Press release

Helene Appel

In the Open

12.11 – 16.12.2026

It is with great pleasure that Galleri Bo Bjerggaard presents Helene Appel's exhibition *In the Open*. This marks Appel's first solo exhibition at the gallery, following her participation in a group exhibition in 2025.

Please enjoy the exhibition text written by artist and writer David Risley:

Let's begin with what we see. A duvet. An envelope. A drain. A book. A mousehole. A sink. It's clearly there, painted life-size, 1:1, like an insect pinned to a board. It's made available to us. It's been prepared for us to see. It's on display. The paintings appear simple, clear and straightforward. There is no swashbuckling brushwork, no trickery. Like a master magician she shows us exactly what she's doing and we think we know what's going on. If only it were that simple.

Appel's paintings are not imitations. They are certainly not photo-realist. It would be easy (and lazy) to miscategorise her paintings as trompe-l'oeil (deceive the eye). There is a classic story from ancient Greek art history: two painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, compete to see who could make the best painting. Zeuxis painted a bunch of grapes so convincingly that a bird flew down and tried to eat them. Parrhasius painted a cloth curtain which fooled his rival who tried to pull it back to see the painting it surely covered. Parrhasius won because he deceived a man whereas Zeuxis only fooled a bird. This is not Appel's game. She isn't trying to deceive us. She's constantly saying, this is not the thing. They are not pictures of things, neither are they the thing itself, to me, they are a third thing. They are equivalences, manifestations. The painting isn't of the thing, it is also the thing, it is the thing, also.

In Appel's paintings, the surface and the illusion are melded. The painting is not a representation of the thing on the smooth surface of the painting. It's woven into the material being of the painting. The painting becomes the thing, transmogrified. Her working method and painterly approach are made new for each subject. Generally, with work that can be classified as realist the artist has mastered a technique and applies it, consistently, to each subject they paint. Appel's approach, medium and technique are contingent on the object she is aiming to portray. For the cold, damp surface of fish flesh she used waxy encaustic paint. She uses watercolour to stain hessian to portray fabric. The weave and weight of the surface, fine linen or rough hessian, become a part of the subject. The colour of the chosen surface does a lot of the heavy lifting in the paintings. The grey/brown linen can become dry soil, wet sand or hard tabletop, depending on the context it's working in. The linen, cotton or hessian she paints on isn't hidden by the painting. It is the visible place the painting happens - the stage - and at times, in the same

painting, an integral part of the thing being depicted. The surface often exists in two states. The painting isn't on the surface, rather, the surface is an active voice in the language she uses to convince us of the presence of the thing being portrayed.

There is a kind of painterly joke in the Sink paintings. The plates and cutlery submerged in the dirty dishwater are firstly painted in full colour, then the water that mutes their colours is made by partially obscuring them with varnish. The paintings are constructed almost like traditional oil paintings, with underpainting, layers and varnish. But here the varnish isn't simply a finishing layer applied to protect the image. It becomes the dirty water itself. Once again, the materials of painting and the materials of the subject become entangled.

In Flann O'Brien's wonderfully philosophical, comical novel, The Third Policeman, years of cycling over bumpy roads causes a shaken exchange of atoms between a cyclist and his bicycle. Over time this causes the man to become a good part bicycle and the bicycle a good part man. Their physical properties are exchanged and intermingled until it's hard to say that they are two distinct things.

Ok, let's take another simple question. Where do the paintings start? Surely, we suppose, she sees a thing in the world that interests her and she decides to make a painting of it. Right? Mmmm. Let's take the painting of a piece of striped fabric with a zipper, partly open. That existed firstly as an idea, she saw it in her mind's eye. She then bought some cloth and a zipper and sewed them together. Then she painted the coloured stripes onto the fabric. She did this so that she could make a painting of the coloured stripes on the fabric that she had just created just to be able to make a painting of it. This is what I mean when I talk about transmogrification and manifestation. It blew my mind. The painting doesn't only affect itself, it affects the world. This is like a tiny bending of space-time. Reality is warped. What is before and what is after? Which is more real, which exists more? The piece of fabric made as the subject of the painting or the painting of it? Like the man and the bicycle exchanging atoms, it's hard to separate them.

Appel's paintings are images of things that exist. Surely we can agree on that? Her painting *Path* began life closer to an Action Painting than a photo-realist painting. She laid a long narrow piece of canvas, 4.5 metres long and 45 cm wide, on the studio floor and walked on it wearing muddy boots. The image is indexical, like the hand prints on cave walls, it isn't an image of a footprint, it is an impression made by itself. She then worked into the marks she'd made with paint, defining the footprints, mud and pools of water. The path didn't (doesn't) exist outside of the representation of itself.

I'm tempted to say the subjects she chooses to paint are unmediated. They reach us with a kind of purity, a visual innocence. Most imagery now belongs to a seemingly infinite stream of advertisements, films, memes, photographs etc. A vast collective unconscious of imagery. Appel's paintings seem to avoid this database and propose new subjects which we don't have preconceived, mediated reference images to pull from. The subject is

familiar and everyday but arrives unburdened by other images. Her painting *Mousehole* exemplifies this. The image I carry in my head of a mousehole is of the perfect archway cut into a domestic skirting board that is the entrance to Jerry's home in Tom and Jerry cartoons. Appel's *Mousehole* bears no relation to this. Hers is natural. A small black irregular circular hole in a forest floor. Looking closer, the hole isn't painted but cut, Lucio Fontana style, out of the surface. Whereas Fontana's cut, and the inferred infinity beyond it, are themselves the subject, Appel's cut becomes an image of something; it is both a real hole and an image. Black fabric is stretched across the back of the painting, creating a velvety darkness beyond.

The paintings conceal nothing yet remain mysterious. How they do this while presenting everything so clearly is beyond me. In showing us overlooked parts of the world, clearly and matter-of-factly, she reminds us of how little we know. How the simplest things can still reveal mystery, magic and wonder.

Short bio: Helene Appel is a German painter (b. 1976, Karlsruhe, Germany), living and working in Berlin. She graduated from Hochschule für Bildende Künste Hamburg in 2004 and received an MA in Painting from the Royal College of Art, London, in 2006.

Appel's works are represented in several collections, including the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (Greece), La Gaia Collection (Italy), Moenchehaus Museum Goslar (Germany), Olbricht Collection (Germany), Touchstones Rochdale (UK), and Williamson Art Gallery (UK).