



ALIX BAILEY

We are reading the story of our lives  
which takes place in a room.  
The room looks out on a street.  
There is no one there,  
no sound of anything.  
The trees are heavy with leaves,  
the parked cars never move.  
We keep turning the pages,  
hoping for something,  
something like mercy or change,  
a black line that would bind us  
or keep us apart.  
The way it is, it would seem  
the book of our lives is empty.  
The furniture in the room is never shifted,  
and the rugs become darker each time  
our shadows pass over them.  
It is almost as if the room were the world.  
We sit beside each other on the couch,  
reading about the couch.  
We say it is ideal.  
It is ideal.

Excerpted from *The Story of Our Lives* by Mark Strand

A L I X B A I L E Y

AT THE PAINTING CENTER  
2018 AND 2021

Essays by John Mitchell and Susanna Coffey

**THE PAINTING CENTER**

547 West 27th Street, Suite 500, New York, NY 10001  
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*Alannah and Jared Diptych, 2018*

Oil on linen

60 x 106 inches



*Jeanette in Lennart's Studio, 2019*

Oil on linen  
14 x 11 inches

### Alix Bailey: A Fresh Feeling of Timelessness

Walking around Manhattan, one could spend a lot of time wondering about the multitude of lives going on behind so many windows. New York City is a truly magical place. For every artist who ever lived here, there is a unique New York. There's Langston Hughes's poetic pride from the Harlem Renaissance, Lou Reed's underground, Martin Scorsese's gangster films, and there's Alix Bailey's paintings of New Yorkers at rest in soft daylight.

Alix Bailey made this current group of paintings primarily but not exclusively, from direct observation in her West Village studio. Preferring to work in the daytime using only natural light that comes through three east-facing windows. The palette is limited, including one or two of each of the three primary colors – yellow, red, and blue plus white.

The small painting of Jeanette, demonstrates by contrast how important the environment of Alix's Manhattan studio is as a constant in the majority of her other recent paintings, because this small painting was made in Jeanette's late father - Lennart Anderson's studio.

The light in Lennart Anderson's Brooklyn studio is different than the light in Alix's studio. The light on Jeanette shines down from a skylight above, whereas in most of Alix's other paintings of sitters, a raking light floods in from the viewer's right.

The painting of Jeanette shows the presence of a finished and framed painting hanging on the wall. From the visible section, it appears to be a large painting of a woman laying on a white towel in green grass on a sunny day. That fragment of a painted field of green makes this small painting of the pregnant woman the greenest of any of Alix's recent paintings.

In her own studio, Alix often uses sheets of the same kind of linen fabric that she makes her paintings upon, as drapery over studio furniture that models pose on and she frequently includes blank canvases on the walls in the setups. They are meta moments where the limp linen drapery that appears in some of the paintings has been cut, stretched, primed and hung on the wall, existing as a painted image of a blank canvas in the permanent state of the possibility of becoming a painting.

The linen color in the paintings is made by combining all of the colors on her palette to varying degrees, shifting warmer here or cooler there. The stretched linen is always primed white and white is always the ground color that she begins with. Patches of white ground are sometimes left uncovered, becoming high-key white passages that take on volume. Sometimes under-drawing is also visible, revealing the process and adroit ability of Alix's hand at work.

When white of the ground is left exposed, the illusion of representation is interrupted. The physicality of the materials amplified and the sensitive complexity of the way white things are depicted, become even more apparent. Look at the nude self-portrait with the dark statue on the mantel for example; even in this small painting where so much of the white ground is left to see, there is a lot of variation in the color of painted white areas on the wall and fireplace. The white canvas resting on the floor and leaning against the wall at left is made with the actual white of the ground and it feels like a solid object because it casts a shadow. Then on the mantel to the right of the figure, the objects are roughly drawn and left alone. Even though these two areas are made with the white ground, they – along with the other patches of white ground in this small painting all work in surprisingly different ways.

Patterned rugs often appear underfoot, always below the middle horizontal divide of the composition. The color, pattern and design of these rugs are carefully chosen and incorporated into each painting. The blank canvases hanging on the wall are at head height to the people. They work as a foil to the heads. The future of those blanks is as unknown and hopeful as the future of Jeanette's baby forever on the way. And in the painting of Jeanette, there's something satisfying about the painting that appears within the painting in the context of pregnant Jeanette because it is an exception. That the depicted fragment of a painting is finished puts more emphasis on the potential of the coming birth of a new human being.

Whether there's potential energy or expended energy in the paintings is also extant in the way people pose. In some paintings, a person is bound into the composition like a compressed spring. For example, in *Alannah and B*, a person is lying on their back, knees bent, with feet pressed into the linen-covered arm of the love-seat. If they were able to stretch out to their full horizontal length, they wouldn't fit within the composition. In others, a person is stretched all the way out horizontally or standing straight up. When there is enough space for the full figure, the compositions feel more spacious and relaxed.

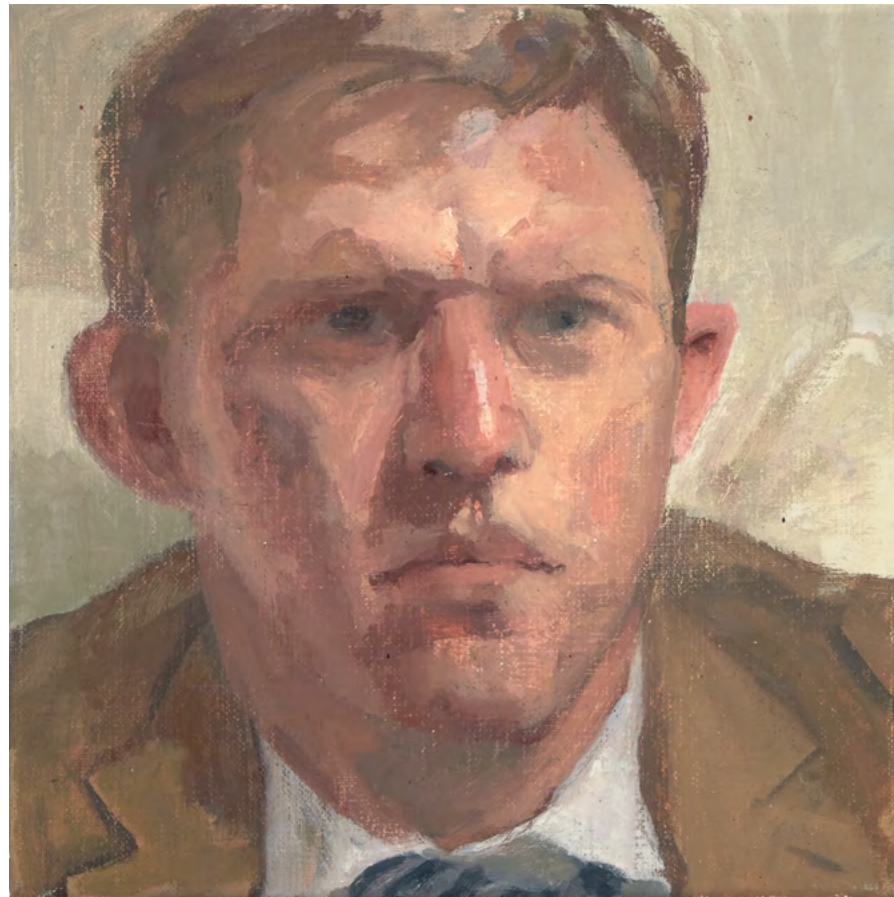
Alix doesn't draw funny the way Charles Schultz and Philip Guston did. But there is something close to funny about her drawing and there is a sense that she enjoys human foibles and amusing things that can happen. Like a tear in a stocking or the way a fancy collared shirt can open slightly between buttons revealing a small section of belly skin.

There is a non-functional marble fireplace on the north wall of Alix's studio and an ever-changing cast of still-life characters that populate the fireplace mantel; a planted cactus and various other plants, vases, cups, bowls, and a small bronze figure of a voluptuous woman with arms raised and left leg forward as in all of those ancient Egyptian walking statues. The triangular negative space between the sculpture's legs, often echo the space between sitters' legs. The plants bring refreshing moments of green and there's something poetic about the relationship between painted plants and sunlit rooms or between the sculpture of a person and painted people.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of human beings as compared to all other living creatures on earth is that people have many things. And our things are representative of us. Vincent Van Gogh's painting of his shoes at the Metropolitan Museum of Art is as much a self-portrait as any painting that he ever made of the reflection of his own face. These things on the fireplace mantel belong to Alix. These objects always occupy the background. Our view into the scene in each of these paintings is from the painter's vantage point and the backmost things we see are objects that belong to and have been arranged by the painter. This is the painter's room. The people depicted are guests in the painter's space; their positions, clothes, and the relative way their shapes fit within the space are all choreographed by the painter.

The characteristics of the people Alix chooses to work with are particular to who she is as well. There is a lot of red hair in Alix's world. And there are allusions to the tradition of painting that Alix so loves. For example, in *Young Group* – the man sitting between the two red headed people in black is wearing a white outfit similar to the one the doctor wears in Van Gogh's *Night Café* from 1888 and the one Pierrot wears in Jean-Antoine Watteau's painting at the Louvre from around 1718. The left shoulder of the dress worn by the woman on the right has fallen and is reminiscent of the formerly fallen shoulder strap in John Singer Sargent's *Madame X* painting.

The person on the left is dressed in what could be a modern dance outfit, reminiscent of Degas's dancers. And the man on the floor is wearing a blue and white striped shirt that is like the Breton shirts Picasso often wore. In fact, Alix bought the blue and white striped shirt for James to wear, specifically for this painting. Notice that this blue and white striped shirt echoes the blue and white striped rug that appears in many of the other paintings.



Whether the references I see were intended by the painter or not, Alix has lived her entire life surrounded by great painting and she is a painter to the core. Her first language is painting and these are paintings first and foremost. Unlike a commissioned portrait for example, the imagery in Alix's paintings is almost a by-product of her process. Look at the abstract qualities of these works – the repetition of form, the relationship of paint to ground, drawing to color and the light that the paintings make.

Alix and her sitters live through the making of these paintings together. In each one, she has remade the experience of looking at someone who was looking back at her as the fleeting light slipped through the room. The light in each of these paintings is from the same sun that illuminated the people in so many paintings from centuries past, including the ancient Fayum mummy portraits. There is a sense of hours of peoples' lives in each of these paintings but also a fresh feeling of timelessness.

John Mitchell, December 2020

Above image: *John Mitchell*, 2018, Oil on linen, 10 x 10 inches



*Ranunculi*, 2018

Oil on linen

14 x 10 inches

## Susanna Coffey on Alix Bailey

These are last, shortest, dark days of 2020. What to say about this year? A year that gave the phrase “going viral” a new meaning, a time of isolation, masked faces and the need to socially distance. But these last weeks, while focusing on the recent figurative paintings of Alix Bailey, very different associations come to mind. Her intimate portrayals of individuals and groups show me a different aspect of this pandemic year. The paintings in this exhibition remind me of Ingmar Bergman’s portrayal of human relationships in his film *Fanny and Alexander*. Bergman reminds us that most real-life dramas are neither high tragedy nor slapstick comedy but are subtle ones enacted within the intimate worlds of family and friends. And that is what one sees in these paintings; a small half lit room where, from painting to painting, people come and go. And these people seem so at one with the space they inhabit, that a viewer doesn’t only fix on them but rather sees the whole of each picture before focusing on a figure or face. This is the kind of portraiture I love the most.

Bailey’s works bring me to a place of quietude, reverie, of solitude but not loneliness. A place where there are people to visit, intimate spaces one might step into, where atmosphere, light, and color tell a good part of the tale. These are pictures that point a viewer towards more than the physiognomy of the portrayed. Rather, in her work, I see as I do in the paintings of Gwen John, early Eduard Vuillard and Johannes Vermeer, portrayals of people who both define and are defined by the painterly world they inhabit.

Each picture shows us a room, an artist’s studio, which reappears in several canvasses. This setting is populated by a single figure, a couple, or a group of four. The figures in the group portraits seem so comfortable that they do not need to touch or gesture with one another. Rather their relaxed gaze suggests they are together, each one immersed in their own thoughts. The one work that establishes quite a different mood is the painting of artist John Mitchell, who looks so sharply and intently outward from his canvas. Alix Bailey’s figures almost feel as if they were the artist’s guests, visitors rather than models.

In a way they are, for Bailey always paints these portraits in the presence of her subjects, people she knows or gets to know well.

The interior shown in these paintings is sparsely furnished but each element in it contributes a narrative subtext. There are cats, drapery, chairs or a couch, and rugs. The fireplace has a mantle upon which we can see objects such as a sculpture, vases, house plants. These objects subtly interact with the figures, plants may loom over or between couples, a rug “warms” a dreamy boy, the sculpture of a standing woman half seen, often looks like it is leaving or entering the scene. Like a rainbow or halo the curve of the fireplace lintel arches over heads and bodies. Such images help me to understand the subjects of Alix’s paintings. Who they are; to one another, to the artist and as individuals.

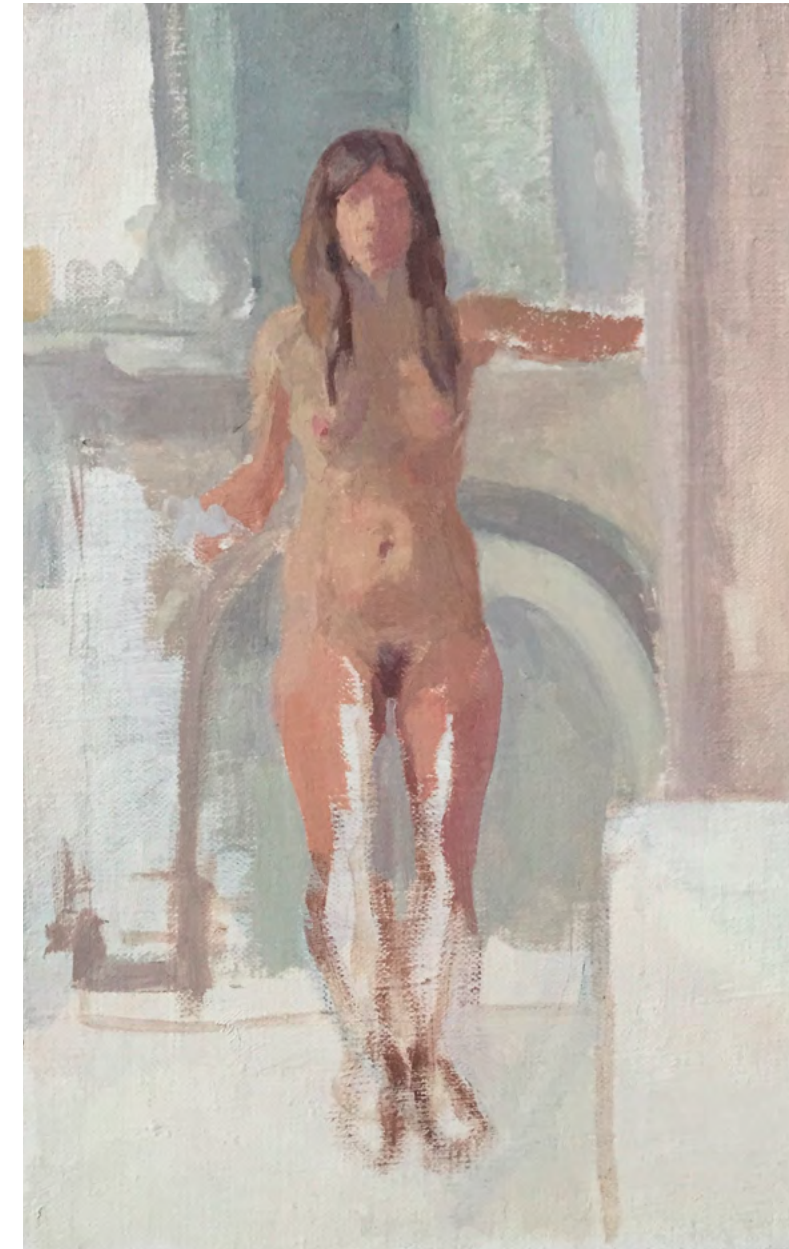
Alix’s subjects inhabit luminous spaces painted with a gestural hand. The artist’s brushstroke is always apparent, sculptural, but not aggressive or foremost. How the paintings are made can be seen, there is a delicate balance between gesture and the iconic representation. At first, white seems to dominate her palette but look carefully and see it never appears starkly or purely. The color white modulates and brings unity to a whole spectrum of hues that wash all parts of the canvas in soft, pearlescent light. All the paintings seem gently sunlit and this pale coloration seems to illumine each image equally. Within each canvas the figures appear in seemingly quiet repose. Even the ranunculus flowers gently droop in graceful arcs, as if they are enjoying a quiet moment before they wilt and wither. The single figures or small familial groups are relaxed within their light filled interiors, and suggest to me that there might be room for me there too.

This has been a dark, tense year in so many ways, and I am grateful for the warm and inclusive “invitation” each of these compelling paintings provides.

Susanna Coffey, December 2020



*Natasha*, 2016  
Oil on linen  
10 x 8 inches, Private Collection

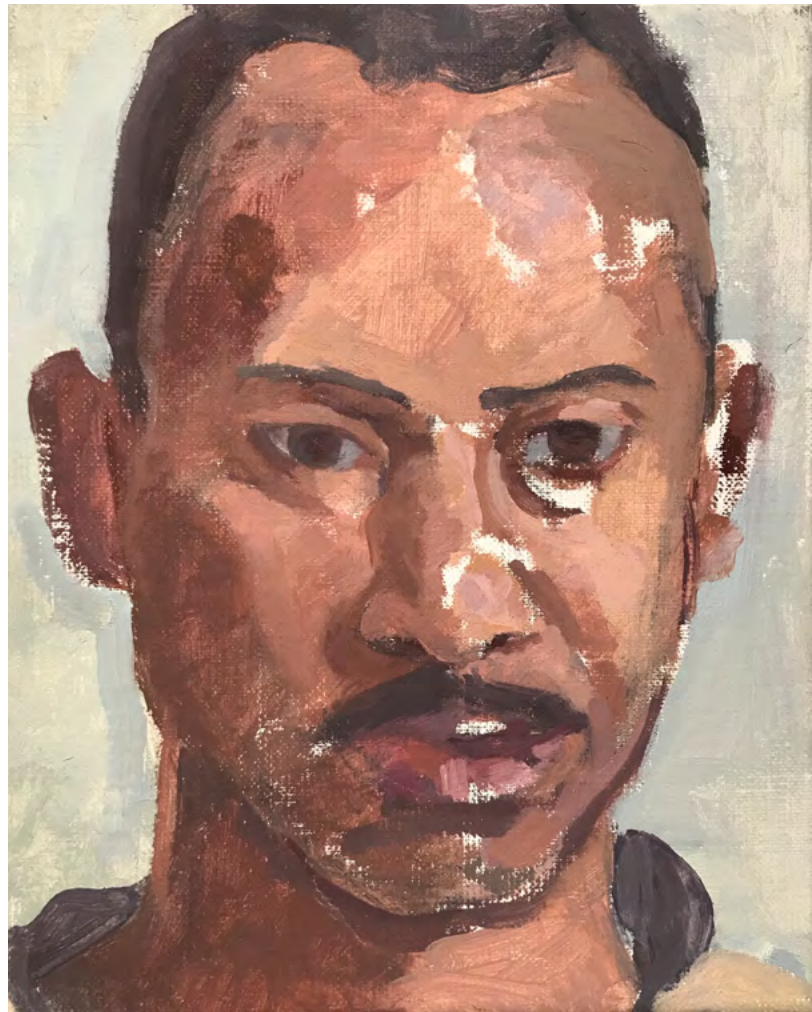


*Self Portrait Nude*, 2015  
Oil on linen  
14 x 8 inches, Private Collection



*Alannah in Mori Dress, 2017*  
Oil on canvas  
70 x 36 inches





*Errol*  
Oil on linen  
10 x 8 inches



*Alannah, 2017*  
Oil on linen  
8 x 8 inches

*Young Group, 2020*  
Oil on linen  
80 x 68 inches



*Natasha Reclining II*, 2016  
Oil on linen  
43 x 40 inches





*Nude Yellow Rug, 2020*  
Oil on linen  
8 x 11 inches



*Nude Blue Chair, 2017*  
Oil on linen  
16 x 11 inches, Private Collection

*Jared and Alannah, 2017*  
Oil on canvas  
69 x 64 inches



*Alannah and B*, 2019  
Oil on linen  
60 x 66 inches





*Study for Jared and Alannah, 2017*  
Oil on linen  
24 x 18 inches



*James in White, 2020*  
Oil on linen and paper  
15 x 11 inches



*Natasha Seated II*, 2017  
Oil on canvas  
58 x 38 inches





*James in Striped Shirt, 2020*  
Oil on linen  
10 x 8 inches



*Study for Alannah and B, 2019*  
Oil on linen  
11 x 14 inches

*Alex and Umbrella Plant (Early Version), 2020*  
Oil on linen  
62 x 72 inches



Alix Bailey

Alix Bailey grew up in New Haven, Connecticut. She lives and paints in New York City and Columbia County, New York. She has shown her work in New York City, Hudson, New York, Connecticut, and in Italy.

This catalogue includes paintings that were exhibited at The Painting Center in February of 2018 and in February of 2021.

I dedicate it to my Dad whose support and encouragement was and continues to be invaluable. I would also like to give special thanks to My Mom, Mary, Kitty, Ford, Ruth Miller Forge, John Mitchell, Susanna Coffey, Karen Kligerman, Diana Horowitz, Jessica Strand, John Dubrow, Eric Holzman, Natasha Thweatt, Alannah Farrell, Jared Oppenheim, James Coombe, Alex MacIntyre, Shazzi Thomas, Blue Ridge Oil Colors Inc, and current and former members of The Painting Center.

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Back cover image: *Natasha Reclining I*, 2016, Oil on canvas, 40 x 54 inches



*Self Portrait Nude II*, 2019

Oil on linen

14 x 11 inches

