

# A Nod Is as Good as A Wink

by Lily Siegel

Caitlin Teal Price's *Dune* (2023) might just be the perfect anchor for the two-person exhibition, with Karin Davie, *The Reality Principle*. If we assume that Price is referring to the landform, not the books/movies that are so present in the popular imagination now (again), we envision a massive mound made of the tiniest of sand particles. Millions, billions, of grains one atop the other form something grand. If Price, however, titled the work after the book/movie, well, that works too.

Karin Davie's painting series *Beam Me Up* (2019–2022), of which two works are included in the exhibition, are titled in direct reference to *Star Trek*. The works were first shown in an exhibition-in-two-parts titled *To Boldly Go Where No Man's Gone Before*.



Image detail: Karin Davie, *Beam Me Up No 4 (Small) (Diptych)*, 2022



Installation view, *The Reality Principle*. Photograph by Kristofer Heng.

Science fiction could be a useful genre through which to consider these works. Like the genre, Price's and Davie's works are based in factual reality, but use speculation to arrive at a more human truth. Both artists' work is firmly grounded in the physical: in an artist's own body and an object's own solidness. Though both artists work in formal abstraction, it is an abstraction inherited from artists, such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Eva Hesse, Richard Tuttle, and Bruce Nauman, whose abstraction has discrete corporeal references. While Davie must steady her full body to achieve the desired repeating wavelike stroke over and over to produce one painting,

Price focuses her control on thousands of small incisions on a single surface.

There is an often-repeated quote of O'Keeffe stating,

“Nothing is less real than realism. Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis that we get to the real meaning of things.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>“I Can't Sing, So I Paint! Says Ultra Realistic Artist; Art is Not Photography—It Is Expression of Inner Life! Miss O'Keeffe Explains Subjective Aspect of Her Work,” *New York Sun*, December 5, 1922, quoted in Jonathan Stuhman, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Circling Around Abstraction* (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 2007), p. 22.

Both Price and Davie worked for many years with more direct representations of the human figure. Their bodies were also always present in the work, as the artist lugging around the camera and accompanying equipment, in Price's case, and through the length and tenor of the brushstrokes in Davie's, the use of her own body in performance and

quotidian household objects. The process, though, is not important except as the expression of the work to make the work.

Same for Davie. Two paintings in the show are titled *In the Metabolic No. 5* and *In the Metabolic No. 8*. The process of metabolizing is a conversion to energy. This series of works is on

diptychs cause a disruption that forces one to do a double take. What looked like a mirrored image is not exact. It becomes uncanny, a bit like seeing oneself with your camera non-mirrored in a video conference. Gestures become heightened. They are perhaps the most important detail, the "real meaning of things."



Installation view, *The Reality Principle*. Photograph by Kristofer Heng.

multimedia works. As the obvious figure was eliminated as the subject of their works, the emphasis became the person in front of the picture—the artist, or even the viewer. That labor is in the image. The results are art works that depict something at once heavy and light.

As smaller cameras, digital printing, and life circumstances made the physicality of taking photographs less integral, Price found herself looking for ways to employ her body more fully in the making. She started taking long walks to gather objects, which led to mapping, which led to drawing. Effort is important. As the artist makes her mark on the paper, dust accumulates on the floor as she removes her material to reveal an image, which is often borrowed from historical photographs or

linen over shaped stretchers that accommodate a cutout that originated as a disruption caused by the artists own impeding body. Because of this elimination, the painter must interrupt her fluid stroke with athletic precision to maintain the coherence of the picture she is painting. Breaks and impediments are important for Davie. The other works in the show are diptychs. The canvases so perfectly fit together that the zips down the middle almost seem negligible. However, just like the notches cut into the edges of other paintings, the break in the



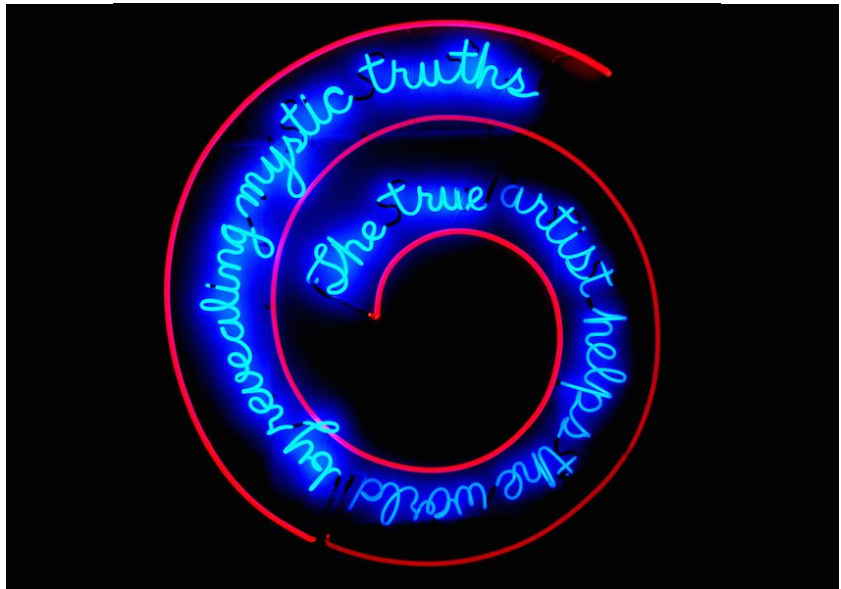
Installation view, *The Reality Principle*. Photograph by Kristofer Heng.

Back to the beam. Davie talks of her fascination with Nauman and his use of his body in the work he's been making since the 1960s. Especially relevant here are those made with neon light and tubing. Nauman's use of light was based in its material properties as delimiting physical space.

His work *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths* (Window or Wall Sign) (1967), a spiral of blue and red neon stating the title, is pointed and funny. Light, especially when present in artworks, is thought to represent the mystical. His bright window or wall sign advertising the service of the true artist is blatantly not revealing any mystic truths.

For Price and Davie, light is also used as a form that takes up space. It is something to move around. A *photograph* is a drawing with light; it is the act of capturing something that is seemingly ephemeral and turning it solid. Price comes from photography and draws atop photographic prints on Hahnemühle Rag paper. Davie's use of light is more like Nauman's use of neon—it becomes solid, a subject, an object, something to make room for. However, light is never *the* subject. It is a small part of the bigger point, an obstacle that one must get past or around to return to groundedness.

**April, 2024**



Bruce Nauman, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*, 1967. Photo: Giulia van Pelt © Philadelphia Museum of Art

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