

Barry Schwabsky, "Gillian Carnegie's 1972, 2023," *Artforum*, April 2025

ARTFORUM

CLOSE-UP

GILLIAN CARNEGIE'S
1972, 2023

BARRY SCHWABSKY

Opposite page: Gillian Carnegie, *1972, 2023*, oil on canvas, 70 × 51".
Below: Gillian Carnegie, *1974, 2018*, oil on canvas, 65 × 51".



GILLIAN CARNEGIE'S current show at Gladstone Gallery in New York, the first significant presentation of the English painter's work in the United States since 2011, comprises just seven works, most of them rehearsing imagery she has used before: a couple of paintings of a tree—maybe the same one in summer, in full leaf, and bare-branched in winter?—a pair of portraits, a still life of flowers, two depictions of the same white cat. Although exquisitely rendered, their mostly pale, mostly grisaille palette puts these images at a ghostly remove from reality.

Carnegie has been painting that tree—or trees like that tree—since 2004, those dried flowers in a cutoff plastic water bottle (or ones like them) since 2000, the white cat since 2017 (succeeding a black one painted many times between 2009 and 2016). One of the two female portrait subjects, who looks like the artist herself, was also painted in a different pose in 2020. But then there is something else: I can't help but thinking of the old quip that Paul Cézanne painted his wife as if she were an apple. Nor can I help seeing all of Carnegie's portraits as versions of one idea of "portrait" rather than explorations of anyone's personal individuality. She somehow makes a person resemble a tree that resembles a bunch of flowers that resembles a cat. But what does it mean that any of them recalls anything or anyone that exists off the canvas? To produce such a resemblance is the most ordinary task of figurative painting, but Carnegie makes it feel incomprehensible—a stumbling block for the mind.

In repainting the same things, Carnegie has not painted them the same way: It's not that she has made many versions of the same painting, but rather that she has made many paintings showing the same things in distinct ways. She does this not by registering changes in the conditions of perception, as an Impressionist would have done—her linear, non-atmospheric approach to form and her anti-naturalist palette are proof of that—but through subtle shifts in her own representational choices. She seems to be playing variations on the theme of "difference and repetition," exploring how, as Gilles Deleuze observed at the start of his book of that title, "to repeat is to behave in a certain manner, but in relation to something unique or singular which has no equal or equivalent." Carnegie's cat, I tend to believe, is the same cat from painting to painting, yet for all their likeness, the cats are different. And of course the paintings



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of different subjects are alike in other ways. I have already mentioned the blanched, almost achromatic palette they share, and then there is their refinement of facture, which is just as muted: never slick, but also never overtly expressive. Composition is unemphatic, too: In six of the seven works in the New York show, the ostensible subject—cat, tree, woman, bouquet—is placed bluntly at the center of the composition before an unobtrusive background.

That makes one of the cat paintings an outlier. It is also the largest of the paintings in the show, its height—nearly six feet—giving it a kind of midsize monumentality. The work is titled *1972* and dated 2023. The title's significance is elusive, as is usually the case with Carnegie's work; all I can say is that the artist had her first birthday that year and that she made a painting featuring similar—but not identical—imagery in 2018 and titled it *1974*. But having called *1972* a cat painting, I am starting to have second thoughts. Really, I should say that the subject of *1972* is a staircase with six steps—that is what occupies most of the painting. We look up from a landing at the next one higher up, and there, looking back down at us from a distance, a couple of feet above the viewer's head, is the little cat, looking not so much like the subject of the picture as a prospective subject considering whether to proceed any farther into it.

There is something subtly unbalanced about how the perspective of the staircase has been delineated. The baluster at the right is parallel with the nearby right edge of the painting. We catch sight of the next flight of steps to a lower floor and a bit of a door and transom window in the slender space between them. But the steps are at an angle to the canvas, giving the composition a sort of twist that makes the view upward toward the waiting feline and the doorway behind feel slightly disorienting. I keep thinking that this painting shows the point of view of someone who fears he might faint as he climbs the stairs—and who imagines that the animal standing at the top is coldly waiting to see if he will.

Obviously, this is me projecting. No one knows what, if anything, a cat is thinking—in life or in art. But it is the kind of projecting that Carnegie's works encourage, just because they are so withholding of anything like overt subject matter. I've rarely seen portraits, for instance, that seem to be as little about the people portrayed in them as hers are. Visually they are individuated, but we are given to know almost nothing about them, and certainly not their inner life. Likewise, the cat seems to be a specific cat, the building through which it wanders a particular building, the tree a certain tree in its gnarled singularity, the flowers in the plastic bottle are these flowers and no others. But the painting of the flowers is no more about the flowers than the portraits are about the people. The paintings show me—to quote Deleuze again—"a singularity without concept," but this singularity is



Above: Gillian Carnegie, *Aminadab*, 2014, oil on board, 29 × 23".

Opposite page: Gillian Carnegie, *Aminadab*, 2018, oil on board, 29 × 23".

hard to differentiate from the other singularities in other paintings. The singularity is inarticulable.

And the paintings of the cat? Maybe I'm drawn to them because they tease me with just slightly more narrative content, or slightly more of a hint of it, than Carnegie's other paintings. Not that I end up knowing more about the cat than about the tree or flowers or people—but the fact that I keep feeling like I am on the verge of knowing something keeps drawing me in. And then, aren't cats emblematic of whatever is familiar but ultimately unknowable? And aren't other people something like that too? And natural things all around us like trees and flowers? As *1972* seems to imply, art leads us step by step toward a confrontation with what we'll never know. □

"Gillian Carnegie" is on view at Gladstone Gallery, New York, through April 26.

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