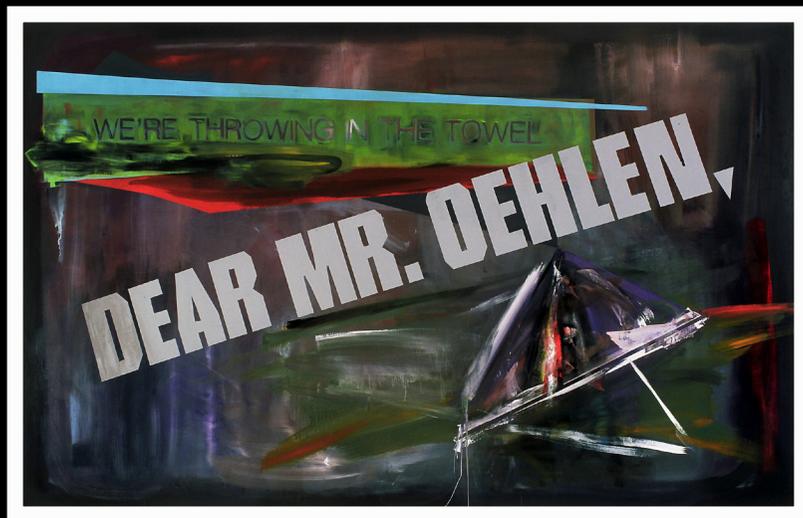




Lise Soskolne

The Work

An Exhibition in Two Chapters



Dear Mr. Oehlen, We're Throwing In the Towel, 2004
Oil on canvas. 60 x 96 in.



Bikini Girl 1, 2000. Oil on canvas. 16 x 24 in. (l), 17 x 26 in. (r)

The Joy

by

Lise Soskolne

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The Joy

The day had finally come to shut the door for the last time, throw the keys under it and bring the remaining coffee cans of used turpentine down to the street. I left the air conditioner for the next tenant, the black vinyl recliner had been illegally dumped in the parking lot, and all of my paintings and tools were in storage across the street. I scattered the cans of spent solvent around the Navy Yard, leaving each one next to a different building so it would seem like less of an imposition on the sanitation workers who had to dispose of them, and went home. That was it—the end of painting.

The end of painting has come and gone for generations, again and again, in theory and as an art historical fact, but it also must at some point visit in a very private way every artist who paints. Whether the irrelevance (and pain!) of painting ever departs from you once it has arrived, and if painting ever begins again, depends on how much you like the dirty business of doing it.

For me the end of painting didn't come last year when I shut down my studio. It arrived in the early 1990s in Vancouver when I started painting. It was there I was taught, without fully understanding why, that painting was dead—or at least inadequate to what the institution of critical theory required of artists at that time. Because the city's fractured art scene seemed to reproduce itself at an aesthetic crossroads, where any evidence of earnest self-expression would direct you out to the field's intellectual margins, a painter could only be taken seriously as an artist if they did it with forensic detachment. And there began my painting problem.

My problem is that the work of pushing oil paint around—of making it behave but not conform—is a filthy process that I love. I find joy in the torture of what's called direct painting, blending paint wet-into-wet, and outrageous satisfaction when it succeeds—which is not very often. But the fact of my feelings being embalmed in the paint once it dries and visible under my fingernails or on the skin of my prematurely aging hands has mostly been at odds with the fact that I find such public displays of commitment to living the cliché of the artist's struggle inherently embarrassing. Then again, I have also found the dirty work of cultivating a public career to be just as much of an indignity.

Bringing together over thirty paintings made between 1999 and 2016, *The Work* documents how I managed my painting problem over the years.

And because it's my first public solo exhibition in New York since 2001, it's also the result of a career management problem, which is to say that it's no coincidence this period of time aligned with an era in contemporary art marked by accelerated professionalization. During the phasing-in of conventions like stylistic cohesion networked through academia and marketed back out again to serve a portfolio-building economy, I was earning a living as an arts administrator and, later, as a labor organizer in New York's nonprofit sector. Being unable and unwilling to do what was required of me to become legible as an artist in this new industry, and believing deeply in nonprofits as the alternative, I chose to invest my labor in them instead. And so, it's because my identity over the past two decades has been as an employee working in service of the art field rather than as an artist exhibiting within it that the paintings in *The Work* also ask, *What happens when an artist cannot or does not comply with the conventions necessary to becoming visible?*

Answering this question has involved detached forensic work. I started thinking about it through the lens of reproductive labor, not only because I was surprised to find so many women in my paintings but also because the kind of badly paid work I did directly contributed to providing material support for the practices and exhibitions of so many of my peers. And as is the case for the majority of artists who labor in obscurity, so too did my unpaid, invisible studio work indirectly contribute to building value and visibility for other artists.

But reproductive labor is something most of us are forced to do every day, and the women in my paintings make me think less about the subjection of women under capitalism and more about the subjection of women by my own hand in reverence to my old heroes, Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Dieter Roth, and Michel Houellebecq. The women in my paintings aren't heroes, they're jokes. And LOL the joke was on me when I evolved into one of them—a woman whose work both in the studio and in the workplace contributed to the industry's uncanny ability to extract value from all of our unpaid labor.

Anyway, there are perks to certain kinds of unpaid reproductive labor, one being the freedom to do whatever you want without anyone watching. I was convinced that the key to justifying representational painting's continued

existence was finding a way to apply paint that hid evidence of my mark. I tried everything. I used paint rollers and palette knives instead of brushes, I made gesso so thick it only took one coat to bury the tooth of the canvas, I pretended the painting support was a movie screen and not a stretcher, I used tape and typographic masking, and I blended daubs of paint by smearing the face of one canvas onto another. *The Work's* first chapter looks like a group exhibition because the paintings in it represent a range of solutions in search of a problem—a painting problem.

So, what happens when an artist cannot or does not comply with the conventions necessary to becoming visible? They either stop or they keep going. My love of the dirty business of painting is what kept me going, and my discomfort with the even dirtier business of self-promotion is what made me invest my labor in reforming the nonprofit sector, where visibility felt like less of an indignity.

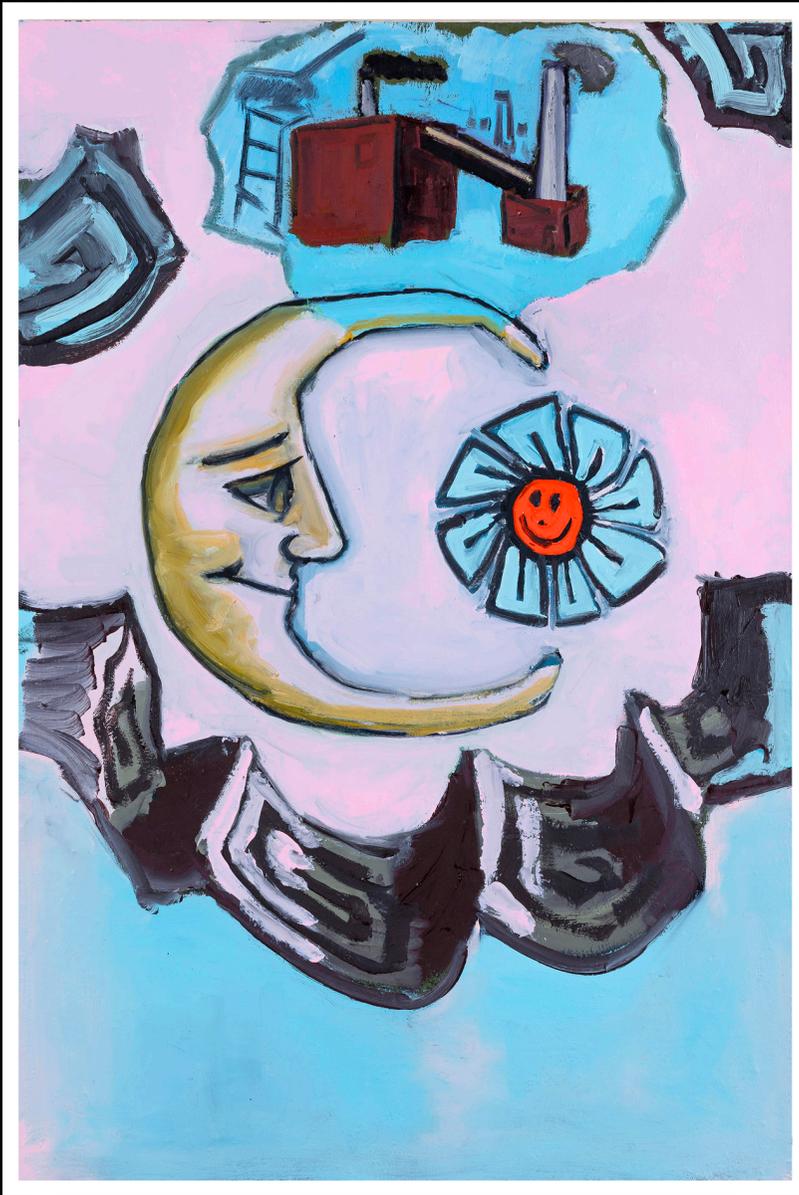
Now that I'm temporarily visible as an artist I can say that *The Work* has taught me something many artists probably already know to be true. The real privilege of becoming visible is not the process of becoming apparent to others. The real privilege is the process of receiving care and material support, along with the belief by another in the work's value, through which one becomes *visible to oneself*. This text is a result of that privilege, and so is the understanding that as long as I have a painting problem, painting has no end.



UGG!, 2013. Oil on canvas. 84 x 65 in.



Michel Houellebecq Ascending in the Horizon, 2006.
Oil on canvas. 60 x 48 in.

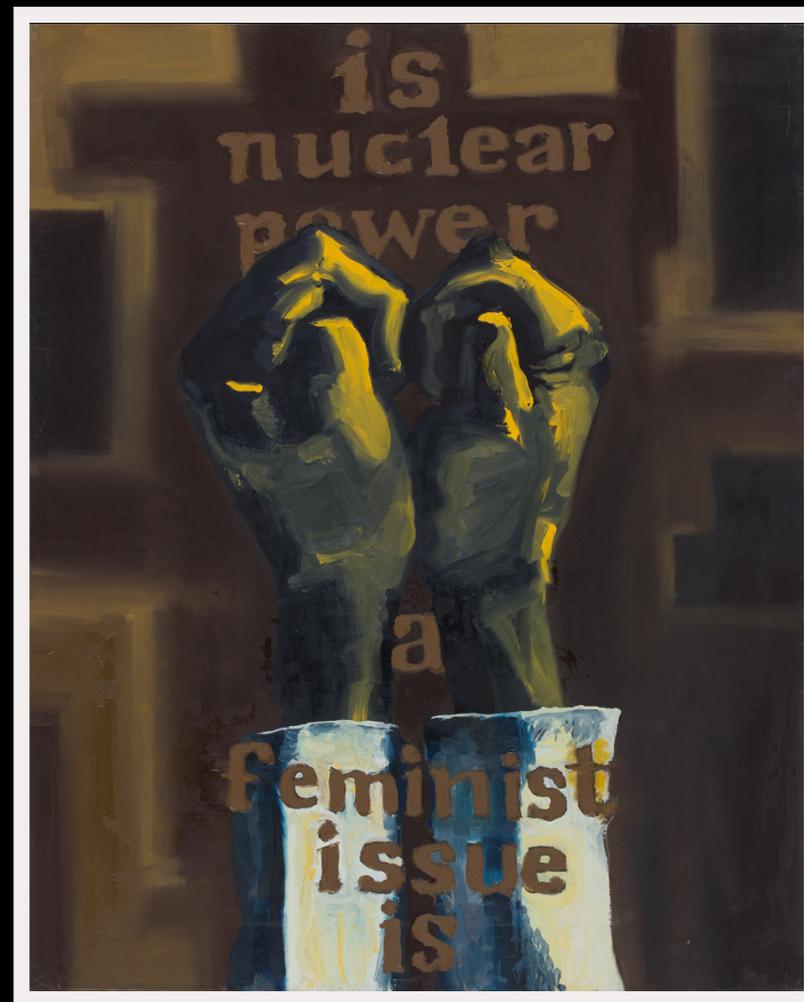


Bethenny 6, 2014. Oil on canvas. 36 x 24 in.

Lise Soskolne is an artist and core organizer of Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), a New York-based activist organization founded in 2008. W.A.G.E.'s mission is to establish sustainable economic relationships between artists and the institutions that contract their labor, and to introduce mechanisms for self-regulation into the art field that collectively bring about a more equitable distribution of its economy. A co-founder of W.A.G.E. and its core organizer since 2012, Soskolne also has over 15 years of work experience in downtown New York City nonprofit arts presenting and development at venues including Anthology Film Archives, Artists Space, Diapason Gallery for Sound, Meredith Monk/The House Foundation for the Arts, Participant Inc, and Roulette Intermedium. In 2007, Soskolne was hired by property owners Fruchthandler Brothers Enterprises to use artists to increase the property value of Industry City, a then neglected 6.5 million sq ft industrial complex on the South Brooklyn waterfront. There she founded and managed the arts component in its broader regeneration, intending to establish a new paradigm for industrial redevelopment that would not displace workers, artists, local residents or industry, but would instead build a sustainable community of working artists in a context that integrated cultural and industrial production. Industry City provided rent-stabilized studio space for 45 artists in financial need and low cost space to nonprofit arts organizations during the years of the project's operation, 2007–2010.



First Female Chimney Sweep, 2005. Oil on canvas. 66 x 66 in.



A Feminist Issue Is, 2005. Oil on canvas. 32 x 26 in.

This Woman's Work by Alaina Claire Feldman

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Feldman

The Work is the title of a painting by Lise Soskolne from 2005 that illustrates a distressed chick just birthed into a world of commitment. The young bird sits atop a cannonball that it is chained to while fractured pieces of an eggshell lay around. Without having been given a chance, it is already in a world where work is the criterion for being. To little surprise, the image was appropriated from a clinical psychology book, where it was intended to exemplify the pathology of overproduction.

Artists are often expected to overproduce and overperform. It is assumed that they consistently exhibit, have a logical CV, are armed with installation images of sterile white walls ready to be circulated into the inboxes of collectors and press. Such determinate protocol foregrounds and rewards the professionalization of authorship. Skeptical of these requirements, Soskolne has positioned herself outside such definable systems, recognizing that “success” on these terms compromises ways of establishing oneself. In an essay titled *Painting Politics*, presented in 2014 at a panel at New York University, she said, “I choose not to do what’s necessary to operate as an exhibiting artist and so I don’t participate that way.”¹

From 1996 until 2007, Soskolne experimented with ways around such normative expectations as an artist by circumventing a definitive method of mark making. Looking to create a proxy to the body, she implemented the paint roller and printing techniques as an attempt to create personal distance from her work. For example, *The First Female Chimney Sweep*, 2005, is a large square canvas (66 x 66”) with a proud, sooty-faced figure who greets visitors as they enter the Mishkin Gallery. This figure, with a broom in hand, maintains a goofy smile alongside her place of work. The paint is evenly applied with a roller, giving it a hazy texture as Soskolne dragged the roller back and forth, up and down the canvas. Despite the attempt to avoid a personal mark, this work nevertheless captures her body movements in the paths of the roller. The more invisible she tried to make herself, the more her labor is reinforced by rendering it visible.

The Work has multiple meanings, as a painting title as well as the title of this exhibition, presented in two chapters in order to accommodate a heterogenous selection of paintings that are eccentric, witty, and at times

uncomfortable. *A Feminist Issue Is*, 2005, is installed opposite of previously mentioned painting *The Work*. It is modest in scale (32 x 26") but one of the most directly confrontational works in the show. The title phrase appears in yellow text as a rhetorical question centered through the picture plane, behind two hands with their thumbs positioned on a detonator. Because the text contains an extra "is," a question that has not been fully asked, viewers are left to consider the abruptness and/or repetitiveness here. The question was sourced from a 1980s issue of the Canadian socialist feminist magazine *Kinesis*² and did not originally include the additional "is." Soskolne would often search for images like these while flipping through pages of vintage magazines and books. Her paintings are influenced by other forms of visual and cultural expressions—photography, film, advertisements, social and cultural theories—and this might help to explain how the works in the first chapter operate together against a fixed subjectivity. With so many references and forms of technical experimentation, they don't appear to be recognizably by one person in terms of style and content.

This first chapter presents work Soskolne made from 1999 to 2013, after studying painting at Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver during a strictly conceptual moment for painting that had little focus on theory. The result of this pedagogical influence can be seen in the two large-scale paintings that flank the far back wall. Both foreground language and reference cinema. *Today, 2000*, a text-based painting that reads vertically, is the intertitles of a Dziga Vertov film. Translations of these intertitles were printed and passed out at Anthology Film Archives, where Soskolne worked from 1999 to 2002. Turning the text on its side highlights it more as a singular object and less as something to be read or studied for the film's political messaging. *Characters*, 1999, is a dark brown canvas that replicates a screen. Off-white film credits are painted to appear scrolling up the center of the canvas. They are the credits from *Nothing But a Man*, a 1964 independent drama film by Michael Roemer, but Soskolne added in extra cast members: Beauty Queen and Undertaker.

In these works, Soskolne subverts the original language and inserts wry, insider jokes. This cheeky use of language and humor offers a more

complex interaction with the paintings by giving lightness to serious topics. We know the chick in *The Work* is distressed, and yet its desperation comes across as funny because the scenario of being tied to the cannonball is so unlikely. *The First Female Chimney Sweep* should be praised as a feminist "first" in her field, and yet her soiled smile looks so foolish. Humor is also a distancing tool because it allows one to perform directness instead of just being direct. This is yet another way for Soskolne to derail heavy and authoritative statements in her painting.

In the three *Bikini Girls* diptychs in the exhibition, the female bikini model smiles at the viewer, although she becomes more and more abstracted as her image is reproduced through a modest form of monoprinting, a technique used to create one unique print. The model's commodified beauty is rendered void through each abstraction. Such methods of emptying out the source as a signifier and replacing its original meanings with new ones are indicative of Soskolne's dissatisfaction with a kind of painting that makes definitive statements. Other works on view, such as *Self Portraitress*, 2005 (a narcissistic painter in her studio), *The Colorist*, 2003 (an ecstatic male painter living his wildest dreams), or *Gallery (happening)*, 2003 (an art-world crowd waiting with devouring anticipation for the object to appear), parody and amplify contradictions around the exceptional status of art and the gendered heroism it upholds.

The second chapter of this exhibition includes a recent series of smaller-scale paintings titled *Bethenny*, 2011–16, which are centered around a psychedelic motif of moons and flowers with human-like features. The moon, which Soskolne describes as a stand-in for the sedated culture of American indifference, gazes at a world of potent symbols. The paintings are busy, full of color and texture, but with the moon always central. Counter to her earlier attempts to empty out symbols in order to critique them and give them new meanings, these paintings frame the symbols as rendered void by American culture itself. The seemingly opiated flowers smile back at the moon with satisfaction, as if they were affirming the trivialization of painted motifs that surround them, representing time, a homogenized Africa, multiple religions, the factory, and so on.

The paintings in *The Work* present us with unexpected ways of considering how to not comply with conventions in order to be both a “good” artist and a “good” painter. They reject the social necessities of participating in the art world status quo and reject the established conventions of painting by forgoing a signature style. They circulate within an alternative stratum among artist-run spaces, a state-sponsored university gallery, or friends’ apartments. They fall between established valuations of good and bad. And they debunk convention in order to broaden our criteria for painting and the structures that legitimize it.



1 *Painting/Politics* was a panel discussion organized by Peter Rostovsky at NYU in March 2014.

2 The question appeared in an article titled *WOMEN AGAINST NUKES: The ultimate death-trip of patriarchy is a feminist issue*, by Annette Clough, in *Kinesis*, 1980-11-01. Clough’s argument was that yes, it is a feminist issue, because all issues are feminist issues. Source: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14288/1.0045473>

Bethenny 14, 2016. Oil on canvas. 28 x 28 in.

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For most of the past two decades, Lise Soskolne's painting practice has been undertaken without a viewing public and concurrent with her work as an administrator and labor organizer in New York's nonprofit arts sector. *The Work*, her first public solo exhibition in New York since 2001, brings together more than thirty paintings made between 1999 and 2016. Most have never before been shown or have not been on view since their initial presentation.

The Work's first chapter triangulates themes related to time, labor, and gender in a series of paintings that alternate between the faithful application of paint with brushes and the use of tools intended to obliterate the painter's mark. Documenting the stylistic range of Soskolne's earlier work and her tendency to engage her subjects with sardonic humor, chapter one sets the stage for *Bethenny*, the exhibition's second iteration. In a tightly focused series of fourteen densely worked paintings made between 2011 and 2016, *Bethenny* pictures a sedated moon surrounded by his attendant hallucinations and doubles as a portrait of the distinctly American capacity for self-delusion.

The years Soskolne spent painting in relative isolation while working in the nonprofit sector coincides with an era in contemporary art marked by intensifying professionalization. Being unable and unwilling to do what was required of her to become legible as an artist in an increasingly market-driven industry, and believing in the nonprofit model as a necessary alternative, Soskolne invested her labor there instead. With her participation over the past two decades having been as an employee working in service of the art field rather than as an artist exhibiting within it, *The Work* also asks, *What happens when an artist cannot or does not comply with the conventions necessary to becoming visible?*

The Work has been curated by Alaina Claire Feldman, the director of the Mishkin Gallery. Baruch College and the George and Mildred Weissman School of Arts and Sciences generously provide support for this exhibition. Booklet design by Eline Mul and Bryan Chu.