



ArtSeen

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DAVID AUSTEN: *the stars above the ocean the ocean beneath the stars*

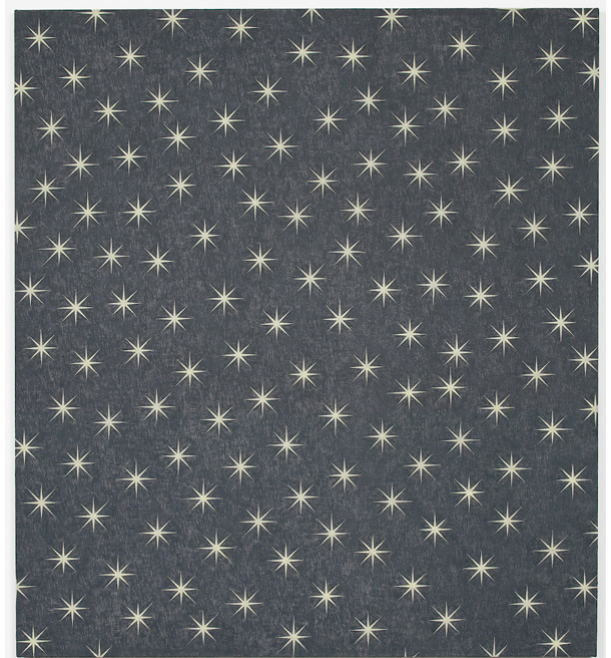
by Hovey Brock

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For his first solo exhibition in the United States, London-based artist David Austen presents film, painting, watercolor, and collage made over the period of a decade. Dreamy, spare, and elegant, these works radiate a shimmering visual buzz, like that first flush of alcohol intoxication before it gets sloppy. Even at their most edgy, such as the watercolor nudes from 2011 and 2017, they go down easy, like blended Scotch whisky.

Austen's compositions typically follow an all-over pattern or a simple figure/ground relationship. In *City of Love and Fear* (2009), the phrase "THE CITY OF LOVE AND FEAR" is painted in big, brightly colored sans-serif capitals spanning the width and length of the canvas. The background is a velvety black. Although this piece resembles Chris Wool's best-known work, the effect is very different. The lush background and the richness of the colors in the letters take this painting into a poetic register far from Wool's deadpan conceptualism. If anything, it is a paean to one of Austen's favorite themes: the thrills of urban nightlife—bright lights, big city—with all its perils and promise.

One of the most beautiful paintings is a nocturne, *Ocean* (2018), made up of stars spread out across the dove-grey surface of his signature oil and flax ground. Austen offers here a fanciful view of the sky just as night is falling and the stars are coming out. There is no particular pattern to their arrangement apart from their even placement. They appear to be all the same—eight points, in an off-white ivory color—except each one is spinning off at a slightly different angle, with variations in the length and width of the points. They exude a jittery energy as the eye jumps around comparing the differences between them,



David Austen, *Ocean*, 2018. Oil on flax canvas, 60 × 54 inches. Courtesy Totah Gallery.

making it impossible not to see them as animate, or even stand-ins for people. To accentuate that association, the gallery chose to hang one of the afore-mentioned watercolor nudes, *Woman arms outstretched (star)* (2017), depicting a delicately painted nude in the eponymous attitude, arms extended at shoulder level, legs spread wide. The spread-eagle figure comes off vulnerable, set against the stark white of the paper, her exposed body dissolving into the ground.

Given Austen's love affair with the night, it is not surprising that the moon also makes an appearance in the 16-minute film, *Smoking Moon* (2006). In it we see Austen wearing a goofy-looking crescent moon mask smoking a cigarette. For the duration of the film, Austen's head is suspended in an inky blackness as the ash on the absurdly long cigarette grows. The movie ends when the cigarette runs out. There are intimations of Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* in the hokey mask and the starkness of the set, yet clearly everything is about the ash hanging at the end of the cigarette. *Smoking Moon* is an excellent example of Austen's sensibility—sweet, funny, yet limned with intimations of death that transform the image of a man in a silly mask smoking an absurdly long cigarette into something disturbing but riveting. It makes one of the best cases in the show for why Austen's work, for all its whimsy, never comes off as twee. Death is the sounding board for all the chords he strikes, from the pathos of the watercolor nudes to the melancholy of the paintings. It's an outlook not unlike the Japanese esthetic of Wabi-sabi: it is precisely the transience and imperfection of things that makes them precious, like the blossoms of the cherry tree. So it is with Austen, whose artworks admonish: "Seize the moment—its like will not come again."



David Austen, *Smoking Moon*, installation view, 2006. Courtesy Totah Gallery.

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