ALMINE RECH

Gwen O'Neil
Over the Ridges and through the Passes

May 11 — Jun 14, 2024 | Paris, Turenne (Front Space)

Almine Rech Paris is pleased to announce *Over the Ridges and through the Passes*, Gwen O'Neil's first solo exhibition with the gallery, on view from May 11 to June 14, 2024.

"Over the ridges and through the passes," Gwen O'Neil's first exhibition with Almine Rech presents a series of new paintings inspired by unique weather and light conditions endemic to southern California. Like many West Coast-based artists—notably those associated with the Light and Space movement such as Larry Bell, Mary Corse, and Dewain Valentine—O'Neil seeks to capture the combination of natural and artificial factors responsible for southern California's dramatic environment. Acknowledging that the fiery sunsets and hazy glow associated with Los Angeles are largely the result of air pollution, O'Neil's paintings are as foreboding as they are dazzling.

Channeling painters like Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, O'Neil composes her compositions—typically swirls, curls and waves of intense and varied colors—out of individual daubs of paint. Placing different colors next to each other on the canvas (rather than mixing them on a palette), O'Neil creates hazy volumes that seem to pulsate as we fix on them. Up close, these abstractions, which she bases on natural forms ranging from the tiny spirals inside seashells to massive murmurations of birds, break down into individual marks, like a digital photograph disintegrating into pixels. A constant push and pull between micro and macro perspectives in O'Neil's work keeps the viewer's eye coming back to the surfaces of her canvas—as do seemingly errant touches of color that "pop," instead of blending with the surrounding hues. Unexpected dashes of hot pink or chartreuse, for example, disrupt the illusion of distance or volume. The effect recalls similarly surprising painterly flourishes found in landscapes by Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh or even Joan Mitchell. Similar to the blazing, almost neon orange sun in Monet's famous Impression Sunrise, 1872, certain aspects of O'Neil's compositions seem intended to emphasize the materiality of paint itself.

In addition to light effects, O'Neil has found inspiration in natural phenomena like starling murmurations and, most recently, the Santa Ana winds. Her paintings translate the dizzying patterns created by thousands of birds flying and swooping into colorful swirling compositions that communicate a sense of awe, but also danger. Stunning though they are, starlings are an invasive species. With this in mind, O'Neil's paintings can be understood not only as appreciations of the birds' incredible synchronized configurations, but also as a kind of alarm bell signaling a potential threat to the ecosystem.

The works on view in Paris continue O'Neil's exploration of California's infamous Santa Ana winds, a likewise duplicitous marvel she has been painting since 2023. These strong winds are the bearer of beautiful clear skies and dry weather, but also have the potential to cause massive destruction. Warm, dry air creates prime conditions for forest fires, which is why Native American tribes have referred to these intense storms as "devil winds." In addition wreaking havoc on the natural landscape, the Santa Anas are associated with all kinds of strange reactions in humans ranging from physical ailments, like headaches, to psychological ones, like depression and anxiety. In paintings like Canyon Vibrations and Mountain Pass (all works 2024), O'Neil captures both tangible and eerie effects of this force of nature.

As an East Coast native who grew up between New York City and East Hampton, O'Neil initially worried she might find California's lack of seasons perturbing. Indeed, fall foliage, winter snow, spring blooms and summer heatwaves, have been replaced with wildfires, flooding, and sea-level rise. With an acute awareness of her immediate surroundings, O'Neil has developed an artistic practice that documents and raises questions about the effects of human caused climate change on her own backyard. Resonating well beyond, her paintings are deceptively beautiful warnings about the precarity of our planet.

— Mara Hoberman, art critic