altfest, interview by Phong Bui, *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2019, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/03/art/Ellen-Altfest-with-Phong-Bui/>.

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