

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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SF WEEKLY

"Art: Elephant in the Room," by Jonathan Curiel,
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Liam Everett jokes about all the behind-the-scenes "neuroses" that go into making his otherworldly paintings. During the many months it takes to complete a series of works, Everett never sits down — there's no place to sit in his studio, anyway — as he puts things on wheels, and prods, chafes, scrapes, sands, and dabs his linen canvases over and over again. When the process is complete, Everett has someone else stretch his canvases into the finished versions that show up in galleries — which deliberately distorts the paintings in ways that will shock Everett.

Then there are the paintings' names, like *Untitled (Tikal)* and *Untitled (Milla)*, that suggest tangible connections to historic geographies but are chosen randomly and designed to play with art-goers' imaginations — and with Everett's. What you think you see with Liam Everett's painting is not quite what you get. The works are both complete and *incomplete* — inhabiting a state of existential limbo that borrows from Everett's theater background, which includes a childhood stint where he performed in Samuel Beckett's most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*.

"I'm very interested in the possibility of a work that's always working, instead of a work that's been worked," says Everett, who's also a playwright, and whose father produced theater in Ireland and in the United States. "My studio looks like a theater set, with everything in motion. The performance and the painting are completely integrated — one leads to the other, in this kind of self-generative form of practice."

Everett's latest exhibit at Altman Siegel gallery, "The Elephant Calf," which references an absurdist Bertolt Brecht play about law, features some nine large-scale paintings, each one a multitude of overlapping, crisscrossing layers that let you peer into the tiniest recesses and come away with something enthralling: blotches, fragments, lines that fade here and there, particles that circle each other. None of the paintings has a recognizable center. And that's exactly what Everett wants.

"A lot of 'The Elephant Calf' paintings spent time with mini-stages that I built in front of the paintings," he says. "I put contents from my studio, like buckets and sticks and lamps and stools, on top of these mini-stages, as props — really crude, agitprop theater sets. And then I'd reflect light on these objects, and they'd cast shadows on the paintings. And then I'd use these shadows to direct my gestures — another elaborate, neurotic way so I don't allow myself to make a gestural, emotional mark. They're led by the content of the space."

Each canvas in Everett's new exhibit has what he describes as "movement" that can take the eye in any direction, and which "implicates" the art-goer in a kind of participatory experience.

This involvement also borrows from the theater works Everett loves, where actors speak directly to audiences and break down the barrier between stage and seating. One of Everett's most recent performance works, *On the Wall*, showcases an actor (sometimes Everett) who drags himself by his forearms on a public street before entering the art space and the waiting audience. He admits his methods are unusual, as with having a framer-carpenter stretch his canvases into shape.



Liam Everett: The Elephant Calf. Through April 23 at Altman Siegel, 49 Geary St., San Francisco. Free; 415-576-9300 or altmansiegel.com.

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"They show up foreign, and it's very unsettling," Everett says. "It's not this kind of self-flagellation or self-destructive force. As idealistic as it sounds, I grow from this experience — that there is this deeper evolution that occurs in the practice when I'm confronted. That's really what it is — especially with this group called 'The Elephant Calf.' They went straight to the gallery, and to see them in this presentable condition, I found really intimidating. I was very anxious. I had a few weeks of high anxiety. I'm *still* having trouble reading them and figuring them out. When I see a painting, things like velocity and direction are the first things I think about. What is the pace at which the painting is moving? Which direction is it moving? Is it right to left? Is it a diagonal or vertical? Every time I've gone back to the gallery, they present themselves in a different condition."

Then, chuckling, Everett adds: "I probably spend a little too much time looking at paintings."