

BETH EDWARDS
OVER TIME

november 4 - december 3, 2016
clough-hanson gallery
rhodes college
memphis, tennessee

Crying Woman II (detail), Oil on canvas, 12" X 13", 1997





Hydrangea II, Oil on canvas, 42" X 60", 2013



Into the Evening, Oil on canvas, 35" X 32", 2010

In her career of nearly three decades, Beth Edwards has been described as both a surrealist and a hyperrealist. Her retrospective at Clough-Hanson Gallery does little to clear up this apparent incongruity, and in fact would do Edwards a disservice if it attempted to do so. Edwards' paintings move productively in the spaces between the sur- and hyper-real, the heightened and the plainly obvious, confounding and destabilizing the viewer's relationship to her seemingly familiar subjects.

Images of domestic life dominate Edwards' early work, presented in an almost neutral, affectless manner. Objects and figures are isolated and surrounded by pools and clouds of color that feel just slightly off, as in *Home Fires Burning* from 1996, where a puddle of warm tangerine meets puce and grassy greens. In this painting, as in others from this period, we can see a developing interest in stilling life. Presented at the speed of painting, the peculiar mundanity of a saucepan is revealed. A sleeping, nude female is not erotic but resting, the way a hunk of meat in a pan is resting, waiting for use, for work, for activity, not completely dissimilar to the sleeping baby hovering near the top of the painting. The utility of all aspects of domesticity is put on display, almost inventoried, in a manner that is decidedly unromantic, almost ruthless. In a feat of balance and tonal sensitivity Edwards charges this work with a sense of unease while leaving the objects and figures inert. In these paintings we begin to see the strategic slippage between figure and object.

In the early 2000's Edwards begins to develop this work in new directions. Using small plastic and resin toys as reference material, she creates tableau, often domestic (typically mid century modern) but sometimes situated in the landscape as well. The toys sit in the gap between figure and object, between baby and saucepan, mother and shoe. With their big eyes and clunky bodies, they don't quite read as objects but they're not completely figurative either. Manufactured to look like cartoons made three dimensional, Edwards presses the toys back to cartoon flatness on the canvas but also revels in their surfaces and dimensionality. As a result, the paintings vibrate with the tension of in-betweenness. This effect is sometimes amplified by the inclusion of well known paintings in the backgrounds of these scenes (works by Manet, Picasso, and Guston make appearances, among others) - flat images of re-flattened space, both recognizable and alien. Is Edwards grappling with forebearers, or with the idea of painting itself, its place in history, its connection to taste, the domestic, the decorative? Probably all of these;

Edwards, though almost surgical in her pictorial economy, is not one for simplification.

In some paintings the domestic interiors fall away and reveal deep space. Beautiful vistas of coastlines, sunsets, or rolling hills stand in contrast with the insistently plastic colors and surfaces of the toys. Zinnias pop into the foreground. Butterflies alight. Nature creeps in, filling distances and edges. In the latest paintings Edwards pushes deeper into the thicket, removing the toys and figures altogether and filling her canvases with botanicals from edge to edge. But still, the subjects of these paintings, typically a single flower or a small cluster of blooms, retain the command and importance of a figure. This is due partially to the careful composition of the images, but also to the great specificity of the renderings and the subtle amplification of the physicality and palette of the blooms (again, playing in the space between sur- and hyper-). In Edwards' hands, the flowers are at once gloriously, ebulliently heightened, and also aggressively normal. They're familiar in the way that all flowers are familiar and unknowable in the way that *this particular flower* is unknowable (and indeed, for all we know, it might not even exist), in the way that people are familiar and unknowable (and, indeed, might never reveal themselves to us). This effect is enhanced by playful passages of near-abstraction, surreptitiously slipped into the backgrounds and areas around the blooms. Again, the space around or behind the *thing* is marshalled forward, activated, charged.

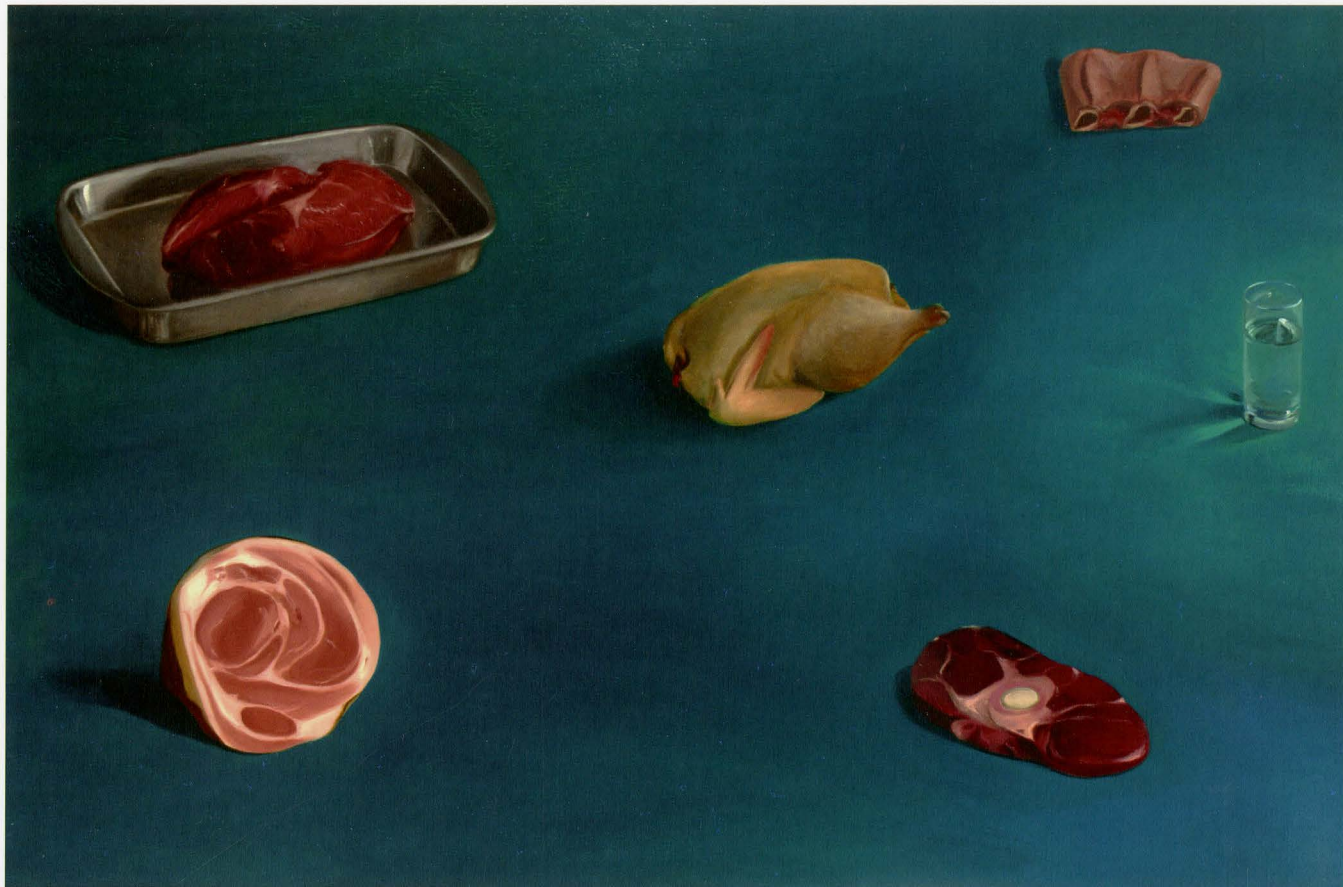
In all of these bodies of work, one clear strategy persists: singling out an object, a toy, a flower, a character, or a person for intense observation. We feel the heat of Edwards' gaze on the object, her scrutiny, her care, possibly her judgement, definitely her devotion. Is it strange to identify with such objects? The anxieties and pleasures of being observed bubble to the surface. Objectification induces a headrush, a thrill, and a dread.

One of the greatest powers of painting might be its ability to absorb the viewer and then return her to herself estranged. In Edwards' work the slippages between object and figure, the careful calibration of inertia, the insistent focus, all work together to summon this power. How great to carefully observe a plate of meat, a shoe, a toy, a rose. How strange to feel oneself as a plate of meat, a shoe, a toy, a rose, so carefully observed.

Joel Parsons
Director, Clough-Hanson Gallery



Hydrangea VIII, Oil on canvas, 40" X 48", 2016



Dinner, Oil on canvas, 40" X 60", 1993



Rhodes College
—1848—

Clough-Hanson Gallery | 2000 North Parkway, Memphis, TN | 901.843.3442 | rhodes.edu/gallery

All images are courtesy of the artist



*This exhibition is presented in partnership with ArtsMemphis and Metropolitan Bank,
who presented Edwards with the 2016 Emmett O'Ryan Award for Artistic Inspiration.*