

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen

Alex Sewell: *When I Wanted Everything*

By [Hovey Brock](#)



Alex Sewell, *Into the Void*, 2019. Oil on linen, 8 × 10 inches.

In his second solo show at TOTAH, Alex Sewell puts his considerable skills to work in paintings with trompe l'oeil flourishes that mimic the effects of pen, pencil, and chalk, as well as

illusionistic interiors and landscapes. The content of the paintings moves through autobiographical territory that bears the stamp of a suburban upbringing, while their compositions favor framing devices that give a theatrical feel to the enclosed scenes. The works on view here also invite rebus-like readings, as Sewell encodes the narratives of his childhood and adolescence in complex layers of signs, mark-making, and more straightforward representation. While there are tinges of suburban gothic à la David Lynch, the overall theme that these works convey is loneliness, as we seldom see human connection. More often, isolated figures must negotiate some actual or metaphorical wilderness.

That figure is often Sewell himself in one guise or another. As an actual self-portrait, he appears in the archly titled *Autoportrait à la Cigarette* (2017). Sketched out in faux pencil lines that are actually painted in oil, his face dominates most of the canvas, but it appears as a wall drawing that shows his flesh ripped away to reveal the bones underneath. In front stands a flimsy wooden contraption with a jerry-rigged belt drive that casts a wan shadow across Sewell's cadaverous visage. The tactile illusion of both the pencil lines and the wooden blocks of the contraption increases rather than diminishes our emotional distance from Sewell once we recognize he has visually tricked us.



Alex Sewell, *Funeral Parlor*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches.

In several paintings, the artist appears as an action figure, an “all-American” blond boy, with red baseball cap, white t-shirt, and blue jeans. *Into the Void* (2019) shows our anti-hero, pathetic sword in hand, about to enter a tunnel to face down who knows what. *Path* (2019) shows the action figure standing in the palm of a hand. Before Sewell’s stand-in is a partially rendered version of Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Virgin of the Rocks* (1483–1486). The Madonna, Jesus, John the Baptist, and the angel are all covered over with *faux* spray paint. Our anti-hero action figure stands blocked, unable to travel into the holy scene. Sewell’s path back to an era when art carried a clear socio-religious purpose is obstructed, and he is returned—by a spaceship in the top left corner of the painting—to the present, a time when art is obliged to trade in references that lack certainty or direction.

A similar sense of loss also crops up in *Funeral Parlor* (2019), but here it is personal rather than cultural. This composition has two frames, one stacked on top of the other. The upper frame touches on the comfort we derive from family movies, as it contains a video still, playing on an old television, of a man holding a baby. Here, however, the baby boy’s eyes are burning a hole in the side of the television. In the lower half of the composition we see a child’s drawing of a skeleton hooked up to an electric motor that appears to be getting its energy from a lightning bolt, rendered in crayon and blue tape, that emanates from the VCR sitting on top of the television. Is the VCR, or rather the tape playing in it, trying to resurrect the skeleton? Given the title and the skeleton, clearly someone has died here, and the pathetic-looking electric current of tape and crayon will do nothing to revive them.



Alex Sewell, *Suicide*, 2018. Oil on linen, 8 × 10 inches.

Sewell's confrontation of death takes its most disturbing turn in the understated *Suicide* (2018). In this work we see a stained sheet framed by two tree trunks. The sheet looks like it has paint strokes daubed over it. At the bottom right of the sheet a pair of legs clad in blue jeans sticks out from under the sheet. Has someone died? Are they passed out from drugs or alcohol? Are they just sleeping? The image gives us no answers. Teen suicide and depression are endemic in the suburbs, and in this context the painting seems a commentary on the alienation of suburban youths, forced to create their own desperate spaces in the landscape, *River's Edge*-style. This work makes a good companion piece to *When I Wanted Everything* (2018), from which TOTAH's exhibition takes its name. In contrast to the cramped, cut-off space of *Suicide*, *When I Wanted Everything* is vast, an ocean panorama interrupted by a hand tearing a hole to reveal a stretcher bar behind the canvas. Sewell's *trompe l'oeil* short-circuits the romantic sweep of the painted vista with an ironic twist that questions its authenticity. The expansive emotion suggested by the painting's title and its seascape view is the manic opposite of the depression in *Suicide*. Such is the teenage worldview, constantly veering between these poles. Sewell's intelligence as a painter recreates that time in his life with precision and insight, giving us a unique experience of adolescent intensity.

Contributor

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