

**JEFF BYE: LIGHT, AIR, AND THE PASSAGE OF TIME CAPTURED IN PAINT**

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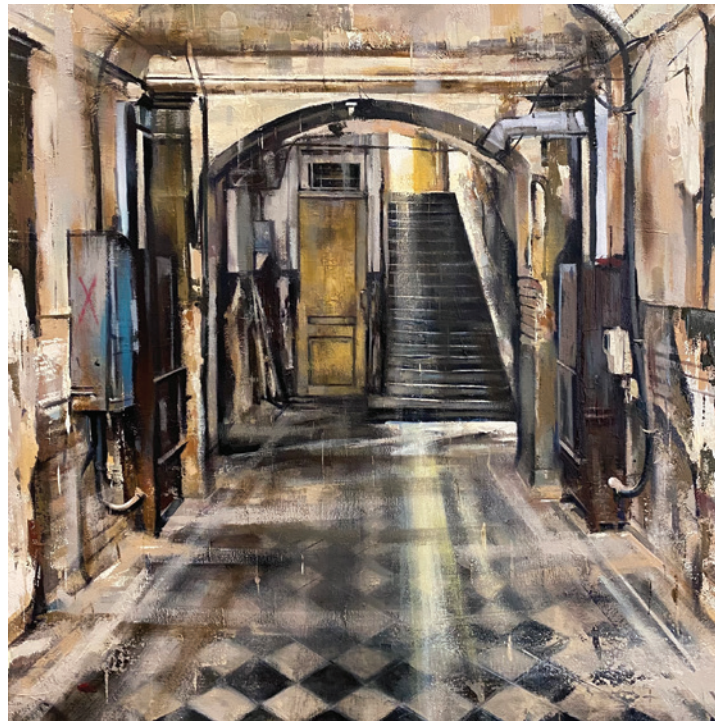
The sounds of silence permeate the spaces depicted in the paintings of the four-story J.W. Cooper Community Center in Shenandoah, PA by Jeff Bye, slated to be at Edgewater Gallery on the Green for the month of October. Originally constructed as Shenandoah High School in 1917, the building became a hospital and a morgue during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic, reopening as a high school in 1919. The ghosts of the building's long forgotten past inhabit Bye's painted rooms and corridors, shimmering in light that drenches the now corroded walls of peeling paint hinting at the personal histories and drama that once took place here.

Born in 1971, Bye attended the Rhode Island School of Design for his undergraduate degree and spent a year in Italy under the European Honors Program seeking a traditional approach to perfecting his skills. Later, he moved to Brooklyn and spent hours transfixed in front of the paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In particular, the isolation and loneliness evident in works like *Nighthawks* (1942) by Edward Hopper resonated with Bye, "I love Hopper. I cherish his struggle. He's not as gifted as Sargent but there's effort and edginess in the work." Bye received his master's degree in painting from the School of Figurative Art, also known as The New York Academy. At the age of 26 he was the youngest master to be inducted into the Copley Society of Boston.

History and the marks people leave on the spaces they occupied have always been of interest to Bye. During a recent interview he reflected, "New architecture is not very exciting to me. In Italy, I was drawn to the wonderful patinas on wall surfaces. I could sit and look at a wall all day." Selecting abandoned buildings in various states of decay for subject matter has its own unique set of obstacles to overcome. In order to

enter a building to see if the interior is as alluring as the exterior Bye must get the owner's permission. Sometimes finding the rightful owner is difficult yet in the case of the Cooper Community Center, Bye was in luck. Kent Steinmetz purchased the property in 2009 intending to create a community center—he turned out to be very cooperative. "Kent is a great owner. Some owners are not very flexible about letting people into their buildings, but Kent let me in, at least eight or nine times, during January and February. The first time it was dismal. Raining and then snowing. I wondered if I would be able to stay and paint there. Later it was a beautiful day. Sunlight poured in, creating triangle shapes of light." Each visit provided Bye with a different sensual experience of the space. "Sometimes it's the sound of flapping pigeon's wings and wind whistling through the windows that creates a feeling of solitude."

Bye first takes photos as reference and on subsequent visits he always brings his sketchbook, taking notes about his observations of the time and the quality of light on surfaces. He then goes back to the studio to work out compositional elements on canvas. While he uses a variety of media, the paintings at Edgewater are all oil. He



Jeff Bye, *Entrance*, oil on canvas, 22 x 22".

prefers Old Holland oil colors, "there's a softness to them, it is a matte paint, giving a dry softness. I don't varnish my paintings. I don't like shine."

The muted colors bring out the structural elements of the unpopulated spaces, exuding a sense of calm rather than foreboding. This viewer was transported in a wave of nostalgia, back to the classrooms and hallways of her New Jersey elementary school, which may have been built in the same decade as the Cooper building. The soft transitions in value in these works are punctuated by subtle accents of color like the red X and bluish surface on an electrical box in *Entrance* (24 x 24"). Bye manages to capture in his paintings the haunting stillness that he's experienced in these same rooms and hallways. "I don't want to get caught-up painting something that is not there. Observation is at the heart of what I do."

Bye lived in Brooklyn for 15 years and now resides in Hershey, PA. He is a professor of painting and drawing at Penn State, Harrisburg Campus and Elizabethtown College. Besides Edgewater, he is represented by galleries in New York, Boston, and Maine. His work has been widely exhibited and is included in many collections worldwide.

—Cynthia Close



Jeff Bye, *Projector Room at The Palace*, oil on linen, 19 x 52".