SINCE 1990 NEW YORK-BASED PAINTER MAUREEN GALLACE has made uniformly small, clarion landscapes featuring vernacular architectural forms—most often cottages or small houses distilled to a shorthand of elemental geometries. Individuating details, when articulated, are spare. The scenes are not visibly inhabited, although a strong sense of place and personality is implied. She works deliberately. Employing a stringently muted palate—icy blues, warm greens, brick reds, stony grays, peachy pinks, creamy whites, and light browns—and purposeful brushstrokes in seriously considered compositions, Gallace averages fewer than ten finished paintings each year. This focus exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago presents a selection, made in collaboration with the artist, of 21 new and recent paintings.
Ostensibly Gallace maps the environs of leisurely holidays and weekends in the country or by the shore. At first blush, her modest objects seem anomalous—old-fashioned, anachronistic even—in the marketplace of contemporary figurative painting. The strength and importance of her work is cumulatively rooted in its self-conscious simplicity, confident technical discipline, and theoretical orientation. Indeed, the focused range of her subject matter evidences a decidedly conceptual itinerary. Like others before her, Gallace is able to mine a seemingly infinite creative potential within a restricted idiom. The repetition has yielded an impeccable skill. Comparisons to such august art-historical precedents as Charles-François Daubigny, Edward Hopper, Alex Katz, Giorgio Morandi, Fairfield Porter, Robert Ryman, and Albert York are easy and frequent; in truth, her practice, while in dialogue with such precursors, is distinctively contemporary. Gallace strikes a precise balance between the familiar and the strange; this is the source of her paintings’ odd, uncanny allure.

The artist’s rigorous, almost anxious, reiterations of the countryside contradict the potentially precious, sentimental, or cute associations of naïve amateurism knowingly conjured by the scale and subject matter of her work. The recurrence of motifs evidences a far more complex fixation. Light and shadow, architectural elements, even blades of grass are all ponderously conceived and endlessly reworked with short, tiny strokes and meticulous, misleadingly casual jabs and daubs of color. In reality, her studio practice is an urban, intense, often worried depiction of scenes that are simultaneously part of and outside of her experience. Under scrutiny, Gallace’s paintings, despite the near perfection of their execution, are highly mediated, eccentric works of art; their charm is more subversive than ingratiating.

The paintings are inflected through a kind of regionalism; the locales conjured are drawn from the geographies of Gallace’s childhood and adult life in New England, mostly Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and her native Connecticut. (One painting, Merritt Parkway, Winter, 2002, documents the road on which the artist regularly journeys between Manhattan and New England.) While Gallace’s compositions have always been obliquely autobiographical, the degree of specificity in
her work has increased over the years. Her earlier paintings, for example, lacked distinguishing features or descriptive details, such as windows and doors. Such scenes are both real and generic. The artist recounts:

"When I started to use the landscape . . . the level of abstraction allowed [the works] to be read as the idea of "landscape," the idea of "home," and the idea of "painting." I never really wanted to make the paintings about my own personal attachments. . . . It took me a long time to realize what these paintings were telling me. In the winter of 1996, I went home to the town in Connecticut where I grew up. I did a lot of drawing and took photographs of the town and surrounding area—all places I remembered. I came back to New York and made new paintings. For the first time, the paintings were specific to me in a very real way. Previously untitled, they are now titled by location and season. I felt like they were finally about something I had secretly wanted them to be all along. The point of origin has moved from a memory (of a painting or a place) or the psychological to a real place and time. Somehow this shift has come as a kind of freedom. This freedom has allowed me to focus more on the actual process of painting.\(^3\)

The house is, to be sure, a powerful, psychologically charged theme. The idea inevitably carries associations of shelter, family, childhood—and all of the attendant emotions (pleasant or otherwise) attached to the memories and lived experiences of home. Even when specifically tracked and identified, Gallace's houses, with their invisible interiors and absentee inhabitants, occupy a symbolic register. Her bucolic retreats and scenic vistas possess a dark edge. Gallace's paintings do not always follow rules of perspective in order to accurately render depth; the refusal of a highly finished realism imports disquiet. Her small, tight compositions confine these places, and their surrounding landscapes, into a kind of claustrophobic dream space.

There are within the artist's oeuvre a few, little-known works that do not picture house and home. Among these are pure landscapes—beach and road scenes notable for the absence of the artist's signature motif. Gallace has also made six portraits, including depictions of herself, a friend, her nephew Bryan, and, oddly, the singer formerly known as Cat Stevens.\(^4\) The striking formal similarities between the modes of her painting echo their shared conceptual abstraction; her images are specific in their sources but generalized to such a degree as to appear
generic. *Bryan*, 2003, for example, is painted in the same way as a house. The cushions of the couch are presented in bands that resemble streaky clouds or successive layers of receding countryside. These works, as well as the empty landscapes, feel in some ways like exercises in refining style, allowing the artist to better understand her vocabulary of mark-making by seeing the facture put to different ends.

Gallace works the paint wet on wet, allowing each brushstroke to sit, legibly and tangibly, on the surface. For many years, the artist employed stretched linen canvases simply prepared with one or two coats of gesso. The absorbent weave of the support lends these paintings a degree of texture and depth. In 2002 she began to paint on panel. The preparation of these surfaces is far more labor-intensive and time-consuming, requiring ten or twelve coats of primer and successive sandings to achieve a finish that is at once flat and smooth but receptive to paint. According to Gallace:

I started using the panels because they are so much more resistant to the paint than the linen. The paint goes on in a perfect kind of way. It's still a struggle, but less of one. When the panels started you could see the brush marks so much more clearly in the paintings. It also sort of forced me to paint a little differently. I can't control the paint quite as much with the panels, so the paint does a little more on its own. Or maybe it's just harder for me to overwork things. I floated the mounting on the back so that the panel would seem different than a stretched canvas as far as the edge. I just wanted the two things to read differently although I don't know how I really differentiate the two surfaces installing them. I just keep things that look like they belong near each other together. The material facts of these paintings are asserted by this perhaps subtle change in surface and support, calling attention to the works' peculiar consistency.

Gallace's subject matter ultimately emerges as repetition, and thus, as painting itself. The relationship of her work to the realities of experience and memory are complex. In a possible inversion, the paintings structure a quality or evoke a specific notion of pleasure, rather than recall or document lost or remembered idylls. As Bruce Hainley, the most poetic and insightful of the artist's critics, has suggested, "Perhaps the reality Gallace has known no longer exists except as she paints it into existence."

JAMES RONDEAU
FRANCES AND THOMAS DITTMER CURATOR OF CONTEMPORARY ART

NOTES
1. Bruce Hainley uncovered accidental precedent in Gallace's colors: "Most of the houses are painted white, but many are painted petal pink, frosted mint, buttercup, fudge, rose beige, antique green, Cape Cod brown, lilac, and so on.
2. "If you saw Maureen Gallace's modest little paintings of New England cottages in a gift shop in Ogunquit, Me., you'd probably pass them by with barely a glance. In a Chelsea gallery, which invites more thoughtful scrutiny, they have a puzzling charm"; Ken Johnson, "Maureen Gallace," New York Times, 21 Mar. 2003, p. E40. See also Bruce Hainley: "Small things are easily dismissed; her paintings are not exactly what everyone has in mind when they preconceive an idea of how the contemporary looks"; Hainley (note 1), p. 75.
4. Gallace explains: "The very first oil painting I ever made was a portrait of Cat Stevens. I think I was 11. The curator from Douglas Hyde found that out and asked me to sort of remake the portrait, so I did. I'm not sure it made any sense to anyone except that guy and me"; e-mail to the author, 17 Apr. 2006.
5. Ibid.
MAUREEN GALLACE

Born Stamford, Connecticut, 1960

BFA from Hartford Art School, University of Hartford, West Hartford, Connecticut, 1981;
MFA from Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1983

Lives and works in New York

SELECTED ONE-PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2005
- Chinati Foundation, Marfa, Texas
- Kerlin Gallery, Dublin
- Galleria Il Capricorno, Venice

2004
- Douglas Hyde Gallery, Trinity College, Dublin (cat. with essay by Rick Moody)
- Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

2003
- Dallas Museum of Art (brochure with essay by Suzanne Weaver)
- 303 Gallery, New York
- Maureen Paley Interim Art, London

2002
- Gallery Side 2, Tokyo
- Michael Kohn Gallery
- Nielsen Gallery, Boston

2001
- Line and Space/Landscape, Fukui City Art Museum, Fukui-shi, Japan (cat.)
- Kerlin Gallery
- Kohn Turner Gallery, Los Angeles
- Galleria Il Capricorno

2000
- Gallery Side 2
- 303 Gallery

1999
- Texas Gallery, Houston

1998
- Kohn Turner Gallery
- Maureen Paley Interim Art
- Nielsen Gallery

1997
- 303 Gallery
- Modulo Gallery, Lisbon

1996
- Galerie Christian Drantmann, Brussels

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2004
- Now Is a Good Time, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

2003
- School Is Out, Southfirst, Brooklyn
- The Great Drawing Show, 1550–2003, Michael Kohn Gallery

2002
- The Holiday Show, Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin
- Gravity over Time, Milleventi, Milan
- American Standard: (Para) Normality and Everyday Life, Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York (cat.)
- Grey Gardens, Michael Kohn Gallery

Landschaften, Museum Schloss Hardenberg, Velbert, Germany (cat. by Cornelia Will, Walter Filtz, and David Rimanelli)
Johnen and Schörtle, Cologne

Sandy Road, 2003
Eight New Paintings, Kerlin Gallery
Beyond Barbizon, Elias Fine Art, Allston, Massachusetts

2001
The Devil Is in the Details, Allston Skirt Gallery, Boston
Maureen Gallace and Vincent Fecteau, Gallery Paule Anglim, San Francisco
I See You 2, Fredericks Freiser Gallery, New York
At Home, Lennon Weinberg Gallery, New York
The Way I See It, Galerie Jennifer Flay, Paris
Kaye Donachi, Maureen Gallace, James Welling, Maureen Paley Interim Art

2000
The Poetic Landscape, Barbara Mathes Gallery, New York

1998
Painting: Now and Forever, Part 1, Pat Hearn Gallery, New York; Matthew Marks Gallery, New York
New Found Landscape, Kerlin Gallery

1997
Pittura, Castello di Rivara, Turin (cat.)

1996
Westchester Celebrates Art, Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, New York
Ideal Standard Life, Spiral/Wacoal Art Center, Tokyo

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Moss, Sarah. *Architecture* 91, no. 7 (July 2002), p. 104.

**WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION**

*Beach House, 2001*
Oil on linen; 35.6 x 35.6 cm
The Speyer Family Collection, New York

*Beach House (with Porch), Falmouth, MA, 2002*
Oil on panel; 22.9 x 30.5 cm
Private collection, New York

*Bryan, 2003*
Oil on panel; 22.9 x 30.5 cm
Private collection, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

*Cape Cod, October, 2002*
Oil on panel; 27.9 x 35.6 cm
Collection of Steve Martin

*Cape Cod, Winter, 2004*
Oil on panel; 27.9 x 30.5 cm
Collection of Nancy Lauter McDougal and Alfred L. McDougal

*Down the Road from My Brother’s House, 2002*
Oil on linen; 27.9 x 35.6 cm
Collection of Nancy Lauter McDougal and Alfred L. McDougal

*February, 2005*
Oil on panel; 27.9 x 35.6 cm
Collection of Frances Fay Bowes

*4th of July, Fairfield, 2003*
Oil on panel; 27.9 x 35.6 cm
Private collection, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

*Grassy Beach House, Falmouth, MA, 2002*
Oil on linen; 27.9 x 35.6 cm
Collection of Isobel Estorick, Los Angeles

*Icy Barns, 2003*
Oil on panel; 27.9 x 35.6 cm
Private collection, courtesy Michael Kohn Gallery, Los Angeles

*Icy Hill (Christmas Card), 2003*
Oil on panel; 25.4 x 25.4 cm
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Jerome L. Coben, Los Angeles

*Lake House with Forsythia, 2006*
Oil on linen; 25.4 x 25.4 cm
Private collection, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

*Late November, 2005*
Oil on panel; 22.9 x 30.5 cm
Private collection, Ireland

*Late Summer, 2002*
Oil on panel; 22.9 x 30.5 cm
Private collection, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York
Long Island, 2006
Oil on linen; 25.4 x 25.4 cm
Private collection, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

Merritt Parkway, Winter, 2002
Oil on panel; 22.9 x 30.5 cm
Private collection, New York

Sandy Road, 2003
Oil on panel; 27.9 x 35.6 cm
Private collection, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

Self-Portrait, 2006
Oil on linen; 30.5 x 30.5 cm
Private collection, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

Stormy Farmhouse, 2001
Oil on linen; 45.7 x 61 cm
Private collection

Winter, Easton, CT, 2006
Oil on panel; 35.6 x 45.7 cm
Private collection, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

Yellow Field, Easton, CT, 2002
Oil on linen; 22.9 x 30.5 cm
Collection of Benjamin Sontheimer

THANKS
Nick Barron, Frances Foye Bowes, Mr. and Mrs. Jerome L. Cohen, James Cuno, Lisa Dorin, Isabel Esterick, Paul Gallagher, Darrell Green, Lauren Grundhofer, Sarah Guernsey, Darragh Hogan, Erin Hogan, Michael Kohler, Dawn Koster, Jeanne Ladd, Chai Lee, Kristin Lister, Steve Martin, Alfred L. McDougal, Nancy Lauster McDougal, Whitney Moeller, Simone Montemurro, Brad and Rebekah Palmer, Maureen Pikowski, Katie Reilly, Rae Riffel, Dorothy Schroeder, Benjamin Sontheimer, Lisa Spellman, Jerry Speyer, Elizabeth Stepina, Jim Szykowski, Francis Williams, Jeff Wonderland, and Stuart and Toni Young. Special thanks to the artist.

THURSDAY 25 MAY
EXHIBITION PREVIEW
5:30–8:00 p.m.
Gallery 139
CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST
6:00 p.m.
Morton Auditorium
OPENING RECEPTION
7:00 p.m.
Jean and Steven Goldman Study Center
Department of Prints and Drawings

FRIDAY 2 JUNE
12:00 p.m.
Assistant Curator Lisa Dorin
Gallery 100
TUESDAY 8 AUGUST
12:00 p.m.
Cary Telfair, lecturer.
Museum Education
Gallery 100
COVER: Late Summer, 2002 (detail)
All images courtesy 303 Gallery, New York
This exhibition is funded in part by Joseph and Anne Tabet. Ongoing support for focus exhibitions is provided by The Alfred L. McDougal and Nancy Lauter McDougal Fund for Contemporary Art.