



Shower Tile, 2009  
oil on canvas, 24" x 30"



Light, 2009, oil on canvas. 24" x 30"

front cover: Drain, 2009, oil on canvas, 24" x 24"

A.J. FRIES • *Ignoring The Sirens* • November 6 to December 18, 2009

A.J. Fries graduated with a BFA from Buffalo State College in 1995. His solo exhibits include *Play With Me* at Big Orbit's Soundlab in 2002, *Living The Fantasy* at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in 2003, *New Works* at The Burchfield Penney Art Center in 2005, *Recent Paintings* at The Nichols School in 2006, and *Ignoring the Sirens* at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in 2009. He has been included in numerous group exhibitions including *Convergence* at The Carnegie Art Center in 2001, 9<24 at Buffalo State College in 2003, *New York State Collects Buffalo State College* at The Burchfield Penney Art Center in 2004, *Up Against the Wall* at Rochester Contemporary in 2006, *Beyond/In Western New York* in 2007, and *Remarkable* at the Indigo Gallery in 2009. In 2001 he was awarded a three-month residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in New York City, and in 2007 he was awarded a full fellowship for a month long residency at The Vermont Studio Center. A.J. Fries lives and works in Buffalo, New York.

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A . J . F R I E S I G N O R I N G T H E S I R E N S



## The Sweet Spot

A.J. Fries' new series of paintings, realized in glorious black and white, are not exactly new.

They *are* literally new, most painted this year, but conceptually, poetically, and even visually, they connect to a lineage of ideas that have wafted through Fries' work from the beginning. They will appear to some as a radical shift in style, an emphatic contrast to his long series of brightly-colored, pop-infused paintings for which the artist originally became known—from quiet slices of pie to reverential images of junk food to his almost-confrontational portraits of sex toys. These new paintings seem at first to defy the Fries' entire collected iconography, but what they really ought to suggest is that his paintings of a slice of pie, a package of Twinkies, or a purple vibrat-

ing dildo were not cheeky monkeys seeking to merely amuse or titillate the viewer, but were always really about something else.

When I wrote about those works, I thought the something else was Desire. I still do. Nostalgic Desire, Humorous Desire, Sexual Desire, Undefined Desire. But the new paintings suggest something wider than that and they do so by eschewing the easier ploy of pop culture references and relying on objects—more appropriately, moments—so banal that their initial fascination might be the fact that anyone bothered to paint them at all. Water on tiles. A soap bubble. A lightbulb on the ceiling. Water descending down a drain. Clouds framing a streetlamp. Just clouds. More clouds. Fire. Corrugated metal.

To consider them photo-representational paintings would be a mistake, despite the literal truth of that, because that's a complete ruse, a means to get to somewhere else. Among those earlier Fries paintings was a circular canvas depicting a glass of milk, seen from above with an Oreo floating in it. But that painting was not about cookies and milk and the warm sense of longing associated with that image or memory—alright, maybe a little—but *more* about the ideas materializing in these new paintings. While Fries has painted these new works with an impressive seeming-reality, they are far less about realistic pictorial representation than about the ephemeral and gossamer moments captured.

Since we've already brought up the downward-seen image of a cookie floating in milk, let's follow that tangent. Imagine a cup of coffee on a saucer, seen from above, after being stirred with a spoon, the liquid continuing to swirl as a caffeinated spiral galaxy. It's an iconic shot from Jean Luc Godard's *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*, over which the narration explains:

*"... since my thoughts divide as much as unite, and my words unite by what they express and isolate by*

*what they omit, since a wide gulf separates my subjective certainty of myself from the objective truth others have of me, since I constantly end up guilty, even though I feel innocent, since every event changes my daily life, since I always fail to communicate, to understand, to love and be loved, and every failure deepens my solitude, since... Since I cannot escape the objectivity crushing me nor the subjectivity expelling me, since I cannot rise to a state of being nor collapse into nothingness... I have to listen, more than ever I have to look around me at the world, my fellow creature, my brother."*

It's a rather fantastic shot (in color, though interestingly, I have always recalled it as black and white) because the moment could not be more ordinary or more full of quiet splendor. While the narration speaks to a existential alienation, the shot holds long enough that the ridiculous and implausible splendor of the ordinary image before us collapses ennui and wonder into a single rich, complex emotional state.

Fries is doing the same thing, painting the ordinary and "holding the shot" long enough to suggest that the scene before us is more mysterious and expansive than it first appears. But these are *paintings* and their greatest asset is not a clever conceptual device—or else they could just be photographs—but the paint. And painted monochromatically, one is sucked into their visual reverie and notices spaces that are assiduously rendered alongside subtler spaces where the image rests of the verge of abstraction. As soon as one focuses on (the ruse of) an intensely convincing detail, the eye just as swiftly drifts into the space diffused around the detail. It is as though the artist were experiencing a fugue state he were attempting to share.

To call them *dreamy* would not be inaccurate. There is a dreamy haze layered over these images, a soft focus, like something only half remembered. The subjects of the paintings are all off-centered, sometimes almost as though they were sliding in or out of the picture frame. While they might obviously be connoting the idea of memory, Fries' act of recollection is not pursuing a memory of these scenes or objects. These are decoys because what Fries is ultimately pursuing is a *sensation*. It is not about painting things but

painting Time.

And not Time Passing. The stillness of the images might suggest that, but this is another ruse. It is Time Suspended. Or Time Expanded. Or Time Amplified. The "sweet spot" is the precise and perfect spot for a golf club or a baseball bat to strike a ball. What's salient about this is not that the ball flies a country mile if you hit the sweet spot, but that Time stands still. It doesn't really, of course, but it *feels* as though it does. There is the sensation of expansion and awareness and something sublime that exists in that instant. It is the sensation of being wholly in the moment and it is that sensation for which Fries' paintings pine.

"Ignoring the sirens" is a literal and metaphoric allusion—the literal sirens passing by the studio window as urban noise or resisting the siren call of doing anything but remaining in the studio. Ignoring the sirens references Fries' commitment to the image at-hand, and the effort to realize not simply a pithy and convincing banality, but to pursue the state of mind and feeling within these painted moments. And "the moment" is a critical idea here, as one has to be "in the moment" to even hope to achieve this. Anyone who has ever tried to paint, or make any art, knows the gargantuan intimidation that must be overcome to find this state of being and operate within it to express anything.

It's not enough to ignore the sirens. Ignoring the sirens doesn't help if you can't find the moment. The Moment Right Now to express The Moment Then. To be so in the moment that paint on canvas avoids culminating into a mess and instead achieves a visual and emotional space where someone other than the artist gets it and is plunged through the proffered banality into a sensation of the wonderment within.

It may be said that A.J. Fries is ignoring the sirens. It may also be said that he is fucking his muse. The sweet spot.

*John Massier*  
*Visual Arts Curator*



far left: *Soap Bubbles*, 2008, oil on canvas, 24" x 24"  
From the collection of Dr. Richard and Kate Braen

above: *Corrugated Metal (Larkin Factory)*, 2009  
oil on canvas, 48" x 60"