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Finding Comfort in Chaos: The Unexpected Liberty of Feeling Lost in the Crowd



Kathleen Beausoleil, "Lift Lines", 18 x 24 in. Oil on Panel. Image Courtesy of the artist.

Realistic oil paintings by Kathleen Beausoleil highlight the all-too human need to feel at once accepted and anonymous.

Individuals like to think about themselves as conspicuously unique personalities. Take a look closer, however, and it's pretty clear that we are deeply social animals, biologically programmed for social interaction and territorial behavior. Even our individual expressions only appear to be acceptable or distasteful within the context of a larger community of organized and accepted social norms.

Outside of the inner circle of our families and perhaps excluding celebrities and the famous or infamous, most people's social lives are played out in relative anonymity. There's a sense of liberty in anonymity, a safety in getting lost in the crowd, but there's no escape from the unspoken social obligations of any society. This is especially true of social interactions that are part of gatherings to celebrate a common purpose. In these situations, the condition, obligations and consequences of our social contract can often appear to be arbitrary. However, under the seeming chaos of any undulating crowd, or protest movement or a day at the ballpark rooting for the home team, there is a basic human psychology at work.

Depending on the social norms of the population, the resulting outcome can often be predictable, although sometimes very surprising. How people behave in public is very telling about the culture they live in and observing these behaviors can help illuminate a better understanding of our place in that culture. So, it is important to sometimes step outside our own cultural norms and observe how people interact and enact the complicated choreography of mass gatherings.

It's been my personal observational experience that people need other people to be happy and accepted and fulfilled. They also need other people to project their grievances and rally around a common enemy. It's a sense of belonging that people seek. Both in our microcosmic home lives and within our macrocosmic social lives. As social animals, we tend to find joy and meaning in the sense of belonging to something larger than just ourselves. We are reassured and

informed by the echoes of our personal scruples in the voice of our larger tribal identities.



Kathleen Beausoleil, "The Shore", 10 x 10in. Oil on Panel. Image Courtesy of the artist.

Kathleen Beausoleil has been painting about the organic forms of crowds and the spaces between people for the better part of a decade. Her work, primarily oil on canvas or panel, explores human social interaction and the territorial behaviors that operate in crowds. Ranging from recreational beachgoers to protesters marching in support of an ideology, her work draws upon her observations of life and curiosity about both social behavior and isolation.

It's often the spaces between people that turn our assumptions around. In her beach scenes for example, we are treated to an organically orchestrated field of silently negotiated boundaries. Blankets and beach chairs, umbrellas and coolers all huddled up in private territorial groupings. This is stark contrast to her protest paintings, which are filled with active bodies, masked for pandemic protection but in a much closer proximity to each other. Perhaps here in these works we can best see examples of larger groups gathered for a common purpose taking liberties with the space they allow between them depending on context and intensity of purpose.



Kathleen Beausoleil, "Mets Stadium", 12 x 12 in. Oil on Panel. Image Courtesy of the artist.



Kathleen Beausoleil, "Stadium Seating", 5 x 5 in. Oil on Panel. Image Courtesy of the artist.

Larger social groups and gatherings have unique personalities and individual identities of their own. This is most acutely observable in urban societies where it is far more likely for these tribal identities to come into conflict with each other or

to come together in support of one and other. Kathleen often explores these issues through her paintings of sporting events and music festivals.

It is in this work that we are treated to scatter shots of color and movement, each individual rendered clearly but when read as a whole the multitudes break down into an almost abstracted heaving swell of bodies.

These works are happy and hopeful and seem to express that instinctual urge to gather and revel in the presence of others who share like minds. In the pieces titled, “Fireman’s Fair”, and “Lift Line” we see the space around people and the space between them that informs the compositions. What at first seems like banal scenes of cues and lines become connected and illuminated human clusters popping out against the backdrop of mostly colorless voids.



Kathleen Beausoleil, "Music Festival", 14 x 11 in. Oil on Panel. Image Courtesy of the artist.

For people watchers and students of human behavior, the social unrest and global pandemic of 2020 has posited serious questions about the long-term effects of isolation and lack of access to the natural urge to gather with others. While the Corona Virus, the PPE masks and required pandemic manners have all complicated easy participation in the basic rights of citizenship which include both voting and political protest, the urge to express ourselves as social animals persists. Families can't gather for holidays, parents can't celebrate their children's graduations, grandparents are isolated and sequestered away from loved ones in what may well be their final years, and young children who are missing out on the formative years of socialization and friendship building go on socially undeveloped.

Yet, and in spite of all this unprecedented upheaval, there is a silver lining of opportunity to reflect on the multitudes of various new ways to gather and connect in 2021, and beyond. How will the repercussions of both the global pandemic and increasing social unrest effect the way we interact with one and other? Beausoleil's new works are visual meditations on these ideas and challenge us to reflect on our own place in the answer.



Kathleen Beausoleil, "Civic Grace", 8 x 10 in. Oil on Panel. Image Courtesy of the artist.

*Kathleen Beausoleil lives and works in Fair Haven, NJ with her husband and three children. Primarily working in oil paint and ink, her realist works focus on what it means to be a social being. She was a member of The Drawing Center's Viewing Program and has attended Artist in Residency programs including the Chalk Hill Artist Residency and the Artist *Forests* Community Program sponsored by the Holter Museum of Art and Helena National Forest. Her work is in the permanent collection of The Art Museum of Missoula and private collections throughout the United States. She has also taught at the SUNY Empire State's Studio Semester program. Beausoleil received her BFA Cum Laude at Syracuse University and currently teaches painting at Canvas Art Studio.*

For more information about her work visit www.kathleenbeausoleil.com